

# An Exploration of African Students in Malaysia

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The exploratory study is an attempt to understand the reasons that prompted African students to study in Malaysia, the challenges encountered and the coping strategies used. The research on such topics among international students is well documented, but studies on international students in Malaysia are scarce. The sample included 155 African students studying in two private higher education institutions in Malaysia. A questionnaire was administered. The results indicated that most of the students chose to study in Malaysia because English is used as the medium of instruction. The challenges they face include developing friendships with Malaysian students. Keeping in touch with family and friends back in their home country is the highest ranked coping strategy.

*Keywords:* internationalization, African students, living in Malaysia, private higher education

## Introduction

The impact of globalization and internationalization on higher education has created a market for the active recruitment of international students, especially in Asia. According to a report by UNESCO-UIS (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-Institute of Statistics) (2009), the number of students pursuing tertiary education has increased five-fold over a period of 37 years. The enrollment of 28.6 million in 1970 grew to 152.5 million in 2007. More specifically, this growth has been active in East Asia and the Pacific where a 12-fold increase has been recorded. Malaysia is one such country that has contributed to this growth through the privatization of its higher education and the recruitment of international students. She is listed as one of the three emerging contenders in the development of student mobility across the globe (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

The country's multi-racial and multi-cultural background attracts students from different countries in Asia, such as Indonesia, India, Vietnam, China and Myanmar. In addition, the options for different programs, especially in undergraduate education have made Malaysia an attraction to students, because they are able to transfer to other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK (United Kingdom) and the US, because of the twinning agreements among countries (Yoshino, 2010).

Sirat (2008) pointed out that Malaysia became a preferred destination for higher education for Middle-East students after the September 11 tragedy. Stricter visa regulations that followed deterred international students from studying in the US. Conversely, students from different sub-Saharan nations have been enrolling in private higher education institutions in Malaysia, because it is easier to obtain a student visa to study in Malaysia as compared to the US. Consequently, there is a broader diversity spectrum of student population in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

One of the challenging tasks for most higher education institutions in Malaysia with the increase of cultures and cultural groups is to ensure that the international students cope well with the adjustment to the host

country and the learning environment. Studies related to the factors that attract international students to countries, such as the US, the UK and Australia and their adjustments are widely documented (Ramburuth & Tani, 2009). However, similar studies related to international students in Asian institutions of higher education are limited. Specifically, studies on international students in Malaysian higher education institutions are equally limited.

Hence, this exploratory study was an attempt to investigate the possible factors that influence African students' decisions to enroll in private higher education institutions in Malaysia and the challenges of coping with living and studying in the country's cross-cultural environment. Specially, the foci was on identifying the reasons why these students chose Malaysia as a destination for higher education, the challenges they face studying in this country and their abilities to adjust and/or thrive in their host countries as well as the new learning environment. The research questions are:

- (1) What are the factors that attracted African students to Malaysia?
- (2) What are the challenges faced by African students in Malaysia?
- (3) How do African students cope with living and studying in Malaysia?

The limitations for this study include the sample of African students enrolled in only two private higher education institutions. Hence, generalizations of the results may not be viable. However, it is important that this topic of study is further explored, because it has implications for international student recruiting, understanding African learners, and teaching and learning in the classroom.

For the purpose of this research, the definition of an internationally mobile person is adapted from the UNESCO-UIS' (2009, p. 35) description, which states that the UIS defines internationally mobile students as those who study in a foreign country of which they are not a permanent resident.

### **International Students in Malaysia**

Currently, students across the globe have more options for higher education, especially with the marked increased of countries that are keen to develop its ability to compete as an education provider internationally. There is a 53% increase of mobile students globally since 1993 (UNESCO-UIS, 2009). Sugimura (2008) described an emerging flow heading to countries in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region. This mobility includes students from the Middle East and African countries. The former's influx may be attributed to the impact of the September 11 attack on the US, while the latter group's presence may have resulted in an outcome of the cooperation between African and Asian nations (Sirat, 2008; Sugimura, 2008).

