

Homesickness and Coping Strategies among International Students Studying in University Technology Malaysia

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Abstract

Aims: Nowadays, one of the most frequent problems that international students face is homesickness. The purpose of this study was investigation of homesickness and coping strategies among the University Technology Malaysia) UTM (international students and finding new research topics for future educational planning research.

Methods: This descriptive study was done in August 2010 among the students studying in University Technology Malaysia (UTM). The respondents were international students from different courses in UTM. Fifty questionnaires were randomly distributed among the students at various faculties and residential colleges of the university. The questionnaire included 11 questions, which was developed by the researcher through literature review.

Findings: Totally, 50 international students including 24 (48%) female and 26 (52%) male students took part in the study. There were different reported causes of homesickness by the respondents that were classified into four aspects: "social", "psychological", "physical" and "academic". The findings showed the most important reason for homesickness has been cultural differences between the countries. Accordingly, 75% of the respondents (n=38) reported social customs as the first reason for international students' homesickness.

Conclusion: The research results indicated that missing family was the most important factor that influenced international students to feel homesick. According to this study, the best and effective way to manage homesickness was to call family and friend(s).

Keywords: Homesickness, International students, Coping strategy

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Introduction

Since Malaysia began welcoming foreign students in the early 1980s, the numbers of students have been increased. There are now about 66,000 international students enrolled in this country's schools and universities. Most of these students have come from different places of world and nationalities. In 2010, the University Technology Malaysia has a student population of more than 22,000, of which the total international students were about 2500 individuals. These international students are probably facing many social, psychological, physical and academic problems [1].

Homesickness is one of the most important problems for international students in most universities all over the world. Homesickness is defined as a negative emotional state characterized by recurrent thoughts of home, missing friends, the desire to go back to the familiar environment, and sometimes, co-occurring of physical complaints. Most of UTM international students face this problem. Although Malaysia is an Islamic country, and its condition is familiar for the students. However, these students might be influenced by homesickness. Some of them are not able to handle homesickness. In other words, they cannot find any suitable solution because neither of them knows how to assess them while they live abroad. Homesickness causes some obstacle problems such as unwillingness

to study, losing interest in life, negative thoughts and feelings, stress, frustration, negative emotions, etc. They cannot communicate properly with others. This may threaten their health and studies. The role of environmental and occupational stressors on physical, social and mental health experienced by individuals has been evidenced somewhere else [2].

The Oxford English Dictionary and others describe homesickness as a feeling one has when missing home [3]. Feeling of longing is often accompanied by anxiety and depression [4]. Some homesickness research was reviewed and refined. Several of them are like leaving family, friends and hometown for search of an academic opportunity abroad. International students frequently find themselves concurrently grieving for missed people and cities, so they have to adjust and adapt to new cultural and environmental demands [5]. Therefore, it is not unexpected that more than 30 percent of international students report frequently of feelings of homesickness [6].

Evidence from both interviews and the questionnaire survey suggests that personal, pedagogical and psychological factors are equally important in influencing the intercultural adaptation process and outcomes [7].

Homesickness negatively impacts the academic performance of college students [8,

9]. Thomson et al. (2006) investigated about "cultural stress among international students at an Australian university". The study depicted that "most students reported at least some degree of cultural stress, especially for items relating to family and a familiar way of life" [10]. Most of the research has been focused on a particular aspect of international students such as residential and financial problems or physical health issues. Some of them are more holistic [11]. This research aimed to assess homesickness and coping strategies among the UTM international students.

Materials and Methods

This descriptive study was done in August 2010 among the international students studying in University Technology Malaysia (UTM). The respondents of the study were international students from different courses in UTM. Fifty questionnaires were randomly distributed among the international students at various faculties and residential colleges of the university. The questionnaire, which was developed by the researcher through literature review, included 11 questions. Different question-types such as ranking, category, listing, open-ended and scales were used in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was observed and corrected by our lecturer. The questionnaire was validated by 5 international students as well as the first author to assess its'

content validity before study. Because it was supposed to assess content validity of the questionnaire just through international students' views, we deeply got these students' opinion regarding the content of the questionnaire and inserted all their views into the questionnaire. The questionnaire was categorized into 4 sections: *social, psychological, physical and academic*, and was supposed to assess the impact of these aspects of homesickness on international students. Another section of the questionnaire was related to recommending solutions to minimize the problems of homesickness. This item was developed based on the COPE [12] and the Ways of Coping Checklist [13].

