

Acculturation Strategies Employed by Malaysian Students Studying Abroad

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Abstract

Pursuing study overseas has always been one of the aspirations of Malaysian students to not only achieve their academic goals but also give them a chance to boost their intercultural communication competence in the long run. However, they often face various obstacles such as cultural barriers, academic strain, and psychological issues during their adjustment period. Therefore, acculturation strategies may be adopted to overcome various obstacles while learning abroad. Hence, this research aims to investigate the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students studying abroad to overcome cultural conflicts. In this qualitative study, an in-depth interview was conducted with 6 Malaysian female students, specifically, 3 students from the United Kingdom and 3 students from Egypt, explores three key aspects: the preparations taken to study abroad, acculturation conflicts faced in the respective host countries and the acculturation strategies adopted by the students. The findings indicate that Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom opted for an integration strategy while adjusting to the host culture. Two out of three participants studying in Egypt chose the integration strategy, whereas only one student adopted the separation strategy. It can be concluded that Malaysian students in the United Kingdom are more inclined to integrate to the Western culture compared to the students in the Eastern country (Egypt). The study offers recommendations for policymakers, higher education institutions, and prospective international students to enhance cross-cultural adaptation strategies.

Keywords: *Malaysia, international students, acculturation, host culture, acculturation strategies*

Introduction

Researchers have been looking Malaysia is known as one of the top countries in the world which has the highest number of its citizens pursuing their study abroad. Malaysia ranked eighth out of the top ten countries that have their natives studying overseas as Malaysia Education and Training (2022) states that as of 2022, Malaysia has a total number of 59,144 students studying abroad. Numerous studies (Sisavath, 2021; Jackson & Oguro, 2017; Milian et al., 2015; Gan & Kang, 2022) have also shown that the reason most students want to continue their studies internationally is due to various benefits being offered that could assist in enhancing their career prospects and employability.

Acculturation signifies how immigrants and sojourners deal with the pressure rooted in the clashing of both cultures between the host and their home country (Ohnis et al., 1999 as cited in Yu & Wang, 2011). In the case of adaptation to studying abroad, despite numerous benefits and great opportunities awaiting the

students, pressure and distress are being imposed on them as well. Culture shock, psychological welfare, and academic struggles are the main issues that students face particularly during their adjustment stage (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Although the number of Malaysian students who pursue their studies abroad has been increasing gradually over the years, their preference for acculturation strategies and the way they adapt to the distinctive host culture has yet to be studied extensively. Research also supported that there is a lack of research that specifically documents Malaysian international students' experience and the strategies that they adopted to overcome cultural boundaries (Kumar et al., 2019). This research will therefore focus on the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian students abroad in adapting to a different culture.

Moreover, the transitional phase from home country to host country may lead to various cultural barriers during students' adjustment period to new surroundings, especially in countries that consist of multicultural societies. Students need to cooperate to achieve successful acculturation strategies in adapting themselves to the foreign culture that is particularly signified by diversity (Yu & Wang, 2011). Diversification in cultures may assist students to develop mastery of intercultural communication and thus, enhance their knowledge of other cultures. Research has proven that experience gained by international students overseas may enhance their global-mindedness, intercultural competence as well as personal development (Maharaja, 2018). Hence, students who acquire the ability to implement successful acculturation strategies may be able to deal with challenges and cultural barriers effectively while residing abroad. Therefore, the present aims to explore the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students when studying at their respective host countries.

Literature Review

The transition of moving from one's home country to another host country influences most international students to develop a bicultural identity. Schwartz et al. (2010) define biculturalism as the individuals' proficiency and capability to practise their cultural values while embracing the culture of the host country. This capability will lead to the development of one's dual identity that embraces both the host and home cultures. Based on Berry's Model of Acculturation (1980), the act of maintaining one's cultural practice while integrating into the host culture is seen as two independent dimensions. The crossover of these two dimensions leads to the development of four strategies of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation. Drawing from this acculturation model, integration is depicted as bicultural as both terms represent the action of one retaining their cultural identity while embracing the culture of the host country (Meca et al., 2019).

The acculturation process among international studies varies depending on cultural contexts and individual preferences as demonstrated by studies such as Yu and Wang (2011). They highlight the preferences of acculturation strategies adopted by Chinese international students studying in Germany. Based on the survey conducted, it was found that the strategies of integration and separation are the most preferred acculturation approaches implemented by the Chinese students. The findings further reveal that male students are more inclined towards separation while female students primarily adopt integration. This study concludes that the acculturation patterns that emerged among the students are influenced by the distinct cross-cultural features of the two nations' psychological distance. However, the sample of this study may not be competently representative of the Chinese students who are studying in Germany due to the lack of diversity in the selection of the participants.

