THE INFLUENCE OF SELF-EFFICACY, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT IN UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

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Introduction

In Malaysia, international student enrolment is an important goal to the country's higher education, the economy, and to the nation's society in general. Since 2001, a flurry of newspaper and magazine articles has been published highlighting the decrease in the enrollment of international students in the United States after the events of September 11, 2001 (Alberts, 2007). Morshidi (2008) highlighted that the international students were reluctant to go to the United States for their education. The U.S. government mandated changes in the admissions process have contributed to the decrease in new enrollment. After 9/11, the growth in numbers of international students enrolled in Malaysian higher learning institutions has been marked, increasing from 3,167 in 2003 to 12,411 in 2008. These students come from a number of countries. Students from Indonesia (3,631) and Iran (3,100) constitute the top two highest number of international students in public universities in this country (National Higher Education Research Institute, Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). There are also a big number of students from China (1,583), Yaman (1,374), Libya (727), and Arab Saudi (612). The arrival of these students at university and college campuses diversifies the viewpoints of the student body, enhances cultural exchange, and promotes internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Morshidi, 2008), and greatly contributes to academia, for instance, making visible the need for cross-cultural psychological studies. In another study, Morshidi (2008) studied the impact of September 11 on international student flow into Malaysia.

Gap in Previous Studies

Given this large number of international students, greater attention has been directed toward the adjustment of students from abroad to Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Moshidi, 2008; Yusliza, 2010; Yusliza & Shankar, 2010). Although the number of international students on campuses continues to increase, only a limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia. For instance, a research by National Higher Education Research Institute in June 2009, has concentrated on issues and problems in attracting international students to Malaysia, including dealing with such issues as the socialisation of the international students, how to deal with the issues and problems faced by the international students, and finally suggestions to manage and recruit the international students.

Research on international students' adjustment has resulted in tremendous work examining various factors, antecedents, determinants, and outcomes and has led the way in the area of multiculturalism on university campuses. However, a stronger focus on studies on international students is still needed as there is a dearth of studies dealing with international students adjusting their life psychologically in Malaysia. In the present study psychological adjustment refers to the emotional expression and is often described as psychological well-being, depression, stress, mental health concerns, or emotional satisfaction and psysical symptoms (Searl & Ward, 1990).

A close examination of the literature reveals that although self-efficacy and social support are frequently studied in international students research (e.g., Sumer et al., 2008), research on the same variables were not studied among the international undergraduate students population in Malaysia. Considering the fact that there is limited research on self-efficacy and social support among international undergraduate students in Malaysia, the main objective of this study is to contribute further to the literature by examining the relationship between self-efficacy and social support and psychological adjustment among undergraduate international students. This article is part of a larger research project in which several aspects of international students' adjustment were investigated.

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy and Adjustment

The general term self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). According to Bandura (1995), motivation, affective states, and actions displayed by humans frequently result from what they believe rather than from an objective assessment of the situation. In other words, perceived causative capabilities are a source of human agency and the efficacy theory explains in depth on how

humans can develop and enhance their efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1995). Bandura believed perceived efficacy to be the fundamental basis of human motivation.

Schwarzer (1992) conceptualised general self-efficacy, which is concerned with more global and stable personal capability to address effectively many stressful situations. General self-efficacy is considered a personal resource or vulnerability factor that can influence a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. General self-efficacy reflects an optimistic self-belief of an individual (Schwarzer, 1992). General self-efficacy also tends to help an individual facilitate goal setting, effort investment, persistence in face of barriers, recovery from setbacks, and emotional adaptiveness (Bandura, 1995; Poyrazli, McPherson, Arbona, Pisecco, & Nora, 2002; Schwarzer, 1992). During the stressful transitional adaptation to a different culture, self-efficacy plays a critical role in protecting against negative experience and emotion, and health impairment (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995).

This argument leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Self-efficacy is positively related to psychological adjustment.

Social Support and Adjustment

Social support is very helpful to international students in adjusting effectively in the host university. DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) studied the linkage of personality and social supports to certain coping strategies and the effectiveness of these coping strategies among patients. The study found that level of satisfaction of social supports received by the patients will affect their coping strategies or behaviours and thus their changes in pain severity over time. When this similar situation is applied to the newly registered international students, the level of social supports received by them might change them psychologically over time.

Yusliza (2011) collected and analysed data from 185 international undergraduate students enrolled in a large public university in the Northern region of Malaysia. The study discovered that support from friends and significant others was positively and significantly related to all dimensions of sociocultural adjustments, which are cultural empathy, impersonal endeavours, and cultural relatedness. However, support from family was only positively and significantly related to cultural empathy. In another study to examine computer-mediated communication technologies, perceived social support, perceived cultural distance, and socio-cultural adjustment among 80 international undergraduate students conducted by Yusliza, Ramayah, Nadarajah, and Mutia (2011), it was found perceived social support was positively related to sociocultural adjustment in international students.

Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton (2005) developed five-item perceived social support scale from people at home via computer-mediated communication (CMC) to measure the positive effect of continuous contact on the perceptions of availability of social support among 280 first-year international students in United States. They found that social support affected directly the students' psychological adaptation and indirectly toward their academic adaptation.

> **"...international students with higher levels of self-efficacy showed higher levels of psychological adjustment".**

Therefore, the following hypothese are constructed:

H2: Social support is related to psychological adjustment.