Before actual data collection, validity of the research instrument was assessed by 5 randomly chosen international students at various places of the university. The viewpoints of these students were inserted in the questionnaire. During the study, the questionnaires were distributed at the various locations of the campus, such as entrance of the library, bus stops, intermediate class of IEC, students' dormitory, and also some apartments inside and outside UTM. Teachers helped us for collecting data. They were asked for permission to have their students fill out the questionnaires. Through this way, all students who were satisfied to enter into the study were selected, and filled out the consent form and

the questionnaire. The process of answering to the questions would take approximately 15–20 min. To maintain the privacy of the participants, no name was put on the questionnaire.

The data were analyzed by the SPSS software, and the results were presented through tables.

The sample size formula as following was applied to calculate the sample:

$$n = \frac{Nz^2p(1 - p)}{Nd^2 + z^2p(1 - p)} * 10\%$$

In this formula, the parameters of N=2500, P = 85%, q =1-P= 15% and d = 0.1 and confidence level of 95% were considered.

Thus the sample size of 50 students was calculated.

Results

Totally, 50 international students including 24 (48%) female and 26 (52%) male students took part in the study. Of all students, 35 (70%) were single, and 15 (30%) were married. Sixty eight percent of the respondents (n=34) stated that they have lived less than one year in Malaysia. Forty two percent of the students (n=21) met their family every year and forty two percent of them (n=21) call family once a week. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the students.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the studied students

| Demographic characteristics | Option | Number | Percent |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 26 | 52% |
| | Female | 24 | 48% |
| Marital status | Single | 35 | 70% |
| | Married | 15 | 30% |
| Stay in Malaysia | Less than one year | 34 | 68% |
| | One year | 12 | 24% |
| | Two year | 3 | 6% |
| | Three years | 1 | 2% |
| Visit family | Every six months | 18 | 36% |
| | Every year | 21 | 42% |
| | Every two years | 4 | 8% |
| | Others | 7 | 14% |
| Call family | Every day | 14 | 28% |
| | Every other day | 15 | 30% |
| | Once a week | 21 | 42% |
| Type of accommodation | Single accommodation | 22 | 44% |
| | Shared accommodation | 28 | 56% |

There were different reported causes of homesickness by the respondents that were classified into four aspects of "social",

"psychological", "physical" and "academic". Table 2 shows these impacts. The findings of this study showed the most important reason

for homesickness has been cultural differences between the countries. Accordingly, 75% of the respondents (n= 38) reported social customs as the first reason for international students' homesickness. About 20 percent of

the students (n=10) identified physical customs, and 5% indicated that homesickness had no reason. Moreover, psychological and academicly reasons were not reported by the respondent.

Table 2: Reported impact of homesickness on students

| Main category | Detailed items | Number | Percent |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Social causes | Being long time away from home | 3 | 6% |
| | Missing familiar environment | 5 | 11% |
| | Missing friends and people | 4 | 8% |
| | Missing parents | 32 | 64% |
| | Abandoning the course | 6 | 11% |
| Psychological causes | Feeling fear of new environment | 9 | 18% |
| | Feeling depressed | 6 | 13% |
| | Feeling lack of security | 2 | 3% |
| | Feeling lack of confidence | 7 | 15% |
| | Feeling loneliness | 17 | 33% |
| | No adjusting to new environment | 9 | 18% |
| Physical causes | Missing home food | 22 | 44% |
| | Missing comfort at home | 17 | 33% |
| | Feeling sick | 11 | 23% |
| Academics | Feeling not motivated to study | 27 | 53% |
| | Feeling not focused in class | 23 | 47% |

Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the homesickness problem and to assess the adaptation ways among the international students studying in UTM. The findings revealed that social support can help students to deal with homesickness. In the previous study, we presented recommendations based on social support to cope with homesickness. Unlike most of the previous researches concerning homesickness that mainly focused on children, this study focused on university students of whom, a high percentage had left their home to study in a foreign university. We

found that missing parents was the most important factor with socially influencing on the international students to feel homesickness problem, indicating that parents could have a significant impact on the students to cope with homesickness. The role of parenting styles and coping strategies in the experience and expression of homesickness has been examined in previous studies [14]. Furthermore, this finding coincides with many changes in the personal and social lives of young people, which in some cases lead to feelings of homesickness. This justification is supported by the findings reported by others

[15]. The findings of this study can be confirmed by previous evidences on homesick conscripts, who had problems with the separation from their parents, and had a strong emotional bond with their parents [14]. The study verified that the absence of a trusted person plays an important role in the development of homesickness, especially when missing family and friends [14].

