

# "Belt & Road" International Education and Cultural Exchange in Higher Education in Malaysia Among Mainland Chinese Students

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## ABSTRACT

*This article is a conceptual review on the One Belt One Road International Education and Cultural Exchange in Higher Education in Malaysia among Mainland Chinese Students. The "Belt & Road" aimed to create the world's largest platform for economic cooperation, including policy, economics, social and cultural cooperation to achieve mutual reciprocity and mutual benefit. In response to the development strategy of OBOR, institutions of higher learning play important roles in cultivating talents and enhancing cross-cultural cooperation. Thus, study abroad opportunities could be the best way to give students a worldwide viewpoint. As the worldwide trend is leaning toward globalization, the tendency for students to study abroad has increased, especially students who study abroad for tertiary education. These enrolments of foreign students could greatly help to recover the higher education sector and restore the economy of a country. This paper examines past research and numerous international*



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*literatures to provide an overview of factors that may influence the development of international education and cultural exchange. It is anticipated that the development of cross-cultural learning syllabus would yield positive outcomes such as increase study abroad opportunities and learn cutting-edge knowledge, reduce the cultural and language conflicts through the convergency of the education system.*

**Keywords:** *Belt and Road; cross-cultural cooperation; tertiary education*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world's trend to embrace globalization, particularly at the higher education level has resulted in an increasing tendency among students to further their studies abroad (Di Maggio, 2016; Liu et al., 2014; McCabe, 2001). This has not only impacted the international tertiary education in both sourcing and destination countries, but it has also increased cross-cultural cooperation, economic cooperation, and social development (Liu et al., 2014).

Studying overseas is a challenging process which demands students to make prior academic plans and to face various adaptation challenges successfully. Moreover, students who possess higher achievement motivation are more likely to have higher desire to gain study abroad exposure and experience (Li et al., 2013). There is a significant relationship between learners' decision to study abroad and their performance academically, particularly in the areas of learners' high school participation and attitudes in taking college courses, and reading literacy (Li et al., 2013; Salisbury et al., 2010). Students with great academic achievement would have clear targets on the study programs, and hence, they would consider the options to study abroad as there are limited slots in high-ranking universities in China.

The students' decision to study abroad can be categorized into three stages, which are the students' decision to study abroad rather than locally, the students' selection on the study abroad destination and the students' selection on the study abroad institution (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). There are six factors affecting students' selection of study abroad destination, such as, 1) knowledge and awareness, 2) personal recommendations, 3) cost

issues, 4) environment, 5) geographic proximity, and 6) social links (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

## **One Belt One Road (OBOR)**

The "One Belt One Road" or "Belt and Road" initiative was proposed by President Xi Jinping (President of People's Republic of China) in 2013. This initiative comprises two major components: 1) Silk Road Economic Belt and 2) 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Du, 2016; Nalbantoglu, 2017; Skarner et. al., 2018). The objective of the initiative is to create the world's largest platform for economic cooperation, including policy, economics, social and cultural cooperation to achieve mutual reciprocity and mutual benefit (Gao & Ma, 2016; Skarner et. al., 2018). Cultural, education/academic, and talent exchanges are a cluster of sub-objectives within the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative, which aims to expand the scale of international students, strengthen the exchange of talents between countries, and effectively promote international cooperation in schools and universities (Gao & Ma, 2016).

In response to the development strategy of OBOR, institutions of higher learning play important roles in cultivating talents and enhancing cross-cultural cooperation (Gao & Ma, 2016). Thus, study abroad opportunities could be the best way to give students a worldwide viewpoint (Beelen, 2012; Leask, 2004; Li et al., 2013). As the worldwide trend is leaning toward globalization, the tendency for students to study abroad has increased, especially students who study abroad for tertiary education (Liu et al., 2014). The traditional international education providers, such as the United States of America, Canada, England, and Australia have been known as dream countries for Chinese students to study abroad (Liu et al., 2014). However, many other countries have emerged as attractive study abroad destinations for Chinese students in recent years, for instance, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Germany (Liu et al., 2014). There are several ways for Chinese students to study abroad, which include student exchange programs, services offered by educational consultants/agencies, and applying and enrolling personally for the courses and programs of choice.

