

Coping Strategies Utilized by Arab Students in Overcoming Sociocultural Adjustment Challenges During Their Study in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the coping strategies utilized by Arab students in overcoming sociocultural adjustment challenges during their study in Malaysian public universities. Although earlier research has largely emphasized the difficulties experienced by international students, less attention has been given to the practical strategies students use to adapt successfully. Guided by cross-cultural adaptation theory and the sociocultural adjustment perspective, the study employed a qualitative interviews approach. In addition, the study focuses on how Arab students respond to language barriers, academic expectations, environmental differences, food adjustment, transportation issues, and social integration. The findings showed that Arab students rely on both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, including improving English and basic Malay communication, seeking advice from Arab peers and supervisors, maintaining religious and cultural routines, using family and community support, participating gradually in intercultural activities, and making use of university services. The qualitative interviews identified four primary areas of difficulty, with language and social challenges emerging as the most prominent. The study recommended that Malaysian universities should provide stronger orientation programmes, culturally responsive counselling, language support, and structured intercultural engagement to enhance Arab students' academic success and well-being.

Keywords: Arab students; sociocultural adjustment; coping strategies; culture shock; international students; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia has become an important destination for international higher education, particularly for students from Arab countries who seek affordable, accessible, and culturally familiar academic opportunities. The growth of Malaysian public universities, the use of English in many academic programs, and the country's multicultural Muslim-majority context have contributed to Malaysia's attractiveness among Arab students. However, studying abroad is not only an academic experience. It also requires students to negotiate new social rules, educational expectations, communication patterns, climate conditions, food practices, administrative procedures, and relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. For many Arab students, arrival in Malaysia marks the beginning of a complex process of sociocultural adjustment.

Sociocultural adjustment refers to the ability of individuals to function effectively in a new cultural environment. It includes practical competence in everyday life as well as the capacity to understand and participate in host-country social norms. International students often experience stress when the host culture differs from their own in language, food, social interaction, classroom expectations, and institutional procedures. These difficulties may

produce culture shock, homesickness, anxiety, loneliness, and reduced academic confidence if students do not receive adequate support. Cross-cultural adaptation theory explains this process as a gradual movement from initial contact and disorientation toward learning, adjustment, and more effective participation in the host society.

Previous studies on international students in Malaysia have shown that adaptation problems are common among students from various regions. Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Mohd Ishak (2010) found that climate, care, and culture shaped the experiences of international students in Malaysia. Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) similarly reported that adjustment among international students is influenced by social support, self-efficacy, and the ability to manage unfamiliar academic and cultural expectations. These findings suggest that adjustment is not a single event, but an ongoing process influenced by personal characteristics and institutional environments.

For Arab students, sociocultural adjustment may involve both similarities and differences with Malaysian society. On one hand, Islam and shared religious values may provide familiarity and emotional comfort. On the other hand, Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural society, consisting mainly of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other communities, may require students to learn new forms of communication and social behavior. Arab students may also face challenges in understanding Malaysian English accents, Malay language use in daily life, administrative procedures, public transportation systems, and local food practices. Al-Zubaidi and Richards (2010) identified language and cultural barriers as significant issues among Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia, particularly because academic and social participation often depends on effective English communication.

The literature also indicates that academic adjustment is closely connected to language proficiency. Students who struggle to understand lectures, participate in discussions, or complete written assignments may experience lower confidence and academic stress. Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) argued that international students' adjustment to college is shaped by language competence, classroom expectations, and social interaction. In the Malaysian context, Arab students may use English as the primary academic language while also needing basic Malay for daily communication. This dual language demand can intensify adjustment pressure, especially during the first year of study.

Social adjustment is another major dimension of the international student experience. Building friendships with host-country students can reduce isolation, improve cultural understanding, and support academic persistence. However, local students may prefer to communicate in their own languages or within existing peer groups, making it difficult for international students to enter social networks. Ward and Kennedy (1999) emphasized that sociocultural adaptation is improved when students develop the skills needed to manage everyday interactions in the host culture. Zhang and Goodson (2011) also showed that social support is one of the strongest predictors of successful adjustment among international students.

