International Students' Perspectives on the Importance of Obtaining Social Support from Host National Students

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Abstract

Students pursuing studies in a foreign land experience a disruption or loss of familiar support networks that function as powerful coping mechanisms in times of stress. Loss of social support has been associated with negative consequences such as depression, anxiety and loneliness. Researchers have categorized social support as emotional, practical, informational and in the form of social companionship. This study reports the findings of a study involving undergraduate international students pursuing their first degrees in four research universities in Malaysia. Using the quantitative methodology, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to international undergraduates with a return of 318 questionnaires. Results showed that many international students desired frequent social support from host national students in all four categories. Suggestions are made to institutions of higher learning to create a more supportive and conducive environment for intercultural contact in line with the efforts of internationalization.

Keywords: host national students, international students, intercultural contact, loss, social support

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

Research on stress and coping has highlighted the importance of social support and its positive health outcomes, including both physical and mental well-being (Argyle, 1992; Piko, 1998). Students pursuing studies in a foreign land experience a disruption or loss of familiar support networks that functioned as powerful coping mechanisms in times of stress. Loss of social support has been associated with negative consequences such as depression, anxiety and loneliness (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yang & Clum, 1995). To combat the undesired consequences, affected individuals are often compelled to find new ways of getting some of the needed encouragement and assistance by developing new support systems in the host country besides maintaining a long-distance support with important sources at home (Walton, 1990). Interactions between international students and host nationals were found to contribute immensely towards social satisfaction and social support (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011). It was also found that international students would have liked more emotional, practical and informational support from host national students. International students' desire for more of such support may be due to a lack of contact with host national students who could be instrumental in the international students' adjustment to the new culture. Increased contact between both groups of students could pave the way for the provision of emotional and practical support associated with a social network. In short, social support plays an important role in the well-being of students and is a key area of concern especially for international students.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

Hung and Hyun (2010) highlighted that the internationalization of the higher education system has brought about a renewed focus on transforming institutions of higher learning to be more supportive and conducive for intercultural contact from proper support systems for international students to a more favorable, all-encompassing curriculum. What this entails is a need to critically understand the needs and cultural norms of international students to establish a highly conducive environment for both host nationals and international students to work and collaborate in a promising manner within an academic setting. In Malaysia, the intensification of internationalization of higher education by its Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in recent years has seen an increase of international student enrolment into Malaysian higher institutions of learning

(Morshidi, 2008). According to the internationalization policy outlined by MOHE (2011), one of the outcomes expected was to increase positive experiences of international students. To realize these positive experiences, it is important to integrate the Malaysian host national students of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other ethnic backgrounds with the international students. The policy had voiced a concern that host national students may have problems integrating international students as part of their social community. To add to this concern, an initial survey by the researchers of this study revealed that there was very little social support from host national students for the international students in four of the universities in Malaysia. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the interaction between host national and international students in four research universities in Malaysia. Specifically, the interaction between these two groups of students was examined in the context of the social support networks accessible to the international students.

The significance of the study is that, unlike majority of the studies carried out on international students in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the United States of America, this particular study in a Malaysian environment presents a different perspective altogether. Malaysia is rich in its multi-ethnic and multicultural diversity, thus the presence of international students who bring their individual cultures to Malaysia, would help widen this diversity. In addition, the findings of this study hopes to provide data to MOHE in promoting its plans and realization of its internationalization policy, particularly in producing a "conducive environment for international students", as well as enhancing the quality of social networking and support for the international students in Malaysia (MOHE, 2011).

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives and Relevant Literature

