The Influence Of Culture And Family Towards The Decision To Pursue Study Abroad:
A Case Study Of Malaysian Public Universities

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THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND FAMILY TOWARDS THE DECISION TO PURSUE STUDY ABROAD: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The choice of educational destination is an active process by individuals, yet it is greatly socially determined by family or friends. This article is to provide an in-depth understanding of how a group of international students managed to be influenced by their families in their decision to study abroad. A qualitative approach was used in this research whereby four public universities of Malaysia had been selected according to the type of universities and location of the research. A group of international students have been interviewed successfully using a set of interview questions which was drafted through a thorough protocol interview which was done during a pilot study. The used of semi structure interview had proven effective to the researchers because researchers had the freedom to interview thoroughly without being fully bound with interview questions that had been constructed. This brought to an even deeper answers exploration related to the problems answered by the respondents. Findings of this qualitative research which is gathered from 40 international students have shown discussion of diaspora-driven motivations on family influence in decision-making to pursue further studies abroad. Based on the discussion in this article, cultural themes are also associated with issues such as opportunities for travel and opportunities for local culture. On the other hand, the uniqueness of cultural diversity in Malaysia has added value to the trust of families and international students in the process of assimilation in a new environment that is different from their home country. Thus, the culture of the institutions of higher learning conducive to the country's initiative to make Malaysia a hub for education in the Asian region. While the categorization of themes such as (i) gaining new experience while in the host country, (ii) assimilating into campus culture and (iii) having the opportunity to gain meaningful experiences in the outside world and (iv) the importance of opinions from family and close friends generated the dominant themes as a result of the research.

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Introduction

The emerging globalization phenomenon has demanded a change in the landscape of Institutions of Higher Learning (HEIs) to a knowledge-based economy (MOHE, 2018). The New Economic Model (2010) introduced aims to generate creative, innovative and highly skilled human capital. It is in line with the government's aspiration to enhance the country's competitiveness in producing first class minds. Various preparations are designed to make Malaysia the hub of global education. Thus, through the Malaysian Development Education Plan (2013-2025) the government allocated RM56 billion through the 2015 national budget which is fully focused on funding various teaching and learning programs under the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (MOHE, 2018).

A competitive and competitive system of higher education is needed to strengthen and improve the quality of the education system in comparison with other developed countries. Therefore, internationalization is seen as a mechanism that can help boost the capacity of the country's higher education system globally (MOHE, 2018). As a developing country, Malaysia is one of the leading destinations for furthering international education (Irma Wani, Herlina and Norazah, 2019b). The enrolment of international students in Public Institutions in Malaysia began to grow rapidly after the Ministry of Higher Education began to push Malaysia to become a center of educational excellence in the Southeast Asian region. This encourages public universities to expand their wings by marketing various study programs to attract more international students to further their studies in the host country. Based on Table 1 below the statistics released by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia showed that the number of international students in Malaysia is 32,404 people in 2019 which is 22,172 male international students and 10,232 female students. Compared to 2014, a total of 27,042 people equivalents to 18,420 male international students and 8,625 female students have furthered their studies at Malaysian Public Institutions of Higher Learning and this has shown an increase in the number of international students of 5,362 over the next six years. The scenario has given a direct indication that Malaysia has been made one of the countries that is the choice of many international students to pursue higher education abroad.

Table 1: Total of International Students Admissions at
Public Higher Learning Institutions of Malaysia from 2007 to 2019 by Gender

Year	Male International Students	Female International Students	Total of International Students Admission
2014	18,420	8,625	27,042
2015	17,842	8,563	26,404

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2016	17,760	8,064	25,824
2017	18,824	8,942	27,766
2018	21,010	9,331	30,341
2019	22,172	10,232	32,404

Source: https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/awam/statistik
(From year 2014-2019)

According to a 2015 UNESCO report titled *Higher Education Asia: Expanding Up, Expanding Out*, there are five main reasons why international students choose Malaysia as their destination of study. These five factors include elements of Malaysia's multiculturalism, affordable education, good quality of life, low cost of living and using English as an intermediate medium in all Malaysian IPTAs (Berita Harian Portal, 2017). In addition, other achievements of Malaysia can be seen in a survey conducted by QS Best Student Cities 2017 which states that Kuala Lumpur is a city that offers many educational opportunities to international students through a variety of quality education programs (New Straits Times Portal , 2017). The quality of education available in Malaysia has proven to be internationally recognized and has gained QS world rankings on 11 programs offered at local universities. It is also ranked in the top 50 best programs in the world(Awani Portal, 2017). It has shown that the quality of education offered in Malaysia is in its own class and able to compete with the quality of education compared to other developed countries.

