



## Research Paper

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# Motivations for studying abroad and adjustment challenges faced by international students in Singapore

*Accepted 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2017*

### ABSTRACT

International students market is now a multi-billion industry and several countries are making intensive efforts to attract them. The adjustment challenges faced by international students could be considerably different depending on the education system and socio-cultural environment of the host country. The main objectives of this study were to investigate the perceptions of international students studying in Singapore, their motivational factors, and various challenges faced by them. A questionnaire was used to collect data and a total of 140 international graduate students from two public universities in Singapore participated in this study. The major benefits perceived by students studying overseas were to: learn about other cultures, improve self-confidence, gain overseas work experience, and enjoy living independently. Some personal challenges faced by the international students were: missing social events and festivals in home country, high living cost in Singapore, and being away from loved ones. Some study-related problems included the difficulty in understanding accents of classmates and professors, heavy workload, and the pressure to obtain good grades. Some adjustment strategies used by the international students to overcome socio-cultural barriers were: making new friends, stay in-touch with family and friends back home, and visit places of interest in Singapore. In this study, some suggestions were made to help international students to quickly adjust in a new environment.

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**Key words:** International students, motivations, adjustment barriers, language proficiency, class participation, socio-cultural challenges.

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### INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is a fast growing trend and many countries are making concerted efforts to attract more international students. It is estimated that nearly 4.5 million tertiary students obtain education outside their country of citizenship and about 53% of them are from Asian countries (OECD, 2013). The annual increase in international students is estimated to be between 6.5 and 7%. In the USA alone, about one million international students, mainly from China, India, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, were studying in different educational institutions

during the academic 2014 to 2015 year (Institute of International Education, 2016). The top six countries hosting about 50% of international students are the USA, UK, Australia, Germany, France and Canada. Other popular destinations for international students are Russian Federation, Japan, Spain and New Zealand. In recent years, several Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Malaysia are also attracting considerable number of international students. It is interesting to note that some of those countries that still send a large number

of their students overseas are now also receiving considerable number of international students (de Wit et al., 2013).

There are several benefits associated with getting education in a country with strong education system and good learning culture. However, international students face various challenges while getting education overseas. Some of these challenges are: different teaching styles, low language proficiency, dissimilar academic expectations and assessment as compared to home countries, unfamiliar living conditions (cultural shocks), personal apprehensions, financial hardship, personal safety issues, unfamiliar local healthcare system, difficulty in adapting to different weather and food, social and cultural isolation, and separation from family and friends (Baklashova and Kazakov, 2016; Sidhu et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2015). Majority of previous studies that investigate the adjustment difficulties of international students were mainly conducted in North America, Europe, and Australia. At present, the mobility of international students to other regions, particularly Asian countries, is gaining momentum. It would be interesting to study how students' adjustment difficulties in these countries differ from developed countries. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to investigate international students' motivations in studying abroad, perceived their benefits of overseas education, and various adjustment challenges faced by them while studying in Singapore. The findings of this study will be useful to academic institutions hosting international students, education planners, curriculum designers, faculty teaching to international students, staff of international student offices, and university counselling services.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors contribute to the growing number of international students, such as aggressive publicity by host universities, the perception that overseas education prepares students better, easy access to global job market, lack of quality education in home countries, improvement in language proficiency, and better communication skills (Calder et al., 2016; Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Miller, 2012; Oliveira and Soares, 2016). In addition, the increase in income levels in Asia and other regions, and affordable air travel have also contributed towards the growth of international student market. Guns et al. (2012) reported a study involving 342 international students from Southeast Asia studying in Australia. The study revealed that, contrary to a general perception that international students come to Australia to migrate, they found that a majority of the international students actually come to Australia to develop better career prospects, experience different life enjoyments, and achieve certain other family

related goals. Some other advantages of studying overseas are personal growth, increased self-confidence, developing a network of international friends, international employability, and an opportunity to live independently (Calder et al., 2016; Bamber, 2014; Miller, 2012; Oliveira and Soares, 2016).

In addition to certain direct and indirect financial gains to the host academic institution, international students also bring many benefits to local students such as diversity in classrooms, internationalization of curriculum, appreciation of other viewpoints, sharing of unique experiences, nurturing mutual respect and tolerance, exposure to other cultures, religions and ethnic groups, and an opportunity to become part of an international social network (Calder et al., 2016; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Wu et al., 2015). International students also bring financial stability to host universities (Calder et al., 2016; Gautam et al., 2016), as well as increase overall university enrolment. In their absence, it may be difficult to offer certain courses due to small class size. Another interesting dimension of international students is healthy academic competition among students as a majority of the international students are top performers and academically well-prepared (Wu et al., 2015). This is likely to motivate local students to work hard, as well as benefit from the knowledge of international students. The presence of international students can also help local students to improve their appreciation of cultural sensitivities and develop appropriate skills to work with people from different nationalities, thus improving their prospects of international employability.