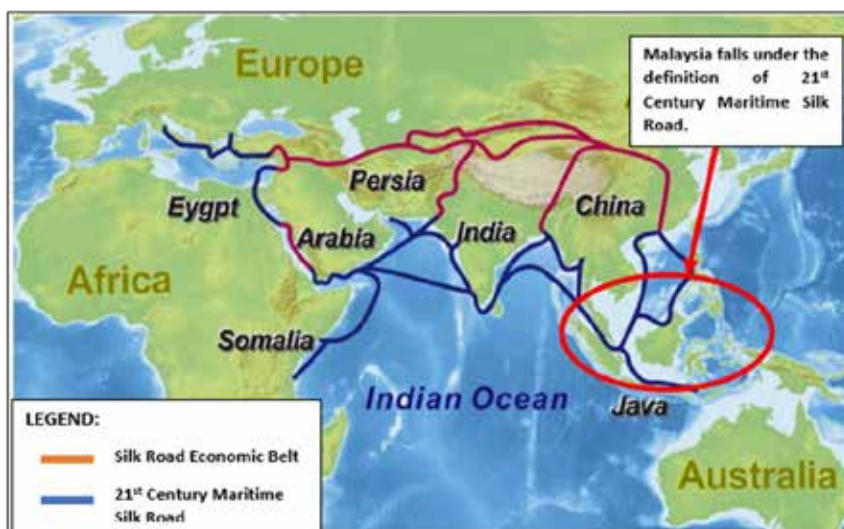
The study abroad initiatives are not without challenges. The typical challenges for Chinese students in studying abroad include issues such as language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievement (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Communication is one of the largest barriers between the local people and foreigners. Reducing conflicts, enhancing understanding, and increasing acceptance of the local community towards foreigners are the foundation of the OBOR strategic policy's implementation (Gao & Ma, 2016). Besides that, understanding and respecting the local cultures should be fostered to enable the students to adapt to the new cultural environment. Undoubtedly, graduation is the final goal of studying abroad for all students. Hence, to achieve good academic grades, students would have to increase their self-motivation to continue studying abroad and to see it to completion.

A new grand strategy initiated by China's President Xi Jinping, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was launched in September 2013, focuses on the economic cooperation on diverse issues between countries under the defined Silk Road - an ancient network of trade routes which connected China to the western world (Du, 2016). The initiative was further extended to maritime version in October 2013 and renamed 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This initiative aimed not only to boost economic cooperation among the participating states but also to gain economic advantage (Du, 2016). Besides, a strategy model called "Convergence" which integrates educational reforms and economic advancement based on latest and effective ways, is a strategic approach to form organizational networks through collaborations and interdependent actions (McGrath, 2008). It has been argued that socio-cultural convergence with education may improve economic connections (Hofstede, 1978; Hanushek, 2016; Ghinea et al., 2017; Wang, 2020).

The Silk Road, popularly known as an ancient network of trade routes, which was formally set up during the Chinese Han Dynasty, has connected many regions in the ancient world due to commercial interest between 130 BCE and 1453 CE as illustrated in Figure 1 (Rui et al. 2015). The Silk Road routes stretched from China through India, Asia Minor, cutting across Mesopotamia all the way to Egypt, the African continent, Greece, Rome, and Britain (Hansen, 2012). The route was named Silk Road because one of the leading export items of the Chinese then was silk (Skarner et. al., 2018).

The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road refers to the marine routes of Belt and Road (B&R) participating countries, linking Asian countries such as Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sudan through ports, oil and gas pipelines, and economic corridors (Sarker et. al., 2018). Malaysia is also one of the B&R member countries listed in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road map (Rui et al., 2015) as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Rui et al., 2015)*



In summary, the BRI aims to create a harmonious trade through cultural exchange in order to create connectivity on both cultural and economic aspects. Thus, academic exchange is of paramount importance in an effort to cross the border trade and to build mutual respect and trust.

## Cultural Exchange

Culture can be defined as a matrix of meanings that plays a constitutive part in generating and preserving a collective identity (Crossaint & Trinn, 2009; Gay, 1994). Malaysia is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country that constitutes a combination of regional cultures including Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazans and other indigenous ethnic

groups. China is also a multi-ethnic country, but Han Chinese is the largest population in China (about 90%) (Michailova & Hutchings, 2006).