The presence of international students from various nationalities, religions, cultures and so on makes universities in the country more diverse and comprehensive (Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a). In addition, the influx of international students who pursue further education in Malaysia gives a special advantage to local students because through the presence of international students, it opens up opportunities for them to also experience cross-cultural experiences and thus enhance their interpersonal skills with students from all over the world (Gresham, 2013; Dora *et al.,* 2014; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014; Li and Zizzi, 2018). To ensure the sustainability of international students, the university administration must take the initiative to create a comfortable and secure environment(Abd Hair, Zaimah and Izzurazlia, 2012; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2017c; Herlina *et al.,* 2018; Sittisom, 2020). As a result, international students and their families build confidence in not only the conducive learning environment but also the diversity of cultures and local communities who are open to assimilating students in an environment that is foreign to them. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the influence of culture and family in the selection of Malaysian public universities as a learning destination to create meaningful experiences among international students.

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Literature Review

Previous studies have found that cultural factors are one of the major factors that influence international students' decision to pursue their studies. Peng and Wu, (2019) claim that cultural assimilation is an adaptation of behavior into a foreign culture and is a transformation that individuals must go through in order to connect with local people in a new country. This was agreed by Ladum and Burkholder, (2019) explaining that cross-cultural adaptation requires that individuals strive to engage in foreign culture and try to integrate their behaviors and values with that of the new community. Other studies have also shown the importance of international students to be adaptable and accommodate to new cultures to ensure their preservation in their home countries (Biserova and Shagivaleeva, 2019).

According to Podymov *et al.,* (2019), cultural interaction is the encounter between two different cultures among students as they interact and communicate through the learning process. The results of Irma Wani, Herlina and Norazah, (2019b)study show that successful interactions between cultures are easier to achieve if compatibility is established and there are similarities between the two cultures. Smith and Khawaja (2014) point out that acculturation is a complex, dynamic and multidimensional process. Some students succeed in adapting and achieving cultural competence, while othersare under pressure to assimilate into new cultures(Khanal and Gaulee, 2019). Thus, although culture is not seen as a major factor in influencing students' decisions abroad, past studies also suggest that some aspects of culture should be viewed as fair considerations before any decision-making is made (Gabel, Dolen and Cerdin, 2013; Tian and Lowe, 2014; Hirai, Frazier and Syed, 2015; Newsome and Cooper, 2016).

Most of the Malaysian media reported that the attraction of international students to this country was due to the uniqueness of the Malaysian culture. In this context, promoting Malaysian culture in the eyes of the world is often done by introducing wealth and cultural uniqueness. Meanwhile, the Berita Harian Portal (2017) reports that international students especially from China, Indonesia, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria and Sudan have made Malaysia a prime choice for furthering education in various fields due to the uniqueness of the multiracial community. Establishing a cultural identity that is very different from their home country's culture, such as the language, food, traditional clothing and festivals has made international students excited about the culture of every nation in Malaysia (Berita Harian Portal, 2017). Based on Malaysia's background as a nation of multiracial, religious and cultural communities, cross-cultural recognition is an active pro initiative to enable international students not to experience cultural shocks while in host countries (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Lee and Ciftci, 2014; Cowley and Ssekasi, 2018; Podymov *et al.,* 2019). Through a cross-cultural program organized by the university during the friendly week, it is seen as an initiative that can help international students explore and learn the culture of the local community. This is

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particularly relevant in providing international students with exposure and easy access to culture and to adapt to the new environment.

