

Challenges and cross-cultural adaptation of international students at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM): A qualitative study

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Abstract - This study explores the challenges and cross-cultural adaptation experiences of international students at International Islamic University Malaysia. Guided by Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, the study examines the challenges encountered by international students, their effects on academic performance, and the coping strategies employed during the adaptation process. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, and data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews involving 20 undergraduate international students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that international students experience multiple challenges, including language barriers, academic difficulties, discrimination, financial constraints, and cultural differences, which contribute to acculturative stress and negatively influence academic performance, particularly during the initial stage of adaptation. Despite these challenges, students gradually developed adaptive coping mechanisms through self-regulation, social support, and the use of social media platforms. The study concludes that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic and continuous process influenced by both individual resilience and contextual support systems. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support in facilitating international students' adaptation and enhancing their academic success in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Academic performance, acculturative stress, cross-cultural adaptation, higher education, international students, Malaysia, phenomenology

1. Introduction

The increasing globalization of higher education has contributed to a substantial rise in international student mobility, making cross-cultural adaptation an important concern for universities worldwide. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 6.9 million students are currently pursuing higher education outside their home countries, with projections suggesting that this figure may exceed 8.5 million by 2030 (UNESCO, 2025). As institutions become increasingly multicultural, international students are required to navigate unfamiliar academic systems, communication styles, social norms, and cultural values. Consequently, understanding how students adapt to culturally diverse educational environments has become a significant area of inquiry within intercultural communication research.

Studying abroad offers numerous benefits, including academic development, intercultural competence, and enhanced employability in an increasingly globalized labour market (Mayer et al., 2024). However, these opportunities are frequently accompanied by considerable challenges, particularly during the initial stages of transition. International students often experience difficulties related to language use, academic expectations, social integration, and cultural adjustment (Chen et al., 2019). Such challenges may generate acculturative stress, defined as the psychological and emotional strain associated with adapting to a new cultural environment (Amlashi et al., 2025). Previous studies have shown that acculturative stress may manifest through anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, fatigue, identity confusion, and reduced academic engagement (Lau et al., 2019; Rivas et al., 2019). From an intercultural communication perspective, these challenges arise not merely



from individual characteristics but from the interaction between students and the sociocultural systems in which they are immersed.

Among the various challenges experienced by international students, language barriers remain one of the most frequently reported. Studies conducted in Malaysia and other host countries consistently identify difficulties in understanding accents, communication styles, and academic language requirements as major obstacles to adjustment (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Titrek et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015). However, language challenges extend beyond linguistic proficiency. Effective communication also requires the ability to interpret meaning, understand cultural nuances, and adapt to culturally specific interaction patterns. Therefore, language barriers should be understood as intercultural communication challenges rather than merely deficiencies in language competence.

In addition to language-related difficulties, international students frequently encounter cultural and social challenges. Previous studies have reported that unfamiliar food, religious practices, social norms, and lifestyles contribute to culture shock and adjustment difficulties (Alasmari, 2023; Almutairi, 2020). Research further suggests that adaptation involves ongoing negotiation between individuals' existing cultural identities and the expectations of the host society (Kim et al., 2019; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2019). Academic challenges also represent a significant aspect of students' adaptation experiences. International students often struggle with unfamiliar teaching approaches, assessment methods, research expectations, and classroom participation norms (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Singh & Jack, 2021). These challenges are closely connected to communication processes, as students must learn to engage effectively with lecturers, peers, and institutional structures within a new cultural context.

Beyond language, cultural, and academic difficulties, international students may experience financial constraints, homesickness, social isolation, and discrimination (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Sumra, 2018). These challenges are not independent phenomena but rather interconnected experiences that collectively influence students' adjustment outcomes. For example, language difficulties may limit social interaction, while social isolation may intensify psychological stress and negatively affect academic performance. Previous research has consistently shown that acculturative stress, communication difficulties, and adaptation challenges are associated with lower academic achievement, reduced classroom participation, and decreased educational satisfaction (Deng et al., 2022; Rivas et al., 2019; Singh & Jack, 2021).

International students continue to face a wide range of academic, sociocultural, psychological, and linguistic challenges when adapting to new educational environments. A trend analysis spanning more than two decades revealed that language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, discrimination, and psychological stress remain the most persistent issues experienced by international students across countries (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Educational service quality and sociocultural adaptation have been identified as significant determinants of student satisfaction, indicating that institutional support plays a crucial role in shaping international students' experiences (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022). Similarly, policy-oriented research emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to develop more comprehensive support systems that facilitate cross-cultural adaptation and improve international student management (Zhang, 2024).

