Abstrak: This recent decade has observed an influx of Muslim students who migrate to other Muslim countries abroad to further their studies, mainly at postgraduate levels (Masters or Doctor of Philosophy). The influx of Muslim international postgraduate students potentially gives a positive impact on the migrated universities in terms of income generation. Malaysian public universities have received an increasing number of Muslim international postgraduate students registering each year, especially from the Middle East such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Lebanon, Yemen, and a few others. Besides noticing the positive impact that these students have brought; that are, to promote Malaysia to become an Islamic educational tourism hub, little is known; however, about their struggles to meet the language barrier, academic challenges, and cultural barriers they face with the local community. To those universities that depend largely on the income generated from international students’ fees, the need to understand their problems, as well as to maintain this increasing figure earned each year is therefore urgent. This study aims to review the related literature pertaining to the challenges and perils experienced by Muslim international postgraduate students while undergoing their study at public universities in Malaysia, as well as to identify the coping strategies they have taken in meeting the challenges. This study is significant in terms of providing information to the top management of public universities in Malaysia in receiving international students.

Kata kunci: Muslim postgraduate students, language barrier, Islamic educational tourism hub, academic challenges, postgraduate students’ welfare

INTRODUCTION

This recent decade has observed an influx of students who migrate to other countries abroad to further their studies, mainly at postgraduate (the master’s or doctoral) level. The influx of international students potentially gives a positive impact to the migrated universities in terms of income generation. Malaysian universities have witnessed an increasing number of international students registering each year, especially from the Middle East countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Lebanon, Yemen, and a few others. Therefore, the Malaysian Higher Education Ministry set up an international students’ division to cope with the increasing number of Arab and other foreign students pursuing higher education in Malaysia and turning the country into a centre of educational excellence. The division has been operating since 2007 to facilitate the entrance and management of foreign students who are expected to number 100,000 by the end 2010. These students were distributed in 20 public and 35 private universities all over Malaysia.

Based on the statistics obtained in 2010, 86,919 international students were reported to have enrolled in Malaysian universities. Not reaching the target, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia plans to attract 200,000 international students into the country by the year 2020. Based
on the statistics released by the Centre of Graduate Studies of a public university in Malaysia, for example Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), it shows a figure of 716 international students registered in the distributed ten faculties at the university in February 2018. This figure, however, has doubled by November this year. Almost 75% of the population of the international students is mainly dominated by Arab students especially from Jordan, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and many others.

Besides noticing the positive impact that these students have brought in terms of university revenue, little is known about their struggles to adjust to the language, postgraduate systems and procedures set by the graduate schools in Malaysian universities, and the community in Malaysia. Little also is known about their language barrier, academic challenges, and cultural barriers they face with the local community. To those universities that depend largely on the income generated from international students’ fees, the need to understand these issues, as well as to maintain the increasing figure earned each year are therefore urgent.

One of the requirements mainly set by some leading universities in the world is that students must indicate adequate proficiency of the languages which are spoken internationally, such as English. In Malaysian universities, international students who are selected must meet the requirement set by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) of Malaysia; that is, to pass the set level of IELTS or TOEFL prior to their admission to some schools and faculties of the universities. In cases when English is used as a medium of instruction or communication in Engineering, Business, or English faculties, for example, the requirement set for international students for the IELTS or TOEFL scores is much higher. This has imposed a constraint for international students to attain, especially those who are not competent English language users. The requirement set may limit their potentials to get entry to the faculties which use English as a medium of instruction.

