

# Sociocultural Adjustment Challenges Encountered by Arab Students in Selected Malaysian Public Universities

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the number of Arab students enrolled in Malaysian universities has increased significantly. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab students as they adapt to a new cultural environment in selected Malaysian public universities. A mixed-methods research design was employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The sample of this study consisted of 261 students who studied at five Malaysian public universities, and 10 students were interviewed from the targeted universities using the simple random sampling technique. This study was based on cross-cultural adaptation theory, drawing on the U-curve model of adaptation and utilizing a modified version of Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS). The findings revealed that environmental and academic challenges had the highest mean scores, while language and social challenges ranked at intermediate levels. The qualitative interviews also highlighted four main areas of difficulty, with language and social challenges emerging as the most prominent. Therefore, it can be recommended that to encourage universities to include cross-cultural communication training for both local and international students.

**Key words-** Adjustment – challenges – Culture Shock – Public Universities – Sociocultural

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a boom of globalization in the whole world, and it is considered an inevitable fact that has an impact not only on the business world but also on the educational field. It makes the world like a small village, which has had a major impact on the learning process, and this phenomenon is having a great effect on education. Brown & Daly (2004) mentioned that the rise of globalization is encouraging a large influx of international travellers to leave their home countries and resume their aspiration for advanced education, and in nearly every country, there are students from abroad who move there to pursue their studies.

Nowadays, the internationalization of higher education is a crucial matter that generates significant enthusiasm among many students. The increasing demand for higher education has made it a key to unlocking various opportunities. While the international students originating from a range of lifestyles and socio-cultural origins before enrolling in Malaysian universities (Utami, 2015). So, studying abroad for international students means not only being alone and away from home, friends, and country, but also face experiencing unexpected challenges. Accordingly, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education aims to enhance globalization by boosting the number of international students (Yusoff, 2012). Regardless of their origins, it is certain that international students will experience life changes in Malaysia as newcomers in an unfamiliar environment (Natsir & Hamuddin, 2018).

Pursuing a higher education in a foreign country is a dream for many people. This desire is driven by a number of purposes, ranging from obtaining high-quality education, equipping themselves as prospective employees, and is necessary for a country's economy in an era of globalization and a knowledge-based economy today (Pandian, 2008). Therefore, universities worldwide have an increasing trend to admit students from other countries to study overseas as a way to expand their education as well as broaden their appreciation for cultural and racial diversity (Yeasmeen, 2008 & Wan et al., 2013).

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Internationalization in higher education has emerged as a critical concern for students worldwide, as it is widely regarded as a pathway to enhanced personal and professional opportunities. Within this context, Malaysia has become a preferred destination for international students seeking to pursue advanced studies in the region. Malaysia has one of the highest numbers of international students pursuing higher education, and over the past decade, the country has become the fastest-growing destination for international students, attracting an annual growth of over sixteen percent (Daily, 2015).

Most international students who start a new life in a new environment do not have any social connections, making new friends and building new relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds can be a challenge for them. In this sense, coming to Malaysia means entering into a new social and educational environment where international students face a difficult situation in adapting to the host community. In the early stages of international students' life in Malaysia, students face obvious challenges that they have to deal with and try to adapt to the environment and the lifestyle.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia, the number of Arab Students in Malaysia in 2021 was 27,520 students. The growing existence of Arab students is also associated with socio-cultural and language barriers, which might expose them to cultural shock and require them to adapt to the new environment (MOHE 2022). Although Arab students gain knowledge in Malaysia, they face some sociocultural adjustment challenges with the host culture. Several studies about international students and expatriates stated that they go through some challenges in the host environment, such as the culture of the society, language, education system, food, or even weather conditions. The combination of all those factors can cause to the students a cultural shock which can influence their academic performance, and sometimes can lead them to fail their educational goals. (Ma, 2025; Mohamed, 2014).

However, there is a gap in the literature in the investigation of major socio-cultural adjustment challenges experienced by Arab students during their studies at Malaysian public universities. The current study attempts to bridge this gap by focusing on socio-cultural adjustment challenges, namely environment challenges, language challenges, academic challenges, and social challenges, which might hinder international students' learning sustainability in the Malaysian context.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this paper is to identify the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab Students in Malaysian public universities.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The main research question is:

**What are the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab students in Malaysian public universities?**

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Based on the current situations in the Middle East and the chaos in most Arab countries, many Arab students come to study and search for knowledge in Malaysian universities. Therefore, the significance of this study is

to help Arab students identify the most common socio-cultural adjustment challenges in Malaysia. Moreover, this paper supports the Ministry of Higher Education- Malaysia and Malaysian universities in understanding Arab students' experiences and adjustment processes, which can ease integration. In addition to that, it benefits both current and future Arab students by providing a clearer understanding and practical guidance for cultural adjustment in Malaysia.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited only to Arab students at five Malaysian public universities in the second semester (2/2020-2021); therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other international student groups or private institutions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

International education has become an increasingly essential component of higher education globally, as students pursue personal, and professional goals abroad (Pinamang et al., 2021). The rise in international student mobility is driven by a combination of social, cultural, educational, geographical, and economic factors (Boyaci & Yakup, 2019). This trend has significant socioeconomic implications for both sending and receiving countries, affecting university incomes, labor markets, and the broader global education sector (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014). In addition to the financial contributions, international students enrich the cultural and social diversity of host communities, often seeking qualifications that enhance career prospects upon returning home (Maadad, 2014).

In the Malaysian context, the government has actively promoted internationalization in higher education through mobility programs. These initiatives facilitate the integration of international students into local communities and foster socio-economic and political networks (Mahmud et al., 2010). As a result, Malaysian cities increasingly show international characteristics, including diverse populations, culturally varied residential areas, and globalized commercial districts. Studies examining international students' adaptation in Malaysia highlight several challenges. For instance, GulRaihan & Sandaran (2017) surveyed 200 students using the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) and identified four primary difficulties: language proficiency, academic adjustment, environmental adaptation, and interpersonal relationships.