Krsmanovic (2020) investigated the social experiences of international freshman students in one of the public institutions in the Southeast United States of America by implementing Berry's Acculturation Model (1974,1980,1997). Ten international students were selected, and a descriptive research design was used to examine the degree to which each of the four strategies of the acculturation model, assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization, would emerge from the students' social experiences during their first year of study.

Cultural scholars and psychologists have acknowledged that embracing the values, beliefs, and customs of the host country does not completely imply that a newcomer will stop practising the culture of his or her homeland (Schwartz et al., 2010). The situation, however, might be different for some sojourners as they do not really possess the freedom to choose their preferred acculturation strategies when migrating to another foreign country. Berry (2005, in Fadil & Mohamad, 2022) concludes that the dominant culture, therefore, will influence and determine the employment of one's acculturation strategies. Henceforth, Berry's Model of Acculturation or also known as Berry's Fourfold Model was introduced to identify to what extent the sojourners will adopt their preferred acculturation strategies in adapting to the host environment. The model has divided the acculturation strategies into four aspects which are assimilation (adopting the host culture and rejecting their home culture), integration (maintaining one's home culture while adapting to the host culture), separation (maintaining one's home culture but rejecting the culture of the host country) and marginalisation (rejecting both of their home culture and the host). Berry's Model of Acculturation (1980) strategy is presented in Figure 1:

Cultural Adaptation (relationship sought among groups)			
Maintenance of heritage culture	High	Low	High
	Separation	Integration	
Low	Marginalization	Assimilation	

Figure 1: Berry's Model of Acculturation

Berry's theoretical model of acculturation strategies has been universally adopted in numerous studies (Yu & Wang, 2011; Krsmanovic, 2020; Luo et al., 2021) to investigate the preferences for acculturation strategies among international students studying abroad. Based on previous research, it was found that international students have different choices and solutions when it comes to the application of acculturation strategies when adjusting to the host environment and culture. Therefore, the adoption of 'Berry's Model of Acculturation' in this study is relevant as it is aligned with the research objective to identify the preference for acculturation strategies among Malaysian students studying abroad.

Alcott et al. (2017) describe the adaptation of the sojourners or immigrants towards a foreign culture into two fundamental dimensions: Dimension 1- the dominant culture or conserve their home culture and Dimension 2- engage with the local population. The concoction of these two dimensions leads to the formation of four distinctive acculturation strategies: assimilation (abandon one's home culture, adapt to the host culture, and engage with the local citizen); separation (retain one's home culture without practising the host culture and engaging with the local citizen); integration (retaining one's own culture and adapting to the host culture simultaneously); and marginalisation (rejecting both of the host culture and their own cultural identity).

Methodology

The present study aims to identify the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian students studying abroad by adopting a qualitative research design specifically a qualitative thematic analysis. A qualitative research design was adopted to gain a deep understanding and insights of the participants' perceptions, ide-

as, experiences, and the justification for their actions (Ugwu & Eze, 2023) and describe the complex details of the participants' viewpoints and behaviours in naturalistic surroundings (Perera, 2020).

A purposive sampling method was adopted for this study in selecting the research participants. This sampling technique has been broadly applied in qualitative studies to derive insights from individuals that are particularly knowledgeable about the phenomena of investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). In the present study, the participants who were purposively selected were Malaysian students currently studying abroad in Egypt and the universities in the United Kingdom.

In the present study, the first step was to seek participants that fulfilled the criterion specified which was Malaysian international students who are currently studying either in Egypt or the United Kingdom. The participants were identified from the researcher's close acquaintances of university friends who have connections with Malaysian students studying in foreign countries. Three Malaysian university students studying in Egypt and three Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom agree to participate in the research. This study determined that the finalised sample size is sufficient for this research (Dworkin, 2012).

