

Students' Coping Mechanisms in Adapting to Cultural Challenges: A Case Study of African Students in a Private University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural challenges faced by African international students and the coping mechanisms they employ while studying at a private university in Malaysia. Using a qualitative case study approach, six African students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews to share their experiences of cultural adjustment. The findings revealed that the participants encountered challenges related to cultural differences, communication, and social adaptation. To cope with these challenges, the students participated in workshops and cultural events, utilised counselling services provided by the Student Affairs Department, built support networks through African student associations, and sought peer advice and emotional support. These strategies contributed positively to their social integration, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging within the university community. The study highlights the importance of institutional support and peer networks in facilitating the cultural adaptation of international students in Malaysian higher education institutions.

Keywords: coping mechanisms, cultural adaptation, African international students, cultural challenges, peer support.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education has contributed to the increasing mobility of students across borders, with many students pursuing education abroad to obtain quality academic experiences and global exposure. Malaysia has emerged as one of the preferred destinations for international students due to its multicultural society, affordable education system, and internationally recognised universities (Abdul Rahman & Ramli, 2023). As a result, Malaysian higher education institutions continue to experience a growing population of international students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Despite the opportunities offered by studying abroad, international students often encounter various challenges when adapting to a new cultural and academic environment. Previous studies have identified common issues such as language barriers, cultural differences, communication difficulties, homesickness, and social isolation, all of which may affect students' emotional well-being and academic adjustment (Singh & Jack, 2021; Xue & Singh, 2024; Elheneidy & Mohd, 2025). African students, in particular, may experience additional challenges related to stereotypes, limited social integration, and cultural misunderstandings while studying in foreign institutions. These experiences may hinder their ability to fully participate in university life and adapt effectively to the host culture.

To manage these challenges, international students commonly adopt various strategies. Studies have highlighted the importance of institutional support, peer relationships, counselling services, and participation in social and cultural activities in promoting students' cultural adaptation and psychological well-being (Che Man et al., 2023; Elheneidy et al., 2025). Participation in multicultural programmes and support networks can help international

students develop a stronger sense of belonging and improve their social integration within the university community.

Although previous studies have explored the experiences of international students in Malaysia, limited research has specifically focused on African students in private universities. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the cultural challenges faced by African students and to explore the coping mechanisms they employ while studying at a private university in Malaysia. The findings of this study may provide valuable insights for higher education institutions in strengthening support systems and creating a more inclusive environment for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Challenges Faced by International Students

The internationalisation of higher education has increased the number of students pursuing studies abroad, including in Malaysia. Although studying overseas provides opportunities for academic and personal growth, international students often encounter challenges when adapting to a new cultural environment. These challenges commonly include language barriers, homesickness, communication difficulties, and unfamiliar social norms, which may affect students' academic performance and emotional well-being (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

In Malaysian higher education institutions, cultural adaptation remains a significant concern among international students. Singh and Jack (2021) found that language and cultural differences influence students' academic adjustment and social interactions, particularly in classroom participation, group discussions, and relationship building. Furthermore, Xue and Singh (2024) highlighted that international students in Malaysia experience sociocultural and psychological challenges, including social isolation, stress, and difficulties integrating into the local community.

African international students may encounter additional challenges associated with stereotypes, racial perceptions, and limited intercultural understanding. Studies have suggested that difficulties in social acceptance and communication may contribute to feelings of loneliness and reduced participation in campus activities. Such experiences can negatively influence students' sense of belonging and overall university experience.

Coping Mechanisms Among International Students

To overcome cultural and psychological challenges, international students employ various coping mechanisms to support their adaptation process. Coping mechanisms refer to the strategies individuals use to manage stress and adjust to unfamiliar environments. Research has consistently demonstrated that social support and institutional assistance play important roles in facilitating successful cultural adaptation.

Support from lecturers, peers, and host communities has been identified as a major contributor to international students' cross-cultural adjustment. Chan et al. (2021) reported that support from lecturers and local students positively influences students' academic, social, and interactional adjustment in Malaysian universities. Similarly, participation in social and cultural activities enables international students to build friendships, improve communication skills, and develop intercultural understanding.

Institutional services such as counselling and student support programmes also contribute significantly to students' emotional well-being and adaptation. Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) emphasised that universities should provide supportive activities and environments that help international students reduce stress and adapt more effectively to local cultures. In addition, peer support networks and student associations provide emotional encouragement and practical guidance, particularly for students adjusting to a foreign environment.