Adapting to a new culture can significantly affect students' daily lives and interactions with local communities (Abdul Talib et al., 2014; Singh, 2012; Pandian, 2008). Faleel et al. (2012) observed that international students often experience greater adjustment difficulties abroad than local students, primarily due to cultural unfamiliarity. The presence of a large Muslim community, coupled with Malaysia's political stability and supportive environment, further attracts students from Muslim-majority countries (Yee & Hassan, 2024). Post-September 11 security concerns and stricter visa policies in Western countries have made Malaysia a more appealing alternative, particularly for students from the Middle East and North Africa. Political unrest in countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen has also prompted students to seek safe and stable educational opportunities in Malaysia (Najeeb et al., 2012).

As of December 2016, Malaysia hosted 132,710 international students, with a significant proportion receiving scholarships from Middle Eastern countries to pursue undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate studies (Singh, 2019; Pandian, Baboo & Mahfoodh, 2016). These students often face challenges with English language proficiency, particularly in pronunciation, despite their high motivation and dedication (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010). The 2024 systematic review by Yee & Hassan emphasizes that while Malaysia has successfully expanded its international student base, ongoing challenges include language barriers, cultural adaptation, and academic integration, highlighting the need for targeted institutional support programs.

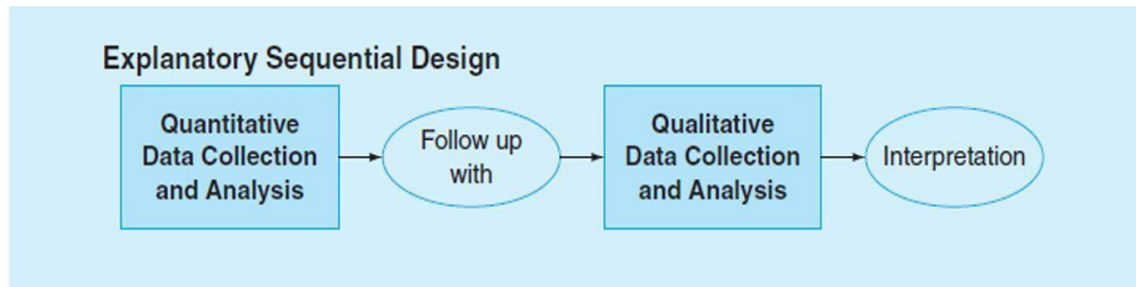
## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-method research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches using mixed-method research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than relying on a single approach. The questionnaire consists of two sections; the first part is mainly concerned with demographic information. The second part consists of environment challenges, academic challenges, language challenges, and social challenges.

The design, shown in Figure 1, is an explanatory mixed methods design which is perhaps considered to be the most popular form of mixed methods design in educational research. An explanatory sequential design consists of first collecting quantitative data and having it represent a major aspect of data collection, then collecting

qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. This design has the advantage of capturing the best of both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain quantitative results from a population in the first phase, and then elaborating these findings through an in-depth qualitative exploration in the second phase.

Figure 1



**Data Collection**

The questionnaire comprises 29 items, which were adapted from (C. Ward & Kennedy, 1999) to measure the individual's adaptation in terms of the amount of difficulty experienced in a variety of situations. Students evaluated the statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale that ran between " no difficulty" and " extreme difficulty". The second instrument of this study is an interview. The interview in this study was conducted after getting the quantitative data. The purpose of the interview is to obtain a clear understanding of the sociocultural challenges facing Arab students and to support the quantitative data. As for the semi-structured interviews, the complete responses of the 10 participants were interpreted by using the Content Analysis method.

**U-Curve theory of Adjustment and culture shock**

The "U-Curve Theory" of adjustment (UCT), the theoretical framework for this study, rooted in the work of Lysgaard (1955), has been one of the most commonly and consistently used theories of a culture shock (Al Mahrouqi, 2018). By studying the experience of Norwegian scholars in the US in 1955, Lysgaard developed a theory called "U-curve theory". As a result of these studies, Lysgaard estimated three stages of culture shock. In the beginning, scholars were optimistic and fascinated by the new culture. Then, they felt anxious, frustrated and confused. Finally, scholars learned how to deal with culture Shock, but able to adjust to the new surroundings (Belhadi & Ayad, 2017). "Thus, the initial feeling of euphoria, the subsequent crisis and the final adjustment, all expressed in graph form, gave a U pattern. This pattern became known as the U-curve hypothesis" (Katan, Manca, & Spinzi, 2009:81).

The reason to use U-Curve theory is it would be fitting for this study and it is fits in with the questionnaire we used. Also, Gasper and Baharudin (2018) stated that the U-curve theory is normally applied to students during their stay at a host country.

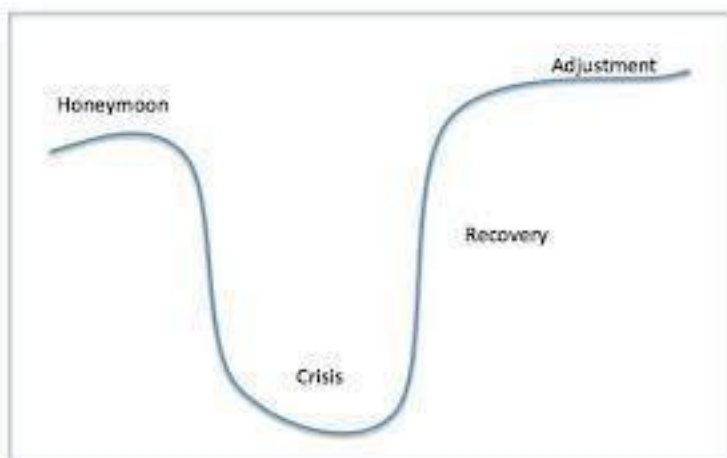


Figure 2 Oberg's U-curve Model

## Participants

The researchers employed the Random Sampling technique in this study, where the respondents were selected. The sample consisted of 261 students from five Malaysian public universities. 10 students were interviewed from the targeted universities using the simple random sampling technique. Hence, every individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the study. The selection of the individual does not affect the choice of any other person.