Although many studies have examined the challenges faced by international students, there remains a need to focus more directly on coping strategies. Understanding only the problems provides an incomplete picture. Arab students are not merely affected by the host environment; they also actively respond to it. They seek help, build networks, maintain religious and cultural practices, improve language skills, and gradually learn how to live within Malaysian society. Therefore, this study focuses on the central research question: How do Arab students cope with the sociocultural adjustment challenges they encounter during their study in Malaysia? By examining this question, the study contributes to the literature on international student adaptation and provides practical insights for Malaysian universities seeking to strengthen support for Arab students.

Recent scholarship published after 2023 further strengthens the relevance of this study and shows that sociocultural adjustment remains an active concern in Malaysian higher education. Bi and Ahmad (2024) found that international postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities face academic adaptation challenges connected to institutional expectations, academic support, and emotional support. Wong and Liu (2024) added that online social networking sites can help international students build co-national support, communicate with local students, and obtain practical information during the adaptation process. Similarly, Xue and Kaur Mehar Singh (2025), in a systematic review of international student adaptation in Malaysia, emphasized that language barriers, cultural and religious differences, and social integration difficulties continue to shape students'

academic, sociocultural, and psychological experiences. Ahmed Mahmoud Elheneidy and Sehu Mohd (2025) also reported that cultural adaptation in Malaysia is closely linked with mental well-being, particularly when students face language barriers, loneliness, food differences, and culture shock. More recently, Jiang et al. (2026) showed that social and digital media support can assist international students in coping with academic challenges, especially those related to language, teaching styles, and group collaboration. Although these studies focus on different international student groups, their findings are relevant to Arab students because they highlight similar adjustment patterns within the Malaysian higher education context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine the coping strategies used by Arab students in Malaysian public universities. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was to understand students' lived experiences, personal meanings, and practical responses to sociocultural adjustment challenges. Rather than measuring adjustment only through numerical indicators, the study sought to capture how students described their own challenges and the strategies they used to overcome them.

The study was guided by cross-cultural adaptation theory and the sociocultural adjustment perspective. These frameworks helped the researcher examine how Arab students gradually learned to function within a new cultural and academic environment. The participants were Arab students enrolled in selected Malaysian public universities. They represented different academic levels, including undergraduate, master's, and doctoral study. The selection of participants was based on their direct experience of studying and living in Malaysia as international students from Arab countries.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the researchers to ask prepared questions while also giving participants the freedom to explain their experiences in detail. The interview questions focused on four main areas: environmental challenges, academic challenges, language challenges, and social challenges. Participants were also asked to describe the coping strategies they used in response to each difficulty. Examples included how they dealt with weather, food, transportation, university staff, academic work, English and Malay language barriers, cultural differences, and making friends in Malaysia.

The interview data were analyzed thematically. First, the responses were read carefully to identify repeated ideas and meaningful patterns. Next, similar responses were grouped into categories. These categories were then developed into broader themes that reflected the major forms of adjustment challenges and coping strategies. The main themes identified were environmental coping strategies, academic coping strategies, language coping strategies, and social coping strategies. Direct participant statements were used in the original study to support the interpretation of each theme.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary. Their responses were treated with confidentiality, and the analysis focused on shared adjustment experiences rather than personal identification. The study was limited to Arab students in selected Malaysian public universities and to the data collection period available to the researcher. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all Arab students in Malaysia, but they provide useful insight into common coping patterns among this group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed that Arab students experienced several forms of sociocultural adjustment challenges, but they also used multiple coping strategies to manage these difficulties. The first major area was environmental adjustment. Participants reported that Malaysia's hot, humid, and rainy climate was difficult to tolerate, particularly for students from countries with colder weather or four distinct seasons. To cope, students used practical strategies such as staying in air-conditioned places, spending time in university libraries, wearing light clothes, taking showers frequently, avoiding outdoor movement during very hot hours, and going out during evenings or cooler periods. These responses show that environmental coping was mainly practical and problem-focused.

