



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
MODERN EDUCATION  
(IJMOE)  
[www.ijmoe.com](http://www.ijmoe.com)



## CROSSING BRIDGES: CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

Pragash MuthuRajan<sup>1\*</sup>, Sultana M Alam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia  
Email: [pragashm@utar.edu.my](mailto:pragashm@utar.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia  
Email: [sultana@utar.edu.my](mailto:sultana@utar.edu.my)

\* Corresponding Author

### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 30.09.2024

Revised date: 14.10.2024

Accepted date: 25.11.2024

Published date: 16.12.2024

#### To cite this document:

MuthuRajan, P., & Sultana, M. A. (2024). Crossing Bridges: Cross-Cultural Adaptation And Social Interaction Of International Students In Malaysia. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 6 (23), 110-129.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.623009

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



### Abstract:

The globalization of education has led to a rise in international student mobility, with Malaysia becoming a key destination. However, research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Malaysia remains limited. This study examines the adaptation experiences of 958 international students across 20 universities, focusing on their perceptions of interactions and relationships with Malaysians. The results indicate that most students report positive adaptation outcomes, including emotional closeness to Malaysians, a sense of being understood, and active participation in academic and social activities. However, some students feel disconnected, citing barriers like language and cultural differences. The study recommends strengthening orientation programs, peer mentoring, and cultural sensitivity training to improve integration, and encourages local students to foster inclusive environments. The findings have practical implications for enhancing the cross-cultural experience and well-being of international students.

### Keywords:

Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Social Interaction, International Students, Higher Education, Malaysia

### Introduction

The globalization of education has brought about transformative changes in the movement of students across borders, leading to a significant rise in the number of international students globally. According to UNESCO (2024), over 6.4 million students are currently engaged in international study programs, out of a global total of 254 million students. This remarkable

trend underscores the increasing prominence of international education as an integral component of academic and cultural exchange. Malaysia, in particular, has emerged as a leading destination, hosting more than 170,000 international students from 162 countries, a number projected to grow as the nation aims to attract 250,000 international students by 2025 (The Star, 2023). This evolution positions Malaysia as a dynamic hub for global higher education, drawing students with diverse aspirations and cultural backgrounds. While Malaysia's prominence in international education continues to grow, a critical challenge lies in understanding the nuanced experiences of international students as they navigate cross-cultural adaptation. Despite the notable influx of students, there remains a paucity of research examining their integration and social experiences in Malaysia (Zhao et al., 2023). As such, the need for focused inquiry into the emotional and relational dimensions of adaptation has become increasingly apparent. Studies indicate that successful cross-cultural adaptation involves complex interactions shaped by perceptions of closeness, understanding, friendliness, approachability, integration, and a sense of belonging within the host society.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing how international students in Malaysia perceive their interactions and relationships with Malaysians, exploring dimensions such as approachability, togetherness, and familial bonds. By delving into these aspects, the research aims to provide valuable insights into the emotional and social challenges faced by international students, contributing to strategies that enhance their overall well-being and integration into Malaysian society. Based on above discussion, present study aims to investigate the level of cross-cultural adaptation among international students studying in Malaysia and perceptions towards interactions and relationships with Malaysians. As such, the research poses the following questions:

RQ1: What is the level of cross-cultural adaptation among international students studying in Malaysia?

RQ2: What is the overall perceptions of international students towards their interactions and relationships with Malaysians?

RQ3: To what extent do international students engage in social interactions with Malaysian students and participate in Malaysian cultural and social activities?

## Literature Review

### *Cross-cultural Adaptation*

When students travel abroad for study, their process of cross-cultural adaptation encompasses not only learning academic and social norms but also navigating emotional, psychological, and practical challenges inherent in living in a foreign country (Cao *et al.*, 2023). Interactions between diverse cultures often lead to conflicts and contradictions during this adaptation, which are nearly unavoidable. International students frequently contend with culture shock (Tseu *et al.*, 2023), anxiety (Razgulin *et al.*, 2023), and other challenging social and psychological conditions (Okunishi & Tanaka, 2023), resulting in homesickness, boredom, fluctuating emotions, heightened sensitivity, and feelings of isolation (Mohamud & Madderla, 2024). A study by Alasmari (2023) among international students studying in Saudi Arabia discovered that over half of the respondents reported experiencing significant nostalgia, depression, stress, and loneliness during their first year of study; and all respondents expressed feelings of homesickness and missing their families, besides suffered from culture shock due to disparities in lifestyle, religious sects, and languages used in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, another study

conducted among 193 international students studying in a university at Lithuania revealed that 59% of respondents showed symptoms of depression, 20% had moderate anxiety, while 17% experienced severe anxiety (Razgulin *et al.*, 2023). All these difficulties are evident when significant disparities exist in geography, lifestyle, values, and other aspects between their home and host cultures, exacerbating the process of adapting to the new cultural environment. Various other factors also influence the cross-cultural adaptation process, including the student's personality, social support, language proficiency, and prior intercultural experiences (Zakaria & Yusuf, 2022). Furthermore, they face challenges such as adjusting to new diets and accommodations, financial limitations, unfamiliar academic schedules and methodologies, as well as overcoming language and various cultural or personal obstacles (Koo & Nyunt, 2023). These transitional difficulties affect both daily life and cultural adaptation.

