

Negotiating Adjustment and Belonging: International Students' Lived Experiences at City University Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: International students do not encounter university life as a single process of “adjustment”. Academic expectations, language, social relationships, cultural routines and access to support can develop at different speeds and may reinforce or complicate one another. This study explored how international students at City University Malaysia made sense of these interconnected experiences. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was used with 16 non-Malaysian participants who had studied at the university for at least one semester. Individual semi-structured interviews were analysed through an adapted six-stage Colaizzi-informed process, supported by descriptive phenomenological principles of openness and meaning-oriented analysis. Eight related themes were developed: motivations and expectations; academic experiences and the learning environment; academic challenges and coping; teaching and lecturer interaction; social integration and peer relationships; cultural adjustment; institutional support; and personal growth and future outlook. Across the themes, adjustment was uneven rather than linear. Communication shaped academic participation, peer contact, help-seeking and, in some settings, professional participation. Support was most meaningful when students could identify it, reach it and connect it to the problem they were facing. The findings suggest that international student adjustment is better understood as an ongoing negotiation of participation, belonging and competence than as a fixed outcome. Universities should therefore combine clear academic expectations with programme-sensitive language support, predictable routes to lecturer guidance, repeated orientation and more navigable support systems.

KEYWORDS: international students, phenomenology, academic adjustment; cultural adjustment; belonging, social integration; institutional support, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has become a routine part of contemporary higher education, but successful recruitment does not guarantee that students will participate confidently or feel that they belong after enrolment. Studying in another country requires more than adapting to a new curriculum. Students also have to interpret unfamiliar academic conventions, communicate with lecturers and classmates, build social networks, manage daily life and decide when and how to seek institutional support. These demands often overlap, which makes adjustment difficult to describe as a single transition with a clear starting and finishing point.

Malaysia is an important setting for examining these experiences because international education is a substantial part of its higher education sector. Ministry of Higher Education statistics recorded 159,138 international students in Malaysian public and private higher education institutions in 2025, with 102,573, or 64.5%, enrolled in private institutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2025). These figures show the scale of international enrolment, but they do not explain how students experience teaching, communication, peer relationships or support within particular institutions.

Research in Malaysia has already identified a wide range of adjustment issues. Malaklölunthu and Selan (2011) reported academic, religious, personal and social concerns among international students in private higher education. Lashari et al. (2018) linked social support with academic and psychological adjustment, while Lashari et al. (2023) showed that language proficiency also matters within the relationship between acculturative stress, social support and adjustment. Qualitative work has added important detail. Singh and Jack (2022), for example, showed how language and culture affected supervision, research training, group work and friendship. Syed Ahmad and Loke (2022) found that aspirations, family influence, independence, homesickness and friendship were part of the moving-in experience of international students at a Malaysian private institution.

The issue, then, is not a lack of research on international students in Malaysia, but the way the evidence is dispersed across institutions, levels of study, nationality groups and separate dimensions of experience. Academic adjustment, language, cultural transition, social support and belonging are often examined as distinct topics even though students encounter them together. A student may become academically confident while still feeling socially peripheral. Another may be comfortable with everyday life

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in Malaysia but struggle with academic writing, professional communication or finding the right institutional contact. A more integrated account is needed to understand how these experiences are connected in a specific institutional setting.

This fragmentation is particularly relevant in private higher education, where institutional structures, programme design and student populations may differ from those in public universities. Xue and Singh's (2025) systematic review of Chinese students in Malaysia demonstrates how academic, sociocultural and psychological experiences can intersect, but its nationality-specific focus cannot represent the wider international student population. Likewise, evidence from several institutions can identify recurring concerns without showing how support, relationships and academic participation are experienced inside one university. Institution-specific qualitative work is therefore useful not because it replaces broader research, but because it reveals how general issues take shape in a particular organisational and social setting.