For African students, connections with fellow African students and participation in cultural associations may provide emotional comfort and a sense of familiarity. These support systems help students cope with homesickness, cultural shock, and social isolation while studying abroad. Therefore, coping strategies such as participation in university programmes, seeking counselling services, and building peer support networks are essential in promoting successful cultural adaptation among international students.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the cultural challenges faced by African students and the coping mechanisms they employ while studying in a private university in Malaysia. Since this study is exploratory in nature, a qualitative research design was considered the most appropriate approach to capture the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and adaptation strategies in adjusting to a new cultural environment. A case study method was employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the cultural adaptation experiences of African international students and the coping mechanisms used to manage cultural challenges.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving six African students currently studying at Albukhary International University. The study was conducted with six participants to ensure that rich and detailed information could be obtained, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. The decision to include six African students in this study was guided by established qualitative research practices that prioritise depth of understanding rather than large sample sizes. In qualitative research, particularly exploratory and phenomenological studies, smaller sample sizes are considered appropriate when the objective is to gain comprehensive insights into participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2020). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2020) further emphasised that sample sizes ranging from five to ten participants are often sufficient to achieve meaningful themes and patterns when the participants are closely related to the phenomenon under investigation.

The respondents selected for this study consisted of both male and female African students in their final year of study who had lived in Malaysia for at least three years. This criterion was considered important to ensure that the participants had substantial experience in adapting to the Malaysian cultural and educational environment.

Table 1: Respondents' Background

Respondent	Gender	Country	Age
A	Female	Liberia	23
B	Female	Uganda	23
C	Female	Nigeria	22
D	Male	Senegal	24
E	Male	Somalia	24
F	Male	Ghana	25

The physical interview were used to gather responses from the participants. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded, transcribed, and systematically organised to ensure transparency and reliability throughout the data collection process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). Each participant completed a set of semi-structured interview questions developed based on the objectives of the study, namely to identify the cultural challenges faced by African students and to explore the coping mechanisms they employ while studying in Malaysia. The semi-structured interview approach allowed flexibility and enabled the researcher to obtain in-depth insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives (Kallio et al., 2016; Tindall et al., 2023).

The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Initial coding was guided by the research objectives, followed by the identification of recurring patterns and themes emerging from the data. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding cultural adaptation.

Emergent Themes

I. Cultural Challenges Faced by African Students

- Language and communication barriers
- Cultural differences and social adjustment
- Feelings of isolation and homesickness
- Stereotypes and misunderstandings

II. Coping Mechanisms Employed by African Students

- Participation in workshops and cultural events
- Utilisation of counselling services provided by the Student Affairs Department
- Building support networks through African student associations
- Seeking peer advice and emotional support

The thematic analysis provided valuable insights into the challenges experienced by African international students and the strategies they employed to adapt to the Malaysian cultural and educational environment. The findings also highlighted the importance of institutional support and peer networks in facilitating students' emotional well-being, social integration, and sense of belonging (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). Prior to participating in the study, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any consequences.

Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined when subsequent interviews yielded repetitive information and no additional themes emerged.

Reflexivity Statement

The researchers have academic backgrounds in English language education and qualitative research. Their experiences in language teaching and educational settings may influence their interpretations of participants' perspectives. To minimise potential bias, the researchers employed a semi-structured interview protocol and remained neutral during the interview sessions by avoiding leading questions and allowing participants to express their views freely. During data analysis, the researchers independently reviewed and coded the interview transcripts before discussing and reaching a consensus on the emerging themes. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' responses rather than the researchers' assumptions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample was limited to six African international students from Albukhary International University, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other international student populations or higher education institutions in Malaysia. The experiences and coping mechanisms of African students in other universities or cultural settings may differ due to variations in institutional support, social environment, and individual backgrounds.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data obtained through semi-structured interviews, which may be influenced by personal bias, selective memory, or social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses they perceived as socially acceptable rather than fully reflecting their actual experiences and feelings. In addition, the study focused primarily on students who had lived in Malaysia for at least three years, which may not fully represent the experiences of newly arrived international students who may encounter different adaptation challenges.

Lastly, as this study employed a qualitative case study approach, the findings provide in-depth insights into participants' experiences but are not intended for broad statistical generalisation. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable understanding of the cultural challenges and coping mechanisms among African international students within the context of Malaysian private higher education institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges as International Students

All of the participants admitted that they have challenges adapting to the local culture, including a language barrier.

Respondent A:

"It is hard to mingle with local classmates at the first place because I don't know..maybe because of my skin colour?"

Respondent B:

"There are many challenges, such as it is hard to communicate with the hawkers and Grab drivers, the weather in Malaysia, and even forming a group with classmates."

Respondent C:

"For me, the most challenging part is I have to admit that I am experiencing homesickness."

Respondent D:

"Well...it is pretty challenging to adjust to the food here as well as the weather and the educational system."

Respondent E:

"Language is the biggest challenge for me. They couldn't understand my pronunciation."

Respondent F:

"For me, it's the language. And also the loneliness."