In spite of the many benefits associated with studying overseas, international students face several challenges which can broadly be categorized into academic, socio-cultural, and psychological challenges (Alsahafi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Banjong, 2015; Mesidor, 2016; Wu et al., 2015). These challenges can directly or indirectly affect students' academic performance, mental and physical health, level of happiness in a new social environment, and their perceptions of the host country. International students go through an acculturation process which may not be very smooth. According to Shih and Brown (2000), acculturation is a dynamic process where a minority group selectively adopt values and cultural practices of the majority group. A study by Cura and Isik (2016), based on 298 international students in Turkey, revealed a positive correlation between academic adjustment and perceived social support. Gómez et al. (2014) reported that students' acculturation process is positively associated with their participation in various leisure activities and involvement in social networks. Availability of appropriate socialization opportunities can also reduce loneliness and home sickness of international students (Sherry et al., 2010). However, due to several possible reasons, many international students find it difficult to make local friends

and actively participate in social events (Deters, 2015). Shafaei et al. (2016) investigated the acculturation process of international students in Malaysia. They concluded that students adjusting to local academic norms demonstrate significant positive commitments to host country's academic norms concerning research, exam and assignments. However, students upholding the norms of their home countries tend to show non-significant attitudes towards host country's academic norms.

Academic challenges play a crucial role in the adjustment process of international students. These challenges include: low language proficiency, communication problems with faculty, classmates and university administrative staff, different classroom environment and learning dynamics, and use of different pedagogical approaches as compared with home countries (Akanwa, 2015; Baklashova and Kazakov, 2016; Deters, 2015; Harman, 2003). For some international students, examination period is particularly stressful due to different assessment methods used as compared with their home countries (Mesidor, 2016). Host universities and faculty teaching to international students can play an important role in helping international students to adjust in a new social and academic environment. Abdullah et al. (2014) reviewed a sample of 497 research articles concerning international students over the past 30 years. They stress that much of the responsibilities in managing international students fall on universities and their faculty members. Their review also showed an increased ethnical awareness among countries and higher education institutions in hosting and safeguarding international students.

Leong (2015) discussed the experiences of international students studying in the USA and the acculturation problems faced by them. She noted that, as compared with other international students, Chinese students face more adjustment difficulties due to language and cultural barriers. According to her, these difficulties persist regardless of whether the students restrict their interaction with only Chinese students or mingle with local students. In addition, it was also found that certain social factors, such as culture and reception of host society were considered equally important. Deters (2015) compared the adjustment difficulties faced by Chinese and South Korean students studying in a Canadian post secondary institution. Both groups of students faced language challenges, as well as adjusting to a different class environment.

Another language-related problem is different accents of international students which may cause communication problems (Ralarala et al., 2016; Kuo, 2011). Some international students avoid taking part in class discussions as they fear that instructors and local students may not be able to understand them or even make fun of their accent (Majid and Wey, 2009). In some situations, they even pretend to understand the conversation with

native English speakers although actually they do not (Terui, 2011). Similarly, international students also fear that their low language proficiency may develop a negative impression in the minds of professors who may doubt students' ability to understand course content, write assignments, participate in class discussions, and make effective presentations (Alsehafi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Majid et al., 2010). In addition to difficulties in oral communication, low language proficiency can also result in slower reading speed and comprehension, which may affect students' academic performance (Sato and Hodge, 2015).

Beside academic adjustment difficulties, international students also encounter many social, cultural and psychological issues which are often interlinked. A large number of the international students face the problem of social isolation and loneliness which can result in stress, depression and anxiety (Alsehafi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Banjong, 2015; Steele, 2008). A study by Russell et al. (2010), investigating 900 international students in Australia, showed that 41% of them were experiencing substantial level of stress, which could be due to homesickness, cultural shocks, and perceived discrimination. Some other socio-cultural issues troubling international students are: lack of proper accommodation, unfamiliar living environment in university residences, unaccustomed food taste and difficulty in meeting dietary obligations (e.g. vegetarian, halal Muslim, kosher), complex healthcare system, and personal safety concerns (Ozturgut and Murphy, 2009; Sidhu et al., 2011). A majority of the studies also highlight financial problems faced by international students which may limit their choice of food, accommodation, participation in social activities, healthcare, entertainment, and travel (Calder et al., 2016; Constantine et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2015).