The enrollment of international students in Malaysia has increased steadily over the past decade with the country's aim to enroll 100,000 by 2010. The NCHERM (National Center for Higher Education Research Malaysia) (2009) reported that a total of 70,426 international students were enrolled in institutions of higher education in 2008. Approximately, 71.9% of this population was studying in private higher education institutions, while 28.1% were students at the public institutions. In addition, this recent report identified the representation of countries among these students according to enrollment number. From 2003 to 2005, students from mainland China were the biggest group with Indonesian students being the second biggest. However, this changed in 2006 with Indonesian students being the largest group, while students from China have become the second largest. Students from Bangladesh and Pakistan were the third and fourth largest groups from 2003 to 2006. This trend changed in 2007 with Iran and Nigeria replaced these two countries in the Indian Continent. The latter group represents the majority of African students in Malaysia.

### African Students in Malaysia

African students are the most mobile international students (Mulumba, Obaje, Kobedi, & Kishun, 2008). According to Maringe and Carter (2007), it was estimated that one out of 15 foreign students in the UK is an African. Their study is one of the few that investigated the possible reasons why these students decided to study in the UK and their experiences as international students. The results indicated that there were more push than pull factors that encouraged this mobility, which include economic and political reasons as well as the lack of higher education opportunities in the home country. The main pull factors include the recognition and prestige of obtaining UK qualifications. Recommendation of friends was an influential factor for African students who chose to study in the UK for the first time. The concerns among the students who chose to study in the UK include the financial demands and the inability to pay for their studies.

The research literature on African students' decisions to study in Malaysia as well as their experiences living and studying in this country are scarce. Unfortunately, there are unfavorable newspaper reports about African students' criminal activities and other social problems.

### Methodology

A questionnaire survey was developed to seek certain information related to the three research questions for this study. Several statements linked to the three research questions were designed to inquire more detailed information. Convenience sampling was the primary method employed to obtain participants as the two private higher education institutions enroll quite a substantial number of African students.

An email was sent to the respective lecturers who had African students in their classes to obtain permission to administer the survey for one institution. An informant was indentified to help administer the survey to African students in another institution. A total of 155 completed surveys were tabulated using SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) 16 to determine the frequency and percentage of responses to each statement. The answers were ranked according to the highest frequency and percentage of the combined "Strongly agree" and "Agree" responses.

Table 1 shows the diversity of African countries represented among the participants, which are mostly from the sub-Saharan region. This indicates the high mobility of students from this region. The largest representation from this sample is the Nigerian students who comprised 47.1% of the students surveyed. The second largest is from Botswana.

Table 1

#### *Demographic Characteristics*

Country	Frequency	Percent (%)
Nigeria	73	47.1
Eritrea	3	1.9
Kenya	11	7.1
Uganda	15	9.7
Botswana	26	16.8
Cameroon	4	2.6
Sudan	7	4.5
Tanzania	10	6.5
Mauritius	1	0.6
Somalia	1	0.6
Zimbabwe	4	2.6
Total	155	100.0

## Results and Discussion

It is interesting to note that more than half of the students surveyed choose to study in Malaysia, because its programs are conducted in English, and the possibility of transferring to a native English-speaking country is another factor that was highly rated. Another interesting factor is the availability of recruiting agents in the respective African countries or regions.

Forty-six percent of the students indicated that agents in their home countries recommended Malaysia as a higher education destination. The weaker factors are the recommendation of friends and also the multiracial context of Malaysia as indicated by the respective 31.0 and 34.8 percentages (see Table 2).

Yoshino (2010) pointed out that English as a medium of instruction in Malaysia offers international students an alternative “English-speaking” country for higher education. Most of the English medium programs are offered by private higher education institutions. In addition, many of these institutions have dedicated marketing departments that recruit nationally and internationally. These factors may have contributed to the higher enrollment of international students.

Table 2

### *Factors for Choosing Malaysia*

	Frequency	Percent (%)	Ranking
The tuition fee in Malaysia is affordable	56	36.2	8
The medium of instruction (teaching) is English	89	57.4	1
The multiracial context of Malaysia	54	34.8	9
The tropical weather	59	38.0	7
The recommendation of friends already studying in Malaysia	48	31.0	10
The recommendation by agents in own home country	72	46.4	3
The possibility of transferring to another country, such as Australia, the US and the UK	80	51.7	2
Malaysia is a relatively safe country	69	44.5	4
The education fairs that promoted Malaysia	67	43.2	5
My family encouraged me to study in Malaysia	61	36.4	6

The “transferability” factor indicated that Malaysia may be perceived by international students as a transit country where completing an undergraduate degree is not a priority. The availability of numerous franchise programs with Australia and the UK in Malaysia provides another option for international students who would like to pursue such a curriculum.