### ***Social Interaction***

Social interaction plays a crucial role in the adjustment of international students to a new cultural environment. According to Wang *et al.* (2023), effective social interactions with host country nationals help international students build social networks, increase cultural awareness, and reduce the stress associated with cultural transition. A study conducted by Sheng *et al.* (2022) among international students' studying in China, found that respondents' sociocultural adaptation is strongly supported by friendships with host nationals and other international students, which significantly enhance their psychological well-being. In line with this, Zheng (2024) studied about international students' experiences on intercultural friendship formation in a British university, found that the interaction between international students and their peers, particularly host students, plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural friendships, which are integral to their adaptation to local cultures. Zheng further added, developing such relationships enables international students to navigate cultural constraints, reflect on their actions, and address biases or misconceptions. These interactions not only empower students to overcome obstacles but also support their broader cultural learning and adaptation. This shows that social interaction among international students and host students can significantly enhance international students' ability to adapt into the local culture. Similarly, a study by Brunsting *et al.* (2021) among international students studying in two universities at US, highlighted that the frequent interactions with local students leads to various positive impacts on the emotional well-being and academic performance of international students. According to Campbell *et al.* (2023), international students who engage in academic cooperation and form social bonds with local students are better able to navigate the academic system and overcome challenges related to language, teaching styles, and cultural differences. The benefits of social interaction extend beyond academic achievement to include greater participation in extracurricular activities and increased likelihood of long-term residence in the host country (Zhu & Smith, 2024).

### **Theoretical Background**

Kim's (2005) Integrative Communication Theory (ICT) offers insights into cross-cultural adaptation, the process of adjusting to a new culture. It explains how individuals undergo transformation through interactions with the new environment when moving from their familiar home culture. ICT emphasizes affiliative, dominance, and anxiety behaviors as influential in communication during adaptation, stressing the role of cultural context in shaping communication norms. For international students, adapting to a new culture often involves navigating language, nonverbal cues, and cultural norms, all of which ICT suggests can significantly impact their adjustment process. Overall, ICT provides a valuable framework for

understanding how communication behaviors affect cross-cultural adaptation and social interaction, underscoring the importance of cultural context in analyzing such behaviors.

## Methods

### *Sample*

The study focused on international undergraduate students aged 18-29 studying in Malaysia, adhering to Ruben and Kealey's (1979) recommendation of a minimum six-month foreign residence for observing cross-cultural adaptation. Only students meeting this criterion were included. Employing purposive sampling, the study targeted students from 20 universities, both public and private combined, across Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, to ensure diverse representation and comprehensive insights into their adaptation experiences. While purposive sampling effectively ensured the inclusion of respondents with relevant characteristics, it may limit the generalizability of findings to the broader population of international students in Malaysia due to its non-random nature. Additionally, dependence on online questionnaire distribution through social media platforms may have excluded students with limited internet access or those not active on these platforms, potentially leading to selection bias. To mitigate these limitations, the study employed multiple strategies. First, efforts were made to disseminate the questionnaire widely across diverse online channels to reach a broader audience and minimize platform-specific bias. Second, targeting students from a wide range of universities, including those in East Malaysia, was intended to enhance the representativeness of the sample by capturing varied institutional and geographical experiences. Finally, the large sample size of 958 valid responses adds robustness to the findings, providing a substantial basis for analyzing cross-cultural adaptation experiences despite these potential limitations.

### *Respondents' Profile*

**Table 1: Respondents' Demographic (n=958)**

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	356	37.2
	Female	602	62.8
<b>Country</b>	Mauritius	4	0.40
	Brunei	5	0.50
	Japan	5	0.50
	Maldives	5	0.50
	Taiwan	7	0.70
	Kenya	11	1.10
	Thailand	13	1.40
	Ghana	17	1.80
	South Africa	18	1.90
	India	23	2.40
	Indonesia	60	6.30
	Nigeria	85	8.90
	Pakistan	95	9.90
	Bangladesh	142	14.80
	China	468	48.90
<b>Age Group</b>	18-21	53	5.5
	22-24	275	28.7

	25-27	349	36.4
	28-29	208	21.7
	Above 29	73	7.6
<b>Year of Study</b>	First	345	36.0
	Second	380	39.7
	Third	197	20.6
	Fourth	20	2.1
	Fifth	16	1.7

Table 1 shows breakdown of the respondents' demographic profile. A total of 958 respondents ( $n = 958$ ) have participated in this study, consists of 356 male (37.2%) and 602 (62.8%) female respondents. Respondents from 15 countries have responded to the survey. International students from China contributed the largest number of participants, with 468 respondents making up nearly half (48.90%) of the total sample. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nigeria also made substantial contributions, comprising 14.80%, 9.90%, and 8.90% of the total sample, respectively. The distribution reflects a diverse participant base, highlighting contributions from across Asia (including Southeast Asia and South Asia) and Africa. In regards to respondents' age group, majority of participants are in the age groups of 25-27 years ( $n=349$ , 36.4%), indicating a significant proportion of young adults in the study. The minority age groups include 18-21 years with 53 participants (5.5%). The distribution shows a relatively even spread across the age groups, with notable concentrations in the mid-20s to late 20s. While younger adults (18-24 years) make up a substantial portion, there is also a presence of participants in their late 20s and older. Largest groups of the respondents are in their second year of study, comprising 380 participants (39.7%), followed by the first year with 345 participants (36.0%). Fourth and fifth year students constitute the smallest segments of the sample, accounting for 2.1% and 1.7% of respondents, respectively.

