

## Acculturative Stress among Asian International Students in Singapore

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### Abstract

*This study aims to identify the level of acculturative stress and to examine the correlations between acculturative stress or its subcategories and variables such as English language proficiency. The results show that international students were challenged by social interactions, lack of English language proficiency and financial issues. The results of this study and their possible implications for educational institutions in Singapore and Asia are considered.*

**Keywords:** international education, Singapore, acculturation, stress, Asia

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International education is becoming an essential part of higher education. Students from all over the world leave their countries to enroll in educational programmes abroad and many of them establish their careers in the host country. With globalization becoming more and more important every day, having an international education and experiencing another culture becomes a meaningful and rewarding experience (Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Zorn, 1996). Such educational experiences also empower the students with the ability to withstand adversities and to face new challenges. International education is undergoing constant changes under the effects of globalisation and it becomes more valuable to individuals since it can provide them with enhanced economic and career benefits (Opper et al., 1990; Zorn, 1996).

Singapore is a major destination for Asian students to pursue higher education because of its high standards of education and multi-racial composition of its population comprising mainly Asians (Tsang, 2001). Furthermore, most international students are offered scholarships to finance their studies in Singapore (Tsang, 2001). International students (students who are on student pass/visa) contribute to the development of a multicultural society in Singapore. Singapore aims to be the education hub of Asia and hence foreigners are encouraged to work or study in the country. This will also help Singapore to develop a talented workforce. The Center for Private Education (2011) reported a total cumulative student enrollment of 187,000. Overseas education may provide many benefits but it can also pose challenges to students as they have to adjust to a new environment, a different culture, achieve proficiency in a new language, and overcome feelings of isolation and acculturative stress (Jeong, Hickey, Levett-Jones, Pitt, Hoffman, Norton, & Ohr, 2011). Although the majority of the international students adapt reasonably well to the demands of the host culture and academic institutions, many are likely to experience pressures related to

acculturation, racism and decreased access to their usual support system (McLachlan, & Justice, 2009; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Acculturative stress refers to stress induced by the adaptation or acculturation process due to a change in cultural environment where a person has to make a number of personal, social, and environmental changes (Jang & Chiriboga, 2010; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). This study aims to understand the characteristics of international students, to identify their level of acculturative stress and to examine the correlations between acculturative stress or its subcategories and variables such as gender, English language proficiency, country of origin, length of stay in Singapore and monthly income. Acculturative stress was chosen as the focus for research since it can be measured using reliable and validated scales such as the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Furthermore, the ASSIS scale covers a broad range of factors such as culture shock, homesickness, fear, etc. The findings of this study will greatly assist educational institutions in Singapore to better plan and enhance the learning and living experiences of international students.

### **Review of Literature**

Previous research reports have examined the experiences of international students studying in English speaking countries such as America, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (Evans & Stevenson, 2010; Poyrazli, Thukral, & Duru, 2010; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). He, Lopex and Leigh (2011) cited that due to their nationality, difference in cultural beliefs and poor command of the English language, the international students feel stressed by the host country. Studying in an unfamiliar new environment and adapting to the new language and academic challenges is a central process resulting in stress and varying degrees of cultural shock for international students (Ruddock & Turner, 2007; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao, & Wu, 2007).

Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2000) reported that the international students' foreign accent can be a source of criticism from their classmates and lecturers and cause poor communication between the local and international students. International students from countries where English is not a first or native language experience more stress (Brown, 2008) mainly due to problems with English speech and comprehension (Charles & Stewart, 1991; Abriam-Yago, Yoder & Kataoka-Yahiro, 1999). One group of researchers reported that lack of knowledge about the host country is also a causative factor for acculturative stress as international students require a longer time to adapt to the new culture and environment (Faleel, Tam, Lee, Har, & Foo, 2012). However, students joining clubs, activities, seeking and finding help and support, have helped to relieve stress and problems faced in the new environment (Lewthwaite, 1996).