Whereas Smith and Khawaja (2014) identifies three stages of cultural adjustment. The first stage is the honeymoon phase, which is characterized by a feeling of excitement. During this phase, students are excited and ready to start a new adventure. Students also feel a sense of satisfaction and pride in their achievement in furthering their studies abroad. Most of the international students are excited to adapt to the new cultural environment. The second stage is known as the 'hatred phase'. At the level of 'hostility', international students can no longer tolerate misunderstandings and misinterpretations caused by new cultural differences. They are in a fragile state of emotion and are sensitive to cultural shock which is then expressed through feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, confusion, anxiety and depression. International students at this level are more likely to relate their problems to external factors. The implications of these cultural shocks have left them feeling insecure, unable to co-operate with their peers, lacking motivation and lack of interest in pursuing their educational goals. The latter stage is known as the 'home phase'. This 'home' level is characterized by the feeling of students being comfortable with the new cultural environment. Students strive to learn new cultural norms and standards by integrating elements of the original culture into the new culture. Cultural adjustments are more likely to occur during the early stages, honeymoon and hostility, while cultural adjustments are completed at home.

Understanding two important concepts related to adjustment, namely cultural and emotional intelligence, can further explain the process of cultural adjustment (Kim, 2015). The concept of cultural intelligence can help international students understand the adjustments they experience while living in a new place. Cultural intelligence refers to one's ability to effectively interact, relate and adapt across a wide range of cultural contexts (Morrell *et al.,* 2013). Whereas for Lewis, (2016) find that cultural adaptation is understood as a process that adapts to behavior and adapts to foreign culture. It is a transformation that individuals must go through in order to establish a connection with the culture of the local people in a new country. In such contexts, international students need to be adaptable and adapt to new cultures to ensure their preservation in their home countries (Greeshan, 2013; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014; Glass and Westmont, 2014; Li and Zizzi, 2018; Biserova and Shagivaleeva, 2019). Thus, cultural interaction is a learning process in which there is a collision between the two cultures (Podymov *et al.,* 2019).Successful inter-cultural interactions are more easily achieved if they are able to create harmony by accepting their cultural similarities and differences with more positive attitudes (Irma Wani *et al.,* 2017b). A study conducted by Yan, (2017) found that lack of motivation in conducting inter-cultural interactions has led to a lack of self-confidence and openness among international students when interacting with local students. These scenarios occur due to significant cultural background differences. According to

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Falcone, (2017) this culture shock is caused by confusion when dealing with a culture so foreign to them.

In addition to cultural aspects, family influence is a dominant factor in the decision to further study abroad among international students (Lee and Morrish, 2012; Pimpa, 2013; Liu and Morgan, 2016; Ahmad and Buchanan, 2017; Sana, Amrita and Rosna, 2018; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2018a). Recent research consistently discusses the importance of family and peer perspectives on international students in making informed decisions about the choice of host country and institutions of higher learning (Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Thomas and Sumathi, 2016; Nicholls, 2018; Irma Wani, Herlina and Norazah, 2019a; 2019b; Sinanan and Gomes, 2020). The views of family members are said to have the potential to influence a variety of individuals' behavior in making their final decisions (Naeeni *et al.,* 2015; Lewis, 2016). Meanwhile, Sinanan and Gomes, (2020) suggested that social networks such as acquaintances and idols (mentors) be a major influence in decision making for international students to pursue their studies abroad. This is also evidenced by the results of a study conducted by Herlina *et al.,* (2017) showing that 37 percent of international undergraduate students have chosen parents and friends as their primary source of information in the decision-making process to further their studies abroad. From that perspective, the safety factor in the host country is a consideration of parents and families before allowing their children to continue their education abroad. According to Irma Wani *et al.,* (2017a) and Irma Wani *et al.,*(2018b), factors such as political stability, lack of discrimination, low unemployment, free speech and no war in the country are among the factors that attract students to further their studies abroad.

Research Methodology
The qualitative research aims to study the diaspora of international students by exploring the first-year experience of the driving force behind the tendency to select Malaysian public universities as study abroad destinations. The selection of four public universities named University I, University II, University III and University IV is determined based on the classification and status of the university, the history of the establishment and the socio-political environment as well as the international student population registered at each of these institutions of higher learning. To maintain confidentiality, students and universities involved are classified as pseudonyms.The use of purposive sampling techniques is intended to refer to a group of study subjects that have certain characteristics and are selected based on the researcher's judgment by referring specifically to the objectives of this study (Creswell, 2013).This study used a semi-structured interview method involving 40 international students for the purpose of obtaining empirical data in line with the objectives of the study (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). The advantage of using a structured semi-structured interview method is that it provides the opportunity for the researcher to re-examine each and every feedback given by the respondents, thereby using their wisdom in emphasizing the issues that are

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worth exploring in depth (Flick, 2014). Finally, the acquisition of in-depth empirical data was processed through inductive analysis by transcribing each respondent's audio recording into text (Flick, 2014). The categorization of themes through the coding process was done to generate the dominant themes as a result of the research (Creswell, 2013).