Language and communication have consistently emerged as central factors influencing adaptation outcomes. A review of the literature demonstrated that language proficiency significantly affects students' academic performance, social integration, and psychological well-being (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). Studies conducted among Chinese students abroad further revealed that successful adaptation is closely associated with effective acculturation strategies and the ability to balance cultural maintenance with engagement in the host society (Lai et al., 2023). Language anxiety and communication difficulties have also been found to hinder social participation and academic engagement among international students in higher education institutions (May et al., 2025).

Research across different educational contexts suggests that adaptation is a multidimensional process involving sociocultural, psychological, and academic dimensions. International nursing students in China experienced gradual improvements in cross-cultural adaptation over time, although challenges related to communication and cultural understanding persisted (Sun et al., 2023). Cultural identity has been shown to significantly influence psychological adaptation, indicating that students who maintain a positive sense of identity are better equipped to cope with adaptation stressors (Deng,

2025). Similar findings indicate that international students often encounter interconnected academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges that require holistic support mechanisms from universities (Xue & Singh, 2025; Bai et al., 2023).

Longitudinal and mixed-method studies provide additional insights into the adaptation process. Acculturative stress tends to be highest during the first year of study, highlighting the importance of early intervention and support programs (Koo et al., 2021). Academic adaptation has been found to be closely linked to students' overall adjustment and educational success, while friendship networks can moderate the relationship between academic adaptation and psychological well-being (Mao et al., 2023; Sheng et al., 2022). Research further demonstrates that successful cross-cultural adaptation contributes significantly to overall student satisfaction, academic achievement, and well-being (Purkayastha & Singh, 2025; Dorcas et al., 2024).

Despite the extensive body of literature, several limitations remain evident. Many studies focus predominantly on specific national groups, particularly Chinese international students, which may limit the generalizability of findings across diverse student populations. In addition, much of the existing research relies on self-reported data and cross-sectional designs, reducing the ability to establish causal relationships. Future research would benefit from comparative cross-national studies, longitudinal approaches, and evaluations of institutional interventions designed to enhance international students' academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation (Ammigan et al., 2022; Astley, 2024; Mao, 2024).

To manage these challenges, international students employ various coping mechanisms. Studies have identified social support, interpersonal communication, family connections, and social media use as important resources for facilitating adjustment and reducing stress (Hamid & Awhinawhi, 2025; Wang et al., 2015; Amrullah et al., 2025; Rini & Triastuti, 2024). Interaction with host nationals has also been found to enhance students' understanding of local cultural norms and improve their adaptation experiences (Kim, 2016). Nevertheless, while previous studies have examined coping strategies, relatively limited attention has been given to the communicative processes that underpin these coping mechanisms. The effectiveness of social support and interpersonal relationships depends largely on students' ability to communicate across cultural boundaries and navigate diverse social environments.

Malaysia has emerged as one of the leading destinations for international education in Southeast Asia, supported by government initiatives aimed at positioning the country as a regional education hub (ICEF, 2023). Within this context, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) provides a particularly distinctive environment due to its multicultural student population and integration of Islamic values within academic and social life. International students at IIUM must therefore adapt not only to Malaysian culture but also to an institutional environment shaped by religious and intercultural dimensions. Despite the increasing number of international students in Malaysia, research focusing on their lived experiences remains relatively limited (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Singh & Jack, 2021). Existing studies have largely examined adaptation challenges in isolation and have paid limited attention to the relationships among adaptation challenges, academic outcomes, and coping mechanisms within specific institutional contexts.

This study is grounded in Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which conceptualizes adaptation as a dynamic and continuous process through which individuals gradually achieve functional fitness and psychological well-being within a new cultural environment. While early adaptation models viewed adjustment as a linear progression through predetermined stages (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960), contemporary perspectives emphasize the interactive and ongoing nature of adaptation (Lopez, 2021). Adaptation occurs through continuous communication between individuals and their sociocultural environment, making intercultural communication central to the adaptation process. Consequently, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how international students negotiate challenges, cope with stress, and develop strategies for successful adjustment.

Accordingly, this study explores the challenges faced by international students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), the impact of these challenges on academic performance, and the coping mechanisms employed to facilitate adaptation. By examining these interconnected dimensions through an intercultural communication lens, the study contributes to a

deeper understanding of cross-cultural adaptation in contemporary higher education environments and provides insights into the experiences of international students within a multicultural Islamic university setting.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore international students' lived experiences of cross-cultural adaptation. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for examining human experiences, meanings, and perceptions in depth (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Given the study's focus on subjective experiences, the phenomenological approach enables participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations without being constrained by predetermined assumptions.