Some studies also point out prejudice and discrimination against international students (Charles-Toussaint and Crowson, 2010; Hitlan, 2007; Russell et al., 2010). Lee and Rice (2007) claimed that as compared with white students, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and other non-white students are more likely to perceive discrimination against them. A study by Sato and Hodge (2015) also endorsed these findings as they found that Asian international graduate students feel being marginalized, alienated, isolated, discriminated, and consistently face difficulties engaging in academic and social activities with local classmates. On the other hand, Charles-Toussaint and Crowson (2010) reported that American students felt that international students pose threats to their education, job opportunities, and social values.

International students, particularly during the transitional phase of their settlement, are likely to suffer from a variety of stresses; seeking help from university counselling services is logical. However, Yi et al. (2003) reported that on facing psychological difficulties,

international students usually prefer approaching their families and friends to resolve these problems. Students who do not have such support readily available to them, use university counselling services but not very frequently. Russell et al. (2008) also found that counselling services were under-utilized by international students in Australia basically due to unawareness about the existence of this service. Steele (2008) investigated the perceptions of international students studying in Singapore and noted that, due to certain cultural similarities, students from China face less adjustment difficulties and thus rarely use university support services. Banjong (2015) investigated various problems faced by international students studying in a U.S. Midwestern university and the support services used by them. Based on a sample of 344 international students, the study concluded that for language related difficulties, the students used the services of writing and student success centres, while for financial and loneliness problems, they approached the university counselling centre. Le and Gardner (2010) pointed out that support from faculty, academic advisors, and fellow students can help reduce stress of international students considerably.

In recent years, a new trend is emerging where, in addition to the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK, a considerable number of the international students are choosing other English speaking countries (Steele, 2008). Due to certain reasons, such as higher tuition fees, distance from home country, expensive travel, perceived discrimination, personal safety, and visa problems (Bamber, 2014), many international students are now considering alternate destinations for their higher education. Nasirudeen et al. (2014) investigated the stress level among international students in Singapore and its relationship with their acculturation process. The results showed that international students face the challenges of limited social interaction, lack of English language competency, and financial difficulties (Sherry et al., 2010). Steele (2008), in her PhD dissertation, explored the opinions and experiences of undergraduate mainland Chinese students studying in a Singapore university. The major difficulties experienced by these students were related to English language proficiency, weather adjustment, and unfamiliar food tastes. However, on the whole, the students did not face any major problems in adjusting and studying in Singapore. Several other challenges often faced by Chinese students in other countries, such as social isolation, home sickness, and cultural shocks, were not experienced by them in Singapore. The study concluded that international students face less adjustment problems if culture and language of the host country are similar (Steele, 2008).

Singapore is a city state and fast becoming an attractive education destination for international students from Asia due to its proximity, quality of education, well-equipped classrooms and laboratories, multi-national faculty,

somewhat similar culture, weather and food, and low crime rate (Sidhu et al., 2011). A report released by Universitas 21, indicates that Singapore is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> among countries worldwide and the first in Asia for its quality of higher education (Cheng, 2012). In spite of sizeable number of international students in Singapore, only limited literature is available on the adjustment issues faced by them. The main objectives of this study were to investigate perceptions of international students studying abroad, their motivating factors, and the challenges faced by them.

Most previous studies on international students' adjustment problems have been conducted in North America, Europe and Australia where over 50% of the international students emanate from Asia (OECD, 2013). The literature review suggest that major difficulties faced by Asian students are related to weather, food, and socio-cultural adjustments in the host countries. At present, a considerable number of the Asian international students are going to other Asian countries with well-developed education systems, it will be interesting to investigate if these students face the same level of difficulties as their counterparts experience in North America, Europe and Australia. Only limited literature is available on this regard and this study will help bridge this gap. It is expected that the findings of the study will be useful to education planners in offering more sought-after programs, staff of international student offices to review their strategies and services, and faculty teaching to overseas students in Singapore, as well as other countries hosting international students. Some of the findings will also be useful to potential international students who are considering studying in Singapore to get ready to face certain adjustment challenges.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a mixed method approach where quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire and qualitative data through a focus group discussion. Most previous studies carried out on international students have also used questionnaire surveys and focus groups for their data collection (Abdullah et al., 2014). Several previous questionnaires were reviewed for developing the survey instrument. The questionnaire consisted of nine sections and in the first section, demographic and some general information about the respondents were collected. The sections 2 to 6 investigated motivations, perceived benefits of studying overseas, and personal, academic, language, and socio-cultural problems faced by international students. As some previous studies have reported communication problems faced by international students (Majid et al., 2010; Tani, 2008), the next section captured responses regarding class participation problems

faced by them. The last section of the questionnaire focused on different strategies used by the respondents to overcome various adjustment problems. The survey instrument was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Since lists of international students were not readily available from the participating universities, the snowball convenience sampling technique was used to collect data. Singapore is a city state and there are only five public universities - two are comprehensive universities teaching a wide range of subjects, while the remaining three universities provide education in specialized disciplines such as management, and information technology and design. The two comprehensive universities are the largest universities in Singapore and host a majority of the graduate overseas students. The medium of instruction in all public universities in Singapore is English language.