## **The Malaysian culture and cultural diversity**

Malaysia's population is highly pluralistic and is made up of more than 80 ethnic groups including three main ethnic groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). In 2019, the total population increased from 32.4 million people (2018) to approximately 32.6 million people of which 29.4 million people or 90.2% were citizens while the 3.2 million people or 9.8%, non-citizens. The Malaysian population consists of ethnic groups such as Bumiputera such as the Malays and the indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%). The Malays form the biggest ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia, constituting 63.1 percent of the total population. The Ibans is the largest indigenous group constituting 30.3 percent of Sarawak's total population while the Kadazan/Dusun form approximately 24.5 percent of Sabah's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). However, the Chinese and Indians have their ancestral background as immigrants who came to Malaya as tin miners and labourers to spur economic activities during the colonial days in the middle of 19th century (Wan Husin, 2012). The interactions between the different ethnic groups have evolved into a special feature in Malaysia called "Cultural Diversity" (Suhaili et. al., 2019).

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, cultural diversity, which is often linked with national unity and integration, has been the key agenda and focus of the political leaders (Suhaili et. al., 2019). Cultural diversity has been given strong emphasis and it is one of the six pillars in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013- 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In the same Blueprint, it is stated that the Malaysian education system aims to be an educational system that offers sharing of experience and value to children by respecting diversity. This effort intends to produce citizens who are proud to be Malaysians although their ethnicities, religions, or economic backgrounds are different. It is hoped that with the formation of this national identity, a Malaysian society that tolerates each another is united and becomes a harmonious society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study examines past research and numerous international literatures to provide an overview of factors that may influence the development of international education and cultural exchange. By the end of this review, the objective to examine the most effective syllabus that can help to reduce socio-cultural conflict between different countries especially in tertiary education based on effective teaching and learning methods can be achieved.

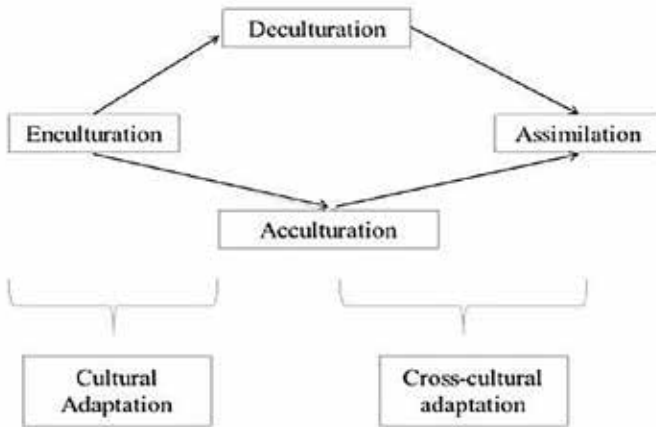
This review was conducted following the theoretical framework proposed by Kim (2001) and Gudykunst (2005). The theory postulates a zero-sum process whereby assimilation or "adaptation" occurs only to the extent that the newcomer lose the characteristics of their original cultural identity, such as language, customs, beliefs and values. This framework formulated a unified communication theory on cross-cultural adaptation. This theory views adaptation as a balancing act characterized by a "stress-adaptation-growth" sequence. Over time, this process ultimately results in improved functional alignment and mental well-being in relation to the new environment. This aspect of Kim's theory emphasizes the unavoidable tension faced by individuals during a cross-cultural transition as they aim to preserve elements of their original culture while simultaneously trying to assimilate into the new setting (Kim, 2001; Kim 2005).

The relevant past research and numerous international literatures were examined in the period for the past 10 years to identify factors that may influence the development of international education and cultural exchange. The exploratory activities of the literature reviews led to the identification of relevant research questions. The numerous research questions for the literature exploration were grouped with the themes, namely: BRI Initiative, Socio-cultural Conflict in Tertiary Education, Multicultural syllabus, Student adaptation, Intercultural training programs, and Integrative methodologies.

When reviewing the literature to answer the research questions, the researchers also noted the factors that influenced enculturation and acculturation. When individuals immerse themselves in unfamiliar settings, they instinctively exhibit behaviors shaped by their prior cultural experiences: this is termed enculturation (Figure 2). Enculturation involves

gaining insights into the diverse cultural aspects of the new environment. Acculturation encompasses the gradual inclination to embrace new behavioral norms. In contrast, deculturation refers to the shedding of original cultural habits and practices when transitioning into a new cultural setting (Duong, 2022).

