



Familiar Paradox: Bruneian Linguistic and Cultural Adjustments in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the cross-border adjustment experiences of Bruneian students studying and interning in Malaysia. Although Malaysia is often perceived a familiar environment for Bruneians due to geographical proximity, shared Malay language, Islamic familiarity and frequent tourist mobility. This study examines how these assumptions shaped and conflicted with the participants lived experiences. Using a qualitative descriptive design, semi-structured interviews on 15 Bruneian students in Malaysian higher education institutions or student-related placements. The data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. The findings revealed that prior visits did not fully prepare students for long-term adjustments and shared Malay also did not always create mutual seamless social adaptation. Over time, student adjustment contributed to independence, confidence and professional readiness.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Student Mobility and Close-Culture Adjustment

International student mobility has continued to expand alongside global tertiary enrolments, with students increasingly pursuing higher education outside their home countries for academic, personal and developmental opportunities (Cao & Meng, 2022; Erturk & Luu, 2022; UNESCO, 2025). Existing research has examined factors that shape students' decisions to study abroad, including institutional reputation, geographical proximity, shared language, cultural familiarity and religious similarity (Ahmad et al., 2016; Beine et al., 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Myklebust, 2026). However, studying in a culturally proximate country should not be assumed as automatically easy. Shared culture, religion and language may create familiarity, but they may also hide subtle adjustment challenges when students begin to live, study and work in the host country (He & Fei, 2025; Tomás-Miquel & Capó-Vicedo, 2022).

Beyond mobility decisions, higher education research is also concerned with students' lived adjustment experiences. Adjustment refers to students' experiences when coming into contact with a new environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2015), and this process can influence psychological well-being, academic success and overall satisfaction (Korobova & Starobin, 2012; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013; Shafaei & Razak, 2016).

1.2 Bruneian Students in Malaysia

Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia provide a useful example for examining close-culture adjustment. Both countries are immediate geographical neighbours with long-standing historical, cultural, religious and linguistic ties. Bruneians also frequently travel to Malaysia, with tourism data showing Bruneians consistently ranking among Malaysia's top foreign visitors (Periasamy, 2024). These connections contribute to the common perception that Malaysia is familiar and accessible to Bruneian students.

This familiarity is supported by shared Malay cultural roots, Islam as the official religion in both countries, and the use of Malay as a national language. However, subtle differences still exist in everyday routines, infrastructure, social expectations and language use. Although both countries use Malay, Bruneian Malay and Malaysian Malay differ in pronunciation, vocabulary and everyday expressions. For instance, Standard Malaysian Malay uses a six-vowel system /i e a o u ə/, whereas Bruneian Malay operates on a three-vowel system /i a u/ (Deterding & Athirah, 2017). These differences may appear minor, but they can shape everyday communication and students' sense of belonging.

Despite the presence of Bruneian students in Malaysian higher education, their specific adjustment experiences remain under-researched. Existing studies on international student adjustment in Malaysia have largely focused on broader or more distant student groups, while Bruneian students remain less visible. For example, Abd Malek & Ahmad (2023) study on international student adjustment in Malaysian private universities included only one Bruneian participant, leaving a gap in understanding how Bruneian students adjust in a country that is geographically and culturally close, yet still socially, linguistically and practically different.

This study addresses that gap by examining the adjustment experiences of Bruneian students in Malaysia. It focuses on how students navigate everyday routines, prior perceptions of proximity, subtle linguistic and socio-cultural differences, and the personal growth gained through cross-border adjustment. Therefore, the study contributes to international student adjustment literature by showing how familiarity can create expectations of ease, while lived experiences reveal more complex forms of adaptation, self-reliance and belonging.

1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how Bruneian students navigate practical, infrastructural and everyday routine shifts when moving to Malaysia.
2. To examine how assumptions of cultural proximity and prior tourist experiences shape or conflict with the lived realities of Bruneian students.
3. To investigate how subtle linguistic variations and socio-cultural differences impact the social and academic integration of Bruneian students.
4. To understand how cross-border adjustment contributes to the identity development and professional readiness of Bruneian students.