The researchers used their personal contacts in the participating universities to approach international students for participation. These initial contacts were requested to introduce the researchers to other international students studying in these universities, as well as distribute copies of the questionnaire to other international students who were not contactable during the campus visits. A total of 300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 140 international graduate students participated in the survey, with a response rate of 46.6%. Only master's degree students were included in the survey as their difficulties and adjustment strategies could be different from undergraduate students. For example, both universities provide limited residence places to international graduate students, these students are usually expected to make more presentations and write assignments, and a majority of the graduate programs are completed by international students in one academic year. International students are not allowed to complete their programs as part-time students.

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their availability to participate in a focus group discussion. Willing students were requested to provide their contact information for follow-up communication. The purpose of the focus group was to allow the participants to express their opinions on issues not adequately covered in the questionnaire, as well as share their thoughts on certain trends emerged as a result of quantitative data analysis. Eight students, from different nationalities and academic streams, agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. This group size was considered appropriate for a productive discussion (Morgan, 1996). Some of the focus group questions were based on the adjustment factors studied by Steele(2008). The focus group discussion, which lasted for two hours, was audio recorded and in between refreshments were

served to the participants. The participants were encouraged to articulate their opinions in their own words(Petersen, 2006), as well as share their experiences as international students. The focus group data was transcribed by one of the researchers and checked by two others for data accuracy. The emerging themes were identified and similar ideas were organized into conceptual categories to eliminate redundancy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 140 international master's degree students from different subject areas participated in the questionnaire survey, of which 30.7% were female and 69.3% male. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents belonged to the age group of 20-25 years, 23.5% were in the age group of 26-30 years, and 2.1% in the age group of 31-35 years. Majority of the students were from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar.

The results of this study are presented under the following themes: motivations for studying overseas, perceived benefits of studying abroad, personal, study- and language-related problems faced by the international students, factor hampering class participation, and measures taken by the students to adjust in a new social and learning environment. The comments by participants in the focus group are presented along with the quantitative findings.

### Motivations to study overseas

The participating international students were asked what factors motivated them to study in Singapore. As shown in Table 1, the top three motivating factors were: gaining new experiences (mean: 4.54), attending a world class university (mean: 4.44), and developing an international career (mean: 4.16). The least important factors in students' decision to studying abroad were affordable fees (mean: 2.12), and non-availability of desired program in their home countries (mean: 2.74). These findings support the results of several previous studies which claim that international students wish to benefit from well-established academic systems of host countries, learn about other cultures, and prepare themselves for the international job market (Calder et al, 2016; Miller, 2012; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Pyvis and Chapman, 2007; Wu et al., 2015).

In response to an open-ended option for this question, the students also identified certain additional motivating factors, such as availability of scholarships and research grants, an opportunity to attend a reputable university, the desire to study overseas, getting overseas exposure, and developing international contacts.

**Table 1:** Motivations to study overseas (N=140).

S/ N	Motivations	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	An opportunity to get new experiences	4.54	0.83
2	Desire to attend a world class university	4.44	0.78
3	A first step towards an international career	4.16	0.98
4	Opportunity to experience different learning methods	4.01	0.98
5	Family/friends encouraged me to study abroad	3.45	1.07
6	Difficult to enter a similar program in my country	2.80	1.21
7	Preferred program not available in my country	2.74	1.31
8	Fees are comparable with fees in my country	2.12	1.18

**Table 2:** Perceived benefits of studying overseas (N=140).

S/N	Benefits	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	Better understanding of people from other races/ ethnic groups	4.28	0.87
2	Personal maturity and improved self-confidence	4.21	0.86
3	Gaining overseas work experience and career development	4.19	1.00
4	Opportunity to live independently	4.17	1.05
5	Advanced academic knowledge	4.16	0.80
6	Opportunity to understand one's own strengths and weaknesses	3.91	0.94
7	More awareness and knowledge of the country of study (Singapore)	3.86	0.96
8	Opportunity to improve English language competency	3.76	1.06