### ***Instrument***

This study utilized a self-administered survey questionnaire comprising two sections: demographic data and cross-cultural adaptation. The demographic section included questions on gender, nationality, age group, undergraduate status confirmation, year of study, and duration of stay in Malaysia. Subsequent sections contained questionnaires designed to measure cross-cultural adaptation, followed by social interaction. The Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) developed by Lee and Robbins (1995) was adapted to measure the cross-cultural adaptation. This scale focuses on social belonging and adjustment, originally used among Asian American college students. It has also been applied by Sun *et al.* (2021) to study connectedness and adaptation among Chinese international students in the U.S., and by Yang *et al.* (2022) to examine perceived discrimination and adaptation among international students in China. In this study, the SCS was adopted and employed to gauge cross-cultural adaptation among international students in Malaysia. The scale consists of six items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Meanwhile, the scales for social interaction was adapted based on Kim's (2001) theoretical paradigm of cross-cultural adaptation and her measurement structural model of cross-cultural adaptation, as suggested by Peng and Wu (2019). Reliability test was performed to assess the extent to which these items are correlated with each other. High internal consistency indicates that the items are measuring the same underlying construct consistently. This is important because it ensures that the scale is reliable and that the items are indeed measuring what they are intended to measure.



**Table 2: Reliability Test Result**

Item	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Cross-cultural Adaptation</b>	
CCA 1 - I feel close to Malaysian around me.	.803
CCA 2 - I feel understood by the people I know here in Malaysia.	.781
CCA 3 - I see Malaysians as friendly and approachable.	.771
CCA 4 - I fit in well in this new environment of Malaysia.	.774
CCA 5 - I have little sense of togetherness with my Malaysian peers.	.772
CCA 6 - My Malaysian friends here are like my family.	.818
<b>Social Interaction</b>	
SI 1 - I discuss significant social issues with Malaysian students.	.768
SI 2 - I go out (e.g. movie, shopping) with Malaysian students.	.807
SI 3 - I do academic work in cooperation with Malaysian students.	.812
SI 4 - I participate in club activities with Malaysian students.	.725
SI 5 - I take part in Malaysian cultural events.	.701
SI 6 - I take part in Malaysian festivals, traditions, and celebrations.	.757

Table 2 shows the Cronbach's alpha value of each item is above the cut-off range of 0.7, which indicates that these items are reliable and good to proceed with further analyses (Hair *et al.*, 2022).

### Findings and Discussion

Data obtained from SCS scale was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

#### *RQ1: What Is The Level Of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Among International Students Studying In Malaysia?*

The total score of the cross-cultural adaptation scale is 30. Score of 16 and above is considered a high level cross-cultural adaptation, and vice-versa for score 15 and below. First, the scores are totaled up using the *Compute Variable* feature in SPSS. With the help of *Recode into different Variables* option, the computed data was recoded to two groups namely *High* and *Low*, to indicate the high and low levels of cross-cultural adaptation. Score of 15 and below are labeled as *Low*, while score of 16 up to 30 are labelled as *High*.

**Table 3: Level of Cross-cultural Adaptation**

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High (score of 16 and above)	785	81.94
Low (score of 15 and below)	173	18.06
Total	958	100

Based on the results shown in Table 3, 81.94% of the respondents have scored 16 and above for the cross-cultural adaption scale, indicating a high level of adaptation to cross-cultural situations. Followed by 18.06% of respondents who have scored 15 and below in the scale, indicating low level of cross-cultural adaptation.

*RQ2: What is the overall perceptions of international students towards their interactions and relationships with Malaysians?*

#### **Item CCA1: I Feel Close To Malaysians Around Me**

The descriptive analysis of each item is discussed in this section. Item CCA1 “*I feel close to Malaysians around me*” measures the respondents’ sense of emotional closeness to Malaysians in their social circle.

**Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of CCA1**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Strongly Disagree	46	4.8
Disagree	190	19.8
Not sure	366	38.2
Agree	256	26.7
Strongly Agree	100	10.4

Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of responses to item CCA1. The distribution across response categories reveals a diverse range of sentiments among respondents regarding their emotional closeness to Malaysians. The majority of respondents expressed *Not sure* (38.2%). However, the combined percentage of those who respondents *Agree* (26.7%) and *Strongly Agree* (10.4%) is 37.1%, indicating that most respondents have developed meaningful relationships and feel accepted within their Malaysian social environment, and also have assimilated into the cultural and social milieu. Respondents’ sense of closeness to Malaysians signifies a deep understanding and acceptance of local customs and behaviors (Lyu, 2024). Furthermore, these results emphasize Malaysia’s reputation as a hospitable destination and highlight the importance of cultivating inclusive environments within educational institutions.

On the other hand, the relatively high percentages of *Disagree* (19.8%) and *Strongly Disagree* (4.8%) indicate that a notable portion of respondents do not feel emotionally close to Malaysians. This highlights a potential area for improvement, suggesting that some international students may struggle with forming close relationships or feel isolated from the local community. These feelings of disconnect could be due to various factors, such as cultural differences, language barriers, or a lack of opportunities for meaningful interaction. Addressing these challenges is essential for promoting social cohesion and ensuring the well-being of international students. Universities can enhance their efforts by providing more support services, creating platforms for cultural exchange, and encouraging local students to engage with their international peers. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, educational institutions can help international students feel more connected and integrated into the Malaysian community.

These findings reflect both the successes and areas for improvement in supporting the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Malaysia. While many students feel a sense of emotional closeness to Malaysians, continued efforts are necessary to ensure that all international students have the opportunity to build strong, supportive relationships within their host community.

**Item CCA2: I Feel Understood By The People I Know Here In Malaysia**

The second item, CCA2, “*I feel understood by the people I know here in Malaysia*”, assesses the respondents’ perception of being understood by the people they interact with in Malaysia.