Research Questions

1. How do Bruneian students experience and manage the transition into the independent realities of daily life in Malaysia?
2. In what ways do prior perceptions of proximity and tourist familiarity influence the actual adjustment struggles of Bruneian students?
3. How do Bruneian students navigate everyday communicative, social and academic interactions in Malaysia?
4. How do Bruneian students perceive their personal growth, autonomy and workplace readiness as a result of their stay in Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Behavioural and Coping Approaches to Adjustment

International student adjustment is commonly understood as a multidimensional process involving both emotional coping and behavioural adaptation. The Dual-Process Model of Coping and Adjustment originally conceptualised by Searle & Ward (1990) and later refined by Ward & Kennedy (1999) is useful in distinguishing these two dimensions of student adjustment. Searle & Ward (1990) define psychological adaptation as an internal process connected to emotional well-being, life satisfaction and stress-coping mechanisms. In contrast, Ward & Kennedy (1999) refers sociocultural adaptation to the behavioural ability to manage everyday life, social interactions and practical demands within the host environment.

The Culture Learning Approach to Acculturation (Masgoret & Ward, 2006) further explains student adjustment within the sociocultural domain. Rather than viewing international student difficulties only as ‘emotional crises’, this approach frames adjustment as a process of skill development or “second-culture learning” (Mumin, 2022). According to Masgoret & Ward (2006), individuals gradually acquire the skills needed to function in the host environment and this process can be influenced by local language fluency, cultural proximity and active interaction with host nationals. Language and verbal fluency are especially important aspects of adjustment as they allow students to build relationships, access support networks and understand how locals interpret their social world.

This framework is relevant to Bruneian students in Malaysia as their adjustment may not be seen as a complete cultural disruption, but as a gradual process of learning how to function within a familiar yet different environment. Everyday tasks such as using transport systems, managing local norms, adapting to dialect variations and developing coping strategies can therefore be contributed as part of their sociocultural adjustment. Therefore, the student adjustment process involves emotional coping and practical culture learning, while simultaneously developing behavioural skills needed to manage daily life in Malaysia.

2.2 Expectations, Proximity and Perception

Additionally, student adjustment is also influenced by the expectations held before entering the host environment. Recent studies emphasise the need to consider both mundane everyday interactions and broader institutional, or social, challenges faced by international students (Abd Malek & Ahmad, 2023; Mustafa & Illias, 2013). Within an interaction level, Burgoon's (1993) Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) provides a useful framework for understanding moments where expectations are violated. EVT suggests that individuals enter novel social spaces with internalised assumptions about what behaviours are normal, appropriate and preferred. When these expectations are violated, individuals are forced to interpret and assess the unexpected behaviour.

This is especially relevant in culturally proximate student adjustment contexts. He & Fei (2025) found that Malaysian Chinese students studying in China described their host environment as a “familiar yet distant” paradox which reflects the central concern of EVT. Their findings showed that students expected adjustment to be immediate and seamless due to shared culture and language. However, this assumed closeness obscured significant challenges such as subtle differences in behaviour, communication styles and unspoken cultural norms. These unexpected differences produced psychological strain since students had expected the host country to feel familiar.

Apart from EVT, the W-Curve Model by Gullahorn & Gullahorn's (1963) is another useful framework in understanding student adjustment process as dynamic and gradually changing. The model suggests that students may move through phases such as initial comfort, culture shock, friction, adjustment and eventual mastery. Within culturally proximate contexts, surface-level similarities may extend the honeymoon/initial comfort phase as students believe they were able to adjust seamlessly in a familiar environment. However, subtle differences will eventually accumulate and subsequently descend students to the phases of culture shock as they did not adapt as well as they had initially expected.

Therefore, the EVT and W-Curve Model are particularly useful to explain how Malaysia may initially appear familiar due to shared language, religion, travel history and geographical proximity; however, these similarities may generate expectations of seamless integration. Therefore, these frameworks help to explain how the assumption of familiarity can be disrupted by everyday activities such as language differences, transport systems, social norms, academic expectations and independent living responsibilities.