Data were collected through a combination of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussions facilitate the generation of diverse perspectives through interaction among participants, thereby producing rich and dynamic data (Shabina et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, allow for in-depth exploration of individual experiences through flexible and responsive questioning (Kakilla, 2021). The integration of both methods enabled the study to capture both collective and individual dimensions of students' adaptation experiences.

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises understanding individuals' subjective meanings within their social and cultural contexts (Sandberg, 2005). Unlike positivist approaches that prioritise objectivity and generalisation, the interpretive paradigm focuses on how individuals construct and interpret their experiences (Babones, 2016). This paradigm is appropriate for the present study, as it seeks to understand how international students perceive and respond to the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation.

2.2 Research Setting and Sampling

The study was conducted at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak campus, focusing on undergraduate international students from the Abdul Hamid Abu Sulaiman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS). This setting provides a culturally diverse academic environment, making it suitable for examining cross-cultural adaptation processes.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Tajik et al., 2024). In this study, participants were selected based on three criteria: (a) undergraduate status, (b) international student status, and (c) enrolment in AHAS KIRKHS. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to recruit additional participants through referrals from initial respondents (Bhat, 2016). Through these combined techniques, a total of 20 international students participated in the study.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through two focus group discussions and ten semi-structured interviews. Each focus group consisted of five participants. Although the study initially intended to rely solely on focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews were incorporated due to participants' preferences and scheduling constraints. Some participants expressed discomfort in group settings, while others faced difficulties coordinating schedules. The inclusion of interviews ensured broader participation and richer data. Most sessions were conducted online via Google Meet, with only two interviews carried out face-to-face due to logistical constraints near the end of the academic semester. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Participants were briefed on the purpose and scope of the study, and confidentiality was assured. All sessions were recorded with participants' permission.

English was the primary language used during data collection. However, participants from Cambodia and Vietnam occasionally used Cham when they encountered difficulties expressing themselves in English. Focus group discussions lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes, while interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes, continuing until data saturation was reached. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions structured into four sections aligned with the research objectives: (1) participants' background, (2) challenges faced while studying at IIUM, (3) the impact of



these challenges on academic performance, and (4) coping mechanisms used to manage these challenges.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored for research purposes only.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within participants' responses. All focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed prior to analysis. Codes and themes were developed inductively based on recurring patterns in the data. These themes were then compared and interpreted in relation to existing literature to provide a deeper understanding of the findings (Dye, 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Participant Characteristics

A total of 20 international undergraduate students from various departments within AHAS KIRKHS participated in this study. Participants represented diverse national backgrounds, with half originating from Southeast Asia. They were distributed across different years of study, ranging from first to fourth year. The characteristics of the respondents are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic information of the respondents

Pseudonym	Department	Year of Study	Country of Origin
Respondent 1	Communication	Year 1	Bangladesh
Respondent 2	Sociology and Anthropology	Year 4	Japan
Respondent 3	Sociology and Anthropology	Year 4	China
Respondent 4	Quran and Sunnah Studies	Year 3	Cambodia
Respondent 5	Sociology and Anthropology	Year 2	Vietnam
Respondent 6	Fiqh and Usul al Fiqh	Year 1	Cambodia
Respondent 7	Quran and Sunnah Studies	Year 1	India
Respondent 8	Communication	Year 2	Vietnam
Respondent 9	Communication	Year 3	Cambodia
Respondent 10	English Language and Literature	Year 1	Thailand
Respondent 11	Usuluddin and Comparative Religion	Year 4	Qatar
Respondent 12	Quran and Sunnah Studies	Year 3	Yemen
Respondent 13	Quran and Sunnah Studies	Year 4	Morocco
Respondent 14	Communication	Year 1	Cambodia
Respondent 15	Communication	Year 2	Cambodia
Respondent 16	Communication	Year 3	Vietnam
Respondent 17	Political Science	Year 4	Cambodia
Respondent 18	Communication	Year 4	China
Respondent 19	Communication	Year 4	China
Respondent 20	Psychology	Year 2	Bangladesh

3.1.2 Challenges Faced by International Students

Language emerged as the most significant and pervasive challenge, with 17 out of 20 participants reporting difficulties, particularly during their early stages of enrolment. These challenges were primarily associated with limited English proficiency, which affected students' ability to communicate effectively in academic and social settings. One participant shared: "...I could not speak English... it was very hard to speak with others... I spent one year in CELPAD just to learn English..."