The focus group discussion also revealed some other motivating factors for studying in Singapore. Several students preferred Singapore as it is a multi-cultural and multi-racial country with substantial populations of Chinese, Malays, and Indian with somewhat similar culture and traditions. One South-Indian student commented "There are many Tamilians here, so I feel like it is my second home". Almost all students in the focus group agreed that Singapore is close to their home countries and it is easy to travel back home during holidays and local festivals. Another reason given for choosing Singapore was its affordable fee structure as compared to many Western countries. Personal safety was yet another reason given for selecting Singapore for higher education. Four participants also pointed out that their relatives and friends living in Singapore helped them settle down quickly in a new environment, as well as usually assist them whenever there is an emergency situation. Some previous studies also point out that similar culture (Steele, 2008), personal safety (Sidhu et al., 2011), and availability of a support system (Wu et al., 2015) can help international students to adjust in a new environment.

### Perceived benefits of studying overseas

The most important benefit perceived by the international

students studying in Singapore was the opportunity to develop a better understanding of people from diverse ethnic groups (Table 2). The next three most important benefits were: personal maturity and improved self-confidence (Mean: 4.21), gaining overseas work experience (mean: 4.19), and the ability to live independently (mean: 4.17). These benefits of studying overseas were also identified by several previous studies on international students in different countries (Calder et al., 2016; Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Wu et al., 2015). Comparatively, not many international students considered the opportunity to improve English language competency as a major benefit of studying abroad (mean: 3.76). This is probably because at present, a large number of students, particularly from China and India, are more competent English language users.

During the focus group discussion, a female student from India stated "This is the first time I'm staying away from home as I did my undergraduate study and worked in my hometown. This new experience has given me more confidence and the ability to live independently". Participants also pointed out that they got an opportunity to interact and develop friendship with students from different nationalities. Miller (2012) also pointed out that making international friends and living independently were valued by international students.

**Table 3:** Personal problems faced by international students (N=140).

S/N	Personal Problems	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	Missing social events in home country (e.g. family functions, religious festivals, etc.)	3.59	1.12
2	Financial issues (e.g. cost of living)	3.56	1.09
3	Being away from my friends/boyfriend/girlfriend	3.16	1.19
4	Being away from my parents	3.08	1.11
5	Difficulty to continue with my favourite leisure activities	2.90	1.25
6	Cooking my own food	2.89	1.15
7	Keeping in touch with my family and friends	2.78	1.03
8	Making friendship with local students	2.51	1.05
9	Visiting places for religious activities (Temple / Church)	2.42	1.13
10	Making friendship with other international students	2.41	1.05

**Table 4.** Study-related problems (N=140).

S/N	Study-related problems	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	Completing assignments due to heavy workload	2.90	1.17
2	Obtaining good grades	2.84	1.16
3	Preparing for examinations	2.76	1.09
4	Completing degree in the specified time period	2.43	1.13
5	Getting used to different teaching methods	2.36	0.98
6	Communicating ideas during class discussions due to shyness/ nervousness	2.31	1.12
7	Working in groups with students from different nationalities	2.29	1.02
8	Completing assignments due to limited writing skills	2.26	1.00
9	Reading and understanding materials recommended by professors	2.19	1.02

### Personal problems faced by international students

The participants were asked how difficult it was for them to overcome certain personal problems, while studying in Singapore. As shown in Table 3, the three most important personal problems faced by the international students were: missing social events in home countries (mean: 3.59), financial issues (mean: 3.56), and living away from friends and relations (mean: 3.16). Several previous studies have also highlighted the financial difficulties faced by international students (Alsaifi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Calder et al., 2016; Banjong, 2015; Constantine, 2005; Wu et al., 2015). Nasirudeen et al. (2014) reported that international students studying in Singapore encounter financial problems, probably because Singapore is one of the most expensive cities in the world (Jacobs, 2014).

The three least problematic areas were: making friendship with other international students (mean: 2.41), visiting places of religious activities (mean: 2.42), and making friendship with local students (mean: 2.51). It appeared that international students in Singapore felt less social isolation as compared with those studying in North America, Europe, and Australia (Alsaifi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Banjong, 2015; Deters, 2015). It was probably

because majority of the international students in Singapore are from the regional countries with somewhat similar culture, languages, weather, and food (Steele, 2008).

The focus group discussion also provided more details about the personal problems faced by the international students in Singapore. One difficulty repeatedly mentioned by the students was higher living cost in Singapore due to limited students' accommodation options, expensive food, transportation, groceries, entertainment, and other necessities. On the whole, it appeared that international students in Singapore were facing less adjustment difficulties, except the high living cost.