**Table 5: Descriptive Analysis of CCA2**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	20	2.1
Disagree	137	14.3
Not sure	353	36.8
Agree	336	35.1
Strongly Agree	112	11.7

Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown of responses to item CCA2, highlights respondents’ perceptions on whether they feel understood by the people they know in Malaysia. The majority of respondents were *Not sure* (36.8%), indicating a degree of uncertainty about their sense of being understood. However, the combined percentage of those who *Agree* (35.1%) and *Strongly Agree* (11.7%) is 46.8%, suggesting that a significant portion of international students feel understood by their social circles in Malaysia. This sense of being understood is critical for the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, as it reflects their ability to communicate effectively and connect with others on a deeper level. Feeling understood helps students build strong relationships and navigate social interactions more successfully.

The relatively low percentages of *Strongly Disagree* (2.1%) and *Disagree* (14.3%) further emphasize the general positivity of the students’ experiences. These low percentages indicate that only a small fraction of respondents feel misunderstood, suggesting that negative experiences are not widespread among the surveyed international students. These results underline the importance of maintaining and enhancing cultural exchange and understanding within Malaysian universities.

The overall positive feelings of being understood likely result from ongoing efforts to promote social cohesion and inclusivity. Initiatives such as language support programs, cultural sensitivity training, and opportunities for meaningful interactions between international students and local Malaysians contribute to creating an environment where students feel recognized and valued.

**Item CCA3: I See Malaysians As Friendly And Approachable**

The third item, CCA3, “*I see Malaysians as friendly and approachable*”, which assesses international students’ perceptions of Malaysians as friendly and approachable.

**Table 6: Descriptive Analysis of CCA3**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	10	1.0
Disagree	97	10.1
Not sure	275	28.7
Agree	404	42.2
Strongly Agree	172	18.0



Table 6 provides a detailed breakdown of responses to item CCA3, reveals a substantial portion of respondents view Malaysians positively in terms of friendliness and approachability. A notable 60.2% of respondents *Agree* (42.2%) or *Strongly Agree* (18.0%) that Malaysians are friendly and approachable. This positive perception is crucial for the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, as feeling welcomed and accepted facilitates their integration and enhances their overall experience in Malaysia (En *et al.*, 2023). These students likely benefit from positive social interactions, supportive university environments, and inclusive cultural practices that contribute to their sense of belonging.

Conversely, the percentages of *Disagree* (10.1%) and *Strongly Disagree* (1.0%) indicate that a smaller portion of respondents do not perceive Malaysians as friendly or approachable. This suggests that while the majority have positive experiences, there are still some who may face challenges in their interactions with Malaysians, potentially due to cultural differences or communication barriers (Alasmari, 2023). The percentage of respondents who are *Not sure* (28.7%) highlights a significant level of ambivalence about their perceptions. This could indicate varying experiences among international students or a need for more opportunities for meaningful interactions and cultural understanding. These findings underscore the importance of promoting cultural exchange and understanding within Malaysian universities.

While many international students perceive Malaysians as friendly and approachable, there is room for continued efforts to promote mutual understanding and strengthen social cohesion. By addressing these aspects, universities can ensure that all students, regardless of their background, feel valued and supported in their educational experience in Malaysia. Initiatives such as cultural sensitivity training, language support programs, and social integration activities can help bridge gaps and foster positive relationships between international students and Malaysians. By creating a welcoming and inclusive environment, educational institutions can support international students in their cross-cultural adaptation journey and enhance their overall academic and personal growth.

#### Item CCA4: I Fit In Well In This New Environment Of Malaysia

The fourth item, CCA4, “*I fit in well in this new environment of Malaysia*”, which assesses international students’ feelings of fitting in well within the new environment of Malaysia.

**Table 7: Descriptive Analysis of CCA4**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	2	.2
Disagree	51	5.3
Not sure	211	22.0
Agree	438	45.7
Strongly Agree	256	26.7

Table 7 shows the results of CCA4, a significant 45.7% of respondents *Agree* and an additional 26.7% *Strongly Agree* that they fit in well, making a combined total of 72.4%. This suggests that a substantial majority of international students feel they have successfully adapted to their new surroundings in Malaysia. This high percentage of agreement is crucial for the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, as feeling integrated and accepted is essential for their overall well-being and academic success (Pazil *et al.*, 2023). These students likely benefit

from supportive university programs, social interactions, and inclusive community practices that help them adjust to their new environment.

The percentage of respondents who are *Not sure* (22.0%) indicates that while a majority feel positive about their adaptation, there is still a significant portion of students who are uncertain about their level of integration. This ambivalence could highlight areas where further support and resources are needed to help these students feel more confident and comfortable in their new environment.

The relatively low percentages of *Disagree* (5.3%) and *Strongly Disagree* (0.2%) indicate that only a small fraction of respondents do not feel they fit in well. This suggests that negative experiences of integration are not widespread, but they are still present and should not be overlooked. These feelings of disconnect could be due to various challenges such as cultural differences, homesickness, language barriers, or a lack of social support (Wang & Mafa, 2024). Addressing these issues is important for improving the overall experience of international students.

Overall, these findings reflect the successes and challenges faced by international students in adapting to the Malaysian environment. While many students feel a sense of belonging and fit in well, continued efforts are necessary to support all students in their cross-cultural journey, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities needed to thrive in their new surroundings.

#### Item CCA5: I Have Little Sense Of Togetherness With My Malaysian Peers

The fifth item, CC5, “*I have little sense of togetherness with my Malaysian peers*”, measures the respondents’ feelings of unity and connection with their Malaysian peers.

