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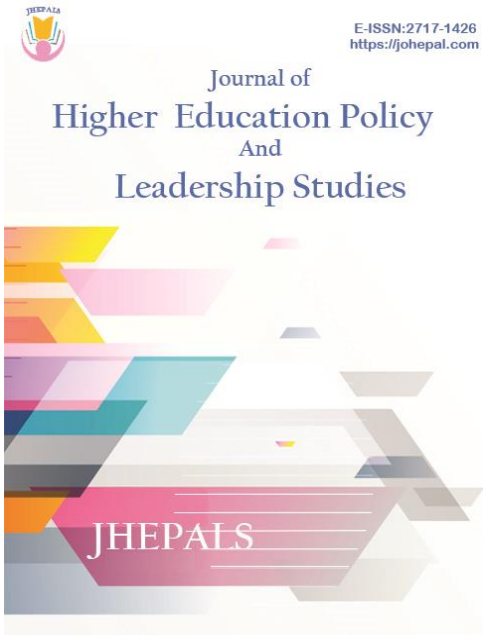
Exploring the Experience of Arab PhD Students in Malaysia: A Phenomenological Study



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Exploring the Experience of Arab PhD Students in Malaysia: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

International students often face numerous challenges upon arrival in the host country that can result in culture shock and increased stress. Malaysia is a prominent destination for international students from diverse nations, particularly Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It is actively striving to expand its current market share in the future. The study seeks to investigate the firsthand experiences of a group of Arab PhD students who enrolled in a PhD program at a Malaysian university, particularly to identify the psychological, sociocultural, and educational obstacles they face, determine the factors that contribute to these challenges, and assess the effectiveness of Malaysian higher education institutions in attracting and meeting the needs of international students. The study employs a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand participant's lived experiences. It utilizes in-depth, semi-structured interviews and applies Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data. The study found eight overarching themes, which included elements that appeal and areas that need improvement. Additionally, it recognized other subthemes. The study advised prioritizing students' perspectives and considering their feedback as a useful resource for enhancing the higher education sector in Malaysia.

Keywords: International Students; Higher Education; PhD Journey; Arab Students; Malaysia; Phenomenology

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Introduction

Traveling abroad to study is a common phenomenon. Students move to other countries for many reasons. For example, some students travel to study a subject that is not available in their home countries; other students seek a quality higher education that is only available in developed countries, such as the USA, the UK, and other Western countries; some students move to study in other countries due to challenges in the education and social system, such as lack of justice and equality among various classes of the community; some students move due to crises in their home countries, such as economic crises and wars. However, many Arab students started looking and going to the Far East, especially Malaysia (Ramkumar, 2002).

Students from Arab countries that are involved in long-run political conflicts and civil wars after the Arab Spring, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Palestine (including the Gaza Strip), Sudan, and Egypt, as well as students from economically stable countries like Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE, choose to travel to Malaysia. Education in this country has become a commercial product within the international arena (Zeeshan et al., 2013) and aims to attract 250,000 international students by 2025 and increase its market share (ICEF Monitor, 2016). This is driven by factors such as the appeal of the country, its Islamic culture, the quality of education, and affordability.

However, cultural shock and stress exist among those students due to alienation from families and friends and other factors. For example, Asmar (2009) revealed several factors that contributed to anxiety among Arab students about speaking the English language in public, including lack of experience, self-confidence, tension, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and losing face in public. Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2010) found other critical factors, including academic, language, and cultural difficulties.

Although Malaysia adopted several strategies to improve its education system since 2010 to attract more international students from various countries to internationalize the university's campuses (Gautz, 2014) and increase its market share and economic benefits, Memon et al. (2014) claimed that Malaysian higher learning institutions made a limited effort in their settings to conceptualize and explore student satisfaction. Also, Schulte and Choudaha (2014) contended that retaining international students is crucial for institutions to avoid financial loss.