Participants were briefly briefed about the research purpose and consent forms were distributed to the interviewees to obtain their agreement in participating in the interview session and for their data to be used for research purposes. After obtaining the consent from the participants, the interview questions were shared one week before the scheduled interview. Date, time, and platform were then chosen and agreed upon by those involved to conduct the interview session online. In the present study, a semi-structured interview was adopted to gain deeper insights of the participants' perceptions on the subject matter. The interview approach allows the participants to elaborate on the topic being discussed in further detail (Alamri, 2019). This method is deemed suitable and useful in gaining in-depth information concerning the respondent's experience in using acculturation strategies. A total of 5 demographic questions and 14 questions related to acculturation strategies were developed for the purpose of the present research.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Malaysian Students Studying in the Kingdom and Egypt

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Foreign Country	Duration of Staying Abroad
Sofia	22	Single	United Kingdom	4 years
Dhia	22	Single	United Kingdom	3 years
Lisa	22	Single	United Kingdom	3 years
Mariam	23	Married	Egypt	5 years
Nazira	24	Married	Egypt	6 years
Yasmin	23	Single	Egypt	3 years

An average duration of 1 hour was taken for each interview session and was conducted on the Google Meet video call platform. The interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Due to privacy requirements, pseudonyms were adopted by the participants. Table 1 presents the participants' details which include their pseudonyms, ages, marital status, the foreign countries that they are currently studying in, and their duration of staying abroad.

In this study, the first step of analysis was to familiarise with the data obtained. Next, initial codes were generated from the data collected. In this study, codes such as "integrate" and "homesickness" were found in the raw data. The researcher then searched for the main themes to categorise the initial codes gained from the findings. For instance, one of the themes identified in this study was "acculturation conflicts faced by Malaysian students studying abroad". The emergence of the themes was later revised to avoid redundancy of the research themes. The process of defining and naming the themes that are aligned with the generated codes was then carried out. The final step was to produce a report according to the relevant themes and codes that highlighted the conflicts and the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students studying abroad.

Findings

This study examines the acculturation strategies of Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom and Egypt, with a focus on three key objectives. The first research objective is to examine their preparation before departure and identify the cultural and social challenges that the participants experience. The final objective is to explore the acculturation strategies in response to these challenges.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Malaysian students studying abroad in the United Kingdom and Egypt employ varying strategies to adapt to their host environments. Their experiences are shaped by their level of preparation, the acculturation conflicts they face, and the strategies they adopt to navigate cultural differences. While students in the UK generally perceive the cultural gap to be minimal due to prior exposure to Western influences, students in Egypt encounter greater challenges, particularly in linguistic and social adaptation challenges. Despite these differences, most participants demonstrate a preference for integration which balances maintaining their home culture and adapting to the host culture. However, social and religious constraints influence their level of engagement, thus leading the participants to employ a separation strategy in specific contexts.

Research Objective 1

The first research question that this study aims to address is how do Malaysian students prepare before studying abroad? This study determined that the extent of preparation among students varies based on their per-

ceived cultural proximity to the host country. While some students undertook active research to familiarise themselves with their new environment, others relied on indirect exposure through media and social networks. This pattern is particularly evident when comparing the participants' preparation experiences. The findings outlined two differences approaches that the participants use when preparing for their study in the UK and Egypt. Some students actively sought information about their host country before departure such as Lisa who took a more structured approach. Lisa mentioned that *"I researched British culture, customs, social etiquette, and even their education system before leaving. This helped me transition smoothly into the new environment."* She conducts background research on British customs, education systems, and social etiquette to ease her transition.

In contrast, others relied on prior exposure through media, peers, and family. Most participants heading to the UK perceived minimal cultural differences, therefore, they prepared less extensively. Sofia and Dhia, for instance, did not conduct formal research before leaving Malaysia, believing that exposure to Western media had already familiarised them with British culture. Dhia also relied on seniors' experiences via social media.

"I think there is nothing in particular that I did research on because I think as we grew up in Malaysia, we have been accustomed to the Western side." (Sofia)

"...the preparation that I did was very limited, just like since our seniors would definitely go to the UK, I just contacted them and asked, "How is it there?" and looked up their social media stories and observed how they were adapting, and those were the only things that I did before going to the UK." (Dhia)

Similarly, students bound for Egypt did not conduct extensive background research, relying instead on word-of-mouth information from seniors and family members. Mariam and Yasmin noted that their understanding of Egyptian culture was based on brief pre-departure briefings and conversations with seniors.

"I've only heard stories from seniors and officers in charge during my pre-departure program, but everything was only mentioned briefly." (Mariam)

"I just knew about Egyptian culture from my seniors. They told us to expect the worst first." (Yasmin)

Nazira, however, took an additional step by watching YouTube videos to better visualise the social normal and lifestyle of Egypt.

