



# Multicultural Adjustment Among Self-Initiated Academic Expatriates: The MPQ as a Determinant

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**Abstract.** As an academic entity, higher academic institutions provide a distinct atmosphere with different mission and work tasks, unlike corporate organizations. Thus far, only a small number of investigations have turned its focus on self-initiated academic expatriates (SIAEs). Taking this into consideration, the present research aimed to investigate further on the adjustment of SIAEs. For this purpose, the multicultural personality instrument was used to examine the multicultural effectiveness among this group of expatriates. The instrument consisted of five dimensions, which are cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. Questionnaires were distributed to SIAEs attached to a university in Malaysia. One-hundred and one questionnaires were returned, and the data was analyzed. It was uncovered that open-mindedness and flexibility relate significantly to expatriate personal adjustment, while cultural empathy, emotional stability and flexibility relate to expatriates' social adjustment. Flexibility is the only dimension of MPQ that predicts SIAEs' work adjustment. Apart from the findings, the paper also highlights the limitations and directions for future research in the field.

**Keywords:** Expatriate Adjustment · Self-Initiated Academic Expatriates · Multicultural Personality Questionnaire

## 1 Introduction

The demand for expatriates is increasing worldwide because organizations believe that it will improve organizational performance through the transfer of knowledge, skills and technology especially in education. Expatriation is a process where people move across national borders to live and work temporarily in another country [1]. The open-door policy enforced by many countries has enabled academic expatriates to travel and find work abroad. Studies have shown that their numbers are growing exponentially [2].

The academic sector portrays diverse organizational surroundings with different work responsibilities than professional firms. In the sense of the nation's higher education institutions, the university's primary goal is to have staff members who are proactive, have universal communication skills, including speaking more than one language, and

have high self-esteem [3]. In order to become the top world ranking in education sector, most of the educational institutions such as universities and college has increased the needs and demands to employ the talent academic globally as one of their internalization processes [4].

In Malaysia for example, the government policy requires that local universities engage foreign academics to a certain percentage. The major goal is to introduce local students to diverse cultural components, including language, values, viewpoints, and global issues. The policy has enabled Malaysian universities to be more proactive and aggressive in their search for suitable academic expatriates to work at their institutions. In attracting competent and eligible SIEAs, these universities promote and present alluring contracts. The drive to employ foreign academics is also attributed to the competition, with the aim of getting higher student enrolment, either local or foreign. This has led to a growing number of SIEAs working and travelling across national borders as a result of the interest demonstrated by foreign universities. This group of expatriates usually initiate their travel to foreign countries [5, 6].

Additionally, universities also offer a distinct environment. In contrast to corporate organizations, each academic institution has a distinct goal and performs certain tasks [7, 8]. For instance, universities are completely different work environments with a wide range of administrative responsibilities. In addition to their primary duty of giving lectures, academics have additional duties which include obtaining research grants, starting research projects and consulting, publishing, giving paper presentations, and managing courses, among others [9]. This explains how the academic sector differ from business sector, and this also explains how academic and business expatriates differ in terms of their responsibilities in a distinct work environment. The management of universities has also grown more complicated and difficult as the number of academic expatriates keeps rising [10].

Due to the uncertainty surrounding their professional prospects, these academics expatriates may not be accustomed to foreign surroundings, which may affect their capability to adjust to their work [11]. Cultural differences that exist between the home and the host country had put off the success rate of these expatriates [12]. There seems to be a presumption in the majority of the existing theory and research on expatriates, which is mostly untested, that the more dissimilar the host culture is from the expatriate's own culture, the more challenging the adjustment process will be [13]. Hence, problems related to cross-culture adjustment, have led to various work-related issues such as work stress, which has affected the job performance of the expatriates. Thus, finding the best method in adjusting to the host culture such as Malaysia, is essential for expatriates to maximize their performance because Malaysia for example, is a country characterized by a distinctive ethnic diversity and a high degree of collectivism [12].

Although there has been an abundance of studies on expatriation and cross-cultural adjustment, studies on SIEs especially academics, are still scarce. Even though SIAEs have shown to be a broader and compelling segment of the labor market [14], they have been under studied and little is known about their adjustment to a foreign country. Only in recent years that research begin to embark and explore SIAEs [6, 15, 16]. To further understand the adjustment of SIAEs, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) scale is used to examine how SIAEs are adjusted in an effort to close the gap

and answer the call made by Abacioglu et al. [17], that there has been lack of specific measures of multicultural attitudes and success. The present research specifically investigates the adjustment of SIAEs with the objective of identifying how MPQ dimensions affect expatriate adjustment. The outcome from the research will further enhance the understanding of theory and pragmatic applications of expatriate management and cross-cultural communication, especially cross-cultural adjustment.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 The Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs)

The early work on SIEs by Inkson et al. [18], has garnered a lot of interest and consideration on people (the SIEs) who travel across borders in search of work in other countries. This group of expatriates is different than business expatriates as they seek for opportunity and work in another country without any support from home organizations [16]. Although they have been around for years seeking job opportunities, experiences and challenges, only in recent years that studies on SIEs have multiplied. The SIEs view working abroad as a means of self-development in addition to advancing their personal agendas. This is contrary to a more structured path of organizational expatriates. Additionally, Joseph et al. [19], point out that the younger generations, who are more driven to discover the globe and experience new cultures, are mostly those who choose this job route, which requires them to travel to a foreign country.