Table 1. Number Of Male and Female Students

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	117	44.8%
Female	144	55.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>100%</b>

As displayed in the table (1), the female students were 144, representing 55%) Out of the total number, while the male students were 117, representing 45%. In this study, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to gather the necessary information. The questionnaire of this study was developed based on Ward and Kennedy’s theory (1999) and used the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) to investigate the sociocultural adjustment challenges of Arab students in the host public universities.

The interview in this study was conducted after getting the quantitative data. The main aim of the interview was to obtain a clear understanding of the sociocultural challenges facing Arab students and to support the quantitative data.

## RESULTS

1. What are the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab Students in Malaysian public universities?

In order to answer this question, the researchers used the mean and the variation of each item of the questionnaire to discover the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab Students during their study at Malaysian public universities. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Results of Descriptive Statistics for all Challenges

Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
Environment	3.85	0.66	High
Academic	3.87	0.78	High
Language	3.23	0.71	Intermediate
Social	3.35	0.78	Intermediate

To give more insight into the challenges, the researcher used the standard deviation and the mean weight of each item of the questionnaire according to the challenges, as shown in Table 2

Table 3. Results of Descriptive Statistics for the Environmental Challenges

Environmental Challenges	N	Mean	St. Deviation	level
Going shopping	261	4.29	1.06	Very High
Using the transportation system.	261	4.15	1.12	High
Dealing with the climate.	261	3.80	1.12	High
Adapting to the local accommodation.	261	3.28	1.17	Intermediate
Finding the food you enjoy.	261	3.43	1.26	High
Getting used to the local food.	261	2.71	1.33	Low
Following rules and regulations.	261	4.61	0.70	Very High
Worshipping in your usual way.	261	4.54	0.91	Very High
Environment	261	3.85	0.66	-

Such results indicated that the students faced more environmental challenges related to regulations, weather, shopping, and food during their study, particularly when dealing with the environment outside the university. so, students who performed well in this area are identified as struggling to manage external factors beyond their control.

Table 4 Results of Descriptive Statistics for the Academic Challenges

Academic Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
Understanding what is required of you at university.	3.93	1.02	High
Coping with academic work.	3.90	1.01	High
Sharing your thoughts in class	3.73	1.17	High
Interacting with the university's local staff	3.51	1.15	High
Doing an oral presentation	3.99	0.97	High
Working with students from other cultures	4.15	0.98	High
Academic	3.87	0.78	High

Such results revealed that the students faced academic challenges related to university life and academic work due to presentation skills and research methodology.

Table 5. Results of Descriptive Statistics for the Environmental Challenges

Language Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
Understanding the local accent/language.	1.82	0.99	Low
Making yourself understood by others.	3.62	1.04	High

Interacting with individuals from a different ethnic background.	4.02	1.01	High
our) tone and accent when interacting with local people.	3.03	1.24	Interm ediate
ge during university courses in learning English.	3.67	1.21	High
Language Challenges	3.23	0.71	-

These results indicated that the students faced language challenges, which means Arab students encounter challenges in speaking the English language due to a lack of practice in the English language. Also, students with poor language skills face challenges in talking and explaining their ideas to other people.

Table 6. Results of Descriptive Statistics for the Social Challenges

Social Challenges	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Making friends in Malaysia.	261	3.41	1.30	High
Relating to older people.	261	3.68	1.14	High
Understanding cultural differences.	261	3.94	0.96	High
Getting used to the pace of life.	261	3.98	0.99	High
Attending social gatherings.	261	3.05	1.29	Intermediate
ding the local political structure.	261	3.09	1.20	Intermediate
Residing abroad without family	261	3.16	1.47	Intermediate
Dealing with the bureaucracy.	261	2.97	1.07	Intermediate
teracting with individuals of higher rank	261	2.79	1.09	Intermediate
le and culture of Malaysia resemble mine	261	3.40	1.20	High

It is obvious that there are five items with a high mean (3.4-3.9), the items are about “Getting used to the pace of life.” Got mean (M=3.98) " Understanding cultural differences". (M=3.94), “Making friends in Malaysia”. (M=3.41). Such results indicate that the students face more social challenges because they come from different cultural backgrounds, and they need to be more involved in the community and have more social relationships with the local community.

On the other hand, it is observed that the following items got the intermediate mean score, such as the item " Going to social events/gatherings/functions ". with a mean score (M=3.05), and this item " Dealing with the bureaucracy "got a mean score (M=2.97), and the lowest mean score was the " Dealing with people of higher status " got a mean score (M=2.79). These results indicate that the students face fewer challenges with the social events, which means they are satisfied with adapting in the host country.

**Qualitative part of The Question**

Many Arab students come to Malaysia to seek higher education abroad. The majority of these students leave their families remain in their home countries, which presents significant challenges for them on their own in a foreign country. Based on the numerical and descriptive data showed that Arab students experienced difficulties mainly with environmental challenges and academic challenges. Whereas the results showed that

many of the Arab students faced language and social challenges.

### **Environment Challenge**

Living in a new environment causes many challenges of problems, and transformations in one's life. All individuals involved in this study encountered various forms of challenges, especially during their initial period in Malaysia, but environmental challenges are the most common obstacles encountered by Arab students

in Malaysia, such as experiencing a difference in climate and public transportation.

### **Weather**

One of the prominent environmental challenges encountered by the participants was the weather, particularly the hot and humid climate in Malaysia. Arab students, who hail from countries with distinct four seasons, commonly expressed difficulties adjusting to Malaysia's consistent tropical weather. However, it's essential to mention that not all students were equally affected, as some came from tropical regions with similar weather patterns to Malaysia. The following quotes highlight the opinions of select participants in the study:

Sara, a Libyan Master student, said that:

“The weather is not good here; the sun is too hot. The climate in my country is significantly better as there are four seasons. I think Malaysia is one season, Because the weather is always the same, it’s only hot. The heat and humidity are very high despite the ongoing rain. I don’t like the hot weather.”