Besides, these students will face a lot of struggles in communicating with other international and local students due to their limited knowledge of English. Lack of English competence may henceforth lower their self-esteem. Since international students’ fees constitute the major revenue to Malaysian universities (Yusliza & Shankar, 2010), and since the international students must reach the language entry level set by the university authorities, a lot of efforts need to be given to improve their language proficiency and social barriers in order to maintain the growing influx of international graduate students in this country. Few studies were reported to investigate the struggles faced by these international students, especially among the Middle East students, who the majority are Muslims and constitute the largest percentage of the student population in Malaysian public and private universities. This study aims to review the related literature of the range of barriers that Arab students meet, and the coping strategies they have taken in meeting the challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical perspectives and adjustment issues pertaining to the challenges and coping strategies taken by Arab students in meeting a range of challenges and barriers.

Theoretical Perspectives

Migrating abroad to pursue the study takes a lot of efforts on the parts of international students. They have to face a series of acculturation and transformation in order to adapt to a new environment and a new learning experience. Two significant theories, namely acculturation and transformational theories, explain the phenomenon of international students studying abroad.

1. Acculturation Theory

Acculturation is often discussed by many studies of the international students’ adjustment (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). A number of studies define acculturation in various ways (Berry, 2009). Ward and his colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward &
Searle, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1992) define acculturation as a “process” and “state” developed from first-hand contact with the host culture. Acculturation occurs when groups of individuals having a different culture come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original patterns of either or both groups (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Besides, Roysircar-Sodowsky and Maestas (2000) define acculturation as an adaptation of an individual to the dominant or mainstream culture. Anthropological studies have established that both groups, the dominant and non-dominant group, would change and become acculturated in larger society, which has been shown in four intercultural strategies (Berry, 2008).

2. Transformative learning theory

Another theory that explains the adjustment of international students to a new learning environment is Transformative Learning theory. It offers a different lens to examine what is implicit, which is called transformative learning in higher education. Since educational stakeholders are associated with efforts to bring about change in higher education, they need to raise what kind of change is required. ‘Transformation’ suggests an intense change for the better; transformative learning theory explores how that change comes about. Transformative learning occurs when, through critical questioning of ourselves, our beliefs and our expectations, we experience a deep swing in perspective which leads us to a new way of being in the world (Wilcox, 2009).

Wilcox (2009) states that learning process may be an answer to upsetting life experiences such as disorienting dilemma served as a precipitating event, and is followed by gradual or sudden change, or it may be a developmental compromise of life changeovers, in which case there is a sense of being on the edge of, and moving towards, somewhat new. Through transformative learning, students re-examine the ways they make sense of the world, and their revised understandings inform the following decisions they make and actions they might take. Transformative learning process is often described as cognitive and rational, but it may also incorporate imagination, intuition, affect and soul-work. It is not a solitary implementation, perhaps dialogue with others typically plays a vital role in the critical process of reviewing our long-held assumptions. Hence, when individuals who have transformed their perspectives act differently in the world than they did before, and share their new perspectives with other people, societal transformation can come about claims (Wilcox, 2009). Understanding in more than just an intellectual sense that there is more than one way of seeing a circumstance can be quite transformative. This can lead us to revise our beliefs about and expectations of future events (Lawrence & Cranton, 2009).

Challenges Faced by Arab Students

A study conducted by Malaklolunthu and Selan (2011) among international students in five private universities in Malaysia found that international students, including Arab students, often face many adjustment problems the moment they set foot to study in Malaysian universities. The problems range from academic, religious, and personnel or psychological to social and financial ones. The study also reported that adjustment problems were rated high, with financial and language adjustment problems showing the least impact. The findings in this study were supported by several other studies conducted in investigating the range of challenges or barriers faced by Arab students in public or private universities in Malaysia.

Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2009) contend that many of Arab postgraduate students who come to Malaysia face the language, cultural, and academic struggles. In terms of language barrier, Arab students may find difficulty in adjusting to the various accents of instructors and staff (Talebloo & Baki, 2013), along with their different teaching styles. They may have difficulty understanding class lectures, making them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions. Secondly, they may find test constructions difficult to comprehend, and they may be unfamiliar with the testing and grading systems of the university. Those who have low English proficiency may require extra time to read their textbooks. Due to limited knowledge of
vocabulary, they may not be able to articulate their knowledge on essay exams or research papers due to their limited vocabulary. Poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in Malaysia. Simple mispronunciation issues can also become a major factor. Some Arab nationalities have a very difficult time with the pronunciation of the English language and it can be very frustrating to them. They may be motivated, and they may give their full and sincere effort, but still they may struggle to learn the English language.