**Table 8: Descriptive Analysis of CCA5**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	150	15.7
Disagree	365	38.1
Not sure	331	34.6
Agree	95	9.9
Strongly Agree	17	1.8

Table 8 shows the results of CCA5, a combined 53.8% of respondents (15.7% *Strongly Disagree* and 38.1% *Disagree*) feel that they do not have a little sense of togetherness with their Malaysian peers. This indicates that a majority of international students perceive a moderate to strong sense of togetherness with their Malaysian peers, suggesting a level of connection and integration within their peer groups (Pazil *et al.*, 2023). However, a significant proportion (34.6%) of respondents are unsure about their level of togetherness with Malaysian peers. This uncertainty could reflect varying experiences, perceptions, or a neutral stance regarding their social integration. In addition, total of 11.7% respondents reported *Agree* (9.9%) and *Strongly Agree* (1.8%) with the statement, indicating that they feel they have little sense of togetherness with Malaysian peers. While this percentage is relatively low, it still signifies that a minority of international students perceive a lack of connection or unity within their peer group.

The findings suggest that while a majority of international students feel some level of togetherness with their Malaysian peers, there is a notable proportion who are unsure or feel disconnected. Efforts to enhance social integration and foster a sense of community among international and local students could help address these perceptions. Initiatives such as cultural exchange programs, peer support networks, and inclusive social activities may contribute to creating a more cohesive and supportive environment within Malaysian universities. This, in turn, could enhance the overall experience and well-being of international students studying in Malaysia.

#### Item CCA6: I Have Little Sense Of Togetherness With My Malaysian Peers

The last item, CC6, “*My Malaysian friends here are like my family*”, assesses international students’ feelings towards their Malaysian friends and peers as familial.

**Table 9: Descriptive Analysis of CCA6**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	27	2.8
Disagree	102	10.6
Not sure	309	32.3
Agree	384	40.1
Strongly Agree	136	14.2

Table 9 shows results of CCA6, a combined 54.3% of respondents *Agree* (40.1%) or *Strongly Agree* (14.2%) that their Malaysian friends are like family. This suggests that a significant portion of international students feel a strong bond with their Malaysian friends, viewing them as supportive and integral to their social network. This familial bond is crucial for the emotional well-being and sense of belonging of international students, as it helps alleviate feelings of homesickness and loneliness while studying abroad.

Conversely, the percentages of *Disagree* (10.6%) and *Strongly Disagree* (2.8%) indicate that a smaller portion of respondents do not feel their Malaysian friends are like family. This may be due to various factors such as cultural differences, limited time spent together, or differences in expectations of friendship. The percentage of respondents who are *Not sure* (32.3%) highlights a significant level of undecided about their feelings towards their Malaysian friends as family. This could reflect varying experiences among international students or a need for more time and shared experiences to develop deeper bonds.

While many international students perceive their Malaysian friends as family-like, there are variations in these perceptions. Continued efforts to promote friendship and support networks can help strengthen these bonds and contribute to a more positive and enriching experience for international students studying in Malaysia.

*RQ3: To what extent do international students engage in social interactions with Malaysian students and participate in Malaysian cultural and social activities?*

#### Item SI1: I Discuss Significant Social Issues With Malaysian Students.

Item SI1 “*I discuss significant social issues with Malaysian students.*” measures the respondents’ level of engagement in discussions with Malaysian students about significant social issues.

**Table 10: Descriptive Analysis of SI1**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	4	0.4
Disagree	66	6.9
Not sure	262	27.3
Agree	491	51.3
Strongly Agree	135	14.1

Table 10 provides a detailed breakdown of responses to item SI1. The majority of international students (65.4%) report some level of engagement in discussions about significant social issues with Malaysian students, which indicates that these types of interactions are quite common. This aligns with the idea that social discussions with local students can promote cultural integration and understanding. However, the 27.3% of respondents who are unsure or neutral suggest that there may be some barriers or limitations to these discussions, possibly due to language differences, cultural misunderstandings, or lack of opportunities for engagement.

The small percentage of students who strongly disagree (0.4%) or disagree (6.9%) with the statement indicates that, for some students, engaging in such discussions may not be a significant part of their experience in Malaysia, possibly due to factors like social isolation or limited exposure to Malaysian students.

Overall, the data shows that a majority of international students are at least somewhat involved in discussions on social issues with local peers, which could be an important factor in their cultural and social integration into Malaysian society.

#### **Item SI2: I Go Out (e.g. Movie, Shopping) With Malaysian Students.**

Item SI2 “*I go out (e.g. movie, shopping) with Malaysian students.*” provides insight into the international students’ social behaviors and engagement with Malaysian students outside of academic contexts.

**Table 11: Descriptive Analysis of SI2**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	4	0.4
Disagree	47	4.9
Not sure	284	29.6
Agree	497	51.9
Strongly Agree	126	13.2

The findings in Table 11 suggest that the majority of international students (65.1%) participate in informal social activities with Malaysian students, indicating that these types of social interactions play a significant role in their cultural integration. Going out for movies, shopping, or other leisure activities provides students with opportunities to interact with local peers, understand Malaysian culture better, and feel more connected to their social environment. However, nearly 30% of respondents are unsure or neutral, which could reflect varying levels of interest or opportunity for such social activities. Factors like individual preferences, social anxiety, or logistical issues (such as a lack of time or transportation) might contribute to these neutral responses.

The small percentage of students who disagree (5.3%) suggests that, for some international students, informal socializing with local students may not be a common experience. This could be due to factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, or the presence of strong social networks with fellow international students, which may limit interactions with locals.

### Item SI3: I Do Academic Work In Cooperation With Malaysian Students.

Item SI3 “*I do academic work in cooperation with Malaysian students.*” provides insight into how international students perceive their involvement in academic collaborations with Malaysian students.