Food was another important environmental issue. Many participants found Malaysian food different from Arab food in smell, taste, ingredients, and eating habits. Rice-based meals and sweet flavors were unfamiliar to some students who were used to bread, saltier dishes, and home-style Arab meals. Students coped by cooking at home, asking family members for recipes, watching online cooking videos, bringing familiar food practices into their daily routine, and visiting Arab, Yemeni, Syrian, or Middle Eastern restaurants when they lacked time to cook. These strategies helped students reduce homesickness and maintain a sense of cultural continuity.

Transportation also appeared as a challenge, especially during the early period of arrival. Students initially found bus routes, train schedules, university transportation, and Malay road signs confusing. Some also viewed private transport services as expensive. Over time, they adapted by learning bus and train schedules, asking peers for guidance, using affordable public transport, and in some cases buying a small car after becoming more familiar with the environment. This indicates that adjustment improved through repeated exposure and practical learning.

The second major area was academic adjustment. Participants described difficulties related to unfamiliar teaching methods, research expectations, assignment requirements, presentations, course registration, and communication with university staff. Some students were used to different academic systems in their home countries, while others had to adapt to research-based postgraduate study. Coping strategies included seeking help from supervisors, asking instructors for clarification, consulting Arab colleagues, accepting delayed administrative processes with patience, and gradually learning university procedures. Positive relationships with supervisors and helpful staff were particularly important for reducing academic stress.

The third major area was language adjustment. The findings indicate that both English and Malay created challenges for Arab students. English was necessary for lectures, assignments, academic writing, and communication with students from other countries. Malay was useful for daily life, shopping, public transportation, and interacting with local communities. Students coped by enrolling in English courses, practicing English with international students, using translation tools, asking lecturers to explain in English when Malay was used, learning basic Malay greetings and numbers, and improving vocabulary through daily interaction. Language learning therefore became both an academic strategy and a social survival skill.

These recent studies support the present findings by showing that coping is no longer limited to direct face-to-face interaction. Arab students still depend strongly on classmates, supervisors, family members, and Arab communities; however, digital platforms also help them obtain academic information, maintain emotional connection, and reduce uncertainty in a new environment. The role of online communities discussed by Wong and Liu (2024) is consistent with participants' reliance on social networks to solve daily problems, communicate with peers, and feel less isolated. In the same way, Jiang et al. (2026) showed that social and digital media support can reduce academic pressure by helping students understand assignments, teaching expectations, and group work practices. For Arab students, such tools may be especially useful during the first semester, when students are still learning how Malaysian university systems operate.

The fourth major area was social adjustment. Many participants found it difficult to make friends with local students because of cultural differences, language preferences, and existing social groups. Some students also struggled to understand Malaysian, Chinese, and Indian cultural practices at the same time. To cope, they tried to communicate in English, attended university gatherings, participated in social occasions such as open houses and weddings, developed friendships with Malaysian students who spoke Arabic or English, and relied on Arab peer networks for emotional support. These strategies helped reduce isolation and improved students' understanding of Malaysian society.

The findings are also consistent with recent evidence that adaptation includes psychological and emotional dimensions. Ahmed Mahmoud Elheneidy and Sehu Mohd (2025) found that international students in Malaysia cope with stress by joining activities, developing supportive friendships, seeking counselling, and building self-reliance. This supports the current study because Arab students did not merely avoid difficulties; rather, they actively searched for emotional, religious, social, and academic resources that helped them remain stable. Xue and Kaur Mehar Singh (2025) similarly noted that academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges are connected, meaning that weakness in one area may affect adjustment in another. Therefore, when Arab students

improve language skills, create friendships, and receive academic guidance, their overall adjustment becomes stronger.