Research have also shown that SIEs are driven to travel abroad for various motivations such as escaping from problems in the home country, financial issues, gaining an international experience and career growth [6]. As this is a group that initiate their own travel, learning and adjusting to a new cultural environment are not a problem and they can learn and acclimatize to a new situation more quickly.

### 2.2 Expatriate Adjustment

There are numerous definitions of expatriate adjustment that are now accessible. But, for the purpose of the present work, we define expatriate adjustment as the level where SIAEs feels content towards the host culture, and consequently, perform well in the environment. This involves how they personally, socially and psychologically adjust themselves in terms of their feelings toward the new cultural context such as familiarity, comfort and ease. Scholars seem to have different views on what constitutes adjustment, and many have described from the perspectives of well-being and feelings about the new cultural environment.

Research have found that expatriates who have trouble integrating into a new culture frequently struggle to do the same in their new surroundings, and usually experience uneasiness, which will eventually lead to a number of undesirable outcomes such as low performance and job satisfaction [21], and early return to home culture [9]. The undesirable experience that they have in the new culture can potentially lead to a negative perception towards the new culture.

In general, when an expatriate is able to fully adapt themselves to the host environment, it will also ease their performance in the new culture [22]. Clearly, an expatriate's

ability to develop positive relationships with the locals, such as local employees, it will consequently help them meet the performance requirements defined by the organization [11].

### **2.3 The MPQ and Multicultural Effectiveness**

The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire which was developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven [23, 24] is an instrument that evaluates the types of personality that motivate multicultural effectiveness. The instrument which was widely used in measuring multicultural competences contains five dimensions: (1) cultural empathy (CE); (2) open-mindedness (OM); (3) social initiative (SI); (4) emotional stability (ES); and (5) flexibility, evaluates the way individuals adjust themselves to the new cultural setting.

#### **2.3.1 Cultural Empathy**

CE relates to the concerns that individual has towards the new culture [25]. In most cases, this dimension is identified as a crucial dimension of multicultural effectiveness [26]. Scholars have also referred to the dimension as cultural sensitivity to represent the ability to empathize with the emotions, ideas, and behaviors of persons from various cultures. In the case of expatriation, this is the ability of expatriates to understand and be sensitive of the way the people from different culture feel, think and behave. The feeling of empathy enables an expatriate to be more open towards cultural differences, and not simply evaluate them based on their cultural standard. For example, on what is perceived as right or wrong, or good or bad about certain things or behaviors.

An expatriate who are able to find positive meaning in new cultural setting will be able to adjust and get better acceptance by local people. This in turn, enable expatriates to receive social and emotional support which assist them to adapt and manage the stress associated with cross-cultural adjustment in both work- and non-work situations [28, 29]. This explains why the dimension of CE is a crucial facet of multicultural effectiveness [30, 31].

#### **2.3.2 Open-Mindedness**

The next dimension, OM, is a harmonious and unbiased attitude towards people with dissimilar cultural norms and values [26]. In other words, it refers to expatriates who have unprejudiced attitude toward members of minority groups and other cultural norms. Individuals who score higher on the OM scale have fewer rigid ideas about what is suitable and what is not and are more likely to be receptive of the new culture. OM is linked to cross-cultural adjustment [32]. The positive effect of OM on expatriates' adjustment is supported by empirical studies. For instance, [33] found that expatriates were more easily to adjust to both work- and non-work-related aspects of their assignments when they were less judgmental, less likely to evaluate others' behavior in the new culture, and more willing to try new things.

### 2.3.3 Social Initiative

SI describes an expatriate's propensity to stand out, make connections, and participate in new cultures. Researchers have also found out that expatriates should be driven to interact with host country nations rather than waiting for them to initiate contact, focusing on the learning and support components of social relationships [34, 35]. Besides being a crucial element of a fulfilling daily life, social connections with the locals can be developed through proactive social interactions which aid in cross-cultural adaptation. The connection is important as it provides knowledge about cultural variations and emotional support for coping with the tension and anxiety they are dealing.

The beneficial effects of SI on expatriates' adjustment are also supported by empirical studies. For instance, [36] discovered that interpersonal ties and communication skills among academic expatriates were crucial elements of intercultural competence.

