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# Intercultural and Workplace Adaptation: A case study of Malaysian Professional Returnees

Mageswari Kunasegaran[a] * Maimunah Ismail [b], Roziah Mohd Rasdi[c], Ismi Arif Ismail[d]

*a,b,c,d Department of Professional Development and continuing Education, Faculty of Education Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia*

Intercultural adaptation is one of the factors affecting success of returnees' adaptation at the workplace. This study aims to gain insights into Malaysian professional returnees' cultural response from the organisational challenges and supportive role perspective. Integrative Communication Theory was used to explain the interaction between returnees and the organisation climate. This study was conducted through a qualitative approach. Thematic analysis revealed two themes: a) challenges in working environment, and b) the supportive role of the management is required in their adaptation. The empirical findings indicate that Malaysian professional returnees experience different challenges in the organisation. Top management support is the most prominent factor that influences returnee's adaptation at the workplace.

*Keywords:* Intercultural Adaptation, Malaysian Professional Returnees, Interactive Communication Theory and Workplace Adaptation.

## 1. Introduction

There is an abundance of literature surrounding intercultural or cross-cultural adaptation for years (Oberg, 1960; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Kim, 2001; Chaban, Williams, Holland, Boyce, & Warner, 2011; McGraw, Brooks, Myers, Vizcarra, Edwards, Arroyo, & Hernandez, 2012). However, little recognition in the context of workplace was ever made (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; MacDonald & Arthur, 2005). Furthermore, a well-established

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* Corresponding author.
  *E-mail address:* mag8515@yahoo.com

repatriation literature has agreed that intercultural adaptation of returnees at the workplace is more rigid than expatriates' adjustment in the host country (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005). For instance, returnees need at least three to five years to adapt (McGraw et al., 2012); 60 percent of returnees experienced reverse culture shock (Black et al., 1992) and 25 percent of them were engaged in re-migration due to "challenges to self-concept, values conflict, unconfirmed expectations, and a sense of loss" (MacDonald, 2000, p.14). Inadequate returnees' adaptation practices represented a significant human resource development (HRD) problem and a potential obstacle to retain them in the home country. Poor returnees practice is more costly (Black, et al., 1992) than calling back strategy (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005) and leading to dissatisfaction and turnover of returnees (McGraw et al., 2012). A series of Kim's (1988; 2001; 2005; 2007) studies has alarmed scholars and practitioners to pay attention to intercultural dimension to speed up returnees' adaptation process at the workplace. Additionally, intercultural adaptation is influenced by an individual's experiences to determine the length of stay at the workplace (Kim, 1988, 2001). Therefore, intercultural adaptation is one of the primary elements experienced by returned professionals at workplace (Ahn & Kim, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into Malaysian professional returnees on intercultural adaptation that is associated with workplace adaptation (WA). The study posed two research questions: i) What are the challenges faced during the returnees' returning period to Malaysia? and, ii) How do local organisations support their adaptation at the workplace? This study aspires to contribute to the Integrative Communication theory (Kim, 2001), by adding values to current dimensions of Kim's cross-cultural adaptation. It specifically extends the understanding of intercultural perspective from cultural challenges and organisational support.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Workplace Adaptation Definition

The term adaptation is originated from expatriate studies on culture shock (Oberg, 1960) and repatriate studies on reverse culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Hannighan (1990) viewed adaptation as a coping strategy in a new environment, as well as accepting the home country's culture values. It is also defined as a communication experience and psychological well-being in the process of adapting (Ahn & Kim, 2015). In HRD context, WA captured the interest of researchers when HRD scholars began to penetrate on organisational socialisation as a research area (Reio, 1997). Furthermore, Reio & Sutton (2006) have developed the integration model between WA and newcomers' adjustment. WA has been identified as one of the key determinants of returnee's retention in the home country (Siddiqui & Tejada, 2014). This research defines WA as an integration process between acculturation and adjustment at new workplace based on Kim's (2001) definition.

### 2.2. Intercultural Adaptation and Workplace Adaptation

In the effort of cultivating returnee's talent, intercultural adaptation plays an important role in connecting returnees and organisation members at the workplace (Kim, 2001). Kim defined intercultural adaptation as "a dynamic process by which a firm develops and maintains relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with a new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural and institutional environment" (p. 201). Further, Kim and Ruben (1988) described intercultural adaptation as an individual psychological transformation over a long period of time. Additionally, Chen (2013) supported that communication is central to adaptation, such as the ability to interact effectively and build communication network between the host and home countries. In other words, intercultural adaptation is a dynamic process where it extends the degree of mutual understanding, mutual respect, and mutual acceptance among individuals in a workplace environment (McGraw et al., 2012).

Kim (2005) classified intercultural adaptation into two levels – individual and group. The individual-level adaptation focused on the psychological adjustment such as interpersonal action, reaction, interaction in an unfamiliar environment, a way of socialisation, and coping strategy by newcomers. Meanwhile, the group-level interaction is based on acculturation process of groups of people from different cultures in one place, which eventually leads to the transformation of mutual cultural belief or value orientation (Kim, 2001 as cited in Chen, 2013). There are five general models to describe returnees' adaptation process in a new culture. First, acculturation model focuses on returnees' adjustment and consequences outcome (Berry, 1997). Second, coping model describes the way returnees adjust to the