Table 2 below lists the demographic profiles of respondents that contain three main variables, namely gender, age and status, whether they are single or married. All respondentsinvolved in this study were first year undergraduate students from four selected public universities in Malaysia. This research involved a total of 40 international students of which comprises 26 people were male respondents of 65.0 percent and the remaining 14 people were female respondentsequivalent to 35.0 percent. The majorityof the respondents were those who belong to the age range between 21 to 22, which was a total of 22 people who recorded of 55.0 percent.The next group of respondentsaged 23 years old comprise a total of 10 people which led to 25.0 percent. Meanwhile, informants aged 19 to 20 years recorded a total of 8 people equivalent to 20.0 percent involved in this research. All respondents involved in this research were those with single status.

Table 2: Demographic Profile

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	26	65.0
Female	14	35.0
Age (Year)		
19-20	8	20.0
21-22	22	55.0
23	10	25.0
Status		
Single	40	100.0

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The Findings

This article examines the impact of the multicultural culture of the host country and the influence of family and friends in determining the destination of study that the international student will choose. In general, the four sub-themes of the culture are classified as (i) gaining new experience while in the host country, (ii) assimilating into campus culture and (iii) having the opportunity to gain meaningful experiences in the outside world and (iv) the importance of opinions from family and close friends.
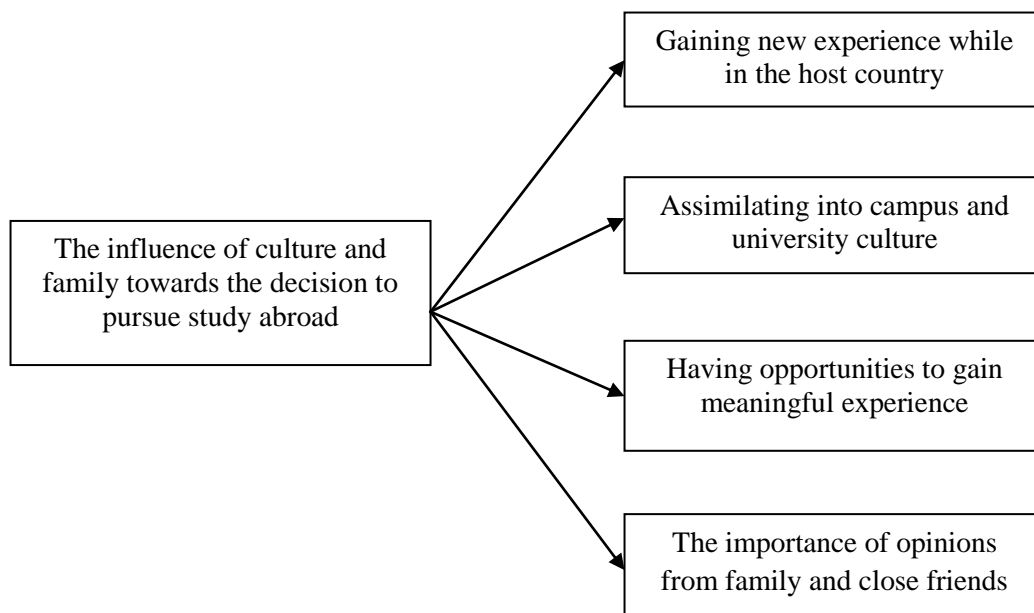

Figure 1: The Influence of Culture and Family Towards the Decision to Pursue Study Abroad

Gaining new experience while in the host country

According to Irma Wani, Herlina and Norazah, (2019b) the factors that push an international student to pursue study abroad are due to the desire to gain new experience and to explore the culture of the host country. According to Table 3, 34international students stated that furthering their studies at Malaysian public universities has given them an opportunity to gain new experiences of living in the host countries.