### 2.3.4 Emotional Stability

ES is the ability to remain composed in stressful situations. This is in contrast to the inclination to exhibit intense emotional responses under stressful circumstances [37]. It describes the ability to deal with stressful situations without getting upset; and to be inclined toward self-acceptance.

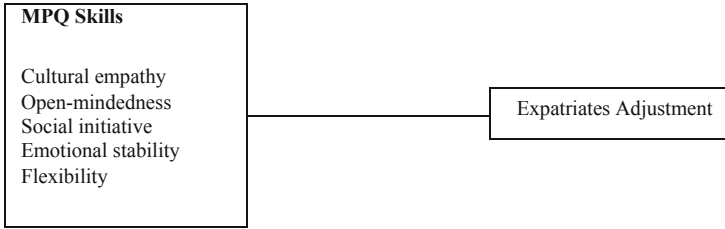
Studies by Sousa and Gonçalves [27] indicate that ES is the precursor of psychological well-being and successful adjustment. It affects job and interaction adjustment. Furthermore, [38] indicates that expatriates who struggle to adapt to cultural variations exhibit neurotic tendencies and a variety of psychosomatic symptoms, including panic attacks.

### 2.3.5 Flexibility

The flexibility dimension has been discussed by a number of scholars [26], and it is regarded as the most important component of a successful adjustment to a new cultural environment. The ability and propensity of expatriates to modify their usual behavioral patterns to unique or constrained situations in other countries would assist them in their adjustment towards the new cultural setting. A flexible attitude is advantageous because expatriates must cope with miscommunication and problems when working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

High culturally flexible expatriates are also able and willing to swap out non-work-related activities they enjoy in their home country for activities already available in the host nation [40]. Maintaining a same lifestyle in nations with differing economic growth and cultural values is difficult, thus being open to exploring or trying new things is a crucial component of general adjustment. Cultural adaptability can also be a significant antecedent of interaction adjustment since it makes it possible for expats to establish social bonds and be accepted by host country nations.

Based on these arguments, it is also anticipated that SIAEs also differ in their adjustment. We predict that SIAEs with high levels of MPQ elements would exhibit higher ability to adjust to the new environment. Hence, we generate a hypothesis to enable us to assess the potential dissimilarities in the pattern of adjustment among SIAEs. Figure 1



**Fig. 1.** Theoretical Framework

demonstrates the theoretical framework that explains the hypothesized relationships between the variables.

*Hypothesis: There are relationships between MPQ dimensions and expatriate adjustment.*

## 2.4 The Social Learning Theory and Adjustment

The Social Learning Theory (SLT), [41] suggests that people learn through observation. For an expatriation to be effective, a person must be enthusiastic and willing to learn about and have a favorable attitude towards the new culture [20]. The theory demonstrates that people model the behaviors of other as the internal psychological conditions are the vital element in learning process. The process of observational learning described by Bandura are comprised of four important components which include attention given to the environment or behavior, the retention of what is observed, reproducing the learned behaviors and finally, the motivation to adapt to the new cultural setting. The four components are crucial when expatriates move to a new unfamiliar setting.

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Respondents

The respondents of the study comprised of SIAEs who worked for one of Malaysia's public universities. The information about these expatriates was obtained from the relevant office that handled international employees working with the university. From the list obtained from this office, we were able to identify 101 SIAEs attached to various schools at the university. The information obtained was regarded confidential, and could only be used for the purpose of the present research.

### 3.2 Instrumentation

We utilized the quantitative research design, and 101 self-administered questionnaire was distributed through a drop and collect method. The questionnaire comprised of three sections which measured the dimensions of MPQ, SIAEs adjustment and SIAEs

**Table 1.** Measures

Variables	Measures	Total Items	Alpha Values
MPQ	Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven [23, 24]	18 items	.79
Cultural empathy		18 items	.78
Open-mindedness		17 items	.81
Social initiative		20 items	.80
Emotional stability		18 items	.77
Flexibility			
Expatriates adjustment	Diener et al.; Van Sonderen	28 items	.81

demographic information. The respondents rated their feelings in response to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale, which indicated how they viewed the statements for each variable being studied. Of the total 101 questionnaires being distributed, 94 of them were returned, representing a 93% return rate. This was sufficient for data analysis.

Table 1 displays the measurement of each variable employed by the study, which reveals a high reliability coefficient. All elements were loaded onto one factor in the principal component factor analysis, indicating the scale is unidimensional.