Accordingly, this study is one rare research that aimed to explore the experience of a sample of Arab PhD students, who form a significant part of the international students studying in the post graduate colleges in Malaysia, to identify the psychological, sociocultural, and educational challenges, predictor factors, and coping strategies with those challenges. Also, to evaluate the success of the Malaysian higher education authorities in implementing strategies to attract and satisfy international students, considering many changes that happened in the environments of the university's campuses, and recommend specific strategies for students, academic institutions, and the Malaysian education authorities.

The study adopted a cross-sectional, qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of five Arab PhD students in Malaysia. Then, the data will be analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009).

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Literature Review

International Student Culture Shock

Ammigan et al. (2021) disclosed that student nationality, destination country, and learning experience differentially influence overall satisfaction and institutional recommendation; learning experience, including teaching variables, such as program organization and lecture quality, mattered most for overall satisfaction, and study variables, such as English language support and employability skills were associated with the institutional recommendation. Lillyman and Bennett (2014) claimed that international students potentially have many issues and stresses to deal with when coming to study in the United Kingdom. Brauss et al. (2015) disclosed that international students studying in the USA viewed people treating them unfairly or negatively based on their nationality, culture, and racial background differently. Newsome and Cooper (2016) found that students at a British higher education institution faced barriers to satisfying their human needs, followed in some cases by a form of accommodation or dropping out, and some students expressed the view that they were victims of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and disingenuous marketing.

Yale (2017) claimed that all international students feel culture shock at some point and to varying degrees; some become overwhelmed with adjusting to cultural differences, and others hide their discomfort and try to blend in, causing more confusion. Oberg (1960, p. 177) defined culture shock as "an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad". On the other hand, Eze (2015) argued against the common understanding of international students' challenges abroad as culture shock and provided some insights that culture shock may not necessarily apply to the experiences of those students. These experiences of international students resemble those of psychological trauma.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed the transactional theory of psychological stress, which states that people's experience of stress is a system of appraisal, response, adaptation, and coping, including problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (disclaiming, escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility or blame, exercising self-control and engaging in positive reappraisals). Winkelman (1994) summarized that cultural shock resolution was addressed through cognitive orientation and behavioral adjustment involving cultural shock characteristics recognition and implementing strategies for its resolution. Ward et al. (2001) highlighted three theoretical approaches to culture shock, including stress and coping (affect), culture learning (behavior), and social identification (cognition).

Zhou et al. (2008, p. 65) stressed that "people engaging in cross-cultural encounters need to be resilient, adapt, and develop coping strategies and tactics." The institution's role was also critical in helping international students by putting comprehensive policies for raising awareness, guiding and supporting international students and teachers, and putting them into practice (Zhou et al., 2008). Furnham (2019) summarized several strategies for helping international students, including proactive counselling and identifying early vulnerable international students, providing continuous and comprehensive guidance services, adopting less stigmatized approaches through less formal and clinical contacts, encouraging students to be involved in their adaptation process and education process, implementing the idea of the buddy system as each new student is assigned to an existing

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student to guide them in the first month, and empowering them through communication workshops and training counsellors to be sensitive in cultural differences, particularly psychological problems.

International Students in Malaysia

Malaysia has become an education hub of choice for international students seeking higher education. According to the Malaysian education authority, namely the Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) (2022), there has been a significant increase in international students seeking a PhD in Malaysia. In 2021, the number of applications received from international PhD students exceeded 11,000, twice the number received in 2020.

Kaur and Sidhu (2009) revealed in a study among postgraduate students, including domestic and international students, in two Malaysian universities that several dimensions impacted students' learning experiences like knowledge, values, contacts, professional and personal values acquired, and specific learning problems encountered. In more detail, most international students felt welcomed by their Malaysian coursemates and learned a lot from their course lecturers, such as valuable research skills and academic writing. Some students mentioned that the courses helped bring out values, including being more hardworking, managing time well, and being accountable for what they do and say in class discussions. On the other side, students cited several obstacles, such as language difficulties, inability to write research papers effectively in English, and 'study shock' among international postgraduate students (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009).