"I watched YouTube to see and imagine the surroundings here in Egypt. I also asked my cousins and relatives who had studied here before about their experiences." (Nazira)

These findings suggest that students who perceive greater cultural differences (e.g., Lisa and Nazira) tend to prepare more actively, whereas those who assume cultural familiarity (e.g., Sofia and Dhia) adopt a more relaxed approach. Thus, while most students across both countries did not engage in extensive research, those in Egypt demonstrated a slightly greater awareness of potential adaptation difficulties, prompting more proactive engagement with cultural learning tools.

Research Objective 2

This study also investigates the challenges that Malaysian international students face while adapting to their host countries. This study determined that regardless of their level of preparation, all participants encountered acculturation conflicts upon arrival. These challenges can be categorised into three key areas: (1) differences in cultural and social norms, (2) language barriers (Egypt-specific), and (3) psychological and emotional distress.

One of the most significant differences in cultural norms in the UK was the drinking culture, which serves as a primary mode of social bonding. Muslim students found this difficult to navigate, as their inability to participate in pub gatherings limited their interactions with local peers. Sofia mentions that *"Drinking is a big part of their social life. Since I don't drink, it limits how I interact with them"* and is further reiterated by Dhia who says that *"They invited me for a pre-drink, and I didn't know what that was. When I realised it involved alcohol, I knew I couldn't join them."* Meanwhile, in Egypt, students faced different cultural challenges, including aggressive traffic behaviors and relaxed attitudes toward household etiquette. As mentioned by Yasmin, *"Egyptians honk their horns constantly, even in heavy traffic. It's noisy and hectic."* Another interesting difference was articulated by Marian who says that *"it feels awkward visiting an Egyptian home and keeping my shoes on."*

The second challenge experienced by the research participants is the language barrier. Unlike students in the UK, those in Egypt encountered linguistic barriers due to the difference between formal Arabic (Fusha) and colloquial Egyptian Arabic (Amiyah) as Mariam highlighted *"Egyptians don't speak formal Arabic (Fusha) but a colloquial dialect (Amiyah), which made it hard to communicate."* In addition to cultural differences and language barriers, students in both countries face emotional stress, isolation, and homesickness. *"At home, everything was planned for me. Here, I have to handle everything on my own, and it was overwhelming at first"* as told by Dhia. Mariam concurs by outlining that *"Studying abroad is a lonely journey. Some days, the loneliness kills you."*

The findings indicate that Malaysian students studying abroad encounter acculturation conflicts that vary significantly based on their host country's cultural, linguistic, and social structures. Students in the UK primarily faced challenges related to social integration, particularly the drinking culture and differences in communication etiquette, which created barriers to forming deeper relationships with local peers. However, the absence of language barriers and the UK's multicultural environment allowed them to navigate these challenges with relative ease. On the other hand, students in Egypt encountered greater structural and linguistic adaptation difficulties, particularly in learning the colloquial Arabic dialect (Amiyah), adjusting to different social norms, and managing unexpected interpersonal conflicts. Across both settings, psychological and emotional distress was a common experience, as students struggled with homesickness, academic pressure, and the shift to independent living.

Research Objective 3

Given the diverse challenges faced by Malaysian students in both the United Kingdom (UK) and Egypt, their ability to navigate and adapt to their host environments is largely shaped by the acculturation strategies they employ. Using Berry's (1980) Acculturation Framework, this study identified integration as the dominant strategy, where students balance maintaining their home culture while adopting aspects of the host culture. However, individual differences, religious beliefs, and the host country's sociocultural environment influence the extent to which they engage with the dominant culture. In the UK, the multicultural nature of society and the relative openness of locals to diverse cultural practices facilitate smoother integration. In contrast, students in Egypt, who face greater linguistic and social adaptation challenges, display a mix of integration and separation strategies, with some choosing to retain their Malaysian cultural identity more strongly in response to local customs they find difficult to adapt to.

Students in both the UK and Egypt demonstrated integration strategies, where they balanced engagement with the host culture while maintaining aspects of their home culture. Sofia emphasised adaptability while maintaining boundaries, showcasing a flexible integration approach:

"I think that I adapt differently to the host culture. But I think when adapting to a host culture, it is important to try to fit in with them and also know your boundaries. For example, if I go to a local's house and they say it's okay, you can wear your shoes, of course, I'm going to take off my shoes. But because it is their home and if they are comfortable with it, I will adapt to them accordingly."