## 4 Results

The descriptive analysis reveals that 61 percent of the respondents (58 SIAEs) aged between 41 to 45 years old, with 10.6 percent (10 SIEAs) were female. All respondents claimed that they graduated with a doctoral degree. A majority of them (68.1 percent) were hired by the university as senior lecturers. Of the total number of SIAEs being hired, 86.1 percent (81) were married and 77.6 percent (73 of them) had their family accompanying them to Malaysia. SIAEs from Indonesia represented the biggest group of SIAEs attached to the university, which was 19 percent (18 SIEAs). This was followed by India (15.9 percent), Nigeria (12.8 percent), and the United States, Pakistan and Yemen respectively (7 percent). The remaining were SIAEs from other countries representing only a small number. It was also shown that more than 50 percent of these SIAEs had been in Malaysia for more than two years. One-fifth of them, or 52.1 percent, had prior international employment experience. Seventy-three respondents (77.6 percent) of these SIAEs had a limited knowledge of the language of the host country, which is Bahasa Malaysia. Their knowledge of the host country's language was limited to a few short, straight forward phrases.

The means, standard deviations (SDs), and correlations of each variable were also computed using the entire sample of respondents. Table 2 lists the mean distributions, SDs, and correlations for each variable. The factor with the highest mean value was expatriate adjustment ( $\bar{x} = 3.83$ ). It was also found that of all the variables, flexibility scored the lowest ( $\bar{x} = 3.26$ ). Additionally, it was evident that, out of all the MPQ dimensions, CE did not exhibit any associations with emotional flexibility and stability. The association between CE and the adjustment of SIAEs was also not significant. In relation to that, the association between open-mindedness and SIAEs adjustment was also not significant.

**Table 2.** Means, SDs and Correlations of All Variables

Variables	M	SDs	1	2	3	4	5	6
CE	3.46	.39						
OM	3.58	.36	.67**					
SI	3.51	.36	.31**	.58**				
ES	3.44	.34	.19	.40**	.49**			
FL	3.26	.32	.18	.41**	.42**	.47**		
Expatriate Adjustment	3.83	.54	.13	.12	.16**	.21*	.23*	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Based on the findings of the hierarchical regression analysis, the results of the correlation between MPQ dimensions and expatriate adjustment are reported. Of the MPQ variables, cultural empathy ( $\beta=.28$ ,  $t=2.64$ ,  $p=.05$ ); open-mindedness ( $\beta=.28$ ,  $t=2.13$ ,  $p=.05$ ); emotional stability ( $\beta=.34$ ,  $t=2.87$ ,  $p=.05$ ) and flexibility showed significant correlations with expatriate adjustment. The social initiative factor did not correspond with any form of adjustment. The MPQ dimensions were responsible for 39% of the variance in expatriate adjustment overall.

## 5 Discussions and Conclusions

The main objective of our research is to determine the relationships between MPQ dimensions and expatriate adjustment. We hypothesized significant relationships between MPQ and expatriate adjustment. The findings revealed that CE, OM, ES and flexibility are associated with SIAEs adjustment. Our findings are consistent with past studies which revealed significant relationships between CE, OM, ES and flexibility on adjustment [27, 33, 39, 40]. Expatriates with high CE, high OM and good ES are able to deal with the differences that exist between the home and the host cultures. It also enables them to understand and sympathize with the feelings of another person. By flexibility, expatriates can easily move around and adjust to the new environment. This in return, provides them with the opportunity to know and learn about the people and local culture, which would consequently lead to a successful and meaningful cross-cultural experience

On the other hand, SI is not related to SIAEs adjustment. The finding is not consistent with past research by Pylväs and Nokelainen [36] as anticipated [34]. Suggests that talkative and outgoing behavior may not be appreciated in vertical collectivist organizational style especially if it disturbs vertical relations and in-group boundaries [43]. Perhaps due to this culture-initiated caveat, extraversion is not considered among the most important multicultural personality of expatriate effectiveness and cross-cultural adjustment [44]. Social initiative may not be related to general and interaction adjustment in Malaysia, we expect it to facilitate work adjustment due to the positive outcomes in work context.



In conclusion, this study found that most of dimensions of MPQ scales are significantly related to expatriate adjustment. The main reason to this could be the country of origin of SIAEs involved in the study, where most of them came from Asian countries with similar cultural backgrounds. Second, the results can also be explained by the nature of expatriates, in which SIAEs travelled independently to seek employment abroad. The fact that 50% of them had prior job experience abroad may have made it easier for them to foresee the changes in the new culture. This is also in line with the SLT, which explains how people pick up on new cultural norms by observing others and modelling their own behavior after them.

## 5.1 Implications and Limitations

Although the number of small sample size involved in our research was rather small, the size was considered satisfactory. The calculation of regression weights connected to the hypothesis testing, however, could have led to further issues as a result. Considering this, future research on investigating SIAEs should consider a bigger number of samples. The generalizability of research findings could be improved by using a larger sample size and including academic expatriates from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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