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Table 3: International Student's First Year Experience Based on Discovering a New Culture

University 1	University II	University III	University IV
International Student 1	International Student 12	International Student 18	International Student 27
International Student 2	International Student 13	International Student 19	International Student 28
International Student 3	International Student 14	International Student 20	International Student 29
International Student 5	International Student 15	International Student 21	International Student 30
International Student 6	International Student 16	International Student 22	International Student 32
International Student 7	International Student 17	International Student 23	International Student 33
International Student 8		International Student 24	International Student 34
International Student 10			International Student 35
			International Student 36
			International Student 37
			International Student 38
			International Student 39
			International Student 40

The experience of exploring the new culture meant by international students refers to the opportunity to gain knowledge and gain new experiences that are different from their home countries (Abd Hair, Zaimah and Izzurazlia, 2012; Kam, 2014; Suryandari, Jaafar and Hamzah, 2014; Nilsson and Umeå, 2015; Herlina *et al.,* 2017; James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Cowley and Ssekasi, 2018; Nerlich, 2020). In addition, they have the opportunity to explore and learn about the uniqueness and richness of multi-ethnic cultural resources in the country. The scenario is in line with Cowley and Ssekasi, (2018) study which claims that international students' decision to pursue their studies abroad is due to the excitement of gaining new experiences, to experience a foreign culture and at the same time gain a better education.

Through statements from International Students 7, 15, 19, 24 and 36 it is evident that the cultural elements highlighted by the local community succeed in providing a more meaningful new experience in their lives while at

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university (Gresham, 2013; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014; Tian and Lowe, 2014; Hu, 2016; Li and Zizzi, 2018; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Macionis, Walters and Kwok, 2019). The cultural uniqueness presented by local students in the university-sponsored cultural program makes International Students 15, 19 and 24 more appreciative of the existence of cultural values in any country. International Students 7 are aware that most local students are friendly and helpful to international students. They always offer help in the event of problems regardless of skin color, religion or race. Meanwhile, for International Students 7, the virtues shown by the local community such as helping and providing hospitality to international students have left them feeling uneasy throughout the country. This can be seen in the statement below:

"The new experience I had while staying at this university was seeing the kindness and friendliness of the local students to help international students if we had any problems. As we are far from family, local students here are lighthearted to help. In contrast to my home country, such a situation is extremely rare. Students in my home country prefer doing things on their own. But students here do not look at your skin color, religion and race to help you. This is a new experience that I will never forget."(International Student 7)

"I think the culture here is fun. It's a bit like Brunei. Only to be seen here is more vibrant because of the diversity of cultures among local students. This can be seen through the cultural performances performed by students of different religions and races at any event or event. I'm interested in learning about it and really appreciate the culture here."(International Student 15)

"*Many new experiences I gained while at this university. I find the culture presented here unique. My roommate says that in Sabah there are many ethnic groups representing different cultures. The uniqueness of the culture featured here makes me appreciate the culture of another country. What fascinates me about the culture here is the clothing worn by certain tribes makes me want to delve into the culture here. It turned out to be a very exciting new experience for me.*" (International Student 19)

"I once attended a co-curriculum carnival organized by the university. From the carnival, I saw the cultural diversity featured through traditional dances and costumes worn by local students. I am excited to see a culture that is completely different in my home country."(International Student 24)

"What I love about the culture and culture here is that everyone loves to help without feeling pressured. So, this is pure practice. I mean, here everybody wants to talk to you. So, I think it's good practice to showcase the beauty of culture here." (International Student 36)

From statements made by International Students 7, 15, 19, 24 and 36 that the decision to pursue their studies abroad is seen as an opportunity for them to experience new experiences (Gresham, 2013; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014; Tian

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and Lowe, 2014; Hu, 2016; Li and Zizzi, 2018; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Nerlich, 2020). The ability to interact between cultural differences becomes easier when there is a desire to discover and learn something new (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Hirai, Frazier and Syed, 2015; Ahmad and Buchanan, 2017; Lee, 2017; Cowley and Ssekasi, 2018).

