

Help seeking behavior among Malaysian international students in Australia

Siti Salina Binti Abdullah

Department of Psychology and Counselling
Faculty of Social Development
University Malaysia Terengganu
21030 Kuala Terengganu
Terengganu, Malaysia

Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify help seeking behavior among Malaysian international students in Australia. Respondents were thirteen married Malay Muslim international students (9 females, 4 males) studying in university in South Australia, Australia. As international students, Malaysian postgraduate students faced challenges in their academic and daily living in Australia. In order to cope with the situation, they sought for help from friends, university colleagues and religious support. Friends in this study referred to the Malaysian international students' spouses and other Malaysian international students who lives in South Australia. Surprisingly, result of this study showed that none of these Malaysian international students asked for assistance from their university's counseling center.

INTRODUCTION

Australia is a unique country, as it represents one of the English native countries as well as developed nations outside of Europe and North America. In terms of its geographic location, Australia is the nearest English native country for some Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. In comparison with the US and the UK, Australia is regarded as the third largest country of international students' enrolment. There are a large number of international students studying at Australian colleges and universities, and the numbers are increasing. In 2008, Australia hosted a record high of over 500,000 overseas students, with a growth of 20.7% from the previous year. The enrolments were recorded by students from more than 190 countries studying at learning institutions in Australia, where more than 75% of enrolled international students came from Asia, followed by increasing numbers from the Middle East, South America and Africa. Overall, in the year 2008, international students' enrolments in Australia came from the following countries: China (127, 276); India (97,035); Republic of Korea (35,376); Thailand (22,278); Malaysia (21,134); Nepal (18,063); Hong Kong (18,012); Indonesia (16,063); Brazil (16,028); and Vietnam (15,931)(Australian Education International, 2009).

The total of overseas or international students from Asia has increased over the past twenty years. It has been identified that due to the change in social and economic policies in Asian countries, the number of Asian students studying in Australia over the past two decades has changed (ABS, 2007). In 1985, five of the top ten countries of residence of students arriving in Australia for education purposes were Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore (South East Asia); Hong Kong and Japan (North East Asia.). Ten years later, China represented 17% of international students in Australia while others were South Korea (8%), Japan (7%) and Malaysia (6%).

BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

International students who study in a foreign country have to face new educational system as well as new learning skills. Being new arrivals, international students also have to struggle with local host language and culture. Unfamiliarity with a new educational system often creates difficulties for international students (Lin & Yi, 1997). Studies have discovered that international students from non-English speaking backgrounds reported having more difficulties in their class and exams because they required more time to understand the content of books, journal articles, etc. (Lin & Yi, 1997; Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

This new education environment puts more pressure on international students as they are required to work hard to adjust with the new demands of where they are learning. The adjustment process is stressful. Research has shown that persons differ greatly in adjusting to a new culture (Wang, 2004). Some people adjust easily while others may be unable to adjust at all.

OBJECTIVES

The present research was conducted for several reasons. Firstly, there are increasing numbers of Malaysian postgraduate students in Australia. In 2007, there was a total of 19,874 Malaysian students enrolled in Australian tertiary institutions and in 2008 this number increased by a further 3.9%. In fact in that year, Malaysian international students represented the fifth largest source of tertiary enrolments (AEI, 2009). Although the enrolment numbers of Malaysian students as international students in Australia are increasing, there has been little research conducted on the experiences of these students while studying and living in Australia.

Secondly, this study is the first to explore the experience of married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students in the Australian environment. Although these results may need to be replicated in larger numbers and conducted in different states to explore the differences, it shows the importance of exploring the adjustment issue experienced by the Malaysian Malay Muslim postgraduate student as it will help potential Malaysian Malay Muslim international students to prepare prior to their journey to Australia, particularly South Australia.

Therefore, the present research attempted to examine the help seeking behavior practices by these students, who hold status as international students in a foreign country which is Australia.

RESEARCH METHOD

To achieve the above mentioned objectives, semi structured interviews were conducted to identify the help seeking behavior practices by Malaysian Malay Muslim international students in order to cope with the challenges while living in Australia. All interviews were conducted in English language. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed manually into text. After reading each interview, a qualitative content analysis was conducted manually to code and interpret the data in terms of commonalities and differences, searching for emerging themes and patterns.