**Figure 2**  
*Acculturation Process*



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Implication of BRI in Malaysia as a countermeasure of cultural barriers

The BRI is not only a trade route but also a conduit for cultural exchange. The benefits of BRI are expected to be shared by all countries that have taken part in this international economic cooperation endeavour of an unprecedented scale (Koh, 2017). BRI attempts to revive the ancient Silk Road Spirit of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” through cultural and academic exchanges, tourism, sharing of information on healthcare and poverty eradication and cooperation in science and technology (Saluto, 2019). This initiative and cooperation between countries and societies would foster closer ties and understanding in order to achieve success in the implementation of BRI (Koh, 2017).



## **Cultural diversity**

Cultural diversity is frequently related with national unity and integration which is the main agenda that has been the focus of state leadership since the beginning of independence (Suhaili et. al., 2019). Despite limited interactions among diverse people, major racial conflicts among Malaysians were rare (Haque, 2003). Different groups, majority or minority, are allowed to practice their cultural values expectations. Each ethnic group in Malaysia practices different religions, uses different mother tongues, goes to different vernacular/ national schools, and tends to socialise mostly within the same ethnicity. Malaysians, although divided by ethnicities, religions, mother- tongues, and marked physical differences, appeared to live peacefully with each other. They remained respectful of each other's practices and traditions. In a multiracial country like Malaysia, mutual respect and tolerance are vital for stability. Therefore, it is crucial for the citizens to put aside their differences and collaborate towards the country's progress. Living in a diverse society provides the people an opportunity to learn, help each other and strive towards personal growth.

Malaysia have more than 80 ethnic groups with three major ethnics and total populations are estimated at 32.6 million in 2019 which comprised of 29.4 million (90.2%) citizens and 3.2 million (9.8%) non-citizens. Malaysian citizens consist of the ethnic groups Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and Others (0.7%). Among the Malaysian citizens, the Malays was the predominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia which constituted 63.1 per cent. The Ibans constituted 30.3 per cent of the total citizens in Sarawak while Kadazan/Dusun made up 24.5 per cent in Sabah (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Chinese and Indian citizen are the descendants of immigrants who came to Malaya during the middle of 19th century to fill up the labour gap required to spur colonial economic activities (Wan Husin, 2012). The interaction between different ethnic groups results a special characteristic in Malaysia called "Cultural Diversity" (Suhaili et. al., 2019).

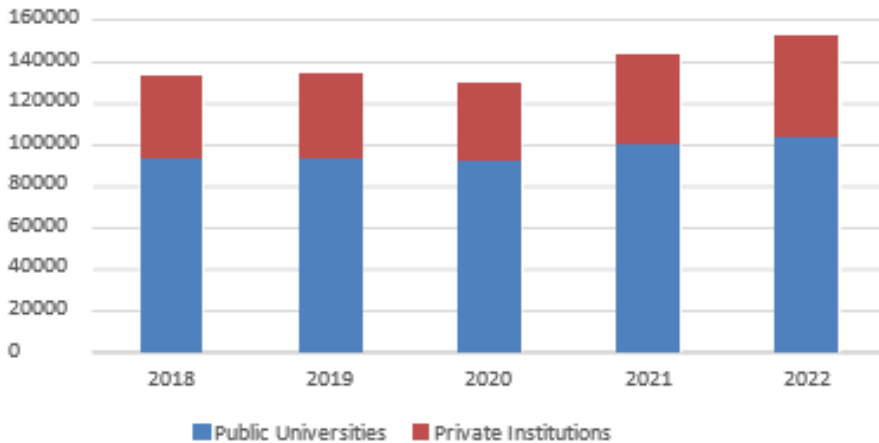
Cultural diversity is frequently related with national unity and integration which is the main agenda that has been the focus of state leadership since the beginning of independence (Suhaili et. al., 2019). The cultural diversity is strongly emphasized as one of the six aspirations of the education system in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025

(Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The system aspiration states "an educational system that offers sharing of experience and value to children by respecting diversity" as stated in National Education Blueprint 2013-2025. This exertion points to create individuals who are pleased to be known as Malaysians. The formation of this national identity will create a Malaysian society that understands one another, and becomes a harmonious society.