Assimilating into campus and university culture

The findings revealed that 17 international students agreed the first year of international students' experience had a profound effect, especially on their exposure to the culture of higher education. This is in the context of cultural assimilation as well as mastery of the language throughout life in the host country, both on and off campus (Cao and Meng, 2012; Gilakjani, 2015; Martirosyan, Hwang and Wanjohi, 2015; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2018a; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Peng and Wu, 2019; Rakhshandehroo and Ivanova, 2020).

Table 4: International Student's First Year ExperienceBased on the Culture of Institutions of Higher Learning

University 1	University II	University III	University IV
International Student 2	International Student 11	International Student 18	International Student 26
International Student 6	International Student 13	International Student 19	International Student 27
International Student 8	International Student 15	International Student 21	International Student 30
	International Student 17	International Student 23	International Student 37
		International Student 24	International Student 38

The uniqueness of the culture and the language of the language spoken by the local students have made the first year experience unique among international students (Gresham, 2013; Glass and Westmont, 2014; Kim, 2015; Krishna, 2016; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2017b; Li and Zizzi, 2018; Smith, 2020). Meanwhile, International Students 8 and 13 are excited by the wide variety of local student language dialects that make them want to try and learn the language.

"The university experience is very different from the cultural perspective of the multi-ethnic community. For example, I saw the culture displayed by students from Sabah themselves through their dance and dress. Not only that, the language aspect also makes it more diverse as students here also use their native language when communicating. I had the opportunity to learn Bajau because I met a fellow faculty member who always encouraged me to learn their mother tongue." (International Student 8)

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Perspectives from International Students 19 focus more on cultural assimilation which is considered to be an easy process due to the many similarities between the cultures in the home country and Malaysia (Lee and Ciftci, 2014; Tian and Lowe, 2014; Abdullah, Adebayo and Talib, 2015; Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Lee, 2017; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2018a). The friendly attitude of the students and the Malaysian community made her feel comfortable in the country. This can be seen through the dialog below:

"I think the culture of this university and of course in Malaysia, has a lot in common with my country. I mean the people here are friendly. When you walk in, there are good people and they will greet you. I think the culture here is the same as the culture in my country. The people are friendly."(International Student 19)

Not all of the feedback provided by international students supporting on the cultural advantages of Malaysia. There are weaknesses pointed out by international students regarding the culture of the country. Among the weaknesses in the culture are the way some students are dressed, and the hostile classroom environment has made international students uncomfortable. According to International Students 24, some local students dress more in western ways than those who are originally coming from western countries. This is due to the influence of social media such as Facebook, Instagram and so on, which has led local students to come to terms with western influences that are more exposed to fashion.

"*What I don't like is that they follow a foreign culture like wearing European clothes, but they have a better culture. They have more modest outfits such as national shirts that cover the genitals and are sweet in appearance. That's why I always wonder why they don't wear it every day.*" (International Student 24)

Through International Student 30 voiced his views on the cultural disadvantages of the classroom environment that had a large number of students and noisy students who were distracted to concentrate during the course.

"*It's like the environment in my classroom. I would sit in the front but the students in the back would often be noisy or they used to be in a crowded classroom. In my country, we can concentrate on whether students sit in the front or students in the back. I am used to have small classes in my country but the classes here are too big. I'm not sure if the students sitting in the back can see what the lecturers are looking forward to.*" (International Student 30)

The International Student 38's statements are in line with Li *et al.,* findings (2020) in which the desire to master the local language by international students can enhance their self-esteem and add value to the individual while in the home country.

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"*When I think about the things I love here, people are friendly. Although religious, but local students here treat me like their family. They love to teach us to interact in the local language. Over time communication has become smoother and this has made us more confident than ever to understand them.*" (International Student 38)

The diversity of cultures and languages of the host country can have a positive impact and benefit international students. Students' interest and desire to learn the local language can be enhanced with the help of the local community and the university (Gresham, 2013; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014; Krishna, 2016; Irma Wani *et al.,* 2018a; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Van Mol, 2019). This can be seen in the statement of International Student 13 who shared the experience of learning everyday ethnic language with their roommates while at university.