### Study-related problems

The international students were asked how difficult it was for them to handle different study-related problems. As shown in Table 4, the top three study-related problems were: difficulty in completing assignments due to heavy workload (mean: 2.90), difficulty in obtaining good grades (mean: 2.84), and difficulty in preparing for examinations (mean: 2.76). International students were experiencing

**Table 5:** Language-related problems (N=140).

S/N	Language problems	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	Understanding English language accent of classmates	2.82	1.03
2	Understanding local jokes and humour	2.78	1.09
3	Understanding English language accent of professors	2.52	1.06
4	Writing assignments	2.19	1.18
5	Expressing my view point during class discussions	2.00	1.00
6	Communicating in English language with my classmates	1.92	0.97
7	Understanding examination questions	1.89	1.02
8	Writing emails to professors and university offices by adhering to acceptable communication standards	1.80	0.88

these problems probably because academic expectations and assessment methods used by Singapore universities could be considerably different from universities in their home countries. A recent study by Mesidor (2016) also pointed out that examinations are particularly stressful for international students due to unfamiliar examination format and different assessment standards as compared to their home countries.

On the contrary, the students faced comparatively less problems in understanding the recommended readings (mean: 2.19), and writing assignments (mean 2.26). These findings endorse earlier findings of this study (section 4.2) where international students did not consider English language competency as a major problem in adjusting to Singapore education system. Similarly, the students felt that working with other international students on group assignments was less problematic (mean: 2.29). This finding is also in line with an earlier finding of this study (section 4.3) where making friendship with other international and local students was not considered a serious problem.

The focus group discussion also supported the quantitative findings as several participants from China and India pointed out that continuing assessment and examinations in Singapore are considerably different from their home countries, and international students usually need some time to adjust in a new assessment system. They also wish to have more time to write assignments, which is likely to reduce their overall workload. The international students also felt that the duration of graduate programs in Singapore should be increased, which is typically one academic year (two semesters). In this way, they can spread their studies over a longer period of time which will also allow them to gain more in-depth knowledge, as well as find sufficient time to participate in social events.

### Language-related problems

The international students participating in this survey were asked about English language-related problems faced by them (Table 5). The top three English language-related

difficulties were: understanding accent of classmates (mean: 2.82), understanding local jokes and humour (mean: 2.78), and understanding accent of professors (mean: 2.52). However, students did not think that language was a serious problem in writing their assignments (mean: 2.19), as well as in their class participation (mean: 2.00). These findings are quite different from studies conducted in North America, the UK, Australia and other English speaking countries where language always appeared as a big adjustment problem (Alsahafi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Akanwa, 2015; Deters, 2015; Kuo, 2011; Ralarala et al., 2016). Even two previous studies in Singapore (Nasirudeen et al., 2014; Steele, 2008) also reported English language as one of the difficulties faced by international students.

It was also worth noting that mean scores for most of the language-related difficulties were considerably lower than personal difficulties, indicating that English language was comparatively a less important adjustment problem for international students in Singapore. It is probably because international students coming to Singapore are now better prepared and competent English language users. These findings also support an earlier finding of this study (section 4.2) where students did not consider improving English language as a major benefit of studying overseas.

In general, students participating in the focus group were able to put through their thoughts and viewpoints comfortably, which was an indication of their English language competency. They explained that it was due to stringent admission criterion used by Singapore universities for language proficiency. However, they stated that interacting with classmates from other nationalities and understanding their English language accent was always a challenge. In addition, the participants pointed out that English accent of some professors, coming from different countries, were also difficult to understand, thus making it hard for them to understand their lectures.

### Factors hampering class participation

Since class participation is considered an important component of graduate programs, the students were asked

**Table 6:** Class participation problems(Multiple responses).

S/N	Participation problems	%
1	I usually do not have many ideas to share	28.6
2	Too shy to participate in class discussions	20.0
3	Class discussions are quite uncommon in my home country	15.7
4	Scared of students' adverse comments	11.4
5	Limited English language proficiency	10.7
6	Asking questions from instructors is considered impolite in my country	10.0

**Table 7:** Social and cultural barriers (N=140).

S/N	Social and cultural barriers	Mean (1-5)	SD
1	Finding appropriate accommodation	2.89	1.26
2	Getting used to local food	2.81	1.23
3	Familiarity with local healthcare system	2.74	1.17
4	Buying my country-specific groceries	2.41	1.13
5	Adapting to local social norms and behaviour	2.25	1.04
6	Following local rules and regulations	2.16	1.06
7	Adjusting to the local climate	2.04	1.07
8	Learning how to go around without getting lost	1.84	0.98
9	Familiarity with local transport system	1.56	0.82

what factors hinder their class participation. Some previous studies suggest that many Asian students do not actively participate in discussions and other class activities due to low language competency, shyness, and nervousness(Alsaifi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Lee, 2009; Majid et al., 2014; Tani, 2008). It was interesting to note that 59.3% of the students claimed that they do not face any problem in class participation. This finding is understandable as in a previous section of this paper (section 4.4) in which difficulty in communicating ideas during class discussions was not identified as a major problem.