The discussion of these findings confirms that coping strategies among Arab students are both problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping appeared in actions such as learning language skills, using public transportation more confidently, cooking familiar food, and asking for academic help. Emotion-focused coping appeared in maintaining religious practices, preserving cultural identity, communicating with family, showing patience, and seeking comfort from Arab communities. The findings are consistent with previous studies showing that international student adjustment is influenced by language competence, social support, academic expectations, and cultural learning (Mahmud et al., 2010; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Overall, the results suggest that Arab students' adjustment in Malaysia is not automatic. It is a gradual process that requires personal effort, peer support, institutional guidance, and intercultural openness. While Malaysia's Muslim-majority context may provide some comfort, students still need structured support to manage practical, academic, and social difficulties. Universities can improve adjustment outcomes by providing clearer orientation programs, accessible language support, mentoring systems, culturally aware staff, and activities that encourage meaningful interaction between local and international students.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Arab students in Malaysian public universities experience a range of sociocultural adjustment challenges, but they also demonstrate resilience and active coping in managing these difficulties. The main challenges identified in the study relate to environmental conditions, food practices, transportation systems, academic expectations, language barriers, communication with university staff, cultural differences, and social integration. These challenges are especially strong during the early period of arrival, when students are still unfamiliar with the host environment.

The findings show that Arab students use several strategies to cope with their adjustment experiences. They manage environmental challenges by changing daily routines, using air-conditioned spaces, and learning transportation systems. They cope with food differences by cooking at home, relying on family recipes, and visiting Arab restaurants. They manage academic challenges by seeking guidance from supervisors, consulting peers, asking for clarification, and learning university procedures. They respond to language challenges by improving English, learning basic Malay, and practicing communication with local and international students. Socially, they reduce isolation by forming friendships, joining university activities, attending cultural events, and maintaining support from Arab communities and family members.

The study also emphasizes the importance of institutional support. Malaysian universities should not assume that international students will adjust successfully on their own. Universities should provide comprehensive orientation programs that explain academic expectations, administrative procedures, cultural norms, transportation, health services, and student support resources. Language support should also be strengthened through English academic writing workshops, speaking practice sessions, and basic Malay communication courses. In addition, universities should create mentoring programs that connect new Arab students with senior international students and trained local student volunteers.

Intercultural engagement should be treated as a central part of international student support. Activities such as multicultural clubs, open-house programs, peer learning groups, and community engagement events can help Arab students interact meaningfully with Malaysian students and other international students. Academic and administrative staff should also receive training on cultural sensitivity, communication styles, and the needs of international students. Such efforts can reduce misunderstanding and improve students' confidence in seeking help.

The inclusion of recent studies published after 2023 also confirms that the adjustment experience of international students in Malaysia is changing. Contemporary research shows that digital communication, online peer support, culturally responsive counselling, and structured university services are increasingly important in helping

students manage academic and sociocultural stress. Therefore, support for Arab students should combine traditional assistance, such as orientation programmes and language classes, with newer forms of digital and peer-based support that reflect how students currently communicate and seek help.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Orientation and Guidance Programs:** Malaysian universities should design comprehensive orientation programs that introduce Arab students to academic expectations, cultural norms, and available student services from the very beginning of their studies.
- 2. Language and Academic Support:** Establish language support centers that provide continuous training in English and Malay, as well as academic writing workshops tailored to the needs of Arab students.
- 3. Encouraging Social Participation:** Encourage Arab students to participate in multicultural activities, student clubs, and community engagement events to strengthen intercultural communication and reduce feelings of isolation.
- 4. Psychological and Social Support Services:** Universities should enhance counseling and mentoring systems that provide emotional and psychological assistance, particularly for newly arrived students facing culture shock.
- 5. Training for Academic Staff:** Conduct professional development programs for lecturers and administrators to raise awareness of cultural diversity, communication styles, and effective approaches for supporting international students.
- 6. Training for Arab students:** Professional programs can be held to start preparing Arab students in their home country by familiarizing themselves with the culture, both general and academic, of the host country.
- 7. Arab students' mindset:** They should maintain an open mind and value diverse cultures. They should strive to focus on the positive aspects rather than dwelling on the challenges.

In conclusion, Arab students' coping strategies reflect a combination of personal resilience, cultural continuity, religious strength, peer support, and gradual intercultural learning. By understanding these strategies, Malaysian universities can design more effective support systems that promote academic achievement, psychological well-being, and successful sociocultural adjustment. Future research may expand this study by including a larger sample, comparing Arab students across different universities, or examining the relationship between coping strategies and academic performance. It is hoped that the results and the recommendations of the current study serve as guidelines to Ministry of education and policymaker.

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