Memon et al. (2014) found in a comprehensive literature review that international postgraduate student's satisfaction intensely depends on critical factors, including the quality of the education, the internal and external environment of a university, and the feedback from research supervisors, are the critical contributors to the satisfaction of international postgraduate students. Lee et al. (2016) found that food quality and the limited choices significantly affected international students' perceptions of the university cafeteria, and most of the respondents indicated that the university cafeteria has poor ambiance and facilities such as poor air ventilation, crowded and packed, lacked seating capacity, dirty and unclean tables. Gulraihan and Sandaran (2017) found that language and academic adaptation have more influence on the sociocultural adjustments of international students than interpersonal adaptation, and the university campus and region of origin of the students influence their Academic and environmental adaptation. Akbara et al. (2021) revealed in a study of international students in Malaysian research universities that food prices were the most satisfactory; food service and quality were unsatisfactory and represented the main weakness. On the other hand, Ali et al. (2020) found that family financial support has a significant positive relationship with the behaviour of international students, in this case, the student's behaviour was positive when they obtained financial support from the family.

Arab international students faced several challenges in the Malaysian context (Asmar, 2009; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010). For example, Arabic-speaking students had a low competency level in academic writing, which was considered a critical issue. Consequently, they should improve their academic writing skills (Abdulkareem, 2013; Keong & Mussa, 2015; Subhi & Yasin, 2015). Furthermore, Sarwari and Abdul Wahad (2018) disclosed that Arab students in Malaysia use English as the primary language in education and

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communication, and their low proficiency in English challenges them to interact with their peers from non-Arab countries.

Scholars have proposed several suggestions to enhance international students' adaptation to Malaysian universities. Universities should celebrate learner diversity when addressing students' difficulties in their continuous effort to support their postgraduate students, track international student retention and use information in the recruitment phase, keeping these students on campus, and use their limited resources in ways that have the most impact; put more efforts to improve students' academic writing skills, improve cafeteria services, and encourage cross-cultural adaptation by enhancing their social support linkages with the locals and people of a different culture than their own (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Schulte & Choudaha, 2014; Keong & Mussa, 2015; Lee et al., 2016; Gulraihan & Sandaran, 2017).

The study explores the lived experiences of Arab PhD students in Malaysia and identifies:

a) how the students select Malaysia to pursue a PhD degree;
b) the psychological, sociocultural, and educational experiences of Arab PhD students in Malaysia;
c) how the Arab PhD students explain their experiences;
d) the coping strategies adopted by those students; and
e) explores the effect of support they received from the academic institutions and supervisors.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional, phenomenological research design, which, according to van Manen (1997a), is the study of the lived experiences of people, including both thematic and expressive dimensions of inquiry. Remeyni et al. (1998) highlighted that direct perceptions and feelings of people are more reliable than explanations or interpretations in communication and include several stages such as identifying a phenomenon, interviewing participants, highlighting common themes, and publishing work.

The study adopts the IPA of Smith et al. (2009), which includes three steps: (1) transcendental phenomenology, which involves examining how things appear in the participant's consciousness; (2) hermeneutics, which focuses on understanding the meaning of lived experiences; (3) and existentialism, which aims to comprehend experiences from the perspective of those who have had them. The IPA focuses on transformative or emotionally charged experiences that can often impact the individual's life.

Smith et al. (2009) claimed that phenomenology focuses on understanding the subjective experience and the participant's meanings of their lived experience. Researchers should separate themselves from the study to avoid bias in interpreting the results or interactions with participants. Also, Smith et al. (2009) considered unstructured or semi-structured interviews the ideal approach to participant subjectivity, and coding and theme identification are close to thematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, IPA involves a small group of people who share a particular experience.