"I am most aware of the fact that there are different cultures, tribes and religions but the people here can still live in peace and harmony. I most enjoyed learn and experience a very unique language that is not available in my home country. " (International Student 13)

Having the opportunity to gain meaningful experiences in the outside world

According to a study conducted by Ahmad and Buchanan, (2017), James-MacEachern and Yun, (2017), Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, (2019a) along with Irma Wani, Herlina and Norazah, (2019b)the main motive of international students to pursue study abroad is to gain knowledge from the host country's higher education system. But at the same time, international students are using the opportunity to study abroad to explore and explore the outside world.

Table 5: International Student's First Year Experience Based on Opportunities to See the World Beyond

University 1	University II	University III	University IV
International Student 1	International Student 13	International Student 19	International Student 28
International Student 3	International Student 14	International Student 20	International Student 29
International Student 5	International Student 15	International Student 21	International Student 31
International Student 6	International Student 16	International Student 22	International Student 32
International Student 8		International Student 25	International Student 35
International Student 9			International Student 36
			International Student

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			37
			International Student
			39

Table 5 shows the list of international students who agree that furthering their studies abroad has opened up opportunities for them to be exposed to the outside world. International students 1, 13, 25, 32 and 37 below, agreed that the decision to pursue their studies abroad opens up an opportunity for them to visit interesting places in their home countries(Ho, 2015; Hamad and Suzanne, 2016; James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Wen and Hu, 2019; Chemsripong, 2019). The host country has its own unique cultural values that attract international students. Excerpts from the dialogues of all these international students can be found below:

"*For me, by continuing my studies at this university, I can see many new things. Among them are interesting places, delicious food and the warmth of the locals. This is different in my home country as this is rarely seen. Therefore, the opportunity to pursue further studies at this university provides an experience for the outside world.*" (International Student 1)

"*The decision to continue my studies at this university is at the recommendation of my friends studying here. They suggested that I come to Malaysia to experience the feeling of traveling to a new place. At first, I felt awkward having no friends at university. But after a few months, I have made many friends among international students as well as local students. In the event of free time, we spend time together exploring the exciting places in the country.*"(International Student 13)

"*Continuing studies at the university offers a thousand valuable experiences, especially looking at the diversity of cultures. It's very lively in my country. My opinion as an international student, furthering my studies abroad has given me a great deal of exposure to the outside world… yes to seeing the outside world as well as pursuing knowledge here.*"(International Student 25)

"*My view of furthering my studies abroad has given me a new exposure where I can see the world and travel to new places. This way, I can visit and explore host countries I have never been to. I love being in Malaysia because the country is rich in history and interesting places to visit.*" (International Student 32)

"*My decision to continue my studies abroad is to get a degree and to explore through adventure to exciting places.*" (International Students 37)

From the feedback of all international students it has been shown that the decision to further study abroad opens up the opportunity to see the outside world by exploring and visiting interesting places in the destination country (Ho, 2015; Lee and King, 2016; Lee, 2016; Chen, 2017; Irma Wani, Herlina

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and Norazah, 2019b; Wen and Hu, 2019; Chemsripong, 2019). In addition, international student travel is not only seen as a form of decision making associated with the pursuit of knowledge, but it also offers other opportunities to experience adventure in new places (Abdullah, Adebayo and Talib, 2015; Hamad and Suzanne, 2016; James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a).

The importance of opinions from family and close friends
Suggestions of parents and friends are among social themes highlighted by Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, (2019a) who emphasize that parents' opinions and personal views of close friends able to influence students' decisions in choosing the destination of their chosen institution of study. While the findings from Herlina *et al.,* (2017) found that close friends and peers also influence the decision of international students to select destinations for further study abroad.

According to Table 6 International Students 6, 17, 22 and 35 agree that the suggestions made by parents and close friends are the dominant influence that contributes to their decision to pursue further study abroad. The original dialogue passages below illustrate these points:

Table 6: International Student's First Year Experience Based on Parents and Friend Suggestions

University 1	University II	University III	University IV
International Student 1	International Student 11	International Student 18	International Student 27
International Student 2	International Student 12	International Student 19	International Student 29
International Student 4	International Student 13	International Student 20	International Student 30
International Student 6	International Student 15	International Student 22	International Student 32
International Student 7	International Student 17	International Student 23	International Student 33
International Student 8		International Student 24	International Student 34
International Student 9			International Student 35
International Student 10			International Student 36
			International Student 37
			International Student 38
			International Student 39

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			International Student 40

Location distance is no longer the reason for hindering the choice of International Student 6 to study abroad(Ho, 2015; Lee and King, 2016; Beech, 2019; Pawar, Dasgupta and Vispute, 2019). Even the family shows a positive outlook on the decision as it is based on the potential of a bright future in the future if students are able to obtain a degree from abroad(Singh, Jack and Schapper, 2014; Hamad and Suzanne, 2016; Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016; James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Smith, 2020). The majority of positive reactions are received from family members when they are informed of a student's decision to pursue further study abroad.