The findings of this study indicate that African international students in a private university in Malaysia experience various cultural and social challenges while adapting to a new environment. The participants highlighted several difficulties, including language barriers, communication problems with local communities, homesickness, loneliness, differences in food and weather, and challenges in social integration with local classmates. Some participants also expressed concerns regarding acceptance and interaction within the local community, particularly in relation to cultural differences and perceptions associated with skin colour. These findings demonstrate that cultural adaptation is a complex process that affects students emotionally, socially, and academically. Among the challenges identified, language barriers emerged as one of the most significant difficulties faced by the participants. Several respondents reported that communication issues affected their ability to interact with local students, hawkers, and service providers, which contributed to feelings of isolation and exclusion. This finding is consistent with previous studies that identified language and communication difficulties as major obstacles to international students' social and academic adjustment (Singh & Jack, 2021; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). In addition, homesickness and loneliness reported by the participants align with findings by Xue and Singh (2024), who emphasised that international students commonly experience psychological and emotional challenges during the adaptation process.

The findings also revealed that differences in food, climate, and educational systems contributed to the students' adjustment difficulties. Such experiences reflect the broader challenges of adapting to unfamiliar cultural and academic environments. Previous research has similarly highlighted that cultural differences and limited social support may negatively affect international students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Chan et al., 2021)..

Participations in Programs and Events

Four respondents mentioned that by participating in programs and events conducted by the university are very helpful.

Respondent A:

"I found that going to workshops on cultural competency was really empowering. Gaining information about

various cultures, comprehending the causes of stereotypes, and obtaining strategies to challenge them gave me practical skills that I could use in my day-to-day interactions”

Respondent B:

“The multicultural affairs office's educational workshops were enlightening.” They gave me awareness about cultural variety, which enabled me to confront prejudice and misconceptions. My attitude to intercultural relations has become more confident and unbiased as a result of my understanding of the subtle differences across cultures.”

Respondent C:

“Participating in educational programs proved to be a life-changing event. With my newfound understanding of various cultural viewpoints and the effects of stereotypes, I feel more empowered”

Respondent E:

“Taking part in cultural competency initiatives provided me with a strong base to combat misconceptions”

The study also found that participation in workshops and cultural competency programmes served as an important coping mechanism among African students. The participants described these educational programmes as empowering and beneficial in helping them understand cultural diversity, stereotypes, and intercultural communication. The workshops increased their awareness of cultural differences and improved their confidence in interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds. These findings support previous research highlighting that participation in multicultural and educational programmes can enhance intercultural understanding, reduce prejudice, and strengthen students’ sense of belonging within the university environment (Chan et al., 2021).

Support through Counselling Services

Four respondents in this study shared that they used the counselling services provided by the Student Affairs Department to get support.

Respondent A:

“When I experienced emotional difficulties because of discrimination, I also looked for counselling services. I was able to communicate my feelings in a secure and encouraging environment throughout the counseling sessions.”

Respondent B:

“I sought out counselling services when I was experiencing emotional difficulties. The counselors offered insightful advice and helpful coping techniques.”

Respondent D:

“My coping process benefited greatly from the use of counseling services”

Respondent F:

“During emotionally trying times, counseling services were a lifeline. The counselors gave me a safe place to talk about my emotions and gave me coping skills. My ability to bounce back from setbacks was greatly aided by the emotional toughness I gained from counseling.”

The study further revealed that African students employed several coping mechanisms to manage these challenges effectively. One significant coping strategy identified was participation in workshops and cultural competency programmes. The respondents described these programmes as empowering and beneficial in helping them understand cultural diversity, reduce stereotypes, and improve intercultural communication skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study explored the cultural challenges faced by African international students and the coping mechanisms they employed while studying at Albukhary International University in Malaysia. The findings revealed that the participants experienced several challenges in adapting to the Malaysian cultural and educational environment, including language barriers, communication difficulties, homesickness, loneliness, differences in food and weather, and challenges in social interaction with local students and communities. Some participants also reported experiences related to stereotypes and difficulties integrating into the local community. These findings suggest that cultural adaptation among international students is a multidimensional process involving emotional, social, and academic adjustment.

Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience by adopting various coping mechanisms to support their adaptation process. The findings showed that participation in workshops and cultural competency programmes helped students develop intercultural understanding, improve communication skills, and reduce misconceptions about cultural differences. In addition, counselling services provided by the Student Affairs Department played a significant role in supporting students' emotional well-being by offering a safe and supportive environment to discuss personal and cultural difficulties. The students also relied on peer advice, friendships, and support networks through African student associations to reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Future research could involve a larger sample size from multiple universities to obtain broader perspectives on the experiences of African international students in Malaysia. Other than that, comparative studies involving students from different countries or cultural backgrounds could be conducted to identify similarities and differences in adaptation experiences and coping mechanisms.

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