Ward and Kennedy (1999) suggested that acculturative stress was mainly related to the length of stay in the host country. The longer the length of stay, the better the social and networking skills, hence the lower level of acculturative stress. Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand indicated that social difficulty was greatest during the first month, that it dropped sharply during the first 6 months and that it continued in a slightly downward direction 12 months later (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). In addition, international students experience more anxiety and stress being apart from family and friends, pressure from school, work and finances than students from host country (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008). Results from Fritz et al., (2008) study showed that Asian students found it harder to cope with the new language and to make new friends, and the European students found it more stressful to be apart from family and friends while studying in USA.

Small cultural differences can have a powerful emotional impact on international students (Gebhard, 2012). As Adler (1975) and Storti (2001) discussed, mundane activities that were easy for students to do in their native countries are no longer easy, and due to social and financial problems, students can start feeling lonely and confused (Gebhard, 2012). However, most students gradually adapt, and as they do, they gain confidence and become more emotionally stable.

Literature search indicated that there were no published studies on acculturative stress among international students studying in a tertiary institution in Singapore. This study aims to fill in the information gap of understanding acculturative stress in international students and understand the needs of these students as the number of international students in Singapore is likely to increase in the coming years.

### Research Method

A convenient sample of 392 international students from China, Myanmar, Nepal, Indonesia, India, Vietnam and Malaysia from a tertiary institute in Singapore was recruited to complete a questionnaire for this study. Usable questionnaires were obtained from 356 international students. Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. Data was collected from April through July of 2012.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Participants ( $N = 356$ )

Socio-demographic characteristics	Number ( $n$ )	Percentage (%)
<i>Nationality</i>		
Cambodia	1	0.28
China	221	62.1
India	2	0.56
Indonesia	2	0.56
Malaysia	73	20.5
Myanmar	53	14.8
Nepal	1	0.28
Vietnam	3	0.84
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	31	8.7
Female	325	91.3
<i>Age</i>		
Below 21	125	35.1
21 and above	231	64.9
<i>Length of stay in Singapore</i>		
Under 2 years	118	33.1
2 to 3 years	142	39.9
More than 3 years	96	27
<i>Source of funding</i>		
Scholarship	317	39
Self-funded	89	11

For this study, the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS – Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) was used to evaluate acculturative stress levels. It is a 36-item scale consisting of subcategories: perceived discrimination (8 items), homesickness (4 items), perceived hate (5 items), fear (4 items), culture shock (3 items), guilt (2 items), and miscellaneous (10 items). Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scores range from 36 to 180, with high scores referring to higher levels of acculturative stress. Written permission was sought from Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) for the use of the scale in this study. For the present study, Cronbach's alpha ( $r = 0.85$ ), Spearman-Brown's split half technique ( $r = 0.92$ ) and Guttman's split half technique ( $r = 0.90$ ) all revealed high reliability coefficients.

Data from the survey were transferred to Microsoft Excel 2010. Standard data entry and quality control procedures were used including double entry, range and consistency checks, and manual review of outliers. All statistical

analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 20.0).

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative research design. Written permission to conduct the research was obtained from the director of the school in which the research was conducted. Written and verbal information about the study were given to all international students. Written consent was sought from the students before administering the survey. The confidentiality of information gathered on the survey form was guaranteed. Individual responses were not reported. International students were also informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.

## Results

### *Gender Differences and Years of Study*

We conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Tukey's post hoc test and a Pearson bivariate correlational analysis to determine gender differences and years of study among the international students on acculturative stress or its subcategory factors. From our results, we did not find any significant correlation between gender ( $p = 0.467$ ) or years of study and acculturative stress ( $p = 0.734$ ) or any of its subcategory factors (Fig. 1, table 2).