This study addresses that need by examining international students' lived experiences at City University Malaysia. It asks how students make sense of cultural adjustment, social relationships and belonging; how they experience the academic environment; and how they describe coping and the availability, accessibility, appropriateness and usefulness of institutional and interpersonal support. The purpose is not to evaluate the university as a whole or to estimate the prevalence of particular problems. Rather, it is to understand how academic, cultural, social and institutional experiences intersect in participants' own accounts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

International student adjustment is increasingly treated as multidimensional. Language, social support, academic expectations and cultural familiarity may each influence experience, but they do not necessarily change together. Wilczewski and Alon's (2023) review places communication across academic, psychological and sociocultural adaptation, reinforcing the idea that language is not only a technical skill. It can shape whether a student asks questions, joins discussion, builds relationships or seeks assistance.

Belonging is similarly relational. Cena et al. (2021) found that language, academic systems, cultural difference and interpersonal relationships contributed to international students' sense of belonging. Social support can also provide both emotional and practical resources. Chuah and Singh (2016), studying international undergraduates in Malaysia, reported the importance students attached to emotional, informational, practical and companionship support from host-national peers. These findings suggest that being surrounded by a diverse student body is not the same as having meaningful opportunities for reciprocal participation.

A broader meta-analysis by Bender et al. (2019) also found a positive association between social support and international students' psychological adjustment. Yet support is not simply a quantity of contact. Its meaning depends on who is available, whether the relationship is trusted and whether assistance is useful in the situation at hand. This matters in university life because the same relationship may serve several functions: a peer can provide friendship and explain an assignment, while a lecturer can provide academic clarification and, through responsiveness, communicate that the student's participation is legitimate.

Institutional support raises a related question: when does a service that exists become support that a student can actually use? Universities may provide orientation, advising, digital resources, counselling and academic services, yet students may not experience these resources as usable. Huang et al. (2024) emphasised communication, campus resources, social support and inclusive environments in international student adjustment. For the present study, support is therefore considered through four practical dimensions: whether it exists, whether students can reach it, whether it fits the context of the problem, and whether students regard it as useful.

Two theories provide complementary interpretive lenses. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework is useful for understanding how people negotiate continued connection with their heritage culture while participating in a receiving society. Importantly, integration does not require the abandonment of familiar language, religion, relationships or other cultural practices. Tinto's (1975, 1993) work, by contrast, focuses on participation in the academic and social systems of higher education. The two perspectives address different levels of experience. A student may feel culturally comfortable in Malaysia but uncertain about assessment or supervision; another may participate successfully in academic work while maintaining a largely international friendship network.

These theories were not used as a coding template. In keeping with the phenomenological orientation, participants' descriptions were analysed before theoretical concepts were used to interpret patterns. This distinction is important because it prevents the findings from being forced into predetermined categories and allows adjustment, academic participation and belonging to remain related but analytically distinct.

This approach also avoids a deficit interpretation of international students. Difficulties with academic writing, classroom participation or help-seeking can arise from the interaction between prior educational experience and new institutional expectations rather than from a lack located solely in the student. Lomer and Mittelmeier's (2023) review of pedagogies with international students similarly cautions against frames that treat international students as inherently deficient. A relational perspective instead asks how students learn new practices and how clearly institutions make those practices available for participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and participants

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was adopted because the study focused on the meaning participants gave to their experiences rather than on testing causal relationships. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Eligibility required participants to be non-Malaysian, to have studied at City University Malaysia, to have completed at least one semester and to be willing to contribute a semi-structured interview account.

The final sample consisted of 16 participants aged 21 to 33. Ten were Somali, while one participant each came from Russia, Sudan, Kenya, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Bangladesh. Their study backgrounds included psychology, engineering, business, information technology, hospitality, TESOL and nursing, with experiences spanning bachelor's and master's degrees, diploma study and a cultural-immersion programme. The sample was not designed to balance nationalities or programmes statistically. Variation was treated as context for interpretation rather than as a basis for subgroup comparison. The one-semester threshold ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to teaching, assessment, peer relationships and university services to discuss experience beyond first impressions.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews based on an interview schedule covering academic experience, cultural and social adjustment, belonging, coping and support. The interviews were conducted through spoken interaction in English. Open questions allowed participants to describe experiences in their own terms, while follow-up prompts were used to clarify meaning or ask for examples. Before contributing data, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and recording. Interview material was transcribed and organised under participant codes P1-P16 rather than names.