2.3 *The Linguistic Paradox of Close-Cultural Adjustment*

Language plays an important role in international student mobility and adjustment. According to Ovchinnikova et al. (2023), international students often choose destinations with shared or closely related languages because they expect cultural, social and academic integration to be easier. However, recent studies suggest that shared language does not always remove communication difficulties. Nada et al. (2026) found that language can function as both a useful tool and an invisible barrier for international sojourners. Although shared or familiar language may support basic communication, interactions with local communities and native speakers can still cause anxiety, stress and exhaustion. This becomes especially relevant when students are expected to immediately understand local accents, slang dialects or speech patterns.

Giles' (2016) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) offers a useful method to understand this subtle interaction processes. CAT suggest that individuals often adjust their dialect, speech speed and communication style to facilitate social and psychological distance during interactions. One key strategy from this theory is convergence, where speakers adapt their communication to align with others and improve intelligibility. On the other hand, divergence occurs when speakers maintain linguistic differences in order to preserve distance and assert an out-group identity.

When applied to Bruneian students in Malaysia, this framework helps to explain why shared Malay language may still create linguistic difficulties. Bruneian students may understand Malay generally but may still struggle with Malaysian accents, regional slangs or specific vocabulary. Conversely, Malaysians may also assume Bruneians to immediately comprehend their version of Malay as both nations share similar language. This lack of communicative adjustment from local speakers may generate cognitive and emotional burden on Bruneian students. Therefore, examining these subtle linguistic barriers is important because the difficulties between Bruneian Malay and Malaysian Malay is often overlooked in the wider international student mobility literature.

2.4 *Stress, Systems and Growth*

Living abroad can become a catalyst for identity development, maturity and professional readiness. This development occurs because student adjustment is not limited to classroom environment but extends into the cultivation of life skills and in turn prepare individuals for the workplace (Lu et al., 2024; Mumin, 2023a). While frameworks such as the W curve model provides a general understanding of the evolution adjustment, they did not fully explain how students transform stress into growth. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine the internal and behavioural changes that occur when students are confronted with unfamiliar situations.

Kim (2000, 2017) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation provides a useful framework in comprehending how student adjustment challenges can eventually lead to development through the Stress-Adaptation-Growth spiral. Kim argues that when individuals enter a novel cultural system, their existing habits and communication strategies may clash with the expectations of the host environment. This imbalance creates psychological stress, which can manifest as emotional tension, cognitive fatigue and interactional friction. However, stress is not a sign failure but instead part of the process that pushes individuals to adjust their behaviours, perspectives and social strategies. Gradually but eventually, this repeated cycle of stress and adaptation can produce growth in intercultural, emotional and practical contexts.

Ultimately, this framework is suitable to map out the developmental growth displayed by Bruneian students in Malaysia because student adjustment involves more than adapting to academic life. Students are needed to manage unfamiliar transport systems, communication styles, professional expectations, independent routines and professional readiness. Therefore, Kim's model provides a useful lens for understanding how everyday stressors in Malaysia may gradually contribute to Bruneian students' personal and professional growth.

3. Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design because it allowed participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words, particularly in relation to everyday routines, social interactions, language use, academic or workplace adjustment and personal development (Brunsting et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method because they provided a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to remain aligned with the research objectives while also exploring unexpected issues raised by participants (Isik, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025).

3.1 Research Instrument

The interview protocol consisted of eight sections: warm-up questions, initial adjustment, background, social integration, culture, language, academic or professional environment, and personal development. Questions moved from general topics, such as reasons for choosing Malaysia and prior visits, to more reflective areas such as independence, communication challenges, cultural differences and workplace readiness. Although the protocol provided a clear structure, interviews were not conducted uniformly. Follow-up questions and probing prompts were used depending on participants' responses, allowing participants to expand on experiences that were most relevant to their adjustment process.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Method

The study involved 15 Bruneian undergraduate students in Malaysia, varying in location, institution and type of undergraduate experience. Two participants were based in Penang, consisting of one short-term mobility student and one student intern, while 13 were based in Kuala Lumpur. The Kuala Lumpur participants included nine student interns, one short-term student and three long-term undergraduate students. Although some participants were completing internships, these placements were part of their undergraduate programme requirements. Therefore, all participants were undergraduate students at the time of the study.