Sample

A snowballing sampling was utilised in this study in which potential participants were identified through a Malaysian Student Council of Australia, South Australia. As shown in Table 1, a total of thirteen married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students participated in an individual interview, nine females and four males. They all studied at universities in South Australia. All participants were Malay and ranged in age from 27 to 42 years. The length of their stay in South Australia ranged from six months and three years of stay. The career background of the participants also varied, with most of them employed as an academic staff at public universities in Malaysia and others employed in government sectors. All participants are currently on their study leave to Australia. Nine of the participants were undertaking PhD programme, while four were doing their Masters degree. All participants were married and brought their family to Australia with them. The length of their marriages ranged from 1 to 18 years and eleven students had 1 to 5 children. All students were sponsored by the Malaysian Government.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Code	Age (years)	Sex (M/F)	Length of stay at Australia (months)	Current Courses
S1	42	F	26	PhD
S2	35	M	6	PhD
S3	28	F	6	PhD
S4	34	F	7	Master
S5	35	M	7	PhD
S6	27	F	6	PhD
S7	36	F	42	PhD
S8	34	M	6	Master
S9	33	M	18	Master
S10	40	F	24	PhD
S11	41	F	18	Master
S12	28	F	16	PhD
S13	34	F	12	PhD

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research outcomes revealed that there were three types of help seeking behavior practices by these married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students in order to cope with obstacles in Australia which are friends/spouses, university colleagues, and religious support (See Figure 1).

In response to what the participants might go for help while living in Australia, friends were noted as social support for twelve participants. Four participants found that university staff and supervisor as well as their colleagues did help in term of their academic issue. All participants stated that faith did help in order to cope with their daily life. Faith in this research refers to participants' Islamic belief. Surprisingly, none of these participants asked for help from university's counseling center even though they aware of the center's existence. Below are the details of the findings.

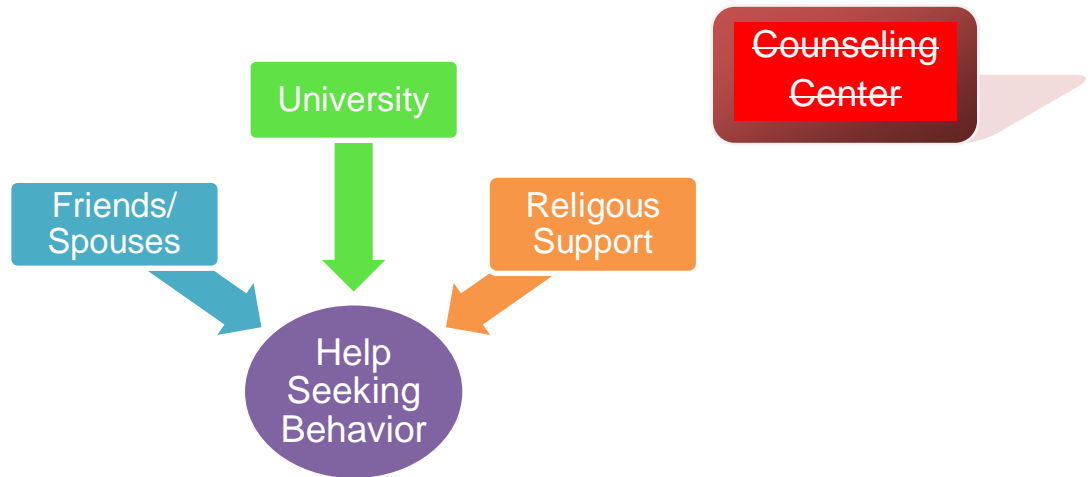


Figure 1: Help seeking behavior practices by Malaysian Malay Muslim International students

Result of this study showed that help and support received from Malaysian friends who were also studied in Australia was effective for these participants while living in Australia. Besides help received, Malaysian friends also acted as a protector to ensure participants safety as no other extended family members and relatives physically around to look after them. For example, as one participant mentioned:

I think because one friend from my home country stays nearby. I feel safe and very secure. – S2

Moreover, through weekly gathering, Malaysian postgraduate students formed a social group among other Malaysian who live in Adelaide in order to overcome their academic and other social problems. By doing so, the networks among Malaysian students grow stronger and helps to reduce other psychological issues such as loneliness and homesickness.