The remaining 40.7% of the participated students highlight various reasons for not taking part in class discussions. A reason presented by 28.6% of the students was lack of ideas to share (Table 6). Another 20% of the students accepted that they were too shy to participate in class discussions. Once again, low English language proficiency did not appear as a major reason for non-participation as only 10.7% of the students picked this option.

The focus group participants also added a few more points to class participation difficulties faced by international students. One Chinese female students said "Classes are different in China as there are less presentations to be made. I need to prepare a lot before I present since we have to make many presentations here". In contrast, another Chinese student, who had completed his undergraduate education in Canada, found class

participation easier due to his previous experience. On the whole, it appeared that international students in Singapore were not facing serious class participation problems as compared with those studying in other countries (Crombie et al., 2003; Tani, 2008).

### Social and cultural barriers

Social and cultural adaptation is one of the challenges often faced by international students as they are exposed to a new environment. As presented in Table 7, the top three socio-cultural barriers were: finding appropriate accommodation (mean: 2.89), adjusting to local food (mean: 2.81), and lack of familiarity with the local healthcare system (mean: 2.74). Previously, Steele (2008) also found the problem of food adjustment by international students in Singapore. This finding was surprising as almost all food courts in Singapore universities have several Chinese, Indian and western food stalls. Food taste in these stalls was considered different from their respective home countries probably due to adjustments made by food vendors in the origin recipes to suit the taste of local students.

On the other hand, the least problematic social and cultural adjustments were: the familiarity with local transport system (mean: 1.56) and the ease of getting around (mean: 1.84). On the whole, it was observed that the mean scores for almost all socio-cultural barriers were

**Table 8:** Adjustment strategies used by international students (N=140).

S/N	Adjustments	Mean (1~5)	SD
1	Making new friends in Singapore	3.79	0.96
2	Staying in touch with friends and family in my home country	3.66	1.06
3	Visiting different places of interest (e.g. shopping, entertainment, etc.)	3.60	1.07
4	Involving in recreational activities (e.g. movies, games, etc.)	3.56	1.06
5	Taking part in local social events (e.g. National day, Chinese New Year celebrations, etc.)	3.43	1.00
6	Taking part in club activities (e.g. sports, drama, etc.)	3.11	1.07
7	Seeking academic guidance (workshops, soft skill trainings, etc.)	3.04	1.01
8	Seeking personal counselling (e.g. Stress, depression, cultural problems, etc.)	2.51	1.11

quite low, indicating that it was less problematic for regional international students to adjust in Singapore. Most of the socio-cultural adjustment related findings of this study were quite different from studies undertaken in other countries where such adjustments were a source of stress and anxiety for international students (Alsehafi and Seong-Chul, 2017; Banjong, 2015; Deters, 2015; Gómez et al., 2014; Miller, 2012; Oliveira and Soares, 2016). Low socio-cultural adjustment problems in Singapore were probably due to the fact that a majority of the international students in Singapore come from Asian countries, having several social and cultural similarities. Steele (2008) also noted that Chinese students face less adjustment problem in Singapore due to cultural similarities.

The problem of finding suitable student accommodation also appeared in the focus group discussion. A Chinese student stated "I did not know from where to start searching for the accommodation information. I mostly used Facebook and a Chinese forum to find this information". Other students also concurred with this observation and noted that finding student accommodation was very difficult and expensive, since public universities in Singapore have limited on-campus housing for their graduate international students. On a different social issue, another Chinese student commented that "Actually I used to party a lot in my country but here I am not able to do so as drinks are very expensive. Moreover, in private housing estates landlords usually put some restrictions on organizing students' parties". Calder et al. (2016) also reported that lack of affordable and appropriate housing was one of the difficulties faced by international students in Canada.

An Indian student pointed out that "Finding vegetarian food was difficult as there were only a few options for vegetarians". Another participant observed that "Healthcare is pretty expensive and so most [international] students prefer home remedies". Several participants also agreed that they had never visited a clinic after coming to Singapore. Another adjustment problem was mentioned by

an international student in these words "Too many rules and regulations like not allowing the usage of chewing gum, and imposing fines on littering are too stringent".

