



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING (IJEPC)

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CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE HOST UNIVERSITY

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 15.10.2025

Revised date: 06.11.2025

Accepted date: 10.12.2025

Published date: 26.12.2025

To cite this document:

Muda, S., & Mahira, A. N. (2025). Cross-Cultural Adaptation Among International Students in the Host University. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 10 (61), 1234-1243.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1061085

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the factors influencing the cross-cultural adaptation process among international students at a public university in Northern Peninsular Malaysia. The research specifically examines the interplay between students' predisposition to change and their eventual intercultural transformation. Grounded in Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, the study frames adaptation as a dynamic, and communication-driven process. The research employed an exploratory qualitative design by conducting in-depth, and semi-structured interviews with ten international students selected via purposive sampling. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis and was assisted by NVIVO 15 software. Credibility was ensured using member checking and data source triangulation. The findings strongly provide empirical support for the Stress-Adaptation-Growth dynamic, structuring the adaptation into three interconnected stages of input, throughput, and output. The most critical challenge identified was limitations in host communication competence, specifically regarding the management of local accents and operational communication. Successful adaptation was evidenced by the development of functional fitness, which included increased resilience and advanced risk management skills. This research confirms that the adaptation of international students is a dynamic process where internal readiness interacts with and overcomes communicative and environmental challenges. Recommendations are categorised into the need for the host university and future research.

Keywords:

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, Adaptive Predisposition, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Process, Intercultural Transformation, Communication Competence

Introduction

The rapid globalisation of higher education and the enrolment of international students help elevate the reputation of Malaysia as a key hub for transnational learning. This trend attracts further investments and leads to a substantial increase in the international student population (Abdul Rohman et al., 2024). The number of overseas students choosing Malaysia as their destination for higher education has steadily grown. As of 2025, Malaysia hosts approximately 170,000 international students which marks a 63% increase from just around 104,315 international students in June 2023 (Ashraf, 2025). The journey for these students involves more than academic study because it necessitates cross-cultural adaptation. This involves a comprehensive adjustment to a new social, psychological, and academic environment (Luo & Zhang, 2021). This process is rarely seamless, often presents significant challenges that influence well-being and academic success (Olagunju et al., 2024; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

The current study focuses on the challenges and factors influencing international students at a host university through the lens of Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001). This theory posits that adaptation is a process of stress, adaptation, and growth driven by communication with the host environment. This study aims to explore the factors influencing the input to change and the subsequent intercultural transformation among students at a public university in Northern Peninsular Malaysia.

Literature Review

International Students in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia presents a unique multicultural environment that requires significant adjustment for outsiders. Studies focusing on students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions highlight that students encounter specific hurdles. These include challenges with language anxiety, cultural adaptation, and social integration (Abdul Rohman et al., 2024, 2025; Jamal & Wok, 2020; May et al., 2025). The success of internationalisation efforts in Malaysia depends heavily on understanding the factors that support successful adaptation within this complex local environment (Jamal & Wok, 2020).

Theoretical Framework: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, developed by Young Yun Kim, serves as the theoretical backbone for this research. The theory views adaptation as a long-term, and cyclical process of deculturation and acculturation that leads to personal transformation, or intercultural transformation (Kim, 2001). Kim conceptualises this dynamic process of stress-adaptation-growth through a model consisting of adaptive predisposition, intercultural stress, and communication competence (adaptation process), and intercultural transformation. In this framework, the success of adaptation is primarily determined by the individual's predisposition and the quality of their host communication competence (Kim, 2001; Liu et al., 2024). Following the framework established by Kim (2001), this study adopts a structural approach that maps adaptive predisposition, the adaptation process, and intercultural transformation onto the sequential stages of input, throughput, and output.

Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Predisposition as the Input Stage

The literature indicates that an individual's background and psychological preparedness significantly influence adaptation outcomes. Pre-departure preparation and individual traits, such as open-mindedness and flexibility serve as buffers against environmental stress (Fedotova, 2021; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). These initial characteristics of the student represent the input stage and determine the capacity of the individual to engage with the host environment (Tang et al., 2024).

Intercultural Stress and Communication Competence as the Throughput Stage

The process of adaptation involves stress and the inevitable culture shock which can manifest as physiological strain or normative conflict (Mulyadi et al., 2024; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). Critical to mitigating this stress is the host communication competence which is defined as the functional ability to communicate with members of the host society (Liu et al., 2024).

Research consistently identifies language barriers as a prominent source of stress and communication anxiety. This is particularly true when dealing with local accents, conversational speed, and operational language (Hasan & Snigdha, 2024; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Difficulty in social interaction and integrating with host peers is also a major challenge that affects well-being (Maharaj et al., 2025; Yu & Wright, 2024).