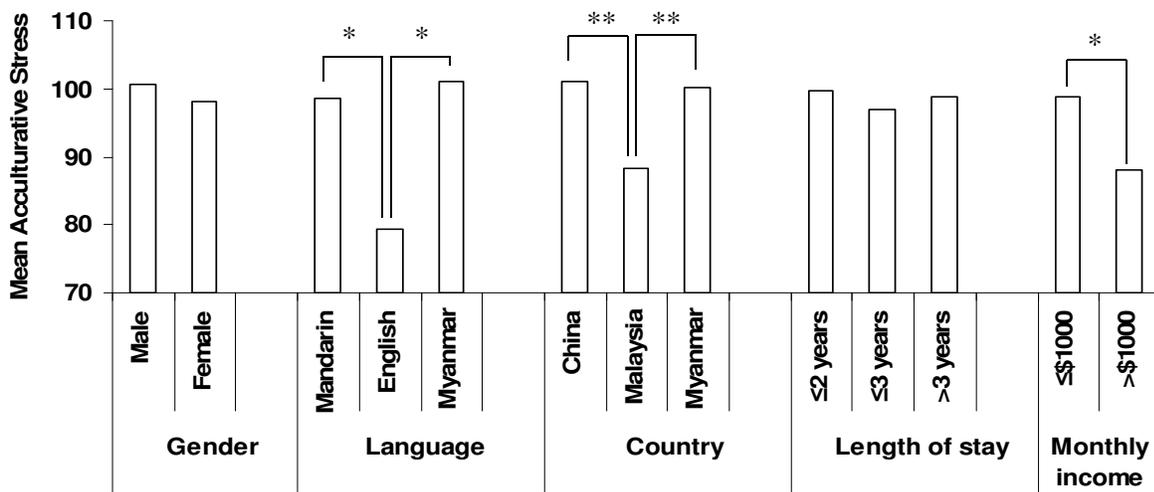


Figure 1. Graphical representation of mean acculturative stress of variables

Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$  level (2-tailed), \*  $p < 0.05$  level (2-tailed)

### *English Language Proficiency*

The respondents in our survey spoke thirteen different languages. We analysed acculturative stress for those who spoke the three most common languages ( $n = 336$ ), namely English, Mandarin and Myanmar. In our survey, most international students reported Mandarin ( $n = 280$ ) and Myanmar ( $n = 50$ ) as their first language. Only six international students reported English as their first language. Participants of this survey were studying a course which was conducted in English. As such we predicted a high level of acculturative stress for non-English speaking international students.

Table 2

## Mean Acculturative Stress of Variables

	Variables	n	Mean
Gender	Male	31	100.71
	Female	325	98.15
Language	Mandarin	280	98.52
	English	6	79.33
	Myanmar	50	101.04
Country	China	221	101.14
	Malaysia	73	88.19
	Myanmar	53	100.15
Length of stay	≤2 years	118	99.62
	≤3 years	142	96.99
	>3 years	96	98.89
Monthly income	≤\$1000	342	98.75
	>\$1000	14	88.07

## Country of Origin

Although 356 international students comprise of eight different nationalities, majority of them are only from three, China ( $n = 221$ ), Malaysia ( $n = 73$ ) and Myanmar ( $n = 53$ ). As such, we analyzed the level of acculturative stress and its subcategory factors among international students from China, Malaysia and Myanmar.

Our data showed significant effect of the country of origin on total acculturative stress (Fig. 1) and further analysis of the subcategory factors of acculturative stress showed a significant effect ( $p < 0.01$ ) of the country of origin on culture shock, perceived discrimination, perceived hate and miscellaneous subcategories of acculturative stress (Table 3). International students from

China and Myanmar experienced higher levels of acculturative stress compared to those from Malaysia.

Table 3

## Country of Origin and Acculturative Stress Subcategory Factors

	Culture shock**		Perceived discrimination*		Homesickness		Perceived hate**		Fear		Guilt		Miscellaneous**	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
China (N = 221)	8.53	2.122	21.07	4.211	13.55	2.979	14.15	3.015	9.75	2.40	4.95	1.507	29.25	5.177
Malaysia (N = 73)	7.05	2.047	17.95	5.802	12.86	3.529	11.18	3.553	9.29	2.884	5	1.414	24.74	6.884
Myanmar (N = 53)	8.85	1.925	22.19	5.425	14.21	2.898	13.51	3.136	9.06	2.735	5.3	1.996	27.04	5.939

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation. \*\* $p < 0.01$  level (2-tailed).

## Length of Stay

Our data did not show any statistically significant effect of the length of stay on total acculturative stress. To further investigate, we performed a Pearson bivariate correlational analysis and analyzed the relation among the level of acculturative stress and its subcategory factors, and length of stay (Table 4). There was a significant negative correlation between homesickness and the length of stay ( $r = -0.111$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the international students who reported lesser length of stay

also reported higher levels of homesickness, and international students who stayed longer in Singapore reported lower levels of homesickness.