### Preferred adjustment strategies

Finally, the participants were asked what measures they have undertaken to adjust in Singapore, avoid social isolation, and overcome home sickness. As presented in Table 8, the three most popular adjustment measures were: making new friends in Singapore (mean: 3.79), keeping in touch with family and friends back home (mean: 3.66), and visiting different places of interest in Singapore (mean: 3.60). Alsehafi and Seong-Chul (2017) also reported that Saudi Arabian students in Australia was making local friends to overcome their social isolation and home sickness.

It was worth noting that the usage of university counselling services was the least preferred option to overcome stress, depression, and other socio-cultural problems (mean: 2.51). Some previous studies have also reported low utilization of support services by international students (Steele, 2008; Yi et al., 2003). One possible reason for low utilization of counselling services by the International students in Singapore could be due to socio-cultural similarities among Asian cultures. The students might be thinking that the counselling services are for more serious personal matters whereas they can adjust in the new environment at their own. Yi et al. (2003) also noted that when faced with socio-cultural problems, international students prefer approaching their family and friends to resolve these problems.

Participants of the focus group also discussed adjustment barriers, as well as shared their experiences of overcoming these challenges. The participants revealed that making new friends helped them to overcome their loneliness. They also specifically mentioned that the availability of certain free communication platforms such

as Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber helped them to stay connected with families and friends in their home countries. A Chinese participant stated "There is no time difference between Singapore and China, so I don't have to worry if it is the right time to call friends in my home country". Another participant added, "As long as we have Facebook, we can keep in touch anywhere anytime". Some of them also said that they visit their relatives and friends in Singapore during different festivals and, as result, the feeling of being away from home is reduced.

On academic issues, most of the focus group participants preferred seeking support from classmates and previous graduates even if professors are easily approachable. It was also mentioned that due to short duration of graduate programs and heavy workload, many international students are unable to actively participate in different students' clubs although it can help overcome loneliness and homesickness.

## Conclusion

The international student market is growing at a rapid pace and several countries are now entering into this business. To become an attractive education destination for international students, host academic institutions need to fully comprehend the challenges faced by these students and how to help them adjust quickly in a new environment. It is expected that as soon as international students have acclimatized in a new social and learning environment, they are likely to feel more comfortable and perform better academically.

Due to procedural difficulties, lists of international graduate students from the participating universities were not readily accessible to the researchers. Therefore, the convenience sampling technique was used for data collection. Due to sampling limitations, the results of this study cannot be fully generalized to the whole international student community in Singapore. Nevertheless, the participating students of this exploratory study exhibited considerable diversity which makes findings interesting and useful. Future studies should strive to use random sampling which will allow them to generalize their findings. Similarly, only one focus group was conducted to collect the qualitative data. Since qualitative data could be very useful in understanding the adjustment problems of international students, more focus groups with diverse participants are likely to yield more interesting results. Future studies can also involve undergraduate students, who constitute the major segment of the international students.

The findings of this study suggest that international students going to a country with similar social and cultural characteristics are likely to face less adjustment problems. Since Singapore is a multi-cultural and multi-racial

country, international students from the region, particularly from China and India, face less adjustment problems. They can find many cultural, weather, food, and language similarities between their home countries and Singapore. Probably that is why international students, though concerned about high living cost, decided to study in Singapore. Another advantage of studying in a neighbouring country, providing high quality education, is the applicability of the acquired knowledge. Professors in these countries are likely to use more local examples, select discussion topics on regional issues, give assignments on indigenous problems, and organize study visits and internships at local institutions. Such academic activities with international, as well as local focus are likely to make learning more engaging and meaningful for the students.

International students studying in Singapore also encountered less social isolation and homesickness problems. Geographical proximity to home countries and availability of many budget airlines allow students to easily visit back their families and friends during holidays and on other special occasions. Similarly, the availability of many free communication platforms, such as Skype, WhatsApp and Viber, allow students to regularly keep in touch with their loved ones.

Nevertheless, some additional measures by host academic institutions can help accelerate students' acculturation process. They can organize various orientation programs for international students to get acquainted with local culture and sensitivities, social acceptable norms, local healthcare and transport systems, places of interest, etc. In addition, universities can organize regular informal social activities to allow students to mingle with other international and local students. Furthermore, different students' clubs can come up with interesting programs to keep international students engaged, which would help reduce their homesickness and social isolation. Academic staff can also play an important role in the adjustment process of international students as they regularly come in contact with these students. Some initial personal care, flexibility, support, and motivation by professors can boost the morale of international students which may help them to quickly adjust in a new learning environment.

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**Cite this article as:**

Majid S, Balaji R, Shivalini MP, Shibani A (2017). Motivations for studying abroad and adjustment challenges faced by international students in Singapore. *Acad. J. Educ. Res.* 5(8): 223-235.

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