Intercultural Transformation as the Output Stage

Successful adaptation leads to a transformed state where the student develops a higher level of functional fitness. This refers to the ability to operate effectively and autonomously in the new culture (Kim, 2001). This stage includes developing coping strategies, building resilience, and achieving psychosocial and academic success (Olagunju et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of international students regarding cross-cultural adaptation at the host university. A total of ten international students were selected as informants using purposive sampling as presented in Table 1. This non-probability technique allowed for the deliberate selection of participants with diverse backgrounds including country of origin, gender, and study level. The selection deemed most capable of providing rich, pertinent information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022) relevant to the study's objective and the cross-cultural adaptation framework.

Table 1: Demographic Background of Informants

INFORMANT	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	GENDER	COURSE	SEMESTER	STUDY LEVEL
1	Japan	Female	Development Management	6	Undergraduate
2	Indonesia	Male	Creative Industry Management	5	Undergraduate
3	Indonesia	Female	Managerial Communication	6	Masters

4	Nigeria	Male	Computer Science	5	Undergraduate
5	Bangladesh	Female	Operation Management	2	Undergraduate
6	Bangladesh	Male	Computer Science	3	Undergraduate
7	Yemen	Male	Logistic and Transportation	2	Undergraduate
8	Somalia	Female	Islamic Finance and Banking	3	Undergraduate
9	China	Male	Statistic	4	Undergraduate
10	China	Female	Management	2	Undergraduate

Data Collection Method

The primary data collection method was in-depth and semi-structured interviews. This method, consistent with rigorous qualitative inquiry, facilitated a balance between a core set of questions based on theoretical tenets of cross-cultural adaptation theory and the flexibility to explore emergent themes. Interviews were recorded with prior consent via digital audio or virtual platform recording features, and then transcribed to ensure data accuracy and reliability.

Data Analysis Method

The transcribed data underwent a rigorous thematic analysis process as follows:

Coding and Analysis

The transcripts were initially read multiple times for deep immersion, then imported into a qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 15 for Mac. Data was systematically coded and categorised into themes and sub-themes that directly addressed the study objective and Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory. This procedure ensured the data was organised according to interview questions and related themes, moving from raw data to conceptual findings.

Quality and Credibility

The study utilised member checking (returning transcripts to informants for verification of accuracy and interpretation) to enhance the credibility of the findings. Additionally, data source triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating information obtained from multiple informants and available data from official university documents (enrolment records, support services) to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Research Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis confirmed a structural alignment with the cross-cultural adaptation framework through the three stages of input, throughput, and output as summarised in Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the research findings reveal that the transformation of international students at this university is not a static event but a dynamic and interconnected process. This process flows from the students' initial Input (Predisposition), moves through the Throughput

of communicative challenges (The Adaptation Process), and culminates in the Output of internal change (Intercultural Transformation).

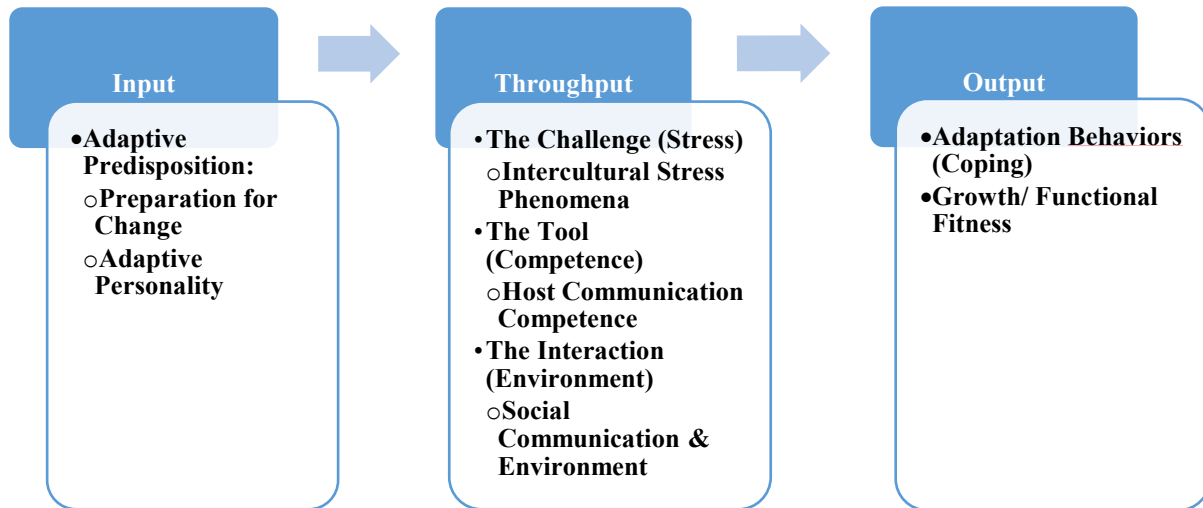


Figure 1: Factors Influencing International Students Predisposition to Change and Cross-Cultural Transformation