"*My family's first reaction was, they were proud that I could study here. Even though the university is located outside of my hometown, they still have the opportunity to come here by airplane anytime, anywhere. My decision was accepted and supported by my family, without any objection.*"(International Student 6)

For example, a statement from International Student 17 stated that he referred to suggestions made by his friends who had previously come to Malaysia to continue their studies.

"*News when I was accepted to further my studies here. This is because my senior friends are also studying at this university. The suggestions they made me choose the university to continue my studies. My mom, my dad, and all my family and friends are happy that I came to this university to continue my studies.*" (International Student 17)

Majority of international students who pursue their studies abroad are under the full responsibility of their families. The scenario refers to the identification of financial resources coming from the student's own family where the dependency of the selection is also influenced by family decisions especially for international students who do not receive any scholarships.Meanwhile, International Students 22 provided a different dimension in which parental support did not place the country's criteria of choice on the grounds of parental education.

"*I am coming from a middle-income family and there was not much allocation to fund my 3 years study expenses. With no scholarship it is going to be a hard way to survive abroad. To add, my parents didn't get much higher education, they had no idea where I should pursue my education. They just followed my will when I wanted to study abroad. I want to meet a lot ofpeopleand learn a lot about not just staying in town and they agree and give me full support.*"(International Student 22)

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International Students 35 have stated that the decision to pursue their studies abroad is based on the recommendation of parents who have furthered their education in Malaysia. The decision made by these international students has received positive reactions from their families in giving encouragement and support to their children's choices (Lee and Morrish, 2012; Pimpa, 2013; Liu and Morgan, 2016; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, (2019a).

"*I am fortunate that my mother and father are former students from abroad, so they have no obstacles. They even offered me the moral support and insight to choose a university that fit my interests.*"(International Student 35)

The decision to pursue a study abroad involves a transition to self-assimilation in a new environment that is very different from their home country (Tian dan Lowe, 2014; Hirai, Frazier dan Syed, 2015; Newsome dan Cooper, 2016; Lee, 2017).Therefore, in terms of social aspects, the suggestions of parents and friends are also discussed to see the continuity in the decision to pursue further study abroad. Suggestions from family and close friends are a major contributor to determining international student factors in furthering their studies abroad (Lee and Morrish, 2012; Pimpa, 2013; Liu and Morgan, 2016; Herlina *et al.,* 2017; Irma Wani, Hasbullah and Norazah, 2019a; Sinanan and Gomes, 2020).

Conclusion

International students gain new experiences when they enter a foreign cultural environment that is different from their original culture. Thus, the new experience is said to be able to give them a positive value. Most international students who choose to pursue their studies abroad are motivated by the desire to travel to new places and experience a different culture from their home countries. The multi-lingual and multi-ethnic uniqueness of the Malaysian community has given international students a taste for the culture itself. The mastery of the local language by international students is seen as not only capable of providing self-confidence but also considered as an added value to international students. Offer to study abroad as a golden opportunity to explore and visit interesting places in your home country. Indirectly, studying abroad has given international students much exposure to international life that is quite different from their home country.

Funding to further study abroad is a significant issue especially for the underprivileged international students. This is because all forms of financing such as tuition, transportation, living costs and so on are entirely borne by their families in their home countries. In contrast, with the assistance from the management of the potential university offering scholarships to international students results to student's academic excellence while pursuing their studies at the university. Thus, the role and strategies played by Malaysian public universities in providing affordable tuition and providing tuition-based funding through internal scholarships have the potential to attract more international students to enroll their studies in Malaysia. While the selection to

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determine the destination of the host country and institution of study is usually based on the recommendations made by parents and friends in the home country. This is because the advice given by parents and close friends has proven to create a meaningful experience in the lives of international students.

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