Similarly, Ali, a Palestinian PhD student, stated that:

“The weather is very hot and humid the whole year as it is not like my country. In my country, we have cold winters and hot summers, as there are four seasons. My country has nice weather, while the weather in Malaysia is very hot, and the temperature is very high. I miss winter and autumn.”

Rahaf, a Jordanian PHD student, said that:

“The weather is completely different in Arab countries; the weather is moderate, and we go along with the four seasons: winter, summer, spring, and autumn. It is also cool and breezy at night. While here in Malaysia, the weather is the same throughout the year: rainy, humid, and high temperature. Thus, such weather affects us negatively.”

These points of view illustrate the participants' experiences with the varying weather conditions between their home countries and Malaysia. Mohamed (2020) in his study highlighted weather as one of the main challenges faced by international students in Malaysia.

### **Public Transportation**

Public transportation is another sub-theme under the main theme of environmental challenges. One factor that facilitates the movement of students within and outside universities is the size of the campus. Malaysian Public Universities are typically situated on vast areas of land with numerous buildings, making it time-consuming to travel on foot without access to intra-university transport. The results of the interview indicated that Arab students have difficulty accessing transportation.

According to the research done by Yusliza et al. (2012) mentioned that international students have reported facing challenges in moving between buildings on weekends due to the limited availability of buses. This may hinder their academic progress as they require transportation to access the library, gather study materials, and engage in group discussions with peers.

A few students have expressed concerns that the buses are not punctual, and it is difficult for them to find buses outside the university.

Basma, an Egyptian undergraduate student, said that:

“The buses were not reliable and often did not run on time, which was a major issue for those who lived outside of the university. Despite having a bus station in front of my condominium, I sometimes had to wait for over an hour for the bus to arrive. It was very challenging to navigate without access to a car.”

Salah, a Palestinian PHD student, said that:

“I did not own a vehicle. I would wait for a private taxi company called Grab to pick me up, which always takes forever, and I would go crazy every time I wanted to go out or meet someone because I hate taking taxis. Additionally, I have a really hard time finding buses outside and figuring out how to get to the institution. In addition, I have trouble purchasing an automobile.”

Ahmad, a Syrian Master student, said that:

“During my first year, I faced a real challenge with public transportation as I did not own a car. This was particularly difficult as I live with my family, and it was a struggle to go with my family from one place to another together. I often had to rely on others to get to different places.”

## Food

Food is the third sub-theme challenge that faced Arab students during their journey of studying abroad. This was mentioned clearly during the interview, where all participants assumed that the local food was one of the most difficult challenges in Malaysia. Many Arab students faced difficulties getting used to Malaysian food, as the main dish is rice. As a result, they complained about the lack of variety of food options in Malaysia. Some participants talked about the differences in food's taste, and they focused on the differences in the types of food they eat.

Amir, a Libyan PHD student, said that:

It is completely different from Arab food, particularly its smell. Also, Malaysian people like to put some sweet into their dishes, which is something I'm not used to, also, it is difficult and unfamiliar to eat rice in all meals. Additionally, in my homeland, we have separate meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and bread is a popular and main choice for all our meals.

Amal, a Palestinian undergraduate student, said that:

“Initially, everything can feel unfamiliar when adjusting to a new environment. For me, the most challenging aspect was adapting to the local cuisine. The distinction between Malaysia and my native country was quite striking, as locals here often add sugar to their dishes, whereas we typically use salt. As a result, it can be challenging to find food that I am accustomed to consuming.”

Huda, a Palestinian PHD student, stated that:

“Food was a major challenge in the initial months in Malaysia. When we eat Arab food, we use bread, but here they depend on rice in their meals most of the time. In addition, the main factor is the spiciness they use; it's very hot. In my country, we're not accustomed to eating spicy food, so I struggled to adjust is not close to our culture.”

Clearly, a problem that all the challenge encountered by the students in this study was the food. It presented a challenge to some students from other cultures. Several other researchers have noted in their studies that international students face problems with different food in the host country, such as Abdullah et al 2015, Mohamed 2020, and Jibreel (2015).

Coming to a new country, international students face challenges with the reality of needing different food, transportation to move, and unfamiliar weather, as there are differences in the environment at home and the

host country. Based on the findings of the conducted study, the environmental challenge poses a major challenge for Arab students in Malaysia. According to GulRaihan and Sandaran (2017) asserted that four main factors influence international students in Malaysia; one of these factors is the environment.

### **Academic Challenges**

Arab students often encounter academic obstacles while studying in Malaysia due to differences in learning styles and teaching methods. Malaysia has developed its own educational system to meet its unique needs, which differs from that of Western countries. Also, Ma (2025) examines the challenges and factors affecting academic adaptation for international students in Malaysia, focusing on language barriers and cultural adaptation. It analyses influencing factors and proposes practical solutions to enhance academic success and integration.

The findings showed that all participants had experienced educational challenges in Malaysia, such as dealing with local staff, working with students from different cultures and languages, and academic work.

### **Academic Work**

Coming to Malaysia to study means entering a new academic life. Generally, the primary goal of an international student is academic performance and achievement. However, international students face a difficult condition during their studies that is related to university life and academic work. All students in the current study described the challenges they face regarding academic work during them at the university.

They reported that the academic work in Malaysian universities is totally different from that in their home countries.

Huda, a Palestinian PHD student, stated that”

“In fact, teaching methods in my country are different from the current teaching methods that I faced when I first came to Malaysia, such as assignments, duties, and oral presentations. I did my utmost to learn in class, and often I require more time to adjust to it. So, sometimes I send my assignments or duties late.”