The Input Stage: Adaptive Predisposition

The adaptation process begins before or immediately upon arrival. The input consists of the student's predisposition, which reflects the personal readiness brought by the students to the host culture. This stage represents the internal factors and resources the student possesses upon entering the new culture. This is evidenced by the two sub-themes. The first sub-theme on preparation for change, the informants disclosed that they performed "online research" on the university and things related to that, and "mentally prepared" to adjust to the new place. Another sub-theme on Adaptive Personality, informants reported having "curiosity" about other culture, and preparing to adapt to the situation by being "flexible" and "open-minded" to "adapt and survive". The informants also believe that the "willingness to learn" will also help them in adapting with the new place. These personality traits acted as the catalyst that pushed students to engage with the host environment rather than retreat when faced with difficulties. These factors heavily influence the adaptation process that follows.

The Throughput Stage: The Adaptation Process

The core of the diagram is the throughput stage, where the internal predisposition collides with the reality of the new environment. This stage is characterised by a cyclic interaction between intercultural stress, host communication competence, and social communication. The findings reveal that students inevitably face intercultural stress phenomena, manifested physiologically through adjustments to "food" and "weather." They also encountered psychological stress through normative conflicts like social etiquette (e.g., touching a woman's hand). This stress necessitates the development of host communication competence. The "language barrier" and difficulty with "local accents" or "speed of English" are not merely obstacles; they are the friction points that force students to acquire operational competence, such as finding the "correct translation" to complete tasks like paying fees. These competencies are tested in the social communication and environment sphere. Challenges in "making new friends" or navigating "intergroup complexity" (local vs. international groups) force the student to actively

apply their communication skills to achieve integration. Within the throughput stage, the challenges, tools, and interaction components are typically shown as interacting with each other to illustrate the continuous nature of adaptation (e.g., stress leads to adaptation behaviours, which increases competence).

The Output Stage: Intercultural Transformation

The struggles encountered in the throughput stage directly result in the output of intercultural transformation. The relationship here is causal because stress leads to coping, which eventually leads to growth. To manage the stress of the throughput phase, students developed active adaptation behaviours (coping as the bridge). Strategies identified include "learning to respect different cultural norms" and actively "trying not to rely on their native language" to force integration. Finally, successful management of these challenges resulted in functional fitness (growth), described by informants as the development of personal capabilities. For instance, the struggle of "staying in a new environment" directly contributed to increased "resilience" and improved "risk management skills".

Thus, the factors influencing international students are not isolated. The adaptive predisposition (Input) equips the student to enter the environment; the stress and communication challenges (Throughput) force the student to adapt; and this struggle produces the intercultural transformation (Output) manifested as personal growth and functional fitness.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that cross-cultural adaptation among international students represents an upward spiral of stress and growth driven primarily by communication. This trajectory provides strong empirical support for the Stress-Adaptation-Growth dynamic central to the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001). By examining the lived experiences of students through the stages of input, throughput, and output, this research identifies the specific mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the transition into a new host environment.

The Input Stage: The Primacy of Adaptive Predisposition

The results demonstrate that the predisposition of the student acts as the foundational input for the entire adaptation journey. Proactive behaviours observed among the informants, such as conducting extensive online research and engaging in mental preparation before arrival, align with established literature regarding the management of pre-departure challenges (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Furthermore, the emphasis that participants placed on adaptive personality traits, including flexibility and open-mindedness, is consistent with the requirement in the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory that individuals must actively engage with the host culture for genuine transformation to occur (Kim, 2001). The readiness of the student to embrace change, rather than resisting it, serves as the initial catalyst for the subsequent throughput stage. This internal preparedness is critical because it dictates how a student perceives and responds to the inevitable pressures of a foreign environment (Jamal & Wok, 2020).

The Throughput Stage: Communication Competence and Intercultural Stress

The core of the adaptation struggle is situated within the throughput stage, which is defined by the interaction between host communication competence and intercultural stress. The findings reveal that students frequently struggle with local accents, the rapid speed of English, and the difficulty of finding correct translations for specific social or administrative contexts. These observations strongly echo concerns raised in contemporary literature regarding the linguistic

and operational barriers faced by international students in higher education institutions within Malaysia and other host countries (Hasan & Snigdha, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; May et al., 2025; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

These barriers are not merely linguistic in nature. Instead, they represent significant operational hurdles that impede the ability of the student to function and manage daily tasks, such as university administration and financial transactions. This lack of operational functionality directly increases intercultural stress and communicative anxiety. Furthermore, the culture shock related to external factors such as food, weather, and normative conflicts involving gender related social rules constitutes a classic manifestation of intercultural stress that necessitates the development of robust coping strategies (Mulyadi et al., 2024; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). While the host university may exhibit high receptivity, the underlying complexity of intergroup communication between local and international groups remains a persistent hurdle (Yu & Wright, 2024).