### Statistics of International Students by year 2018-2022

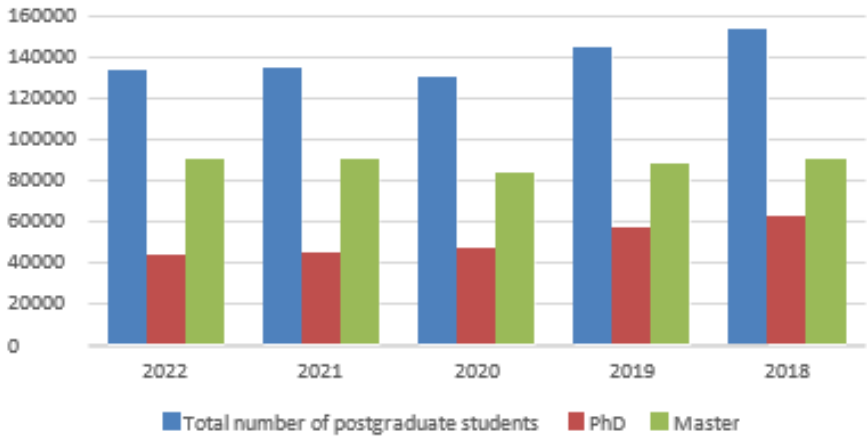
**Figure 3**

*Enrolment for international postgraduate students by institutions from 2020-2022*



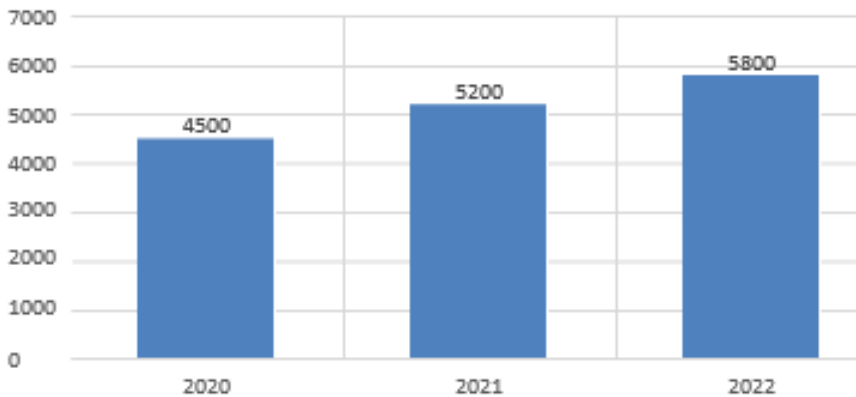
Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2023

**Figure 4**  
*Number of international postgraduate students (Master & PhD) from 2018-2023*



Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2023

**Figure 5**  
*Number of China postgraduate students from 2020-2023*



The number of Chinese postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian universities has significantly increased during the past three years (Figure 5). Approximately 4,500 students were enrolled in the program in 2020; this number rose to 5,200 in 2021; and, finally, to a projected 5,800 in 2022 (Statistics Malaysia, 2022; University Consortium, 2023). This ongoing

development, seen in the accompanying graph, highlights Malaysia's appeal to Chinese students as a location for higher education. This tendency may be influenced by a number of elements, including the standard of education, cultural compatibility, and joint venture agreements between China and Malaysia. The graph illustrates the growing academic relations between the two countries, highlighting Malaysia's status as a rising hub.

## **Cross-cultural adaptation of international students**

Study abroad issues require an in-depth understanding of cross-cultural adaptation research (Wang, 2020). Cross-cultural adaptation continues to be the focus of analysts since the beginning of the 20th century (Kim, 2000). Basically, cross-cultural adaptation is a concept which covers a continuum of a person's preferred responses to a new social setting ranging from total adoption to total rejection of the acceptable of social standards (Lian & Tsang, 2010; Sullivan, 2008; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). However, Ward et al., (2001), revealed one vital finding about movement changes of international students whereby cross-cultural adaptation is linked to mental and sociocultural well-being, and fulfilment with considerations of overseas contemplations. Thus, cross-cultural adaptation alludes to changes in values, convictions, and behaviours resulting from prolonged contact with a present culture.

Adaptation becomes a major concern for international students who stay in a new country or society during studying abroad (Chaney & Martine, 2005; Davis & Krapels, 2005). International students have to develop new lifestyles to adapt to the new cultural environment (Chen & Isa, 2003; Li et al., 2013; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). They have to communicate and interact with the locals in their new environments. The international students must adjust their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations as there are bound to be differences between their culture and the culture of the new environment (Chaney & Martine, 2005; Davis & Krapels, 2005). This unavoidable social and cultural adaptation (sociocultural adaptation) has largely impacted the daily lives of international students.