Accordingly, the authors conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of five Arab PhD students from different universities in Malaysia. The

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study included PhD students from numerous Arab countries who completed their master's degree in another country rather than Malaysia and a minimum of two years in their current academic program. The study excluded PhD students who do not meet the proposed inclusion criteria, such as Arab PhD students who did not complete two years in their program.

The study interview includes several questions prepared by authors based on the literature review and guided by research goals and the theoretical framework, which includes:

1. Tell me the reasons that influenced you to select Malaysia to pursue a PhD degree.
2. Tell me in detail about your experience in Malaysia.
3. How do you explain your experience?
4. How long did it take you to cope with these experiences? How?
5. Tell me how the support you received from the university and your supervisor helped you to cope.
6. Tell me how your perceptions of those experiences have changed since you started the program.
7. Based on your experience, how effective is the Malaysian education system in attracting Arab PhD students?
8. Tell me any information you would like to add.

Also, the interviewer will use the prompts to proceed with the story. For example, What was it like? Can you give me an example, and in what way? (van Manen, 1997b, p. 68).

Results

The demographic data analysis disclosed that five Arab PhD students participated in the study. The participants were male, from different Arab countries, and three different Malaysian universities. All participants met the inclusion criteria: all are Arab PhD students, spent a minimum of two years in the program, and completed their master's degree in another country (See Table 1 for further details).

Table 1.
Demographic data analysis

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	5	100%
	Female	0	0%
Age	25-35	1	20%
	35-45	4	80%
	46-55	0	0
	56-65	0	0
Country	Iraq	1	20%
	Oman	1	20%
	Saudi Arabia	2	40%
	Jordan	1	20%
University	Universiti Tenaga Nasional	2	40%
	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	2	40%
	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	1	20%
Field	Business Management	2	40%
	Finance	1	20%

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	Accounting	1	20%
	Engineering	1	40%

The authors utilized the IPA as proposed by Smith (2009). It included reading and exploring the text of each participant, formulating experiential statements (units of meaning), and identifying the hidden meanings. Then, clustering meanings based on a particular connection and extraction of superordinate themes from the meanings. The analysis identified 92 units of meaning (Appendix 1 – Online Supplement), 23 subthemes, and eight superordinate themes (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2.
The meaning, statement frequency, and number of participants [F, P], and the extracted superordinate themes

Meaning (Subthemes)	Statements [F, P]	Superordinate Themes
Unavailability of the selected PhD program in the student's country	P1-1 [1, 1]	Malaysia owns multiple factors attracting Arab PhD students.
Unavailability of the selected PhD program in Western countries	P3-1 [1, 1]	
Satisfaction with the study cost	P1-2, P4-12, P5-1 [3, 3]	
Positive perception of living costs	P2-1 [1, 1]	
Satisfaction with the education	P1-22, P2-3, P3-15, P4-2, P4-11, P4-12, P5-2 [7, 5]	
Positive perception of the university	P2-5 [1, 1]	
Optimistic attitude toward the Islamic culture in the country	P2-2, P4-1 [2, 2]	
Optimistic attitude toward the country's multicultural	P2-7, P4-3 [2, 2]	
Positive attitude toward the Malaysians	P2-6, P2-8, P2-12, P2-20 [4, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the change of the university's academic rules	P1-4 [1, 1]	
Perception of education quality less than in Western countries	P5-12 [1, 1]	
Negative attitude toward the university	P1-15 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the quality of supervision	P1-6, P5-5, P5-6 [3, 2]	Dissatisfaction with the supervision
Dissatisfaction with the amount of supervision	P1-7, P3-13, P5-4 [3, 3]	
Lack of psychological support	P1-20 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the supervisor's delay in response	P2-19, P3-7, P5-5 [3, 3]	
Satisfaction with the supervisor/supervision	P1-18, P2-24, P4-4, P4-7 [4, 3]	
Confusion about visa period differences	P1-9 [1, 1]	The visa issuing and renewal process is slow and unsatisfactory for Arab PhD students.
Dissatisfaction with the delay in the visa process	P1-8, P2-14, P2-16, P3-9, [4, 3]	
Perception of discrimination in the visa issuing process for Arab students	P2-15, P2-21 [2, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the rule of issuing visas for families	P2-17, P4-13 [2, 2]	
Dissatisfaction with the performance of the Malaysian departments	P2-13, P3-11, P5-8 [3, 3]	
Optimistic attitude about the issuing of entry permits for the first time	P5-10 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the bank's process	P3-10 [1, 1]	D i s s a