Theoretically, this study is based on a functional model developed by Bochner, Mcleod, and Lin (1977) to describe the interaction patterns of international students that are categorized into three functions: co-national networks, host national networks and multi-national networks. The co-national network refers to fellow international students from the same countries (Bochner et al., 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985) and this network forms the primary function of affirming and expressing the culture of origin. Woolf (2007) explains that within the circle of co-national friendships, international students are able to gain a wider understanding of the host country's culture through discussions and social interactions with other co-nationals. Meanwhile, for the network with host nationals, Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) describes its function as an "instrumental facilitation of academic and professional aspirations" (p. 283). Many studies have found that international students also desired to have more contact with host national students and those that had more contact with host nationals were able to adapt better to life overseas, and they had less problems socializing and they became more competent in their communication. The third category of multi-national networks refers to social interactions with multi-nationals visiting from other countries. They are international students who feel the same emotions of being strangers in a foreign land and thus they form friendships with students from other countries (Kim, 2001).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 249) viewed the term *support*, as "the nature of the interactions occurring in social relationships, especially how these are evaluated by the person as to their supportiveness". Despite the multidimensional nature of support (Winemuller et al., 1993), generally there is still some agreement that support comprised of four main types. Cohen and Wills (1985) examined the buffering model and the main-effect model of the benefits of social support on one's psychological well-being. They asserted that support acts as a stress "buffer" and it helps to reduce stress by providing solutions to problems that arise in certain situations. Thus, they provided four social resources: emotional, practical, informational and social companionship support. Emotional support is defined as 'information that a person is esteemed and accepted' (p. 313) and includes behaviours that show love, concern, sympathy, encouragement and approval. Practical (instrumental) support is tangible help in the form of financial aid, material resources, and needed services. Acts such as lending money, helping with language problems or providing transport are examples of practical support. Informational support is 'help in defining, understanding and coping with problematic events' and it also 'includes education, advice or referral to another source of support' (p. 313). Social companionship support refers to a sense of belonging to a social group that provides company for leisure and recreational activities.

Early research by Bochner, Buker, and McLeod (1976) reported that host nationals were sought for practical and informational support (language and academic assistance). In another study (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985), international students also sought host nationals for practical and informational support (help for language and academic problems). Similar support preference is repeated in yet another research by Westwood and Barker (1990) who found that international students in Canada and Australia would rather seek practical and informational support (help in language and academic problems) and social companionship support (sightseeing activities) from host national students. Ramsay, Barker, and Jones, (2007) reported on 280 first year students studying at an Australian university that there is a positive relationship between the level of adjustment and the

amount of each type of support. The research also revealed that well-adjusted international students had significantly higher levels of social companionship support while well-adjusted host national students reported significantly higher levels of emotional and social companionship support. Both host national and international students reported that friends provided the most emotional, practical, and social companionship support.

Rewards resulting from social support for international students were found to be limited to those who are highly acculturated to the host country's culture (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010) whereby social support in this case would come from host nationals. This may be attributed to the nature of the relationship that can be described as being co-dependent where international students and host nationals rely on one another for academic and social purposes. Having such social support that can be eventually translated outside the classrooms would promote intercultural communication and acceptance amongst the students. As mentioned by Harrison (2012), with proactive management, institutions of higher learning will be better equipped at handling intercultural dynamics based on different cultural backgrounds thereby successfully fostering friendships between host nationals and international students.

In a study carried out by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) on the intercultural competencies of students from different cultural background, it should be noted that host nationals and international students who have forged strong friendships can provide not only social and emotional support but academic assistance as well. In particular, strong social support given to international students by host national students would allow the former to be more at ease and comfortable living and studying in a foreign country that present different cultural norms and traditions. At its core, a majority of host national students may express support for cultural diversity in the institutions of higher learning that they are enrolled in. The significant push for more intercultural contact lies in its benefits for both host national and international students. From social support to psychological well-being, positive intercultural relations between the two factions would allow remarkable progress for multicultural acceptance that has the potential to go beyond the confines of the academic environment (Harrison, 2012).

Social support from friends of different cultural backgrounds is indispensable as it allows for an increased cognizant on diversity and tolerance (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Moreover, there is a sense of commonality that would not alienate international students from feeling alone in a foreign environment unlike what they are used to at home. Without doubt, there are hindrances that prevent international students to be more proactive in building friendships and positive relationships with their peers from the host country (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Finally, friendships between international students and host nationals have been found to be one of the more important channels that contribute towards both social satisfaction and social support (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Moreover, it has been suggested that social support does have an influence on the academic performance of international students and host nationals since it is a collaborative effort coming from both factions helping out one another in their studies.