Salah, a Palestinian PHD student, said that:

“My biggest challenge is in the field of research. This is a new experience for me as I am used to learning through courses and lectures. I observed that it is so difficult to grasp research methodology, which is among the academic obstacles I am encountering here. My supervisor in Malaysia exposed me to theories that I had never heard of it before, and sometimes I am assigned tasks related to them. However, it demands considerable effort and time. effort and time for me to complete them.”

International students encounter various challenges that can impact their academic achievements. The transition to a new academic environment can disrupt their academic performance and even prevent them from attaining their educational goals. Mohamed (2020) found that there are four main challenges facing students in Malaysia, one of which is academics. Moreover, Harahsheh et al (2019) mentioned that the first obstacle and barrier in adopting Malaysian culture was academic difficulties. Also, Gebru and Kaptanoglu (2020) concluded that international students encounter academic difficulties in their lives.

### **Dealing with Local Staff at The University**

Supervisors play a Crucial role in the international student research journey. Almost all the individuals involved in the present study. complained about the local staff in the universities as the process is difficult, complex, and takes a long time, especially in registration and regarding visa problems. This problem was faced by all the participants in this study; they faced difficulty communicating and dealing with the local staff.

Amir, a Libyan PHD student, said that:

“The local staff at the university are uncooperative, and the procedures, such as visa processing, subject registration, and document submission, take a long time, making it difficult for me to deal with them. It often takes several days to complete my tasks, which makes me uneasy about the new academic system in place.”

Rahaf, a Jordanian PHD student, said that:

“I’m not fond of the system here; the procedural things take a long time compared to my country. The visa application process takes too long. Also, the same thing happens when opening a bank account. I am very tired from all the studying and the process. I am shocked by everything. One of the most significant obstacles that Arab students are dealing with is the local staff at the university during their studies.”

Non-academic staff at the university must gain an adequate understanding of the diverse backgrounds of international students (Suseela & Sateen Selan, 2011). Working with Students from Different Cultures Once international students begin their classes on campus, interacting with others becomes highly challenging for the local students due to numerous cultures and Communication obstacles. The hardest experience mentioned by the Arab students in participating in the present study was related to teamwork with local students who come from different cultures, since Malaysia is a diverse nation made up of three main ethno-cultural groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

The following Ahmad, a Syrian Master student, stated that:

“To complete the group assignment, my classmates often don't ask me to participate in the group discussion. Even if I attend the debate, I have great challenges on such issue. I wish to take part, but I cannot understand them, because they always speak with each other in their language.”

Basma, an Egyptian undergraduate student, said that:

“Studying in groups is the biggest challenge for me because local students speak their language during the discussion. They know that I have poor Malay language, but they keep speaking in it. Also, when the professor placed us in discussion groups, I was excluded. My classmates might not have wanted me in their group.”

Achieving group assignments with local students, Arab students encounter several difficulties. So, it is becoming a key challenge mentioned by almost all the participants in the present study during their learning process. According to Wu et al (2015), as international students starting their academic journey in a foreign land, they are obligated to collaborate with local peers who have diverse cultural origins. Such dissimilarities may pose a significant challenge for them to successfully finish their sies

## **Social Challenges**

Social challenge is the last challenge faced by Arab students during their academic learning. When moving to a foreign nation, individuals may encounter several challenges in their everyday routine due to the contrasting cultures, customs, and traditions of their home country and the destination country. Additionally, they may also have to integrate with the local populace.

Several studies have highlighted the social challenges, such as Okai (2020) discovered that one of the key Difficulties faced by international students is social challenges. Also, Mohamed (2014) indicated that international students in Malaysia face a variety of challenges during their studies, one of which is social integration with local people. Moreover, in a study conducted by Talebloo and Basri (2015) at University Putera Malaysia, they found that there are challenges and problems related to the social environment.

Thus, social challenges appear to be very confusing for them and include two main elements, which are understanding cultural differences and making friends in Malaysia. This part highlights both elements supported by empirical data from the perspective of Arab students coming from different countries.

## Understanding Cultural Differences

When international students arrive in a foreign country, they become aware of the differences between themselves and the local people. This is particularly evident in Malaysia, which is known for its diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural makeup. As a result, international students often encounter a cultural conflict between their own and that of their host country. Consequently, they tend to gravitate towards individuals who share their cultural background.

International Arab students who participated in the current study mentioned the cultural differences that they faced:

Huda, a Palestinian PHD student, stated that:

“In fact, it is so difficult to understand and integrate with the Malay, Chinese, or Indian cultures. Actually, Malaysian culture is different from ours in my country; one of these differences is that we dress differently from them. So, it is It remains challenging to blend in and connect with local people.”

Anas, a Palestinian PHD student, added that:

“I came from a different language, culture, and customs. I cannot integrate with the Malaysian community because of these cultural differences. In Malaysia, there are many international students who come from different countries, so it is difficult for me to deal with each culture.”

Amal, a Palestinian undergraduate student, stated that:

“When you are in a foreign country, you're aware that you'll encounter challenges with its culture. The first challenge I faced in Malaysia was the different cultures between my country and Malaysia, especially in food, customs, and Eid Celebrations. Such differences prevent me from communicating with local people.”

In this paper, it has been found that most of the participants encountered challenges in communicating with others during their study, which may be attributed to cultural variations. Frequently, they also feel as though they need to struggle to protect their values and objectives. In addition, (Jibreel,2015) mentioned that many find it challenging to understand culture, and the task becomes even more difficult when it comes to cultural transformation. This is due to the potential for misunderstandings that may arise during this process.

## Making friends in Malaysia

International students frequently encounter challenges when pursuing higher education in a foreign country, and this is especially true for those studying in Malaysia. Leaving their families and friends behind in their home countries, these students must adapt to a new environment, make new friends, and learn unfamiliar social customs. Unfortunately, they often encounter challenges when it comes to forming relationships with local individuals. When people feel anxious about interacting with individuals from different cultures, they may develop negative stereotypes about newcomers' behaviour(Garza, Guzmán, & Wu, 2015).