This suggests that students are willing to adjust their behavior to respect the norms of the host society, but they also retain their own cultural preferences when possible. Similarly, Dhia expressed willingness to integrate through alternative social interactions, despite avoiding alcohol-related social gatherings:

"...some of their cultures are totally against my belief as a Muslim. But, I will always try to adapt to the culture here and socialise with the locals without having to step out of my boundary and going against my cultural and religious beliefs. One of the things that I have done is by doing simple gestures, by asking them to have a walk at the park and to do some outdoor activities together without having to wait for chances to happen."

This highlights how religious boundaries shape acculturation as the research participants studying in the UK prefer integration in non-religious aspects while maintaining separation in practices that contradict their beliefs. Nazira, an international student in Egypt, also embraced integration by adopting selective cultural practices, ensuring that she absorbs only positive elements from the local culture:

"I just normally take what is good and leave what is bad. Like for example, the good aspects of the people, the language, and some special styles to interact with the people, and yes, I believe it is the best approach to help adjust to the environment."

Mariam also acknowledged the necessity of adapting to some aspects of the host culture, although she retained strong elements of her home identity. Her statement suggests that acculturation is a process of negotiation, where students adopt aspects that aid daily life while resisting the parts that they find incompatible:

"I cannot deny there are a few occasions where I need to opt and practise the host culture in my daily situation as it is needed for me to go through the day. Nevertheless, there are still many more of the host culture that I didn't adapt to as it differs from mine. So it's both yes and no. Did the approaches help me adjust? Yes."

While integration was the dominant strategy, separation was observed in specific social contexts, particularly where students felt cultural dissonance or resistance to unfamiliar norms. Yasmin expressed a strong preference for retaining her home cultural practices, particularly in social interactions and rule-following:

"However, in terms of social practices, I am more comfortable in retaining our home cultural practices, where most of the time we tend to tolerate and negotiate in solving a problem rather than arguing. Furthermore, we also tend to abide more by the rules compared to the"

Egyptian people, who are more on doing things according to their way. For instance, during the COVID-19 era, even doctors did not wear masks at the hospitals and also when treating the patients. It is completely in contrast to us, who are very particular and strict when it comes to wearing masks during the pandemic era."

This suggests that when the participants find a mismatch in values, they choose to separate rather than integrate, particularly in areas concerning safety, health, and ethical practices. Sofia, despite being open to adapting to certain contexts, firmly maintained cultural separation in others, particularly concerning food and religious restrictions:

"But, in terms of foods and all the drinking, I think that's where I put my boundaries to retain my home culture instead of adapting to the host culture. And I think that when you move to a foreign country, you have to find the exact spot between being able to fit in with the norm but also understanding your own boundaries. But I think that everyone in this world has already understood that different cultures have different understandings, so people tend to respect it."

Therefore, this study identified that integration is the preferred acculturation strategy, but personal boundaries, religious beliefs, and social norms influence the extent of cultural engagement. While some students actively embrace host-country customs, others retain a selective distance in specific social contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aims to identify the acculturation strategies used among Malaysian international students studying in the United Kingdom and Egypt. By adopting a thematic analysis approach, the data were qualitatively analysed based on a total sample of six participants, three Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom and another three studying in Egypt. This study identified three key aspects influencing acculturation: preparations before departure, acculturation conflicts, and acculturation strategies employed by students abroad. The findings suggest that students who perceived a greater cultural gap between Malaysia and the host country engaged in more deliberate preparation, while those who assumed cultural familiarity, particularly students in the UK, prepared less formally. These observations are consistent with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, which suggest that societies with a lower uncertainty avoidance index, such as Malaysia, are more comfortable navigating ambiguous situations and adapting as they go. However, this lack of preparation sometimes contributed to initial cultural adjustment challenges, reinforcing Khanal and Gaulee's (2019) argument that one of the most significant obstacles faced by international students is a lack of precise pre-departure knowledge about the host country's academic and social expectations.