1.4 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

The hypotheses for this study was derived from the theory of multidimensional nature of support postulated by Winemuller et al., (1993), in which they believed support comprises of four main types which are categorised from the aspects of emotional, practical, informational and social companionship support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Thus, the main research question in this study is: 'What social support do international students expect from host national students?' and the specific research questions are:

- RQ1: What are the types of emotional support that international students expect from host national students?

- RQ2: What are the types of practical support that international students expect from host national students?

- RQ3: What are the types of informational support that international students expect from host national students?

- RQ4: What are the types of social companionship support that international students expect from host national students?

Findings of this study would be of benefit to the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOHE) in enhancing internationalization in higher education. The research design would also permit the public universities to hone in their attention on improving interactions between international students and host national students which would subsequently improve the quality of international students' social support systems.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Using the quantitative methodology, involving questionnaires, this study was carried out as part of a larger study investigating the variables of interactions between host national students and international students: quantity and quality of contact, friendship patterns and social support over a two-year period in four public research universities in Malaysia. For the purpose of confidentiality, the identity of the universities is represented by Universities A, B, C and D.

2.2 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

From the population of international students enrolled in undergraduate degree courses in Universities A, B, C and D, a total of 318 samples were obtained using the random sampling method. Table 1 indicates the distribution of the respondents who completed the questionnaires.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to universities

Universities	Number of respondents
A	152
B	57
C	62
D	47
Total	318

Although the admissions offices in the four universities stressed that the actual enrolment of undergraduate international students was more, the samples obtained above were the only ones accessible at the time of the study.

2.3 Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researchers of this study. The questionnaire comprised a demographic section including gender, age of respondents, current year of study, number of years spent in Malaysia and respondents' field of study. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree), the questionnaire contained 14 items relating to social support experienced by international students in the four universities. As mentioned in the literature by Cohen and Wills (1985), the items were categorized into the four areas of social support; namely emotional, practical, informational and social companionship support. Items 1-6 pertain to emotional support while items 7-10 involve the practical support given by host national students. Items 11-13 refers to informational support and item 14 pertains to social companionship support offered to the international students.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Item Analysis

Information regarding the interaction was cross-tabulated with the results from a 4-point Likert Scale pertaining to items on social support. These items were analyzed using SPSS version 19.0 for Windows. For the purpose of this study, significance has been set at $p \leq 0.05$.

2.4.2 Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used to look for sets of responses which have a high correlation with each other. The internal consistency of the items in each factor of the questionnaire established was checked using Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. The items in each factor were considered reliable as the established readings were high at 0.951. According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (2010), the cut-off point acceptable for reliability is 0.70.

3. Results

Results for this study are presented in the following sub-sections. The first section presents the demographic data while the second section presents the data analysis for the research questions.

3.1 Recruitment

Questionnaires were collected between the period of September 2011 and January 2012. The dates coincide with the teaching and learning period where respondents would be attending classes in the campuses. A total of 335 questionnaires were returned but only 318 were fully completed.

3.2 Analysis of Demographic Data

The samples obtained in this study comprised 164 (52%) female and 154 (48%) male international undergraduate students. 22% of the samples were in the age group ranging from 16-20 years old, while the majority, 68% of the participants were in the age group between 21-24 years old. Only 8% were aged between 25-30 years old while 2% were aged between 31-35 years old (Table 2).

Table 2. Age group of respondents

Age Groups	Percentage (%)
16-20 years	22
21-24 years	68
25-30 years	8
31-35 years	2
Total	100%

3.3 Social Support Expected from Host National Students

As can be seen from the mean scores for all 14 items in Table 3, international undergraduate students in all four public universities desire the four areas of social support from host national students.

Table 3. Social support expectations from international students

No	Items	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Mean Score
	Emotional support					
1.	I share my happiness with host national students.	6.0	22.5	57.0	14.4	2.80
2.	I share my sadness with host national students.	17.7	42.6	33.7	6.0	2.28
3.	When I am under pressure, I depend on host national students to help me relax.	13.3	41.1	33.3	12.3	2.45
4.	Host national students accept me as I am.	4.0	17.0	62.8	16.2	2.91
5.	When I cannot cope with my studies, I get encouragement from host national students.	13.3	29.5	43.5	13.7	2.58
6.	When I feel sad and I need a listening ear, I talk to host national students.	19.6	42.8	32.3	5.3	2.23
	Practical support					
7.	Host national students help me to do my work (eg. assignments, presentations, etc.) when I need it.	10.9	22.2	51.4	15.5	2.71
8.	Host national students help me to check my work (eg. assignments, presentations, etc.) when I need to do so.	10.2	22.2	55.6	12.0	2.69
9.	Host national students collect lecture notes for me whenever I miss a lecture.	14.4	23.2	50.5	11.9	2.60