In terms of cultural barriers, cultural differences present additional challenges for Arab students. Adjustment issues concern the degree to which Arab students’ native culture is similar or different in comparison with the local Malaysian culture. In a Malaysian classroom, Malaysian students may have been taught that it is a sign of disrespect to look directly at lecturers when they are speaking to them, or to differ in opinion from these of their lecturers. They may have also been taught not to speak in class unless called upon. Arab students, on the other hand, may have been taught to state their opinions directly in discussions. They may have more arguments or asking many questions rather than being passive and doing a lot of memorizing. Besides, the study also found that Arab students have difficulty in adjusting to food. However, on a positive side, it was regarded by Arab students that Malaysians are positive and welcoming of Arab students or foreigners in general. may have to adapt to the new learning culture that clashes with their own.

In a study conducted by Talebloo and Basri (2015) at University Putera Malaysia, the challenges that were found included problems related to facilities, social environment, education system, financial problem and international office programs. The facilities barriers are categorized into three main groups: habitation, transportation, and campus restaurants. Regarding Accommodation facilities, some students believed that they are not only inappropriate, unsafe, poor, and inconvenient, but also very expensive. Also, UPM was reported as not providing information about accommodation. The findings in this study was also supported by Matarneh (2018) who carried out a study among Arab students at UniSZA. Lack of accommodation was regarded as the second biggest challenge faced by the students after language. Lack of English proficiency is still a major hindrance for them to obtain good results in IELTS or TOEFL tests (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2009; Talebloo & Baki, 2013; Matarneh, 2018). Lack of English language proficiency may also deter the smooth running of thesis writing. The students who major in the field English language studies, specifically, must possess adequate competence of English language in order to survive in the university.

It can be summarised that Arab students face a lot of struggles ranging from language, accommodation, academic, and cultural to financial which they must deal with to achieve successful completion of their studies and academic accreditation. The biggest challenge faced by Arab students, as reviewed from the researchers, is English language proficiency. The question is: What are their coping strategies in facing all the struggles to adjust to the new university environments in Malaysia in terms of language?

**Coping Strategies in Meeting the Language Barrier**

According to Matarneh (2018), Talebloo and Baki (2013), and Mat Saad, Md Yunus, and Embi (2014), Arab students have employed several coping strategies in facing the language barrier. They resorted to their peers who are good at English, and some joined the language support workshops supported by the British Council or tuition centres, who they regarded as very expensive and required a lot of financial supports. Students also had to participate in educational forms, workshops and lectures held in the host universities in order to increase the knowledge of language and style of academic writing. Besides, they also did a lot of translations of articles from Arabic to English using dictionaries or seeking helps from their seniors or local translators. Students were also found to look for online resources such as Grammarly or online paid editing services to, especially before the proposal defence and viva voce. The students, however, mentioned that they benefitted a lot from surrounding individuals who promote the use of English language among local students who major in English language studies.
CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is to review Arab international postgraduate students’ challenges faced in their study at Malaysian universities, and the coping strategies that they have taken in facing those challenges. Based on the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that international students suffer from a variety of challenges during their study. These challenges were reported to be lack of sufficient facilities, different social environment, academic problems, and lack of international service programs. The language barrier, however, was reported to become the main struggle, in which several coping strategies have been employed by them in reducing the barrier. This study recommends speedy actions to be taken by the authorities to improve the barriers as a means of meeting the IELTS and TOEFL requirements, as well as improving and maintaining the number of Arab and Muslim international students in this region.
REFERENCES