H2a: Support from family is positively related to psychological adjustment.

H2b: Support from friends and significant others is positively related to psychological adjustment.

Participants

Participants were 185 international undergraduate students enrolled in a large public university in the Northern region of Malaysia. In all, 85 were male (45.9%) and 100 were female (54.1%). The students were from a variety of different countries (48.1% from China, 14.1% from Indonesia, 10.3% from Finland, 7.0% from Canada, 4.3% from Thailand, 3.2% from France, 2.7 % from Saudi Arabia, 2.2 % from Korea, and 8.1% from other countries such as Maldives, Nigeria, Singapore, Cambodia, Sudan, Iran, and the United States). The average age was 21.2 years (SD = 1.53) and their average length of stay in Malaysia was 16 months (SD = 12.64). More than three fourths (98.4%) of the participants were single and 1.6% of the participants were married. All faculties were represented, with more than half of the students enrolled in the School of Management (56.2%).

Results

Multiple Regression Analyses

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test Hypothesis 1 and 2 of this study. Specifically, these hypotheses are on the effects of self-efficacy and the two dimensions of social support on psychological adjustment. Social support comprised support from family and support from friends and significant others. The dependent variable in this model relates to psychological adjustment. Three main independent variables were entered in the regression analysis.

Overall, the regression model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .40$, Adjusted $R^2 = .39$, F change = 40.86, p = .00. Out of the three independent variables investigated, self-efficacy ($\beta = .33$, $p < .01$) and support from friends and significant others ($\beta = .39$, $p < .01$) had significant positive effects on psychological adjustment. Thus, Hypothesis 1 and 2b are supported. However, Hypothesis 2a is rejected due to insignificant finding. Based on the beta value, it can be said that support from friends and significant others had the highest explanatory power as compared to self-efficacy.

Discussion

The Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Psychological Adjustment

The finding of this study is in line with Poyrazli et al. (2002) and Moeini, Shafii, Hidarnia, and Babaii (2008). Poyrazli et al. (2002) found that students with higher levels of academic self-efficacy reported fewer adjustment problems. Moeini et al. (2008) revealed that greater stress was associated with lower general self-efficacy and lower mental health status. They also discovered a significant inverse relationship between self-efficacy and general health. In the present study, high self-efficacy very likely helps students approach challenging situations without incapacitating anxiety or confusion. This high self-efficacy is likely to help them feel that they have the ability and competence to deal with academic situations and problems. As a result, they possibly experience a better psychological adjustment.

The Relationship Between Social Support and Psychological Adjustment

Having social relationships are crucial for the international students' adjustment, especially relationships with friends from Malaysia. Having Malaysian friends is essential when it comes to cultural and language adaptation. Church (1982) stated that friends are beneficial in providing the sense of belonging. In addition, international students lose their shared identity and support from their families as they pursue studies in Malaysia. This loss of support forces them to develop new cross-cultural friendships with individuals from the host nation as well as other international students.

The current study also demonstrates that international students have the highest levels of support from other people. Students who experience higher levels of support from a special person were more likely to experience more psychological adjustment in the university. The students felt his or her partner, who was an international student as well, was able to provide better support, as he or she had similar experiences to him or her. Couples that have similar experiences would be more understanding of the mutual difficulties faced by them. Literature highlights the importance of perception of support—the perception of being loved by others and that they will be available if needed—in adjustment of the members of the couple (Beach & Gupta, 2006; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998).

The results of this study do not support the findings of previous studies regarding international students' support from family and their adjustment (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Black & Gregersen, 1991; De Cieri, Dowling, & Taylor, 1991). Ang and Liamputtong (2008) found that international students agreed that their family was their main source of support. Cost, time difference, or geographical location did not appear to be an issue for the students in their study. Black and Gregersen (1991) and De Cieri et al. (1991) reported that satisfaction with family relationships has been shown to be significantly associated with psychological adjustment to relocation throughout the expatriation process. There might be three reasons for this discrepant finding. First, previous studies (Black & Gregersen, 1991; De Cieri et al., 1991) used samples that included expatriates in international assignment. Most of the expatriates are married, thus they need their spouse and children to be in the same country to support their life and work in a foreign country. For the current study, most of the international students are single and the most important persons in university life to give moral support in their study are their friends and special person. Second, the students are reluctant to seek support from family from their home countries because they do not want their families to worry about them in Malaysia. As a result, they only rely on their friends or conational for their social interaction and relationships needs.

Policy Recommendation

The results of this study shows that the international students with higher levels of self-efficacy showed higher levels of psychological adjustment. In addition, the results reveals that the importance of friends and others in the study's environment has helped the international students to adjust better in the psychological aspect of adjustment. The recommendation for policy implications are for faculty members to focus on establishing interventions facilitating social support through friends and others as well as build the students' confidence level (in order to increase their self-efficacy) and thus, enhance psychological adjustment of students. For example, creating orientation programmes, more group works, more outdoor activities, encourage the students to speak in class, programme regular gathering, or international students' day that includes social activities and the interaction may be more beneficial than the activities that focus solely on academic requirements or maintaining legal status. Facilitating such programmes would probably work best at the level of particular academic schools rather than if left to the discretion of international student office. On the basis of the current research, it could be hypothesized that programmes that enhance

psychological adjustment of undergraduate international students would increase their satisfaction and will lead to an increase in their academic performance.

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