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Dissatisfaction with the bank's rule of the high money deposit for married students	P2-18 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the bank's rules for specific Arabic countries	P1-11 [1, 1]	
Positive perception of bank procedure in the UK	P1-12 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the university accommodation	P3-3 [1, 1]	Dissatisfaction with some university services and facilities
Dissatisfaction with lacking 24-hour library service	P3-4 [1, 1]	
Dissatisfaction with the admission/ and registration office service	P2-10, P3-5, P3-6 [3, 2]	
Satisfaction with the registration process	P2-9 [1, 1]	
Disappointment of the university facilities	P4-8 [1, 1]	
Satisfaction with the communication with the university	P2-11 [1, 1]	
Positive perception of the university staff	P4-9 [1, 1]	
Satisfaction with the application process	P5-3 [1, 1]	
Lack of system improvement	P1-13, P1-17, P1-21, P3-14 [4, 2]	Lack of attention from the university and the EMGS to PhD students' feedback
Positive adaptation to challenges/culture/supervision/visa process	P2-22, P3-2, P3-12, P4-10 [4, 3]	Positive adaptation to the challenges.
Understanding the supervisor's academic load	P4-5	
Student high self-efficacy	P4-6 [1, 1]	
Seeking outside support for visa issue	P2-23 [1, 11]	
Cynical attitude toward university response to the student's progress reports	P5-7 [1, 1]	
Cynical attitude toward supervisor behavior	P3-8 [1, 1]	
Cynical attitude toward the visa process	P2-25 [1, 1]	
Feeling of frustration	P1-16 [1, 1]	
Asking for improving supervision	P2-27, P3-16 [2, 2]	Positive attitudes toward refining the current situations
Asking to improve visa rules /and process	P1-23, P2-26, P3-17 [3, 3]	
Asking to improve university accommodation	P3-16 [1, 1]	

Discussion of Findings

The study aimed to explore the lived experience of a sample of Arab PhD students studying in Malaysian universities, particularly identifying the psychological, sociocultural, and educational challenges, predictor factors, and coping strategies with those challenges. The study adopted the IPA approach designed to understand people's lived experiences and how they make sense of them in their personal and social contexts (Smith et al., 2009). The principal and second authors have experience with the Malaysian education system, which

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gives them an advantage in interpreting students' experiences. To minimize potential bias, the authors avoided guiding the participants during the interviews.

The study identified several themes. The first superordinate theme is that Malaysia owns several factors that attract Arab PhD students, including five subthemes: (a) Malaysian universities offer various PhD programs that are not adequately available in the student's home country and competitive countries, (b) The cost of PhD programs and living expenses in Malaysia is affordable for Arab students, (c) Malaysian universities deliver high-quality education to Arab PhD students, (d) Malaysia's multicultural environment, inclusive of Islamic culture, renders it conducive for Arab PhD students, and (e) The Malaysian populace is reputed for its kindness and positive attitude toward Arab students. This superordinate theme and the subthemes are critical factors in supporting the adaptation of Arab PhD students in Malaysia. For example, participants 2 and 4 said:

> *"The country has an Islamic-rooted culture suitable for family life and my children's education, and the Malaysians invited us to attend some Eid (Islamic ceremony) activities."*