Table 4

## Bivariate Correlations among Variables, Mean, and Standard Deviations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 LOS	-								
2 PDisc	.040	-							
3 Homesick	-.111*	.352**	-						
4 PHate	.069	.703**	.306**	-					
5 Fear	-.025	.560**	.361**	.569**	-				
6 CShock	-.022	.565**	.451**	.539**	.486**	-			
7 Guilt	-.005	.387**	.501**	.344**	.400**	.422**	-		
8 Misc.	.021	.714**	.430**	.737**	.693**	.602**	.414**	-	
9 ASSIS	.005	.850**	.596**	.817**	.758**	.733**	.571**	.907**	-
Mean	28.79	20.60	13.48	13.43	9.59	8.27	5.02	28.01	98.33
SD	13.43	5.00	3.14	3.47	2.62	2.19	1.68	5.99	19.04

*Note.* LOS = Length of Stay, PDisc = Perceived discrimination, Homesick = Homesickness, PHate = Perceived hate, CShock = Culture shock, Misc. = Miscellaneous, ASSIS = Total acculturative stress scale score, SD = standard deviation. \*\* $p < 0.01$  level (2-tailed), \*  $p < 0.05$  level (2-tailed).

*Monthly Income*

Cost of living is higher in Singapore compared to other Asian countries. Although most of the international students in the tertiary institution where this survey was conducted receive some form of funding such as scholarships or bursaries, the amount may not be sufficient to meet the high costs of living. Our data showed that international students who earned (through scholarship and other income streams) more than one thousand dollars per month showed significantly lower levels of acculturative stress than those who earned less than one thousand dollars ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Fig. 1, table 2).

**Discussion**

Until now, there is no recorded research study conducted in Singapore that explores the factors that affect acculturation of international students. Many international students travel to Singapore every year to enroll in educational programmes so that they can contribute to the economic and social development in their home country upon graduation or enhance their career opportunities in Singapore. Tertiary educational institutions in Singapore are providers of high quality education with good scholarships and student experience, which are features highly sought after by international students. According to the literature reviewed, acculturation continues to be a major challenge facing international students. In this study, variables such as gender, length of stay in Singapore, country of origin, English language proficiency and monthly income, and their effect on acculturative stress and its sub-categories were analyzed.

Literature review on the effect of gender on acculturative stress revealed inconsistent results. This is mainly due to limited research on the subject. Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson and Pisecco (2002) reported gender differences when analyzing loneliness, a subcategory of

acculturative stress. On the other hand, a study by Sodowsky and Plake (1992) did not show any significant gender differences contributing to acculturative stress. Our study did not show any significant correlation between gender and acculturative stress as well. Our results also showed that the years of study does not affect the level of acculturative stress significantly. Those international students who have completed one year of study do not experience more acculturative stress than those who have completed two to three years. However, our finding contradicts the study done by He et al. (2011) who reported that year three international students experienced higher acculturative stress, as compared to those who had completed two years or less.

For most international students, language is a major barrier to adjustment and a factor for acculturative stress (Wilton and Constantine, 2003). The lack of English language proficiency affects communication between international students and local students or faculty members (Lewthwaite, 1996; Chen, 1999). Our results showed that acculturative stress is higher in international students with poor proficiency in English language. The medium of instruction for the courses attended by the students involved in this survey was English. It is expected that international students who have a weak grasp of the English language report significantly higher levels of acculturative stress, as confirmed by this study.

International students have to learn ways of adapting to the new cultural norms of the host country. In this respect, we hypothesized that the country of origin should have an effect on acculturative stress. The results of this study show that international students from Malaysia exhibited lower levels of acculturative stress compared to those from China and Myanmar. International students from China and Myanmar experience more acculturative stress than those from Malaysia probably because of language and cultural differences. Malaysia is a neighboring country to Singapore and the cultural norms and language of these countries are similar. Moreover, Malaysian international students may experience less discrimination and may also be easily accepted because of fewer problems in English language proficiency. Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker and Al-Timimi (2004) also showed that European students experienced lower levels of acculturative stress as compared to Asian students in the United States of America (USA) because European students were able to understand and adapt easily to the cultural norms of USA and they had fewer problems with language proficiency. In 2001, Tsang reported that Singapore and China are similar in culture and therefore students from China can blend into the Singapore society easily (Tsang, 2001). But this has changed over the last decade. The Singapore Chinese students speak less Mandarin and are well-versed in the English language than students from China. Unlike the students from China, Singapore Chinese students have been brought up in a multi-cultural society where their friends include Malays, Indians and Eurasians and their language of communication is mainly English. The students from China are comfortable speaking in Mandarin and hence prefer to form cliques among themselves due to language and cultural similarities. Thus it is difficult for the students from China to blend with the Singapore Chinese students.