10.	Host national students help me when I need equipment (eg. laptop, printer, etc.) to support specific learning needs.	7.4	23.2	56.5	13.0	2.75
	Informational support					
11.	Host national students advise me about university rules and regulations.	9.5	24.2	51.2	15.1	2.72
12.	Host national students explain to me when I am not clear about a course/program offered in the university	7.0	15.1	59.3	18.6	2.89
13.	I get financial advice from host national students when I need it.	23.2	36.1	31.8	8.9	2.26
	Social companionship support					
14.	I go out with host national students for social activities (eg. watching movies, shopping, etc.)	11.6	24.9	49.1	14.4	2.66

3.3.1 Emotional Support

The results of the survey pertaining to the types of emotional support international students expect from host national students (RQ 1) reveal that international students expect to share their times of happiness with host national students (mean score = 2.80). The total percentage of students who agree and strongly agree that they share their happiness with host national students exceeds 70%. However, during times of sadness (mean score = 2.28), the percentage of students who disagree and strongly disagree that they share their disappointments with host national students adds up to slightly more than 60%. On the point of interacting with host national students in times of stress (mean score = 2.45), the weightage of both sides are almost equal. The total percentage of strongly disagreeing and disagreeing totals up to 54.4% while agreeing and strongly agreeing add up to about 45%. On a positive note, the percentage of students who felt accepted into the community of host national students (mean score = 2.91) totals 77%. In terms of receiving encouragement when they cannot cope with their studies (mean score = 2.58), 57.2% agree while less than 50% disagree. Finally, when international students "need a listening ear", 62.4% of the students believe that they find it difficult to talk to host national students about their problems (mean score = 2.23).

3.3.2 Practical Support

Data analysis concerning the types of practical support desired by international students from host national students (RQ 2) indicate positive results in a number of areas. Practical assistance include receiving assistance from host national students in preparing work which include assignments, presentations and so forth (mean score = 2.71); assistance in reviewing their work (mean score = 2.69); collecting lecture notes when they are absent from lectures and tutorials (mean score = 2.60) and loaning them equipment such as laptops, printers and so forth in support of their learning needs (mean score = 2.75). 66.9% of the international students agree that host national students help them prepare their assignments and presentations, while 67.6% agree that host national students help to check the work of the international students. Also, more than 60% agree that host national students collect lecture notes for the international students when they miss lectures. Almost 70% of the international students agree that host national students help provide technical support in the form of notebooks, printers and so forth to meet their specific learning needs.

3.3.3 Informational Support

Results related to the types of informational support that international students expect from host national students (RQ 3) highlight facts such as receiving advice about university rules and regulations (mean score = 2.72); advice about courses/programs offered in the university (mean score = 2.72); and financial advice from host national students (mean score = 2.26) are considered to be particularly important types of informational support that could be rendered by the host national peers. More than 60% of the international students concur that host national students do offer advice pertaining to university rules and regulations while almost 78% of the students agree that host national students offer further explanations about courses and programs offered in the university when they are in doubt. However, in terms of financial advice, 59.3% disagree that they could seek host national students for help.

3.3.4 Social Companionship Support

In terms of social companionship with host national students (RQ 4), activities include watching movies, shopping, playing games and sight-seeing (mean score = 2.66). 63.5% of the international students concur that they were able to participate in social activities with host national students.

Overall, the average mean score was 2.61 which indicates that majority of the international students agree that they desire social support from host national students. In terms of emotional support, the average mean score was 2.55, while the mean score for practical support averaged up to 2.68. For informational support, the average mean score was 2.56 and for social companionship, it was 2.66.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of the Results

This study was designed to examine the types of social support that international students expect from host national students in four public research universities in Malaysia (tabled as Universities A, B, C and D). The results suggest that generally international students enrolled in these universities expect the four main types of support: emotional, practical, informational and social companionship support. These four main types were discussed in Cohen and Wills's (1985) study as vital in benefitting one's psychological well-being as well as alleviating stress.