Participants were enrolled in both public and private Malaysian higher education institutions, including Taylor's University, the University of Nottingham Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This variation helped capture differences in adjustment according to location, length of stay and academic or internship-based experience, aligning with maximum variation sampling (Brgles et al., 2022).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required individuals who had direct experience of Bruneian student adjustment in Malaysia. Two eligibility criteria were applied. First, participants had to be socialised and educated within the Bruneian school system. Second, they had to be enrolled in a Malaysian higher education institution or hold a student visa while completing a student-related placement in Malaysia. These criteria ensured that participants had direct experience of cross-border adjustment from Brunei to Malaysia.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through one semi-structured interview with each participant. A total of 15 interviews were conducted, with no follow-up interviews. Participants were allowed to choose between physical and virtual interviews based on their comfort and availability. Physical interviews were conducted in comfortable settings such as participants' accommodation or secluded cafes, while virtual interviews were conducted through Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. Interview times were arranged flexibly around participants' academic schedules, internship responsibilities and personal commitments. Although the expected duration was approximately 45 minutes, interviews ranged from 22 minutes to two hours depending on how much participants were willing to share.

3.4 Research Ethics

All participants were given a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of participation and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could skip questions, decline to answer or withdraw at any point without consequence. Written and verbal consent were obtained before interviews were audio recorded. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. No personally identifiable information was included in the final report, and participants were labelled using alphanumerical codes from P1 to P15.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study used Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify, analyse and interpret recurring patterns within participants' adjustment experiences. The analysis began with repeated listening of the recorded interviews to familiarise the researcher with the data. Detailed summaries were then prepared for each participant, with identifying information removed to maintain anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Seeking New Experiences in a Familiar Environment

The findings revealed that most participants wanted to seek new experiences outside Brunei but within a destination that still felt familiar and manageable. Malaysia was chosen because it was geographically close, relatively affordable, easier for family visits and less intimidating than more distant countries. For some

participants, the presence of other Bruneian friends also made the decision feel natural. P3, P6, P7, P8, P11 and P13 linked their decision to friends who were also going to Malaysia. This suggests that participants were not seeking complete foreignness, but an expected form of difference. Malaysia offered enough novelty to feel like a new environment, while still providing enough familiarity to feel acceptable to both participants and their families.

Religious and cultural familiarity also shaped this decision. P12 felt Malaysia would be easier to adjust to compared to countries such as Japan or the United Kingdom because Islam was widely practised and Malay-speaking communities were easier to find. Similarly, P13 explained that Malaysia was more acceptable to their family because it was perceived as safer and more familiar. These findings show how cultural proximity shaped participants' expectations before arrival.

Most participants had also visited Malaysia before, either through nearby border destinations such as Miri, Limbang, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, or through family holidays to Kuala Lumpur, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Johor. However, participants explained that visiting Malaysia as a tourist was different from living there as a student. As tourists, they did not need to manage transport, groceries, rent or academic responsibilities. P3 explained that tourist plans were often handled by family, while student life required them to manage everything independently. P4 described the tourist mindset as "boleh lapas tangan," referring to being carefree and free of responsibility.

This theme addresses the second research objective by showing how assumptions of cultural proximity and prior tourist experiences shaped participants' expectations of Malaysia but later conflicted with the realities of long-term student life. This supports Expectancy Violations Theory because participants expected adjustment to be easier due to geographical closeness, shared language, shared religion and travel familiarity. However, living in Malaysia required them to unlearn tourist-oriented habits and manage responsibilities they had not previously associated with the country.

4.2 Learning Independence Through Everyday Systems

Participants' adjustment was strongly shaped by everyday systems such as food, transport and money management. Although these activities may appear ordinary and mundane, they became important as many participants were used to having meals prepared at home, driving, being driven or receiving financial support from family. In Malaysia, participants had to make more independent decisions about how to eat, travel, spend money and manage shared living spaces.

Food was one clear area of adjustment. Eleven participants reported eating out during the first few weeks because of exhaustion, lack of cooking appliances, accommodation issues or discomfort with buying groceries in an unfamiliar environment. Gradually, some participants began cooking to save money, while others continued eating out due to convenience or work exhaustion. P7 relied on takeout at first because their apartment did not have a functioning refrigerator, while P8 only began cooking after purchasing appliances such as a rice cooker and air fryer. P10 cooked more during Ramadhan because it was cheaper, while P14 depended more on cafeteria food because cooking in the dorms was limited. These examples suggest that food adjustment was less about taste and more about cost, time, appliances, energy and living conditions.