Studies done by Vergara, Smith and Keele (2010) and Henrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) reported that the participants who had been staying in the host country for over three months reported low levels of acculturative stress compared to those who had lesser stay in host countries. On the contrary, our results show that length of stay had no significant effect on level of acculturative stress. This could be so because the respondents have stayed in Singapore for at least a year before this study was conducted. However, a Pearson bivariate correlational analysis of the length of stay and sub-categories of acculturative stress showed that length of stay was negatively correlated to homesickness, that is, international students who had stayed longer in Singapore reported lower levels of homesickness. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) showed that international students who experienced higher levels of discrimination also showed higher levels of

homesickness than did students from U.S.A. Our study also showed a significant positive correlation between homesickness and perceived discrimination.

Most international students in Singapore rely on scholarships and bursaries but a few are self-sponsored through personal or family funding. However, with the high costs of living, these scholarships and bursaries are hardly sufficient to cover all the living expenses. Hence, financial issues become potential stressors that may have an effect on international students' levels of acculturative stress (Eustace, 2007). In our study, international students who earned more than a thousand dollars per month reported lower levels of acculturative stress than those who received or earned less than a thousand dollars.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

The findings of this study have various important implications for educators and administrators. Understanding the acculturation requirements and process by the host country could help to reduce the adjustment barriers faced by international students. The education sector in Singapore should recognize that there is a need to understand acculturative challenges and implement strategies to help students adjust. Many institutions across the globe are increasingly tailoring their policies to accommodate acculturation requirements. International students of today have become better informed, more mobile and are better able to make informed decisions on their choice of preferred countries for their learning. As such, it is important and relevant for school administrators and policy makers to understand the growing needs and requirements of international students.

There are a number of limitations in this study that limit its generalizability. The study relied on self-report measures and did not include assessments from other sources (e.g., interviews, focus group discussions). Our study used correlational analysis in certain aspects, which does not prove causal relations between variables. The sample population was selected from a single tertiary institution and hence there is limited generalizability of our results. The study's findings may be limited as the instrument (ASSIS) was used and validated in the U.S.A. limiting the conceptual relevance and validity of the instrument for the international students who study in Singapore.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Understanding the acculturative stress of the international students would allow educational institutions to provide better social and financial structures to support international students. Furthermore, this study will increase awareness among international students about the acculturative stress they are experiencing and will prompt them to seek help from counselors and advisors in their educational institutes. The results from this study should help educational providers, especially in Singapore, with sufficient understanding of the experiences of international students and thereby helping to shape policies aimed at providing more appropriate support services to them.

Asian international students often do not seek counseling or psychological help (Wei et al., 2007). They are reluctant to discuss personal problems to strangers because of cultural stigmas or may not be aware of the availability of support services (Pedersen, 1991). The acculturative stress experienced by international students could be reduced. Faculty or administrators could conduct culturally sensitive outreach programmes to help international students normalize their experience with senior international students and alumni sharing their adjustment experiences. A study done by Hendrickson, et al, (2011) showed that more bonding camps with the local students are necessary to promote friendship and social support. New international students could be buddied with local

students and senior international students to facilitate transition and lessen their acculturative stress. The local student partner can also serve as an English conversation partner or English tutor (Wei et al., 2007). The schools could also provide English language bridging courses. The duration of such courses should be extended to allow them to achieve a higher level of proficiency. The language bridging course should include a component on culture and communication (Thompson, Boore, & Deeny, 2000). The school-level international student advisor should facilitate access to more financial support resources and social events. Evans and Stevenson (2011) reported that students greatly valued seminars organized by schools as useful arenas for relationship building.

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