In the present study, all the participants agreed that it was difficult to make new friends, especially with the local people.

Anas, a Palestinian PHD student, added that:

“When I arrived in Malaysia, I was so happy and optimistic to meet new people. But I do not have enough skills in the Malaysian spoken language. Later. I realized that I did not have any local friends. My communication was only with the Arab community. In fact, it's challenging to have a genuine Malaysian friend who is ready to help in case I need help.”

Amir, a Libyan PHD student, said that:

“Making friends with local Malaysians at university and in everyday life can be quite challenging, particularly due to the differences in language, traditions, and beliefs. I often find myself unsure of how to approach my classmates and initiate conversations. Instead, I tend to wait for them to take the first step and start a conversation with me.”

Basma, an Egyptian undergraduate student, said that:

“The biggest challenge I face it was forming friendships in class and daily life has been challenging. Currently, most of my friends are Arab students who share a similar culture. I’m unsure how to form friendships with my local. I’m waiting for my classmates to arrive so I can talk to them, but they disappear after class immediately, and I believe they already have their own circle of friends and family.”

When adapting to a new culture, students need to manage various new social customs. Participants were from the same culture, which is different from the Malaysian culture. Therefore, they face difficulties due to cultural differences, including customs, traditions, beliefs, and problems related to making local friends. Moreover, Jibreel (2015) pointed out international students have reported that the absence of interaction with local people makes some fear them that they may be misunderstood as they come from diverse cultural backgrounds.

While pursuing education in a foreign country can be. an exciting experience for many, it can likewise. Present a variety of difficulties. These may include adjusting to a new way of doing things, unfamiliar environments, host cultures, language barriers, and encountering people with different ways of life and educational systems from one's own. According to the findings of. both data. Based on the study carried out, it can be inferred that. Arab students suffered from a variety of challenges during their studies. Environment and Academic challenges are the major difficulties that Arab students faced, while most of the students face language and social challenges during their studies.

### **Language Challenge**

It is the third challenge faced by Arab students during pursuing studies in Malaysia as a foreign country. Most of the Arab students arrived from overseas as foreigners and speakers of English as a second language. This implies that the majority of them had little or no understanding of the Malay or English languages, as Malaysia involves different ethnic groups, which often encounter a barrier in their life. Also, it is essential for our fundamental communication, enabling us to assist and gain knowledge from each other. (Jibreel,2015).

According to the results of this paper, many Arab students find it difficult to communicate using English as the language of instruction during their academic pursuits. The following account comprises the views of several Arab students who share the same sentiment. Other participants had some academic challenges during their academic journey, such as oral presentations, assignments, discussions, and group work, because of poor English skills. So, English skills among students need improvement.

Amir, a Libyan PHD student, said that:

“The first academic challenge I faced was the English language as a second language. Also, English conversation skills become challenging when I visit the bank or contact the cable company. I often struggle to understand the entire conversation during those calls to When setting up my internet account, I have to request that they speak slowly and repeat themselves. It makes me feel uncomfortable.”

Sara, a Libyan Master student, said that:

“My English skills are not very strong at the moment. Sometimes, I struggle to understand the lecture and my classmates. The reading is quite challenging; with many words I don’t understand. When the professor assigned us to discussion groups, I was excluded. I think my peers didn’t want me in their group. They speak so quickly and only say things out loud, making it difficult to keep up. Anas, a Palestinian PHD student, said that In the beginning, understanding English was really challenging. When I communicate with people, I get nervous about speaking. Sometimes, I can’t understand the slang, or they talk too quickly. So, usually I have a hard time understanding the material or expressing my ideas. In class, I struggle because of the language

barrier. My Arabic is my first language. Also, sometimes, the lecturer speaks in Bahasa, and we are unable to understand.”

Basma, an Egyptian undergraduate student, said that:

“In Egypt, I studied the Arabic language at school, so I had no background in the English language because I studied only one language, which is Arabic. Therefore, the most difficult thing for me is to improve my English. I did not know how to speak English, and I don’t want to communicate or talk anymore because of language barriers; I feel really frustrated and drained, with no energy to speak. For those who live in rural areas, their challenges were bigger, as most of them speak the Malay language and cannot speak much English.”

Salah, a Palestinian PHD student, said that:

“The language is a big obstacle for me as Arab language is my mother language me. I live in rural areas, and the people do not speak much English; they speak the Malay language. So, it became a challenge for me to communicate with shop owners, restaurant owners, and some neighbours.”

Ahmad, a Syrian Master student, stated that:

“The Malaysian language was difficult for me. It is the first challenge I faced when I came to Malaysia, and I was unsure how to speak it. So, I had difficulties in dealing with the Malaysian language because I put all my efforts to learn the English language, and it is so hard for me learning two languages simultaneously.”

Rahaf, a Jordanian PHD student, said that:

“I could not speak or understand the Malay language. There is a difficulty in communicating with people, whether Malaysian or non-Arabic speakers. It is the biggest challenge to me because I do my best to speak the English language, as I can deal with the local people and the academics at the university through the English language.”

It is apparent in the qualitative and quantitative data that a majority of the participants face a challenge in speaking the native language (Malay) and English while studying. Also, it is obvious that demand for English as a second or foreign language is growing steadily because of its significance in the modern world, where it has become the primary language of instruction in the majority of universities around the globe. Also, Garza, Guzman, and Wu (2015) pointed out that language barriers have adverse impacts on the academic learning of the students.

### **The Analysis of Findings for the First Question: “What are the major sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Arab Students enrolled in public universities in Malaysia?”**

The results of the questionnaire analysis indicated that the environmental challenges and academic challenges are the major sociocultural adjustment challenges among Arab students during their study, got a high mean, whereas the language challenges and social challenges got an Intermediate mean. Qualitative data were categorized into two major themes: environmental challenges and academic challenges. The findings indicated that the majority of the participants faced language and social challenges.