In addition to general proficiency, participants also reported difficulties in understanding local English accents. Five participants specifically noted that Malaysian English posed comprehension challenges due to differences in pronunciation and speech patterns. Furthermore, three participants indicated that some lecturers occasionally used Malay during instruction, which created additional

barriers to understanding. Despite these challenges, many participants reported gradual improvement over time, indicating that language barriers, while significant, are not static but evolve with increased exposure and practice.

Academic challenges constituted another major theme. Participants frequently described difficulties related to unfamiliarity with technological tools, academic conventions, and institutional systems. For instance, one participant stated:

This university is very technologically advanced. Everything is technology. During my first semester, I didn't even know how to use Microsoft Word. I didn't know what APA is. I didn't know how to use Google to search for information.

Similarly, other participants highlighted challenges in completing assignments that required technical competencies such as video editing, graphic design, and online submission systems. The phrase “it is so hard” was repeatedly used by participants when describing their academic experiences, indicating the intensity of these challenges. Additionally, some participants reported difficulties with administrative processes, such as online course registration systems, which further complicated their academic adjustment. However, similar to language challenges, academic difficulties tended to decrease over time as students became more familiar with the academic environment and developed the necessary skills to navigate institutional requirements.

Furthermore, experiences of discrimination were reported by several participants and represented an important aspect of their adaptation experiences. These experiences ranged from subtle forms of exclusion to more explicit negative interactions. Participants described instances where local students appeared unresponsive or dismissive when approached for help. One participant noted that when she asked a question about an assignment, a local student “just stared” without responding. Others reported that administrative staff treated them differently once they were identified as international students, often using a harsher tone of communication. More concerning were reports involving lecturers. One participant recounted: “She changed from English to Malay... everyone laughed... I felt hurt.” Such experiences contributed to feelings of marginalisation and discomfort, highlighting the social dimensions of adaptation challenges.

Participants also reported challenges related to cultural and environmental differences, particularly in relation to food and climate. Half of the participants indicated difficulty adapting to local food, describing it as too spicy, sweet, or oily compared to their home cuisine. One participant expressed concern about food quality, stating: “You don't know how many times they use the oil... I miss my food.” These challenges were further exacerbated by restrictions in university accommodation that limited students' ability to cook their own meals. Weather differences were also noted, particularly among students from colder regions who found Malaysia's hot climate difficult to adjust to. Although these issues were generally considered less severe than language or academic challenges, they nonetheless contributed to the overall adaptation experience.

Lastly, administrative challenges, particularly related to visa processes, were frequently reported. More than half of the participants described visa procedures as complex, time-consuming, and stressful. Some participants also reported negative interactions with visa office staff, which added to their frustration. Financial challenges were also identified, with several participants noting the high cost of tuition fees and living expenses. Some participants reported working part-time jobs to support themselves financially, reflecting the additional pressures faced by international students.

3.1.3 Impact on Academic Performance

The findings indicate that the challenges experienced by international students have direct and indirect impacts on their academic performance. Twelve participants reported that these challenges negatively affected their academic outcomes. Language barriers were identified as a primary factor, particularly in relation to written assignments and examinations. While students were able to revise written work over time, time constraints during examinations posed significant difficulties. One participant mentioned: “when you do assignments, even though your English is not good, you have time to correct. But in Exam, you have no time.”

Psychological factors also played a critical role. Participants frequently described feelings of stress, loneliness, homesickness, and demotivation. One participant stated: “I always felt stressed and demotivated... I skipped classes... my grade was not good.” These emotional experiences were



associated with reduced academic engagement, including decreased attendance and lower productivity.

3.1.4 Coping Mechanisms

Self-regulation emerged as a key coping mechanism, with participants emphasising the importance of maintaining positive thinking and emotional control. Participants highlighted personal resilience as essential for overcoming challenges. For instance, one participant stated: “No one can help us besides ourselves. We just have to stay calm and keep motivating ourselves.” Participants rely heavily on internal coping strategies to regulate their emotions and maintain motivation, particularly during the early stages of adjustment.