Critical Engagement: Interrogating Kim's Theory on Ethnic Support

While this research provides strong empirical support for the general framework proposed by Kim (2001), the findings offer a vital point of interrogation regarding the role of ethnic social communication. Kim (2001) suggests that a heavy reliance on co-nationals can impede the adaptation process because it potentially reduces engagement with the host society. However, the data in this study suggests that ethnic support can extend and refine the theory by acting as a strategic buffer.

Informants in this study redefined the use of ethnic support as a temporary and active adaptation behaviour. Rather than serving as a permanent retreat from the host culture, this support functions as a coping strategy to manage immediate psychological stress. This allows the student to conserve emotional and cognitive energy before they choose to re-engage with the host environment. Consequently, ethnic social communication should not be viewed solely as a barrier. For many students, it may be a necessary prerequisite to survive the high stress throughput stage without experiencing total psychological withdrawal or a decline in mental well-being (Maharaj et al., 2025).

Critical Engagement: The Uneven and Non-Linear Nature of Adaptation

A further complexity identified in this research is whether adaptation appears as a linear progression or an uneven experience across different domains. Although the model developed by Kim (2001) typically depicts an upward and relatively uniform spiral of growth, the findings of this study indicate that adaptation is often segmented. Students frequently reported reaching a high level of functional fitness in academic and operational domains, such as successfully managing university fees and administrative requirements.

In contrast, adaptation within the social domain remained a significant difficulty due to intergroup complexity and the challenges of forming deep connections with local peers. This suggests that a student can become functionally fit for university tasks while still experiencing intense levels of isolation and intercultural stress in their social life. This uneven progression challenges the notion of a uniform transformation. It suggests that intercultural personhood may develop at different speeds depending on the specific environment or domain in which the student is operating. The culture of origin of the student also appears to play a role in how these different domains are prioritized and managed (Fedotova, 2021).

The Output Stage: Intercultural Transformation and Functional Fitness

The ultimate outcome of this process is intercultural transformation, which is evidenced by the development of functional fitness. The self-reported development of resilience and risk management skills among the informants directly supports the tenet that adaptation is a growth oriented experience. The successful management of stress leads to an enhanced capacity to function effectively in a new environment, which ultimately contributes to overall academic success and personal well-being (Olagunju et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024).

As students move through these phases, they move toward the emergence of an increasingly intercultural personhood (Abdul Rohman et al., 2025). This state is characterized by an individual who is capable of functioning effectively across diverse cultural boundaries. By viewing the adaptation phases as a progression from input to output, it becomes clear that the internal transformation of the student is a direct result of the communicative struggles faced during their tenure at the host university (Abdul Rohman et al., 2024; Luo & Zhang, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The adaptation process is a cyclical journey from predisposition through stress and the use of host communication competence, culminating in intercultural transformation. This study confirms that functional fitness is a growth-oriented experience resulting from the successful management of stress.

Based on the findings and the communication-centric theoretical framework, the recommendations are structured into two categories: practical actions for the host university and suggestions for future research. The recommendations for the host institution include to:

Develop Targeted Host Communication Competence Training

The university should implement targeted English language support focusing on comprehension of local accents and fast conversational speech;

Create Operational Communication Guides

The university should create short, visual guides, and infographics that specifically address "operational communication" tasks, such as payment procedures, campus navigation, and administrative processes, using clear and standardised English;

Facilitate Structured Social Integration

The university should implement mandatory intercultural communication programmes that pair international students with local students for project-based learning to break down "cultural walls" and address intergroup complexity, fostering genuine social interaction (Yu & Wright, 2024); and

Utilise Predisposition Assessment

The university could incorporate a self-assessment tool during orientation to gauge a student's preparedness and personality traits (e.g., open-mindedness). This allows the university to provide targeted mentoring to students identified as having lower adaptive predisposition for targeted mentoring.

For future research, studies should quantify the relationship between adaptive personality traits and the speed of developing functional fitness among international students in Malaysia. Further research should also be conducted to compare and analyse the specific language-related challenges faced by students from different cultures of origin (e.g., Asian vs. non-Asian countries) to refine communication interventions. Other recommendation for future studies is to investigate the specific impact of social media on facilitating or impeding host communication competence and ethnic social communication within this cross-cultural adaptation framework.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to extend their appreciation to the students who participated in this research.

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