Transportation was another major form of adjustment. Participants often compared Brunei's car-filled lifestyle with Malaysia's public transport and e-hailing services. Several participants had to learn how to use MRT, LRT, buses, Grab, Bolt, RapidKL, Touch 'n Go and digital maps. Some became strategic in comparing costs. For example, P12 calculated whether Grab or MRT would be cheaper depending on distance, peak hours and whether the cost could be shared. P10 relied heavily on RapidKL because Grab was expensive, even though the commute could take an additional three hours.

Road culture also shaped the adjustment experiences of P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13 and P14 as they described Malaysian drivers as fast, impatient and less likely to give way to pedestrians compared to Brunei. P8 compared Kuala Lumpur driving to the video game *Grand Theft Auto*, while P12 and P13 reported gradually becoming braver when crossing roads. This shows that adjustment was not only about learning routes, but also about adapting to different road behaviours and becoming more alert in public spaces.

These findings support Ward & Kennedy (1999) view that sociocultural adaptation involves learning how to function in everyday life within a new environment. Even during COVID-19, online learning was regarded as a new environment (Ashwan & Mumin, 2024). They also reflect Masgoret & Ward (2006) Culture Learning Approach, which views adjustment as a process of acquiring practical and social skills. This addresses the first research objective by showing how participants adapted their daily behaviours to Malaysia's practical and infrastructural demands, particularly in food, transportation, money management and routines.

4.3 Shared Language and English as ‘Safe’

A significant finding was that the shared Malay language between Brunei and Malaysia did not automatically translate into communicative comfort. Although both countries use Malay, participants’ experiences showed that mutual intelligibility did not always mean they felt confident using Malay in everyday, academic and professional interactions. This was apparent among P2, P3, P4, P7, P10, P11 and P15, who described differences in accent, vocabulary, speech speed, pronunciation and context as factors that affected their confidence when interacting with Malaysians.

These differences were most visible in vocabulary, pronunciation and contextual meaning. P3 explained that common Bruneian phrases did not always align with terms commonly used in Malaysia. For instance, “tapau” is commonly used in Brunei to refer to takeaway food but Malaysians commonly use “bungkus” instead. Other examples included “ali-ali” became “asing” and “sinjang” became “sampin.” P4 also described pronunciation differences, where “*sakit perut*” was misunderstood as lung pain instead of stomachache due to the different pronunciation of “*perut*.” P10 experienced contextual differences in the workplace, such as how “*nanti*” in Brunei refers to the future, while in the Malaysian workplace it could mean something more immediate.

These examples show that shared language did not automatically create seamless integration. Instead, differences between Bruneian and Malaysian Malay created a subtle form of interactional friction that made participants more aware of their position as outsiders. Differences in vocabulary, pronunciation and contextual meaning did not completely prevent communication, but they shaped how confident participants felt when speaking to locals. This reflects Nada et al. (2026), who argued that communication challenges can still occur within familiar or shared languages due to subtle phonological variations, or dialectical and slang shifts.

One response to this linguistic challenge was the use of English. For several participants, English became a ‘safe’ language because it helped them manage interactions that created hesitation, uncertainty or pressure. P3 preferred using English during Grab rides to create social distance and made the interaction feel more manageable. Similarly, P7 used English during Grab rides as a form of consideration to make the interaction straightforward when they were unsure how to respond in Malay. P15 also preferred English because accidentally mixing Bruneian and Malaysian Malay caused embarrassment.

In contrast, P10’s communication challenges were more evident in their internship setting than in casual everyday interactions. P10 explained that they had no major problem understanding Malay outside the office, but workplace Malay felt different from the Malaysian Malay they were familiar with through television shows. Older colleagues casually used formal words such as “*walaubagaimanapun*” and “*manakalapun*,” which made workplace communication feel unfamiliar and intimidating. As a result, P10 preferred using English to communicate with colleagues because it made workplace interactions clearer and helped avoid confusion when unfamiliar Malay terms were used.