The current data indicated that Arab Students primarily face challenges with environmental challenges. They encountered a new environment that is markedly different from their home country, which can significantly affect their studies. findings in this study were supported by several other studies conducted in investigating the range of challenges or barriers faced by Arab Students enrolled in public universities in Malaysia. such as Mohamed (2020), who found that there are four main challenges facing students in Malaysia, one of which is the climate challenge. This result aligns with the findings of other studies related to this. The major sociocultural adjustment challenges face the students. Okai (2020) discovered that one of the major challenges faced by international students is transportation problems.

Past studies showed that Students face difficulties adapting to Malaysia's tropical climate (Tuerxun, Hashim, Abdulla, & Khalid, 2020; Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Lian, 2011). Furthermore, Talebloo and Basri (2015) indicated that the international postgraduate students who studied at University Putra Malaysia encountered difficulties, including transportation. Moreover, Thangiah (2010) discovered that the major sociocultural challenges for international students are navigating the transportation system and adapting to the climate.

Several studies on international students in Malaysia have revealed that food is one of the major challenges students frequently complain about (Movahed, Mokhtar, & Hassan, 2019; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011; Mahmud et al., 2010; Tuerxun et al., 2020; Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Talebloo, B., & Baki, R. 2013). Students expressed that they were unable to obtain their favourite Food (Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010), and they faced challenges eating the local cuisine (Wan, Md Nordin, & Razali, 2013), especially in their first year, due to spiciness or sweetness (Lian, 2011). The same (Alghail, 2017) highlighted the sociocultural adjustment challenges encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students at the public university. including getting used to the local food. Moreover, Abdullah, Adebayo, & Talib (2015) stated that students experience problems with Food.

As to the language challenge, this result aligns with the findings of a recent study conducted by Jamal and Wok (2020) In which they indicated that the language barrier posed a significant challenge in cultural adaptation. Also, Almatarneh et al (2018), who carried out a study among Arab students at UniSZA and found that one of the two biggest challenges students faced was a lack of language. As well, Yassin et al (2020) their results displayed that international students face challenges in the four languages at the start of their academic studies. Skills are crucial, as success largely depends on students' ability to read course materials, write assignments, and answer exam questions in English. Moreover, (Betweli, 2020) mentioned that international students studying in China encounter many problems that influence their language obstacles. This supports some Research by Bista (2015) revealed that the primary challenge for international students was the English language. Additionally, the language barrier has been recognized as one of the most significant difficulties for most international students studying in China (Tsegay et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015).

Likewise, Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) showed that one of the factors Which influence international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment challenges. is English language proficiency. Further, in a similar study conducted among African students at Kuban State University, Kamara (2012) discovered that 59.9% of foreign students experience high levels of stress, primarily due to the need to study in a non-native language and interact with others and other cultures.

Also, Okai (2020) discovered that one of the. The key challenges of international students are English language difficulties (understanding, writing, and speaking). He found that English proficiency among international students was a significant challenge impacting their academic performance, as well as a language barrier can also make it difficult for them to actively participate in class. Mohamed (2020) found that there are four main challenges facing students in Malaysia, one of which is language. Moreover, Harahsheh et al (2019) mentioned that the second main obstacle and barrier in adopting Malaysian culture was language difficulties for Arab students at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Also, Mohamed (2014) stated that international students in Malaysia encounter numerous types of culture shock, such as language differences with local people.

In addition, Jamal and Wok (2020) stated that many international Students encounter obstacles and challenges during their study, such as a language barrier, before they achieve the stage of cultural adaptation. In another study, Gebru and Kaptanoglu (2020) found challenges experienced by international students in Malaysia. These challenges were discussed under three categories, one of which was language barriers. Moreover, Mariño, Montalbo, & Bugtong (2017) showed that overall, the results from both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study revealed that language issues as the major difficulty faced by international students during their studies. Similarly, Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011) indicated that language played a crucial role in the process of acculturation. process, and students with low-level English proficiency were more vulnerable to acculturative stress and more reluctant to interact with the host nationals. These researchers agreed that language Challenges are the most critical issue for international students, and Language is a major barrier for international students in Malaysia (Ahrari, Krauss, Suandi, Abdullah, Abdullah Sahimi, Olutokunbo, and Dahalan (2019); Freeman, K., Nga, E., & Mansori, S. (2019); Mahmud et al., (2010).

In relation to academic challenges, our findings are very similar to previous findings done by Mohamed (2020), who found that there one of the four main Obstacles encountered by students in Malaysia. was academics. In addition, Gebru and Kaptanoglu (2020) found that there are challenges faced by international students in Malaysia. These challenges were discussed under three categories, and academic challenges were one of them. In addition, Harahsheh et al (2019) stated that the first main obstacle and barrier in adopting Malaysian culture was academic difficulties for Arab students at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Furthermore, GulRaihan and Sandaran (2017), who found that there are four main factors influencing international students' sociocultural adaptation in Malaysia, mentioned that academic challenges are one of the most influential subtypes among the four. Slethaug & Manjula (2012) mentioned that students from the rote educational system were challenging to adapt to compared to the Malaysian system, which. emphasizes technology skills, collaborative learning, critical thinking, and an interactive teaching style. The results are consistent with findings of Alavi & Mansor (2011) stated that the second major issue is the curriculum and teaching methods faced by international students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

Further, Al-Zubaidi and Richards (2010) indicated that the first problem faced by Arab postgraduate students at five Malaysian universities is academic difficulties.

Some researchers, such as Sam et al. (2013; Talebloo, 2015) reported that international students who come from a theory-based and teacher-centered system had to struggle with the research and student-centered system of education in Malaysia, and Academic differences present a significant challenge for international students in Malaysia. In addition, Garza et al. (2015) mentioned that studying abroad comes with its own. challenges, and there is evidence that international students experience a range of adjustment issues that can impact their study and overall experience. Furthermore, Talebloo and Basri (2015) mentioned that international postgraduate students at University Putera Malaysia faced challenges related to the education system.