> *"The combination of affordable tuition and an excellent educational environment is the most enticing and magnetic element, which positions Malaysian universities as top priorities for those seeking to continue their education."*

The second superordinate theme is dissatisfaction with academic supervision, which includes several subthemes: (a) inadequate supervision, such as lack of regular meetings provided to students, (b) low quality of supervision, such as some supervisors did not review students' work properly, and (c) late responses to students' emails and requests. The third superordinate theme is dissatisfaction with the visa-issuing rules and renewal process, which includes three subthemes (a) the delay in the visa renewal process, b) the rules of issuing visas for students and families, and (c) the communication with the departments, such as the EMGS and immigration. The fourth superordinate theme is the dissatisfaction with creating a bank account, which includes two subthemes (a) the rules of banks were strict, such as for married students and students from specific Arab countries, and (b) the process is long, rigid, and needs many documents. The fifth superordinate theme is dissatisfaction with the university services and facilities, which includes three subthemes: (a) dissatisfaction with the admission and registration service, (b) lack of 24-hour library service, and (c) poor university facilities, such as accommodation. For example, participants 5, 2, 2, and 3 said:

> *"It took a long time for my supervisor to respond. He did not give me feedback; he told me to continue even without reviewing my work."*

> *"My children's visa took three months. I submitted all documents, but they did not call to tell me that the paid fee was Ringgit Malaysian (RM) 5 less than the required amount."*

> *"The bank requested depositing a minimum of RM 5000 to create an account because I had my family with me."*

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> *"The accommodation provided to me was dirty, some windows were broken, which allowed lizards to enter the room, the furniture was old, and it was far from my college, taking around 40 minutes to walk there."*

The sixth superordinate theme is the lack of attention from the university and the EMGS to PhD students' feedback, which leads to a lack of system improvement. For example, participants 1 and 5 said:

> *"I am still experiencing some challenges, and nothing has changed in the last three years."*
>
> *"The university requested to submit annual progress reports, and they accepted them regardless of the content."*

The seventh superordinate theme is the positive adaptation of Arab PhD students to the challenges, which includes three subthemes (a) acceptance and adaptation to the processes, (b) understanding the supervisor's academic load, and (c) expressing minimum cynical attitudes toward challenges. It is critical to highlight that all participants were challenged with some problems at some point and to varying degrees, and they went through the stages of cultural shock and adjustment, including the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage, the gradual adjustment stage, and the adaptation stage (Oberg, 1954). However, most of the participants did not report severe cultural shock symptoms and adapted to those challenges well using problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and three approaches to culture shock, including stress and coping (affect), culture learning (behavior), and social identification (cognition) (Ward et al., 2001).

The students used positive emotion-focused coping, including affective adjustment, for instance, a minimum level of cynical attitude toward those problems and acceptance (affective). For example, participants 2 and 3 said:

> *"I know a friend who left for Turkey; he got a 4-year visa in 2 days."*
>
> *"It took me a year to adapt to those challenges; I learned to be patient and cope with my supervisor and the visa procedure."*

They also used cognitive adjustment, such as understanding the reasons behind those challenges. For example, participants 2 and 4 said:

> *"The delay in the visa process may be due to the strictness of the Malaysian departments with Arab students, as some of them tried to stay in Malaysia for a long time to find jobs."*
>
> *"I noticed that my supervisor faces a challenge to find time to review student work. Their schedules were often packed with many responsibilities."*

On the other hand, some participants used problem-focused coping like culture learning. For example, participant 3 said:

> *"I became familiar with the new culture and habits of the Malaysians, such as food, dress, and their simple lifestyle. I established new connections with many Malaysians."*

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Nevertheless, participant 1 reached the frustration level; he said:

"I did not cope with those challenges. I thought several times about leaving; I was frustrated and felt I had spent money for no outcome."