Consistent with the main research question of this study, findings show that those international students who are accepted into the social circle of host national students display significantly higher levels of satisfaction, less stress and lower levels of homesickness. These findings are in tandem with the findings of Harrison (2012) who asserted that positive intercultural relations between the two factions would allow remarkable progress for multicultural acceptance that has the potential to go beyond the confines of the academic environment.

Adjustment to new learning and social environments in a foreign country can be a stressful process for international students who have the added strain of adjusting to new cultural values, language and study habits (Yusliza, 2012). For RQ 1, being happy and being accepted by host national students were most important to the international students while being encouraged to cope with their studies was next. These findings are supported by Cohen & Wills (1985) who asserted that emotional support include being accepted and among the behaviours that was listed are love, concern, sympathy, approval and encouragement. The findings are also in tandem with Yusliza's (2012) findings that the importance of friends and others in their environment has helped the international students to adjust better in psychological aspect of adjustment. However, as stated by Zhang and Zhou (2011), cultural differences set up barriers for their willingness and attempts to make friends with the host national students. International students who successfully managed the cultural differences and enjoyed friendship with the host national students felt significantly more satisfied with their experiences at the university and more confident with their ability to interact (pp. 131-132).

The advantages of having social relationships are vital for international students' adjustment, especially relationships with friends from Malaysia. According to Yusliza (2012), having Malaysian friends is important in the context of cultural and language adaptation. As international students lose their shared identity and support from their families as they pursue their studies in Malaysia, they are forced to develop new cross-cultural friendships with students from the host nationals and other international students. Consistent with RQ 2 & RQ 3, results are supported by studies (Bochner, Buker, & McLeod, 1976; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985) in which host nationals were sought for practical and informational support (language and academic assistance or problems). In this study, practical support with the highest mean comes in the form of academic assistance from host national students in areas such as assignments, presentations, and so forth; and also in the form of equipment (laptop, printer, and so forth) to support specific learning needs.

Finally, the results for RQ 4 indicate that the international students do indeed desire participation in social outings with host national students and therefore, social companionship support is consistent with the findings of Westwood and Barker (1990) who mentioned sightseeing activities as a form of social companionship.

4.2 Future Implications

The findings of this study imply that there are several implications for university hostel administrators, educators, administrators working with international students, as well as researchers interested in intercultural relationships within academic environments. Firstly, there is a crucial need to understand the experiences of these students so that the various stakeholders are able to assist the international students through the provision of professional and culturally sensitive academic advisory services to support academic acculturation initiatives/activities amongst foreign students. Such initiatives could include support for English language communication (written and verbal)

programs, developing inclusive orientation programs that are student-centered. These efforts will consequently foster host national students' involvement and interaction with international students. The findings are also particularly useful for the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in line with its internationalization policy of increasing *positive experiences* (such as academic support, emotional support and so forth) of international students.

4.3 Conclusion

This study has provided empirical findings in relation to international students' obtaining social support from the Malaysian students. The findings, specifically has found that social support in the specific areas of emotional, practical, informational and social companionship support play significant roles in the experiences and well-being of international students in the four research universities in Malaysia. With this knowledge and understanding, the stakeholders in higher education such as the students, educators, counselors, and administrators could create and implement suitable intervention programs to improve social support from local students for the international students. The findings also help the students to face, manage and handle social support issues more critically to help improve the learning and social experience of international students in Malaysia. In addition, in line with the internationalization policy outlined by MOHE (2011), one of the outcomes expected was to increase positive experiences of international students. Thus, it is recommended that institutions of higher learning in Malaysia provide a more conducive support network for international students in order that they may enjoy a more favorable, all-encompassing curriculum.

Future research could delve into the importance of analyzing the quantity and quality of interactions as well as the outcomes of friendship patterns between international students and host students. This would help in not only providing causal predictions but would also inform researchers' understanding of how such interactions develop over time between international students and host national students.

Acknowledgments

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