Result also indicated that married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students received support from their spouses. The findings support the previous researches that the presence of the partner or family can provide social support (Beach, Martin, Blum, & Roman, 1993; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Katz, Monnier, Beach, Libet, & Shaw, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). Current results are also consistent with other studies indicating that female married students received support from their husbands, as 69% of the participants were female students. This may be due the fact that spousal support helps to reduce stress experienced by the participants. As a result, the support acts as a shield to help these students overcome their difficulties during their stay in Australia. In addition, since these students are married, their spouses and family could provide social support for them. Therefore, they do no longer need to build other relationship as their spouses and children.

These results suggest that the students' satisfaction depends on the amount of support received from their spouses. Therefore, by helping the students' spouses adapt and adjust in the new environment through reducing the amount of emotional distress such as loneliness, dissatisfaction or depression among spouses will likely help to improve the quality of life among Malaysian postgraduate students. In addition, Malaysian postgraduates students are encouraged to build social networks among other Malaysians, which includes students (undergraduate and postgraduate) as well Malaysian citizens who have become permanent residents in Australia.

Furthermore, future Malaysian postgraduate students should be exposed to this social network as it will likely help their settlement process become easier.

Participants also reported received help from university staff, which included supervisors, administration staff and their PhD colleagues especially issue related with their academic progress. Four participants shared their experiences:

My lecturers here are also very helpful. If I have any problems, they would help me. This is a new experience for me. They are very nice people.- S2

If there's a problem in the university, I'll refer to the head department or manager department. Previously, I could not register my name so I referred to him. If it relates with my study, I'll refer to the person in-charge with the programme. I think it is their job to help.-S9

I will ask my supervisor and lab mates if I have any problems in my study. – S12

I just go to my supervisor to discuss about my plans and my study. –S13

Previous studies indicated that academic and personal support from other PhD students which includes local PhD students as well as PhD students from the same home country also helps the student attain academic success (Harman, 2003).

The present study highlights that many Malaysian postgraduate students perceived their religious belief in Islam as a source of support and functioned as a strategy for living in Australia. It is well understood as Abdullah (1996) described one of the Malays underlying assumption on values was the strong belief in Allah the Almighty. As she explained, to commit to the belief, Malays pray in their daily lives and share rituals to remember Allah as God. In the interview, participants reported that religious or spiritual belief connected them with a power from Allah (God) who helped them during their daily lives in general, as well as during specific times of need. Two participants shared their experiences:

I think my faith is my strength because if I don't have faith in myself and faith of who I am as a Muslim, maybe, I won't be able to survive. That's what I think. –S1

Faith is very important because it helps you cope with difficulties that you face in Australia. In fact, until today as a student we have to rely 100% on our faith in order to make us feel secure, less frustrated when something happens. –S7

Interestingly, another study found that religious functions as a buffer for suicidal thought (Bostik & Everall, 2007) by providing a sense of belonging and social support. Other studies found that God as an attachment figure provides a reliable source of support in general (Bostik & Everall, 2007; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sim & Loh, 2003) as well as during specific times of need (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Interestingly, none of the married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students sought help or assistance from universities' counseling centers even though all participants except one (92.3%) knew the existence of these centers. For those participants who knew the existence of these counseling centers, only three participants were willing to seek for help from these centers in the future. Others were more comfortable to share their problems with friends and spouses rather than to seek help from these counseling centers. These results suggest that universities counseling centers and international students' offices should expose themselves as a friendly support system to build trust among international students as it is hard for them to trust a 'stranger'. Furthermore, services offered by counseling centers and international students' offices should be expanded to other services such as programs for international students' spouses and families so that international students will feel more comfortable to join in as their family members are also involved.

Conclusions

Based on this present study, it can be concluded that the married Malaysian postgraduate students seek help from three major sources which are friends/spouses, university and religious support. By doing so, married Malaysian Malay Muslim international students were able to cope with difficulties faced especially in their academic issue while living in Australia Therefore, it is hoped that the present study will help future Malaysian postgraduate students improve their help seeking behavior in order to live have a better adaptation in a new environment.

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