Analysis followed an adapted six-stage Colaizzi-informed process, supported by the descriptive phenomenological principles discussed by Sundler et al. (2019). First, complete accounts were read repeatedly to preserve context. Second, significant statements relevant to the phenomenon were identified. Third, meanings were formulated and initial codes were developed close to participants' descriptions. Fourth, related codes were compared and organised into meaning units and candidate themes. Fifth, the themes were integrated into an exhaustive description. Sixth, the description was condensed into an essential structure of the lived experience. The study did not claim to implement Colaizzi's complete seven-stage procedure because participant validation, the seventh step in the original method, was not undertaken (Colaizzi, 1978).

Trustworthiness was supported through repeated engagement with the interview material, comparison within and across accounts, retention of contrasting experiences, participant-linked coding, contextual description and analytic memos. Theoretical concepts from Berry and Tinto were introduced after theme development rather than used as predetermined codes. Ethical safeguards included informed and voluntary participation, confidentiality, participant coding and participants' right to limit disclosure or discontinue participation.

Recurring experiences were not assumed to be universal. A theme could be meaningful across several accounts without being experienced by all 16 participants, and less common experiences were retained when they clarified or challenged a broader pattern. This was important in a phenomenological study because the aim was to describe both shared meanings and variation rather than to convert qualitative material into frequency claims.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eight interconnected themes were developed: motivations and expectations; academic experiences and the learning environment; academic challenges and coping; teaching methods and lecturer-student interaction; social integration and peer relationships; cultural adjustment; institutional support; and personal growth and future outlook. The themes are presented below in a more integrated form because participants often experienced several dimensions at the same time.

4.1 Expectations and entry into the study environment

Participants' decisions to study in Malaysia reflected combinations of affordability, perceived educational quality, programme availability, safety, multiculturalism, religious compatibility and recommendations from people they trusted. P1 and P2 associated Malaysia with manageable tuition costs, while other participants referred to multiculturalism, programme reputation or family and peer recommendations. These accounts fit earlier work on push-pull influences in international study decisions, where cost, reputation, prior knowledge and social influence shape destination choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Cynthia & Chong, 2023).

What matters for the present study is that expectations continued to shape experience after arrival. Expectations about multiculturalism were tested through peer contact; expectations about educational quality were tested through classes, assessment and lecturer interaction; expectations about support were tested when students needed help. The transition therefore began before arrival, as Syed Ahmad and Loke (2022) also observed, and continued as participants compared anticipated university life with what

they actually encountered.

4.2 Academic participation, language and lecturer access

Academic experiences were varied. Participants valued clear course organisation, flexible learning arrangements, practical tasks and opportunities for discussion. P12, for example, associated the academic experience with a balance between theory and practical learning through laboratories and projects. At the same time, participants described unfamiliar academic conventions, independent study, research demands and the need to become more confident in communicating academically.

Academic English was particularly important. P8 connected difficulty in coursework and thesis writing with English-language demands, stress and burnout. P9, in contrast, described improvement through practice and lecturer encouragement. The difference between these accounts suggests that academic language cannot be reduced to general conversational proficiency. Reading research, developing an argument, using disciplinary terminology, referencing sources and explaining uncertainty to a lecturer are specialised forms of participation. Similar issues have been reported in Malaysia by Singh (2019) and Singh and Jack (2022).

Workload and academic uncertainty also appeared at different stages of study. P2 linked the first semester with a large volume of assignments, research-intensive projects and greater expectations for self-directed learning. P1 experienced uncertainty later, during a final-year project, when initial supervisory guidance was insufficient. Adjustment was therefore not completed once students passed an orientation period. New demands could emerge when the nature of academic work changed.