The eighth superordinate theme is the positive attitudes of Arab PhD students toward improving the current situations by highlighting those weaknesses and suggesting improvements, including (a) improving visa rules and processes, (b) improving the supervision process, and (c) improving university accommodation.

Moreover, the participants did not report any challenges related to food, contradicting Akbara et al. (2021), as Arabic food and restaurants are currently available everywhere in Malaysia due to the movement of many investments in the food business from Arab countries, such as Syria and Yemen, to Malaysia after the Arab Spring. The participants also did not find a language challenge, contradicting Sarwari and Abdul Wahad (2018), as they are fluent in English due to prior studying in Western countries, and English is the official education language in Malaysian universities. On the other hand, the academic challenges, such as the lack of academic skills, were not reported as a challenge by the Arab PhD students, who considered this as a strength of the Malaysian education system, which particularly mandates every PhD student to publish two research in top academic journals.

It is essential to highlight that comparing the satisfaction of Arab PhD students with the educational system in Malaysia and some competing Western countries, such as the UK and Germany, may tend to some extent in favor of these countries, especially regarding the quality of education, ease of procedures, and quality of supervision. For example, participants 1 and 5 said:

"I believe the procedures in the UK are more flexible and supportive for international students."

"I feel I got more value from my master's degree in Germany than my PhD in Malaysia due to the German system, which focuses on the outcomes."

At last, we must mention that the students mentioned many exceptions. For example, one student received psychological support from the supervisor, another did not face any problems communicating with the supervisor, another acknowledged the online application process, and another appreciated the Malaysian employees who served them at the university. The Arab doctoral students are still happy in Malaysia and hope for change. For example, participants 2 and 5 mentioned that:

"I am proud to study at this university; it has a good reputation in Oman and specializes in energy."

"If I have a chance to restart my PhD, I will still choose Malaysia."

Conclusion

Malaysia has several advantages that could attract PhD international students, particularly from Arab countries. These advantages include a wide range of programs, affordable cost of

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living and education, high-quality education, and a multicultural environment inclusive of Islamic culture. However, the study identified several weaknesses that dissatisfied the Arab PhD students, including academic supervision, visa rules and processes, bank rules, and some of the facilities and services.

Most Arab PhD students adapted well to the new culture and the academic processes and requirements; they stuck to their decision to select Malaysia for their PhD study, considering a trade-off between the advantages and the challenges, and highlighted areas for improvement.

The executives and policymakers in the Malaysian higher education sector should seriously consider those challenges and pay attention to students' suggestions and feedback that perform as a valuable source of information to maintain or even enhance the country's reputation as a hump for higher education, particularly in Arab countries.

Recommendation

The executives and policymakers in Malaysia should recognize the cultural shock experienced by international PhD students who juggle their studies with family and work responsibilities in their home countries. Universities should consider a reasonable academic load for supervisors and train them to pay attention to the psychological status of the students, respond to their emails and calls in a reasonable time, meet them regularly, and provide students with systematic supervision. Moreover, universities should offer new students well-furnished accommodation at least for the first three months at a reasonable cost. Banks also should understand the positive association between the evolution of the higher education sector and attracting more international students, including PhD, and the progress of their businesses.

On the other hand, the EMGS and immigration should improve the visa rules and process. They should prioritize student comments and feedback, as these students have extensive experience with various education systems and can provide valuable insights for improvement. However, neglecting students' voices in a competitive higher education industry in many countries could have a negative long-run effect on the higher education sector in Malaysia.

At last, more qualitative and quantitative research could be conducted to understand the phenomenon of cultural shock among international students from different backgrounds and at various levels of education in Malaysia.

Limitations

All the participants were males; females did not respond to the invitation, which could limit the result of the study. The study also included participants from Malaysian governmental and private universities; no participants from international universities established campuses in Malaysia. International universities may or may not provide better services that satisfy Arab PhD students.

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Human Participants

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Originality Note

The authors confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. Proper citations are also used if others' works are used/ quoted.

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