Our study claimed that feeling loneliness and new environment, as well as new condition influence on international students psychologically. According to the table, the largest percent to homesickness was related to feeling loneliness, so loneliness was the most important factor that influenced psychologically on the international students to feel homesickness. Furthermore, fear of new environment followed by feeling lack of confidence and feeling depressed were the next psychological causes of homesickness among the international students. These findings provide confirmatory evidence of previous research demonstrating that effect of moving from one familiar environment to another strange environment on the health and psychological state of individuals [16, 17].

This study showed the most important physical factor for international students was missing own home food. Furthermore, missing comfort at home and feeling sick were the two other physically causes of

homesickness. According to the opinion of students, limited access to a “variety of cultural cuisine” and different foods were also among the reasons of homesickness, although the most frequent complaint specified by the international students was the economic inaccessibility of foods in the campus.

The present research verified that the majority of respondents believed that feeling not motivated to study was the most significant academic impact of homesickness on the students. 53% of the participants stated that they were unable to continue their study. A postgraduate course takes time and commitment; leaving parents and leaving own home, and other complicating factors such as being away from home, falling ill, money problems, or new responsibilities, it is understandable that, by all these problems, it would be hard to make progress in their studies. In this study, some suggestions such as calling family or friends followed by spending time with friends were reported by the students as the most strategy to managing their homesickness. Accordingly, talking with family or friends from home is usually helpful for coping homesickness. In contrast, according to Van Tilburg, coping strategies that are used by the homesick are mainly emotion-focused coping strategies. As the homesickness situation is generally uncontrollable, because there is no opportunity

to return home timely (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets & Van Heck, submitted); therefore, problem-focused coping is probably less functional than emotion-focused coping [18].

In this study, the ways of coping with homesickness were assessed. Table 3 shows these coping strategies reported by the students.

Table 3: The Ways of copying to overcome homesickness

| Ways of coping | Number | Percent |
|-------------------------|--------|---------|
| See psychologist | 3 | 6% |
| See counselor in UTM | 2 | 5% |
| Sports | 9 | 18% |
| Call family or friends | 16 | 32% |
| Spend time with friends | 12 | 24% |
| Visit places | 8 | 15% |
| Total | 50 | 100 |

Some international students experience a higher level of homesick at the beginning of their academic careers. Homesickness can happen at any time. For many of them, starting higher education is the first step toward a life on their own. There are some reasons for this issue. It follows “communication with other people, food, climate and culture”. These reasons were classified according to the level of agreement and disagreement.

Table 4 describes the reasons of factors homesickness. A total of 38 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that “cultural” difference is among the main reasons for homesickness.

Table 4: Reasons of homesickness

| Reasons | Number | Percent |
|---------------|--------|---------|
| Cultural | 19 | 38% |
| Climate | 5 | 10% |
| Food | 15 | 30% |
| Communication | 11 | 22% |
| Total | 50 | 100 |

“Food” was recognized by 30% of the participants as strongly agreeing to be another factor in creating homesickness. Another reason was “communication”, with 22% level of agreement. In contrast, “climate” with 10% agreement was recognized as a reason of homesickness.

As a result, most of the respondents agreed that “culture” was the main reason to cause homesickness, whereas “climate” was not regarded crucial for this issue.

Although this descriptive research showed some valuable information regarding the causes of homesickness among international students, this information was self reported through questionnaire. Therefore, it could be argued that they might not be the exact views of the studied participants. On other hand, this study was conducted among a limited sample of international students, so it was impossible to assess the relationship of some interactions between the variables.

Based on the results of this study, doing further research including larger sample size to investigate definitive solutions and copying strategies is recommended.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that missing family was the most important factor that influenced the international students to feel homesick. Furthermore, it was revealed that the best and effective way to manage homesickness was to call family and friends. In the view of international students, cultural discrepancies are the most important reason for feeling homesickness.

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