Lecturer interaction could either reduce or extend uncertainty. P3 associated organised explanations with managing course requirements, while P8 described encouragement to ask questions and contribute in class. P2 and P7 also described lecturers as accessible sources of assistance. P10 provided an important qualification by reporting occasions when some lecturers were not available when clarification was needed. These accounts do not justify a general judgement about teaching quality. They show that academic participation depends partly on whether expectations are explained and whether students know when and how clarification can be obtained. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that student-faculty interaction can shape engagement and belonging (Glass et al., 2015; Ammigan et al., 2021).

4.3 Peer relationships, cultural adjustment and belonging

Social integration was not simply a product of being enrolled in a multicultural university. Participants described supportive international and co-national relationships, but they also described limits to participation in other settings. Group work, repeated classroom contact and smaller learning environments created opportunities to meet others, while language and programme context sometimes narrowed interaction.

International friendship networks should not automatically be interpreted as failed integration. Such relationships can provide practical information, emotional reassurance and academic help while students are learning to manage unfamiliar demands. Berry's (1997) framework is useful here because maintaining existing cultural ties can coexist with participation in a receiving environment. Chuah and Singh (2016) similarly showed the practical and emotional importance of social support in the Malaysian context.

P15's clinical placement experience illustrates how social, academic and cultural boundaries can overlap. Limited Bahasa Melayu restricted communication in a professional setting and contributed to a sense of exclusion. The significance of this account is not simply that the participant lacked vocabulary. A language requirement affected participation in a setting that was simultaneously academic, professional and social. It also shows why English-medium study does not remove all communication barriers. The language needed in a classroom may differ from the language needed in a hospital, administrative interaction or everyday local setting.

Other forms of cultural adjustment were more gradual. P1 and P2 associated ordinary encounters with Malaysians with politeness, hospitality and cooperation. P13 found spicy food difficult to adapt to, while P14 needed time to become accustomed to the climate. These details may appear less important than coursework, yet they shape daily comfort and familiarity. Together, the accounts show that students were not simply "adjusted" or "unadjusted". Ease in one domain could coexist with difficulty in another. This unevenness also helps explain why belonging cannot be inferred from visible participation alone (Cena et al., 2021).

4.4 Coping and institutional support

Participants responded actively to difficulties through practice, planning, help-seeking, peer support, lecturer guidance, digital resources, rest, perseverance and, in some accounts, spirituality. Coping, however, did not operate independently of the environment. Strategies became easier to use when guidance and information were accessible and more demanding when students had to discover support routes for themselves.

This was particularly clear in experiences of institutional support. P3 described online resources and lecturer responses as useful for completing academic work, and participants also referred positively to digital platforms and library resources. In contrast, P8 regarded orientation as relatively general, while P15 described advising as useful once the appropriate person had been identified. The distinction is important: a service can exist without becoming part of a student's coping process if the student cannot find it, reach it or connect it to the problem at hand.

The findings therefore support a four-part view of institutional support: availability, accessibility, appropriateness and perceived

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usefulness. Huang et al. (2024) likewise emphasised the role of communication, campus resources and inclusive environments in international student adjustment. In the present study, appropriateness also depended on programme context. General English support, for example, would not fully address a local-language communication problem arising during clinical placement. Support needs may therefore change according to discipline, stage of study and setting.

One of the clearest institutional findings was the gap between formal provision and support that students could actually use. It also helps explain why coping should not be interpreted as evidence that students simply need to become more resilient. When a student can identify a responsive lecturer, locate digital material or reach the correct adviser, personal initiative is supported by the environment. When routes are unclear, the same student must spend more effort discovering where responsibility lies. Institutional support and personal agency therefore work together rather than representing competing explanations of adjustment.

4.5 Personal development and integrated interpretation

Some participants interpreted accumulated experience in terms of personal and professional development. P14 associated living independently with greater self-reliance and discipline, while P1 connected intercultural contact with a broader perspective. P8 linked assignments and presentations with improved communication, and P2 associated programme knowledge with preparation for future work. These are participants' retrospective interpretations rather than objective measures of personality change or employability.