**Table 12: Descriptive Analysis of SI3**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	3	0.3
Disagree	38	4.0
Not sure	198	20.7
Agree	506	52.8
Strongly Agree	213	22.2

The results in Table 12 show that a large majority of international students (75.0%) actively collaborate with Malaysian students in academic work, which suggests a strong level of integration into the academic community. Academic cooperation can contribute to the development of academic and professional networks, enhance cultural exchange, and improve the overall student experience.

The neutral responses (20.7%) indicate that while many international students are involved in academic collaboration, some may not have had the opportunity or inclination to work with Malaysian students. This could be due to factors such as the nature of their courses, individual preferences, or differences in academic approach. In some cases, language barriers or a lack of common academic projects might also play a role.

The small percentage of disagreement (4.3%) suggests that the majority of international students have at least some academic interaction with Malaysian peers. Those who do not engage in such collaboration may have more limited exposure to local students, possibly due to being in highly internationalized courses or having fewer group-based assignments.

### Item SI4: I Participate In Club Activities With Malaysian Students.

Item SI4 “*I do academic work in cooperation with Malaysian students.*” measures the respondents’ involvement in extracurricular or club activities with Malaysian students, such as participation in university clubs, student organizations, or other non-academic social groups. This item is important as it reflects the extent to which international students engage with local students in informal, out-of-classroom settings, which is a key aspect of social integration, cultural exchange, and building social networks.



**Table 13: Descriptive Analysis of SI4**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	6	.6
Disagree	38	4.0
Not sure	276	28.8
Agree	482	50.3
Strongly Agree	156	16.3

The results in Table 13 suggest that participation in club activities with Malaysian students is an important avenue for social interaction and cultural exchange among international students, with 66.6% indicating that they are engaged in these activities. These interactions help bridge the gap between different cultural groups, enhance social networks, and contribute to the overall student experience.

The 28.8% neutral responses could point to several factors, such as a lack of awareness about club activities, limited opportunities for engagement, or other priorities that international students may have such as academic commitments. Some students may not actively seek out these opportunities, or may not feel comfortable joining clubs due to language barriers, cultural differences, or a preference for interacting within their own social groups.

The small percentage of disagreement (4.6%) is positive, as it shows that only a few students are not participating in club activities with Malaysian peers. For those who disagree, it may be worth investigating the specific reasons, whether they are related to time, interest, or social challenges in order to better support their inclusion in such activities.

#### **Item SI5: I Take Part In Malaysian Cultural Events.**

Item SI5 “*I take part in Malaysian cultural events.*” provides insight into the level of participation in Malaysian cultural events among international students.

**Table 14: Descriptive Analysis of SI5**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	6	.6
Disagree	24	2.5
Not sure	191	19.9
Agree	500	52.2
Strongly Agree	237	24.7

Findings in Table 14 shows that a strong majority of international students (76.9%) engage in Malaysian cultural events, reflecting a high level of participation in local cultural activities. This suggests that these events are an effective means of integrating international students into Malaysian society and helping them form connections with local students and the wider community.

The neutral responses (19.9%) indicate that while many students are open to participating in cultural events, they may not have actively sought out these opportunities or may have limited access to them. This group might benefit from increased awareness or more opportunities to engage with such events, especially those who may not have been introduced to Malaysian culture in an organized or structured way.

The low percentage of disagreement (3.1%) suggests that the vast majority of international students do participate in cultural events when given the opportunity, even if they do not do so regularly. For the minority of students who disagree, there may be various reasons, such as unfamiliarity with cultural norms, a preference for staying within their own cultural community, or a lack of time due to academic or personal commitments.

#### **Item SI6: I Take Part In Malaysian Festivals, Traditions, And Celebrations.**

Item SI6 “*I take part in Malaysian festivals, traditions, and celebrations.*” measures the extent to which international students actively engage in Malaysian festivals, traditions, and celebrations. Participation in these events provides a valuable opportunity for international students to experience and immerse themselves in local cultural practices, deepening their understanding of Malaysia's rich cultural diversity. This involvement can also foster a sense of belonging and community integration, as students connect with both local and other international peers in festive, social settings.

**Table 15: Descriptive Analysis of SI6**

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	6	.6
Disagree	31	3.2
Not sure	167	17.4
Agree	513	53.5
Strongly Agree	241	25.2

The findings in Table 15 show that 78.7% of international students are actively engaging in Malaysian festivals, traditions, and celebrations. This high rate of participation underscores the significant role that these cultural events play in the integration and social experience of international students. Such involvement helps to foster a deeper understanding of the host country, enriches the student experience, and encourages the development of cross-cultural relationships.

The 17.4% neutral responses indicate that while many students are open to participating, they may not have actively sought out or been exposed to these events. This group could benefit from greater awareness campaigns or incentives to encourage attendance at cultural events. Neutral responses might also reflect factors such as time limitations, academic pressures, or personal disinterest in certain types of cultural activities.

The low percentage of disagreement (3.8%) suggests that while some international students may choose not to participate, they are in the minority. The reasons for non-participation could vary, such as a preference for personal activities or difficulty accessing events, but the fact that only a small portion reports non-participation is encouraging in terms of overall cultural engagement.

#### **Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insights into the cross-cultural adaptation and social interaction experiences of international students in Malaysia. A significant portion of respondents feel emotionally close to Malaysians, suggesting they have found acceptance and assimilation within the local social environment. However, a notable minority reports feeling emotionally distant, indicating opportunities for improving social connections and inclusivity. Many

international students feel understood by their Malaysian peers, which is crucial for effective communication and relationship building, underscoring the positive impact of ongoing efforts to promote cultural understanding. Moreover, a majority of respondents perceive Malaysians as friendly and approachable, contributing to a welcoming environment. Addressing perceptions of unfriendliness among a minority remains essential to enhance overall inclusivity.