This reliance on English may be connected to Brunei’s Bilingual System of Education, first introduced in 1985 and later continued through SPN21, which positioned English as the medium for academic and technical subjects (McLellan & Deterding, 2016). Due to this, English may not be perceived as merely a foreign language for many younger Bruneians, but as a language used for studying, thinking and expressing themselves in formal settings (Mumin, 2023b; Mumin et.al., 2025). This helps explain why participants turned to English when they encountered unfamiliar forms of Malay in Malaysia. This also attributes to the findings of Sharbawi & Zainal Abidin (2024) that younger Bruneians are becoming increasingly comfortable using English as a form of self-expression rather than Brunei Malay or Bahasa Melayu.

However, not all participants avoided speaking Malay. Several participants showed forms of linguistic convergence by adjusting their speech to accommodate Malaysian communication styles. P4 shifted from using Bruneian expressions such as “*awu*” and “*yakah*” to the Malaysian expression “*ha-ah*.” P8 described speaking Malay more slowly and carefully so that locals could understand the exact meaning they wanted to convey. P14 frequently changed their Bruneian Malay to a more standard form of Malay so that Penang locals could understand them better. P9 also observed that Malaysians often appeared more relaxed when spoken to in Malay, which encouraged them to respond in Malay as well.

These examples illustrate elements of Communication Accommodation Theory, particularly convergence, where speakers modify their communication style to improve understanding and reduce social distance. Overall, this theme addresses the third research objective by showing how linguistic and socio-cultural differences shaped participants’ social, academic and professional integration in Malaysia. Although

Malaysia was initially perceived as linguistically familiar, participants lived experiences showed that shared language did not automatically create communicative ease or a sense of belonging.

4.4 Navigating Bruneian Identity

Although Bruneian identity was not the main focus of this study, it emerged as a repeated pattern in participants' responses. Several participants described moments where they became aware of how Bruneians were perceived in Malaysia, especially through assumptions of wealth, oil and royalty. P4 recalled that locals would often respond with "*oh mesti kaya*" when they found out the participant was from Brunei, while P15 explained that classmates often associated Brunei with Prince Mateen or the Sultan's collection of cars.

Participants also shared how Malaysians could distinguish Bruneians as non-local through accent, speech, appearance and style. P2 explained that some locals mistook them for Indonesian or Sarawakian due to their slang, while P8 noted that Bruneian Malay was sometimes mistaken as Sabahan due to similar accent. P4 and P15 also expressed that people could tell they were not local through their English accent, which was noted as westernised. P4 and P9 added that Malaysians sometimes perceived Bruneians as the 'whiter' version of Malay through skin tone and frequent English use.

These external perceptions may explain why the presence of other Bruneian friends influenced participants' decision to choose Malaysia. For example, P6 remained close to their Bruneian friendship circle despite living in Kuala Lumpur for several years, suggesting that familiarity and group belonging remained important in adjustment. This can be understood through collectivism, where individuals value group belonging, relational security and social harmony (Hofstede, 1980). Pg Hj Idris (2021) similarly observed that Bruneian society is rooted in interdependence, communal harmony and group orientation.

This collectivistic nature can be attributed to Brunei's national philosophy, Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) where values are centred with respect, hierarchy and consideration for others. Although MIB was not mentioned directly, these values were visible in how some participants managed conflict and social discomfort. P12 and P13 avoided directly addressing shared living problems because they did not want to create tension. Instead, they kept quiet, cleaned the shared space themselves or expressed frustration to other Bruneian roommates. P12 also reasoned that they were living in "*negeri orang*," showing an awareness that they were guests in another country. This suggests that their reluctance to confront others cannot be solely interpreted as avoidance, but a reflection of instilled values focusing on politeness, restraint and respect for the host environment.

Overall, this theme addresses the fourth research objective by showing how living abroad increased participants' awareness of Bruneian identity. External perceptions of Brunei and Bruneians shaped participants' sense of difference, while Bruneian values such as politeness, restraint and group belonging influenced how they interpreted and managed interactions in Malaysia.

4.5 Personal and Professional Growth

The final theme explains how participants' adjustment in Malaysia gradually contributed to personal growth and readiness for future responsibilities. This growth did not appear as an immediate transformation but developed through repeated unfamiliar situations where participants adjusted their behaviour to the Malaysian environment. These situations included communication difficulties, workplace expectations, homesickness, food adjustment, transport and shared living.