Similarly, Wu et al. (2015) pointed out that Numerous challenges arise in the academic environment, with language being regarded as one of the most significant academic obstacles preventing smooth adjustment for international students. In addition, (Betweli.2020) stated that in China, international students encounter different challenges that impact their academic learning. According to a qualitative study by Van et al. (2015) that looked at the difficulties faced by international students in Malaysia, students who had a poor command of the English language found it difficult to participate in class activities, write assignments, and achieve academic standards.

Moreover, (Jibreel, 2015) stated that Many students often struggle to communicate with classmates, instructors, and administrators. Some feel very shy and uncomfortable speaking English due to their accent, which hinders them from completing many daily tasks.

Additionally, Gebru and Kaptanoglu (2020) discovered challenges experienced by international students in Malaysia. These challenges were discussed under three categories, and one of these categories is: socio-cultural challenges. In addition, (Jamal and Wok, 2020) stated that many international students faced challenges and difficulties during their study, an example of which was Cultural clashes between their own culture and that of the host country occur before they can reach the stage of cultural adaptation. Also, Abdullah et al., (2015) indicated that students experience Difficulties in the following themes: Making friends, Communication, and Accommodation.

In general, the researcher found that many studies indicated that there are challenges faced by international students during their studies in a host country. In addition, a few studies indicated that there are no difficulties faced by students over the duration of studies, maybe because the European students adapt more easily to the English language, academic, and cultural norms of Malaysia. While most of the students come from Middle Eastern nations. In Africa, many of them are either linguistically or culturally similar to one another. Also, a few studies to date have investigated sociocultural adjustment challenges among Arab students in Malaysia.

The quantitative and qualitative results of the study revealed that environmental and academic challenges (which had a high mean) are the major sociocultural challenges among Arab students. These challenges might be because of the Arab students coming from different cultures and different educational systems than that of

the host nation's system. As a result, they will encounter challenges related to survival due to cultural and language differences. Whereas the language and social challenges had intermediate means, the moderate level of the language challenges and social challenges sociocultural adjustment of Arab students can be attributed to their capacity to learn and comprehend both sides of intercultural issues, as well as the ability to adapt to a shifting sociocultural environment.

To analyse the culture shock that Arab students experience, the study utilized one of the first models of cultural adjustment developed by Ward & Kennedy, (1999), who asserted that the sociocultural adaptation problems are the greatest upon entering a new culture. The reason to use the U-Curve theory is that it was fitting for this study. In which the U-Curve theory is among the theories that have been involved in cultural adaptation, culture shock, and the 'curve adjustment'. It is normally applied to students during their stay in a host country.

The U-Curve model is in line with the outcome of this study, which suggests that both aims and findings of the study are aligned with the theory. It is the most influential theory of cross-cultural adjustment and shows the change over time in the degree of adjustment to an unfamiliar and new environment.

It can be summarized that Arab students face a lot of struggles, ranging from environmental challenges, language, academic, and cultural which they must navigate to complete their studies and obtain academic accreditation.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, the following recommendations were offered for various stakeholders to overcome the sociocultural adaptation challenges that Arab students encounter in Malaysia.

### For the Ministry of Education (Malaysia) Implications:

The findings highlight the need for stronger national policies to enhance intercultural integration and social inclusion within higher education institutions. The lack of meaningful interaction between local and Arab students suggests that current internationalization strategies may focus more on academic enrolment rather than social integration.

#### • Recommendations:

1. Develop a **national intercultural orientation framework** for all international students that emphasizes social as well as academic adaptation.
2. Encourage universities to include **cross-cultural communication training** for both local and international students.
3. Support **collaborative research and cultural exchange programs** that bring together local and Arab students to foster mutual understanding.
4. Provide **funding and incentives** for initiatives that promote multicultural campus environments and community engagement.

### For Malaysian Universities Implications:

Universities play a vital role in creating an inclusive campus culture. The evidence shows that Arab students often remain within their cultural groups, limiting their opportunities for language practice and intercultural learning. This isolation may hinder their academic engagement and overall well-being.

#### Recommendations:

1. Establish **peer mentorship programs** that pair new Arab students with local students to promote

friendship and guidance.

2. Organize **intercultural dialogue sessions, student clubs, and mixed-group projects** to encourage collaboration across cultures.
3. Offer **counselling and adjustment workshops** focusing on managing cultural differences, communication styles, and social expectations.
4. Train academic staff to be **culturally sensitive** and aware of the unique challenges faced by Arab students in class participation and group work.
5. Create **safe social spaces** and events that blend cultural celebration with interactive activities (e.g., cultural nights, language exchange cafés).

### **For Arab Students in Malaysia Implications:**

Arab students often rely on peers from similar backgrounds, which provides emotional comfort but limits their exposure to local culture and language. Successful adjustment requires active engagement and openness to new social environments.

### **Recommendations**

1. Take the initiative to **participate in mixed social and academic groups**, even if language barriers exist.
2. Attend **university-hosted cultural and extracurricular activities** to build social networks beyond the Arab community.
3. Seek **support from international student offices** for guidance on communication and adaptation strategies.
4. Develop **cross-cultural communication skills**, such as using polite Malaysian expressions and showing respect for local customs.
5. View cultural differences as **learning opportunities** rather than obstacles, promoting personal growth and intercultural competence.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, many international students encountered challenges as they pursue higher education outside of their home countries. Similarly, Arab students had their own struggles while living in Malaysia, and they still fight different battles as they try to understand the new environment. In the present investigation, four factors were found to influence the sociocultural adjustment challenges of the Arab students, i.e., language, academic, environment, and social challenges. This research offers valuable insights for future researchers in the field of education for international students in general and Arab students in the Malaysian context in particular. It is hoped that the results and the recommendations of the current study serve as guidelines to the Ministry of Education and policymakers.

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