The data for the section pertaining to the challenges of studying and living in Malaysia investigated the students’ in-class and out-of-class experiences. The first ranked item describes a high level of agreement (70.9%) among the African students that it is easy to develop friendships with international students from other countries as compared to Malaysian students, which is indicated by a low level of 10.9% agreement (see Table 3). More often than not most international students go through a certain period of adjustment and transition while studying abroad. Similar experiences of having to cope in a new environment and adjusting to a new culture may create a sense of group acceptance, because they are facing the same challenges in and out of the classroom. Conversely, the data indicated that developing a relationship with Malaysian students is an arduous task, which implies that Malaysian students may be perceived as being indifferent to or intolerant of other cultures.

More than half of the African students agreed or strongly agreed that it is difficult to adjust to the local

food. Approximately, 54% of the students stated that it is difficult to work in groups, which is a normal challenge, because individual behaviors may become a communication barrier. This challenge is amplified when cross-cultural issues and concerns are not systematically addressed as a part of the classroom learning experience.

Table 3

*Challenges of Living in Malaysia*

	Frequency	Percent (%)	Ranking
It is easy to make friends among Malaysians.	17	10.9	10
It is easy to make friends among other international students.	110	70.9	1
It is easy to understand the lecturers.	48	31.0	5
It is easy to search for accommodation.	42	27.1	8
The orientation sessions provided useful information.	77	49.6	4
It was challenging to work in groups for group projects.	83	53.5	3
It was difficult to work on individual assignments.	43	27.8	7
Most students find it difficult to understand the African accent.	44	28.4	6
It was difficult to adjust to the local food.	84	54.2	2
It was difficult to buy groceries and other basic necessities.	26	16.8	9

The most important coping mechanism for these students is making sure that they are in touch with their families and friends back home. Approximately, 83% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that this helps them cope with the challenges of living and studying in Malaysia. The second ranked item is the academic focus where 76.8% of the students indicated that this is important. Completing their studies and doing well is one of the primary objectives of sojourning to Malaysia. Hence, keeping in touch with lecturers is ranked fourth as a priority coping strategy with 72.2% of the African students either agreeing or strongly agreeing to it (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Coping Strategies*

	Frequency	Percent (%)	Ranking
Having fellow Africans on campus helps new African students to adjust to the new environment.	114	73.5	3
Initiating friendships with Malaysian students will help new African students to adjust to the new environment.	88	56.7	10
Initiating friendships with other international students will help new African students to adjust to the new environment.	110	71.0	6
Becoming a member of the African Student Association will help new African students to find a sense of belonging.	91	58.7	8
Keeping in touch with other African students at other campuses creates a sense of belonging to a wider community.	108	69.7	7
Staying focused on academic achievements is highly recommended for all African students.	119	76.8	2
Learning more about Malaysia and its people will be helpful to reduce any form of cultural miscommunication.	91	58.7	8
Keeping in touch with family and friends back home helps to reduce homesickness.	128	82.6	1
Keeping in touch with lecturers will help to reduce frustrations about completing assignments.	112	72.2	4
Staying active in extra-curricular activities will help to build good relationships with other students.	111	71.6	5

The lowest ranked item (56.7%), which indicated the possibility of initiating friendships with Malaysian

students, is consistent with the African students' opinions that making friends with the former is a formidable task. This is an area that requires some thought about diversity in the classroom and is a very important issue to address, because the world has become increasingly borderless as the mobility of individuals become more fluid.

### Conclusions

As a small and developing country, Malaysia has positioned herself as a hub for higher education and is aiming at increasing its international student population. However, the challenges faced by the higher education institutions that enroll them have to be identified, discussed and delineated as a part of a bigger system that intends to work towards world class standards in university education. One of the key issues is to begin to understand the different groups of international students who are in Malaysia and the challenges they face while living and studying here. Additionally, the experience of Malaysian students and staff in working with international students is another area that needs to be explored.

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