Establishing relationships with peers was another important strategy. Participants reported that friendships provided both emotional support and practical assistance in navigating academic requirements and social challenges. Additionally, social media was widely used as a coping tool, both for relaxation and for maintaining connections with family and friends. Participants indicated that these platforms helped reduce stress and provided a sense of continuity with their home environment.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the multifaceted nature of international students’ cross-cultural adaptation. Consistent with previous research, language barriers emerged as the most significant challenge faced by international students (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). However, the present findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that language challenges are not limited to linguistic proficiency alone but also involve difficulties in understanding local accents and navigating multilingual classroom environments. This supports the argument that language barriers should be conceptualised as part of broader intercultural communication processes rather than as isolated linguistic deficiencies.

Academic difficulties reported by participants are also consistent with earlier studies (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Singh & Jack, 2021), which highlight challenges related to unfamiliar educational systems and academic expectations. However, this study further reveals that these challenges are closely linked to technological competencies and institutional practices. This suggests that academic adaptation is not solely dependent on cognitive ability but is shaped by students’ capacity to engage with new systems of knowledge production and communication. Furthermore, the experiences of discrimination reported in this study reinforce previous findings that international students may encounter social exclusion and unequal treatment in host institutions (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

However, the present findings highlight that such experiences can also occur within academic spaces, including interactions with lecturers. From an intercultural communication perspective, this indicates that adaptation is a relational process influenced not only by individual efforts but also by the inclusivity of the host environment. In addition to this, cultural and environmental challenges, such as differences in food and climate, have also been identified in previous studies (Alasmari, 2023; Almutairi, 2020). While these challenges are often considered secondary, the findings of this study suggest that they contribute cumulatively to students’ overall adaptation experience. This aligns with the view that cross-cultural adaptation involves continuous negotiation between individuals and their environment.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that these challenges have significant implications for academic performance. Language barriers, academic difficulties, and psychological stress were found to negatively affect students’ ability to perform academically, supporting previous studies that identify stress as an impediment to academic success (Deng et al., 2022; Frazier et al., 2019). This highlights the interconnected nature of academic, psychological, and sociocultural factors in shaping student outcomes.

The coping mechanisms identified in this study further emphasise the role of communication in the adaptation process. Consistent with previous research, social media was found to play a significant role in helping students cope with stress and maintain social connections (Zahid et al., 2016). Similarly, establishing interpersonal relationships with peers supports adaptation by providing both emotional and academic support (Kim, 2016). However, the findings also highlight the importance of self-regulation, suggesting that adaptation involves both individual agency and external support systems.

Finally, the findings strongly support cross-cultural adaptation theory, which posits that individuals experience initial stress when entering a new cultural environment but gradually adjust



over time (Lopez, 2021). The participants' experiences reflect this pattern, as challenges were most intense during the early stages of enrolment and became more manageable as students developed coping strategies and familiarity with the host environment. However, the findings also suggest that adaptation is not a linear process but involves ongoing negotiation between individual, social, and institutional factors.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by international students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), the impact of these challenges on their academic performance, and the coping mechanisms employed to facilitate cross-cultural adaptation. The findings demonstrate that international students encounter multiple and interrelated challenges, particularly during the initial stages of their transition. Among these, language barriers, academic difficulties, and experiences of discrimination emerged as the most salient factors shaping students' adaptation experiences.

Importantly, the findings indicate that these challenges are not isolated issues but are deeply interconnected, influencing students' academic performance through both cognitive and psychological pathways. Language limitations, unfamiliar academic systems, and emotional stress were found to hinder students' ability to engage effectively in their academic tasks, highlighting the close relationship between sociocultural adjustment and academic success.

At the same time, the study reveals that international students are not passive recipients of these challenges but actively employ various coping strategies to navigate their new environment. Strategies such as self-regulation, the development of social relationships, and the use of digital communication platforms play a crucial role in mitigating stress and facilitating adaptation. These findings underscore the importance of both individual agency and social support in the adaptation process.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support cross-cultural adaptation theory, which conceptualises adaptation as a dynamic and ongoing process involving initial stress followed by gradual adjustment over time. However, the study extends this perspective by highlighting the central role of communication in shaping adaptation outcomes. The ability to interpret, negotiate, and engage in intercultural interactions emerges as a key factor influencing how students experience and overcome challenges.

Taken together, the findings suggest that successful adaptation is not solely dependent on language proficiency or academic ability, but rather on a holistic interplay between linguistic competence, social interaction, and sociocultural understanding. Therefore, higher education institutions should move beyond focusing solely on academic support and consider integrating intercultural communication development, social integration initiatives, and student support systems to enhance international students' overall adaptation and academic success.

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