The study also reveals that a substantial majority of international students feel they have successfully integrated into Malaysian society, indicating positive adaptation outcomes. However, addressing uncertainties among some students about their integration status is crucial for providing comprehensive support. While most feel a sense of togetherness with their Malaysian peers, a notable proportion remains unsure or feels disconnected, suggesting a need for structured programs and peer support networks to mitigate feelings of isolation. Lastly, many international students view their Malaysian friends as family-like, highlighting strong social bonds that support their emotional well-being. Efforts to deepen connections among students who feel less familial with their peers can further enrich the overall student experience. Malaysia offers a positive cross-cultural experience for international students, characterized by acceptance, understanding, and integration into both academic and social realms. Continued efforts in enhancing support services, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering inclusive environments are crucial for sustaining and improving these perceptions, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, feel valued and supported throughout their educational journey in Malaysia.

In regards to the social interaction, overall, the results demonstrate that international students in Malaysia are generally socially active and culturally engaged, with academic collaboration, participation in club activities, and involvement in festivals and cultural events being significant areas of interaction with Malaysian students. The high rates of participation in these activities suggest that these forms of engagement play an important role in enhancing social integration and cultural exchange. However, there remains a substantial group of neutral responses, which points to the potential for more targeted initiatives aimed at increasing opportunities for engagement, providing information, and addressing potential barriers to participation.

The relatively low disagreement rates reinforce the conclusion that social isolation is not a major issue, but the presence of neutral responses calls for further understanding of the factors that might prevent full participation. Universities and student organizations could focus on improving accessibility and awareness of these activities to encourage even greater involvement, ensuring that all international students have the opportunity to form connections and fully integrate into the local cultural and social fabric.

In summary, while the findings are positive overall, there is room for growth in fostering a more inclusive environment where all international students can take part in cultural, social, and academic activities, thus enriching their experience in Malaysia.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on the findings, several practical implications can be drawn to enhance the cross-cultural experience of international students in Malaysia, particularly in the area of social interaction. The study highlights the importance of fostering strong social connections between

international and local students, which is integral to students' successful social integration and adaptation.

Universities should focus on enhancing support services such as orientation programs, cultural sensitivity training, and peer mentoring to foster smoother integration, as highlighted by the findings where a significant majority of international students reported positive engagement with Malaysian students in both academic and social contexts. These initiatives would help build social support networks that enable students to form meaningful connections, which are crucial for adaptation. As the study suggests, students who participate in academic work and extracurricular activities with local peers are more likely to develop stronger social bonds and a better understanding of Malaysian culture.

Next, local students play a pivotal role in cultural exchange initiatives and inclusive social activities. The study indicates that perceptions of Malaysians as friendly and approachable contribute to a welcoming environment for international students, which in turn enhances cross-cultural interactions. By actively engaging in activities such as joint cultural events, sports, and academic collaborations, local students can help build bridges between cultures, facilitating mutual understanding and long-lasting friendships. Encouraging local students to participate in peer mentoring or co-organizing events with international students can foster an atmosphere of inclusivity and shared experiences.

Lastly, the Malaysian government's support for policies promoting diversity and inclusion in educational institutions is vital to enhancing international students' experiences. The study emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural dialogue in creating an inclusive environment, which can be strengthened through government initiatives that promote integration at all levels. Policies that encourage community involvement and cultural exchange can provide students with more opportunities for meaningful social interactions, thus improving their social and academic experience. As the study suggests, fostering stronger interactions between local and international students can also contribute to student retention and Malaysia's global academic reputation.

### **Limitation and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study on international students' cross-cultural and social interaction experiences in Malaysia, several limitations and recommendations for future research can be identified.

Firstly, the study employed purposive sampling to target international undergraduate students aged 18-29 studying in Malaysia. This method may introduce sampling bias by excluding students who are less active online or have different adaptation and interaction experiences. Consequently, the sample may not fully represent the diversity of international students in Malaysia. Future studies should consider employing more diverse sampling methods to mitigate sampling bias. For example, combining online surveys with in-person interviews or campus-wide surveys could capture a broader spectrum of international students, including those who are less digitally engaged or have varying levels of adaptation experiences.

Secondly, the findings may lack generalizability beyond the specific universities and regions sampled in Malaysia. Variations in institutional characteristics, geographical locations (urban vs. rural), and program structures across different Malaysian universities could limit the

transferability of results to the entire international student population in the country. Future research could enhance generalizability by expanding the scope of universities included in the study. Including institutions from diverse regions and with varying academic programs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural adaptation and interaction experiences across Malaysia.

Thirdly, the study utilized a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of international students' perceptions at a single point in time. This approach limits the ability to establish causal relationships or track changes in adaptation experiences over time. To address this limitation, future studies should consider longitudinal designs that track international students over extended periods. Longitudinal studies would enable researchers to observe how adaptation processes unfold over time, including fluctuations in students' perceptions, challenges, and integration experiences.

Furthermore, future studies may consider conducting comparative studies that explore the experiences of international students from different countries or regions. This approach can highlight unique cultural challenges, successes, and adaptation strategies specific to Malaysia, contributing to a richer understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. Besides, qualitative approaches can provide deeper insights into the lived experiences, emotional dimensions, and interpersonal interactions of international students in Malaysia, particularly in their interactions with local peers. Hence, employing qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to complement the quantitative findings are recommendable. Last but not least, it is crucial for future research to ensure active engagements with diverse stakeholders, including international and local student communities, university administrators, and policymakers. Collaborative research efforts can generate more holistic insights and promote inclusive educational environments for international students.

