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# Expatriate Adjustment: Validating Multicultural Personality Trait among Self-initiated Academic Expatriates

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## Abstract

This study looks at the adjustment of self-initiated academic expatriates working at one of the public universities in Malaysia. The main aim of the research is to investigate the relationship between Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) and the expatriate's personal, professional and social adjustment. The MPQ consists of five dimensions - cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. One-hundred and one questionnaires were distributed to self-initiated academic expatriates attached to various departments at the university. Results show that the MPQ predicts all three types of adjustment. Apart from the results, the discussions and limitations of the study are also presented in the paper.

## 1. Introduction

A significant number of literature on expatriates appears to focus on organizational expatriates (OEs) (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Selmer & Lauring, 2011). However, as globalization takes place, expatriate assignments are no more organizational decisions but rather of personal choice and individual growth. As research on the adjustment of OEs has reached its highest point and the phenomenon is well-understood (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Myers & Pringle, 2005), another group of expatriates that is now being highlighted is the self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). This group of international employees was first being highlighted by Torrington (1994) but only in recent

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years researchers begin to shift their attention on individuals who initiate their own travel and find work in a foreign country. This group of expatriates perceives overseas experience as a means of self-development or part of other personal agenda, and their career developments do not follow the structured organizational path of the OEs. Myers and Pringle (2005) label SIEs as a form of self-managed global career. They should be separated from OEs and be seen as part of an individual's career enhancement (Inkson, Pringle, Arthur & Berry, 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). According to Myers and Pringle (2005), this career path is predominantly undertaken by the younger generation who likes to explore the world and experience new cultures.

In this era, the utilization of SIEs in the global market does not only involve business organizations as universities are also joining the global work market, searching for potential academics. This enables for more academic expatriates to travel and work around the globe since many countries have an open-door policy towards academic expatriates. For example, in Malaysia, it has been the government's policy that local universities employ foreign academics to teach in the country to enable local students to get more exposures of other cultures, especially the language, values and teaching styles. However, for some countries, the employment of academic expatriates could be attributed towards the shortages of knowledge workers in the country (Adler & Ghadar, 1990). The increase in the number of movement of academic expatriates has enabled the local universities to offer attractive contracts to suitably qualified academics from other countries. Being the SIEs, academic expatriates have often initiated their travel to foreign countries themselves (Richardson & McKenna, 2000). As compared to business organizations, universities present a whole new work environment involving different job requirements such as lectures, research projects, publications, consultation, acquiring research grants and administration (Barry, Berg & Changler, 2003). The increasing numbers of academic expatriates have also led to that more universities have an international faculty representing different national cultures (Altbach, 1996). Hence, the management of university becomes more challenging as expatriate academics present growing challenges for institutions of higher education (Richardson & McKenna, 2000) that is likely to be even more critical in the future. Questions arise in terms of what supports are available to academic expatriate, whether in their work and what is needed to ensure effective support and thus, lead to their effective adjustment to the new cultural environment. As many have discussed, in order to adjust to a new culture and work efficiently, these expatriates need to accommodate their attitudes and behaviors to the new cultural context (Huang, Chi & Lawler, 2005). Therefore, the main aim of the present research is to establish the predictive relationships of the MPQ and the expatriates' personal, social and professional adjustment. Specifically, the research investigates whether MPQ has any significant relationships with the three areas of adjustment.

## 1.1. Expatriate adjustment

So, what is expatriate adjustment? Scholars have come up with various definitions of expatriate adjustment. For the purpose of this research, expatriates adjustment is defined as the level at which an expatriate feels comfortable towards the new environment which consequently leads him/her to function effectively in that environment. Three areas of adjustment are identified from the literature: the psychological (personal) and sociocultural (social) adjustment (Searle & Ward, (1990), and work (professional) adjustment (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Hawes & Kealey, 1981). Psychological adjustment relates to psychological well-being and satisfaction with the various aspects of life. It focuses more on the attitude of the expatriate or sojourner. Unlike psychological adjustment, sociocultural adjustment refers to the social skills that inspire the attitudinal factors. It is one's ability to "fit in" into the new cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990). It concerns the way a sojourner deals with problems associated with living in a new environment, how he/she strive to perform effectively and interact meaningfully with people of the host nation (Aycan, 1997). In this research, social support is seen as the support that expatriates received from peers at work. Work adjustment simply refers to how an individual accomplishes their tasks and their attitude towards work (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) and this is marked by good performance and a positive attitude towards the new job in the new cultural environment.