## **Sociocultural constraints faced by international students**

In adapting to the new cultural environment, international students require a change in culture learning perspective and the ability to socialize

in the host culture (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Social and cultural factors are the two main factors which influence international students' life in adapting to new cultural environment, from the moment they arrive on campus to their decision to continue with their studies, and subsequently to sustain until they graduate from their studies abroad. Some of them have to undertake some challenging tasks independently such as carrying out daily routines, looking for food and accommodation (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Language barriers and basic communication are the main factors to convey their basic needs in daily life (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Li et al., 2013). Due to the international students' limited vocabulary and not familiar with the speech pace, they often find it difficult to understand the spoken host language in communications (Bista & Gaulee, 2019; Robertson et al., 2000). Nevertheless, language barriers are not restricted to speaking using the host language, but also in reading and writing in the host language (Robertson et al., 2000).

While facing difficulties in second language fluency, the lack of formal and casual social networks in the new environment have in actual fact burdened them in performing their basic social responsibilities). This language difficulty results in stress and depression among international students who have typically been able to carry out these basic responsibilities in their home country (Lee & Rice, 2007; Trice, 2007). Therefore, Rajapaksa and Dunes (2002) have observed that international students have a tendency to experience loneliness and homesickness more common than the local students.

Previous study also showed that language barriers have a negative influence on international students' academic achievement (Long et al., 2009). Due to language limitations, it is not easy for international students to fully understand what the lecturers say or what the lecturers want. Nevertheless, it is not only just a matter of language proficiency for international students, but also unfamiliar learning approaches in the host country has brought about great challenges to the international students in their academic achievements (Borland & Pearce, 2002; Shin, 2011).

Suseela and Poovaikarasi (2011) has categorized the constraints faced by international students into 4 themes: (a) general living adjustment,

(b) sociocultural adjustment, (c) personal psychological adjustment, and (d) academic adjustment. General living adjustment encompasses constraints to the host country's weather/climate, transportation systems, bill payment, health care systems, food, and accommodation arrangements. These basic routines are time and energy consuming for the students. Sociocultural adjustment refers to experiences such as culture shock (local social interactions), discrimination, new values, new norms, and new customs. Depression, loneliness, feelings of isolation, homesickness and frustration are issues which lead to personal psychological adjustment. In addition, they are concerned about their families' well-being and employment opportunities after graduation.

### **Future perspective of One Belt and One Road International Education and Cultural exchange**

Malaysian higher education institutions/universities, being one of the connecting bridges under social and cultural cooperation between China and Malaysia, provide various opportunities for Chinese students to study abroad in Malaysia and to learn the cutting-edge knowledge in particular professional fields. During the study abroad opportunities, students should not only gain professional knowledge, but they should also enhance their ability to communicate with local people, to understand the differences in both Malaysian and Chinese histories, and to accept the various different races and religions, all of which are also the BRI objectives under the cross-cultural cooperation. It is anticipated the development of cross-cultural learning syllabus would generate positive outcomes such as increase study abroad opportunities and learn cutting-edge knowledge, reduce the cultural and language conflicts through the convergency of education system.

### **CONCLUSION**

The significance of the BRI aims to expand the scale of international students to strengthen the exchange of talents between countries, and to effectively promote international cooperation in schools and universities. Therefore, an effective syllabus can be developed to reduce socio-cultural conflict between different countries especially in tertiary education teaching and learning methods. Education which aims to include the multicultural syllabus should focus on the value of multiculturalism and skills that

contribute and encourage students to adapt to the new educational environment in the short term. In addition, teachers should develop their academic skills in order to lead their students towards a cohesive study context. The students should understand the importance of multiculturalism so they are able to accept and integrate the local practice in their country of study.

Adaptation and awareness of multiculturalism in the environment are important because this practice and awareness can introduce new thoughts, ideas and views to students. Therefore, intercultural training programs which start from a pre-training analysis to a post-program evaluation should be included. In that way, the interactive methodology can combine all the intercultural research theory, real-life examples, workshops and practical advice for students studying abroad.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS**

All authors contribute equally for this article.

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