P10's experience was one clear example of managing stress and uncertainty. They struggled with workplace communication, long commutes and unfamiliar office expectations. Whereas P4 experienced academic exclusion when local groupmates dismissed their ability to participate and present in Malay, while P2 struggled to understand classroom terminology such as "*lakarkanlah rajah*." While P15 experienced strong homesickness in the first month of their adjustment. These examples show that stress did not occur uniformly, but differed according to location, responsibilities and social environment.

Over time, participants developed strategies to manage these challenges. P10 asked officers to use English, relied more on written texts for easier tracking and became more proactive in asking for clarification to avoid mistakes. P4 gradually built their Malaysian vocabulary, while P2 noted unfamiliar Malay terms and translated them later. P15 managed homesickness through regular family calls, listening to Bruneian radio and checking home CCTV. These examples show that stress became part of a gradual adjustment process where participants moved from uncertainty to practical action.

Independence also appeared differently across participants. P1 became less doubtful and more willing to ask others when navigating unfamiliar spaces. P8 and P13 grew more confident exploring Kuala Lumpur alone

and using maps and stations. P6 and P10 planned trips to Singapore, Melaka and Ipoh using their own money and itinerary. P14 and P15 described independence with managing their own laundry and money, while P3's independence appeared through adult responsibilities such as negotiating rent, deposits and household repairs. Even participants who did not directly identify their experiences as growth still described increased responsibility, flexibility and confidence.

These adjustments also contributed to professional readiness. Participants connected their experiences to workplace skills such as communication, negotiation, leadership, problem-solving and resilience. P10 felt they had become more mature, punctual and better at self-management. P3 believed their experience negotiating rent, deposits and repairs could be applied to workplace communication. P4 connected university activities and extracurricular responsibilities to leadership, teamwork, budgeting, proposal writing and event management skills.

These findings reflect Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth model, where repeated stress pushes individuals to adapt and gradually develop. Overall, this theme addresses the fourth research objective by showing how living in Malaysia helped participants develop confidence, independence, self-management and professional readiness.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the cross-border adjustment experiences of Bruneian students studying or interning in Malaysia. Addressing a common perception that Bruneian student would easily adjust in Malaysia because of several shared qualities. The study aimed to examine how this perceived familiarity influenced, shaped or challenged participants' actual lived experiences. The findings showed that Malaysia was perceived as familiar and manageable due to its geographical proximity, shared religion, shared Malay language, prior tourist exposure and the presence of Bruneian peers. However, living in Malaysia as a student or intern was different from visiting as a tourist. Participants had to manage everyday responsibilities such as transportation, food, money, accommodation, academic or workplace expectations and social interactions. Therefore, familiarity and cultural proximity helped ease student adjustment but did not remove the need for independence and social adaptation. The findings also addressed the research objectives by showing that adjustment involved practical, cultural linguistic and personal aspects.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature on student adjustment and cultural paradox by focusing on under-researched student group and challenging the assumption that Bruneian students would adjust easily to Malaysia. The findings suggest that Malaysia can still be a suitable study destination for Bruneian students who want an overseas experience within a relatively familiar environment, however, students should be prepared for the practical and emotional realities of long-term adjustment.

Future research should focus specifically on long-term Bruneian students in Malaysia so that academic and social integration can be better analysed over time. Further studies could also examine how education background influences language preference, particularly whether students from private, semi-private schools differ in their comfort with English or Malay. Gender may also be explored as it could shape experiences of safety, mobility and communication differently. Finally, future research could compare Bruneian student adjustment across different Malaysian states since participants from Kuala Lumpur and Penang experienced adjustment differently depending on location, transport local accents and campus environment.

In conclusion, Bruneian students' adjustment in Malaysia was shaped by both familiarity and difference. Malaysia helped reduce initial fear of studying abroad but participants still had to live independently, communicate strategically and manage unfamiliar responsibilities. Through cross-border student adjustment, many participants developed confidence, adaptability, self-reliance and greater awareness of themselves as Bruneian student abroad.

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