Across the eight themes, three relationships were especially important. First, communication crossed domains. Academic English affected coursework and help-seeking; Bahasa Melayu became relevant in a professional placement; and speaking confidence shaped peer interaction. Second, relationships could be both experiences and resources. A classmate could provide belonging and academic assistance, while lecturer responsiveness could clarify a task and signal that questions were welcome. Third, adjustment was recursive and uneven. Students could become more capable in one area without resolving every difficulty elsewhere.

This cross-theme pattern is consistent with research that treats international student experience as more than a set of separate problems. Wilczewski and Alon (2023) position communication across several forms of adaptation, while Singh and Jack (2022) show that language and culture can shape both academic and social experience in Malaysia. The present findings add institution-specific detail by showing how the same communication issue could move between coursework, peer contact, help-seeking and professional participation.

The combined use of Berry and Tinto helps explain this pattern without collapsing different experiences into one concept. Berry draws attention to cultural continuity and participation in the receiving society, while Tinto directs attention to academic and social participation within the university. The findings suggest that these processes can reinforce one another, but neither guarantees the other. The essential structure of the experience was therefore an ongoing negotiation of participation: students became increasingly able to engage with academic and social life while repeatedly renegotiating belonging, competence, cultural continuity and future possibility.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that international student adjustment at City University Malaysia was neither a simple movement from difficulty to adaptation nor a process located only within the student. Participants planned, practised, sought help and built relationships, but the effectiveness of those strategies depended partly on how academic expectations, lecturer access, peer opportunities and institutional support were organised. Personal agency and institutional conditions were therefore inseparable.

A practical implication is that universities should avoid treating support as a package delivered once at entry. Academic and institutional needs change over time. Programme-linked academic literacy support can make assessment criteria, referencing practices, research expectations and disciplinary communication more explicit at the stages when students need them. Routes for lecturer consultation should also be clear enough that students understand where and when to seek clarification.

Social support should similarly focus on opportunities for repeated, reciprocal contact rather than assuming that diversity by itself produces belonging. Intercultural peer activities or mentoring may be useful when they widen voluntary contact without devaluing co-national or international friendship networks. Where programmes include professional placements that require local-language interaction, faculties should explain communication expectations before placement and consider context-specific preparation when a genuine need exists.

Institutional services should be evaluated not only by whether they are available but by whether students know about them, can reach them, consider them relevant and find them useful. Repeating orientation information at meaningful transition points and providing a simple referral map for academic, administrative and well-being support could reduce the burden of navigating the university through trial and error. These recommendations should be treated as proposals for piloting and evaluation rather than interventions whose effectiveness has already been established by this qualitative study.

5.1 Limitations and future research

Several limitations define the boundaries of the findings. The study involved 16 purposively selected participants from one

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university and was not designed for statistical generalisation. Somali participants formed a substantial proportion of the sample, while several other nationalities were represented by one participant. Differences across accounts therefore cannot be attributed confidently to nationality, programme or study level.

The analysis also relies on retrospective accounts. It captures how participants remembered and interpreted experiences rather than independently verifying what happened in every classroom, placement or administrative interaction. Lecturers, local students, advisers and support staff were not interviewed, and institutional records or direct observations were not used to triangulate participants' perceptions. Interviews were conducted in English, which may also have limited the nuance with which some participants expressed complex cultural or emotional experiences. Finally, the cross-sectional design cannot show prospectively how adjustment changed from arrival through later stages of study.

Future research could address these limitations through multi-site studies, longitudinal interviewing, more deliberately balanced comparative samples and multilingual qualitative approaches. Including lecturers, local students and support staff could also clarify how opportunities and barriers to participation are understood from different positions. Larger mixed-method studies could then examine how widely concepts such as support navigability, academic communication confidence and reciprocal peer contact occur across the international student population.

In conclusion, the study contributes an institution-specific account of international student adjustment as an ongoing negotiation of participation under conditions of difference. The central question is not simply whether an international student has "adjusted", but where participation becomes possible, where it becomes restricted, what resources the student uses and whether institutional support is usable when it is needed.

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