Acculturation conflicts were also central to the adaptation process, with students in both the UK and Egypt encountering significant sociocultural barriers. In the UK, participants struggled with drinking culture, informal communication with lecturers, and differences in social norms related to personal space and privacy, leading to initial discomfort in social interactions. These findings mirror studies such as Thurnell-Read et al. (2018) which emphasise how international students from collectivist cultures often have trouble adjusting to the more individualistic and informal social customs in Western countries. Meanwhile, students in Egypt faced language barriers due to differences between formal Arabic (Fusha) and the colloquial dialect (Amiyah), as well as challenges in adapting to different social behaviors and interpersonal norms. These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Cao et al., 2016; Smith, 2011; Yu et al., 2019) that highlight how language barriers remain one of the most persistent acculturative stressors among international students, particularly in non-English-speaking countries. Beyond linguistic and social challenges, all participants experienced psychological and emotional distress, including homesickness, academic pressure, and isolation, which further shaped their acculturation experiences. This is consistent with Yusof et al. (2018) that international students frequently face mental health challenges stemming from adjusting to a new cultural and academic environment.

Despite these challenges, most participants adopted an integration strategy, actively engaging with the host culture while maintaining their Malaysian cultural and religious identity. This reflects Yu and Wang's (2011) argument that integration is the most preferred acculturation strategy among international students, as it enables them to adapt to the local culture while simultaneously strengthening their intercultural competence. In the UK, students found it relatively easy to integrate, as British society is multicultural and generally receptive to diversity. The openness of the environment facilitated their ability to interact with locals while retaining aspects of their own cultural identity, which is supported by the findings of Mamat and Rambely (2016), who noted that Malaysian students in the UK often develop a broader worldview through cross-cultural exposure. However, religious considerations played a major role in shaping the depth of integration. Some students, such as Sofia and Dhia, deliberately avoided social settings that involved alcohol consumption but engaged in other activities that allowed them to form social connections without compromising their values. This indicates that acculturation is not a binary process of assimilation or rejection but a strategic negotiation of cultural boundaries, where students selectively adopt aspects of the host culture that align with their personal beliefs.

In Egypt, integration was more challenging due to linguistic and social adaptation barriers, leading some students to opt for partial separation strategies. While two participants adopted an integration approach, selectively engaging with aspects of the local culture that facilitated daily interactions, one participant chose separation, particularly in social settings where cultural norms diverged significantly from Ma-

Malaysian values. This finding is consistent with Krsmanovic's (2020) study, which found that students who perceive wide cultural disparities between themselves and the host country may deliberately limit their engagement with the local culture, particularly in contexts involving religious and ethical values. Yasmin, for example, resisted adopting certain local norms such as the informal approach to conflict resolution, preferring to retain Malaysian social customs that emphasise negotiation and rule adherence. This reflects the argument by Fortes and Araújo (2019) that students who adhere strongly to their home cultural norms may experience a greater sense of cultural misalignment, which impacts their willingness to integrate fully into the host environment.

The implications of these findings suggest that higher education institutions and policymakers play a crucial role in facilitating smoother acculturation experiences for international students. The findings reveal that many Malaysian students had little to no formal exposure to the academic, cultural, or social expectations of their host country prior to departure, which may have exacerbated their acculturation stress. This highlights the need for comprehensive pre-departure training programs that provide students with structured cultural awareness education, language preparation (especially for those studying in non-English-speaking countries), and psychological resilience training. Additionally, universities in both the UK and Egypt should enhance institutional support systems by implementing peer mentorship programs, cultural exchange initiatives, and academic guidance tailored to international students' needs. As suggested by Khanal and Gaulee (2019), such initiatives are critical in helping students navigate the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation and develop a stronger sense of belonging in their host institutions.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on international student mobility and acculturation by offering insights specific to Malaysian students, an area that remains relatively underexplored in existing literature. Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include Malaysian students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, studying in a wider range of countries, to capture a more comprehensive picture of acculturation preferences. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how students' acculturation strategies evolve over time, particularly in relation to academic success, intercultural competence, and post-study career development. Understanding these long-term adaptation patterns would provide valuable insights for universities, policymakers, and international education stakeholders aiming to enhance the overall experience of Malaysian students abroad.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while integration remains the preferred acculturation strategy, its implementation is influenced by sociocultural factors, institutional support, and personal values. While students in the UK found integration relatively seamless due to a multicultural and accepting environment, those in Egypt faced more adaptation challenges, leading to the adoption of mixed integration and separation strategies. These findings reinforce the need for targeted support structures that acknowledge both

the opportunities and barriers faced by Malaysian students abroad, ensuring that they are equipped with the cultural competence, psychological resilience, and academic preparedness necessary to thrive in an international environment.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, U.M.U.M.; methodology, U.M.U.M.; formal analysis, U.M.U.M.; original draft preparation, U.M.U.M.; supervision, Z.B.H.; writing—review and editing, Z.B.H., N.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Z.B.H, upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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