By addressing these recommendations, future studies can overcome current limitations and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of international students' overall cross-cultural adaptation and social interaction experiences in Malaysia. This, in turn, will support the development of effective support mechanisms and policies that enhance the overall educational experience and well-being of international students in Malaysian universities.

### Acknowledgment

This research was supported by Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman Research Fund 2023 – Cycle 1 (IPSR/RMC/UTARRF/2023-C1/P01: 6557/1P02) from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kampar Campus, Perak, Malaysia.

### References

- Alasmari, A. A. (2023). Challenges and social adaptation of international students in Saudi Arabia. *Heliyon*, 9(5). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e16283>
- Alshammari, M. K., Othman, M. H., Mydin, Y. O., & Mohammed, B. A. (2023). Exploring how cultural identity and sense of belonging influence the psychological adjustment of international students. *Egyptian Academic Journal of Biological Sciences. C, Physiology and Molecular Biology*, 15(1), 251-257.
- Brunsting, N. C., Zachry, C., Liu, J., Bryant, R., Fang, X., Wu, S., & Luo, Z. (2021). Sources of perceived social support, social-emotional experiences, and psychological well-being of international students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 89(1), 95-111.



- Campbell, A. C., Nguyen, T., & Stewart, M. (2023). Promoting international student mobility for sustainability? Navigating conflicting realities and emotions of international educators. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 27(4), 621-637.
- Cao, C., Zhang, J., & Meng, Q. (2023). A social cognitive model predicting international students' cross-cultural adjustment in China. *Current Psychology*, 42, 14529-14541. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-02784-x>
- En, C., Rosnon, M. R., Razak, M. A. A., & Amin, S. M. (2023). Sociocultural adaptation, educational ecosystem and quality of life among the international students community in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(16), 156-173.
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C., & Sarstedt, M. (2022). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Kim, Y. Y., & Gudykunst, W. (2005). Adapting to a new culture. *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 375400.
- Koo, K., & Nyunt, G. (2023). Pandemic in a foreign country: Barriers to international students' well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 60(1), 123-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2022.2056476>
- Lee, R. M., & Robbins, S. B. (1995). Measuring belongingness: The social connectedness and the social assurance scales. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 42(2), 232.
- Lyu, J. (2024). Cultivating cross-cultural competence in students. In *SHS Web of Conferences*, 187, 04006). EDP Sciences.
- Mohamud, G., & Madderla, S. R. (2024). An investigation into the effects of personality traits and resilience on homesickness among international students. *International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods*, 12(3), 966. <https://doi.org/10.56025/IJARESM.2023.1201242970>
- Okunishi, Y., & Tanaka, T. (2023). Difficulties and coping behaviors in interpersonal relationship formation among Japanese students in France: Implications for cross-cultural social skills for studying abroad in France. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 6(2), 66-84. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2023.9>
- Pazil, N. H. A., Hashim, I. H. M., Aziya, J. A., & Mohd Nasir, N. F. W. (2023). International students' experiences of living temporarily abroad: Sense of belonging toward community well-being. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 17(1), 64-74.
- Razgulin, J., Argustaitė-Zailskienė, G., & Šmigelskas, K. (2023). The role of social support and sociocultural adjustment for international students' mental health. *Scientific Reports*, 13(1), 893. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-27123-9>
- Ruben, B. D., & Kealey, D. J. (1979). Behavioral assessment of communication competency and the prediction of cross-cultural adaptation. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 3(1), 15-47.
- Sheng, L., Dai, J., & Lei, J. (2022). The impacts of academic adaptation on psychological and sociocultural adaptation among international students in China: The moderating role of friendship. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 89, 79-89.
- The Star. (2023, July 12). International students are great assets. <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2023/07/12/international-students-are-great-assets>
- Tseu, A., Ganesh, K., & Wirtz, D. (2023, February). Adjusting in a pandemic: Experiences of incoming international students. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1003051.
- UNESCO, (2024, July 4). *Higher education. What you need to know about higher education*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/need-know>

- Wang, L., & Mafa, M. (2024). Finding strength through adversity: An exploratory study of the role of homesickness among international students. *Asian Social Work Journal*, 9(2), e00290-e00290.
- Wang, X., Alauddin, M., Zafar, A. U., Zhang, Q., Ahsan, T., & Barua, Z. (2023). WeChat moments among international students: Building Guanxi networks in China. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 26(1), 47-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1097198X.2023.2166752>
- Yang, F., He, Y., & Xia, Z. (2023). The effect of perceived discrimination on cross-cultural adaptation of international students: Moderating roles of autonomous orientation and integration strategy. *Current Psychology*, 42(23), 19927-19940. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03106-x>
- Zakaria, N., & Yusuf, B. N. M. (2022). Sacrifices from relocation to a foreign land: Multifaceted challenges experienced by self-initiated expatriate female nurses during cross-cultural adjustment. *Current Psychology*, 42, 11303-11319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-02745-4>
- Zhao, W., Osman, M. N., Omar, S. Z., & Yaakup, H. S. (2023). The cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysia: A systematic review. *Asian People Journal (APJ)*, 6(1), 66-81.
- Zheng, L. (2024). Intercultural friendship formation through the lens of cosmopolitan agency. *Journal of Communication, Language and Culture*, 4(2), 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.33093/jclc.2024.4.2.2>
- Zhu, Y., & Smith, C. (2024). The impact of student leadership on Chinese international students' language proficiency and belongingness. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 16(1), 113-126. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v16i1.5011>