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Adaptive coping strategies among credit transfer students: a qualitative study of UPGRIS and DMMMSU partnership program

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Adaptive coping strategies among credit transfer students: a qualitative study of UPGRIS and DMMMSU partnership program



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Abstract: International Credit Transfer was held between Universitas PGRI Semarang and Don Mariano Marcos Memorial University (DMMMSU) Philippines. The students of UPGRIS would learn at DMMMSU for a semester. The language and cultural differences became challenges for the students to adapt to the learning situation. This matter brings psychological challenges for the students. Therefore, they had to promote coping strategies to manage their difficulties. This research determined the adaptive coping strategy of credit transfer students. This qualitative approach research provided the real experience and portrayal of a real research site by directly interacting with the research subjects. The researchers involved four students of the Guidance and Counseling program with credit transfer program status for a semester. The researchers collected the data with a structured interview and documentation. The applied analyses included three matters: data reduction, data presentation, and data verification. The results showed that every participant applied problem-focused coping, plain-problem solving, confrontative strategy, and social support search for instrumental reasons. Universities should provide psychological services to increasing international student's stress managing skill.

Keywords: Coping strategies; International students; Students academic adjustment

INTRODUCTION

The International Credit Transfer Program is part of Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka policy to facilitate students enriching and developing their potential by studying at other overseas universities. This program prepares students with global competence in an effort of anticipating global competition from various aspects. Thus, collaboration with overseas universities is important to realize.

The General Directorate of High Education, represented by the Directorate of Education and Students, promotes an International Credit Transfer program as an effort to develop competence and broaden insight for the students. This program is an acknowledgment process toward the study plan and the learning outcomes of students from a host university. This program allows a home university in Indonesia to recognize and learn various credit transfer systems in the world, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), and UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS). The program also allows the home university to apply and develop the appropriate credit transfer system based on the necessity and the applied regulation of High Education in Indonesia.

In the even semester of 2021/2022, five UPGRIS joined in online learning with the students of DMMMSU to join the International Credit Transfer Program. The students had to adapt to different learning climates and promote self-adjustment. The students encountered differences, starting from the languages, cultures, peer learning, academic demands, and lecturers. These matters frequently became the students' problems.

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Adjustment became the initial key to the academic success of the student and their psychological support. Adjustment is an individual process and action to cope with problems, support the necessities, and manage various complex situations (Schneiders, 1964). The result of this adjustment is a harmonious relationship between life and personal necessity demands. An individual with excellent personal adjustment could provide excellent, efficient, broad, satisfying, and healthy responses while managing mental conflict, frustration, personal difficulty, and social challenge without any psychosomatic behaviors or problems against moral values, socio-religion, and occupation.

Furthermore, individuals who have a good adjustment could maintain their physical, emotional, and behavioral states. They could also guide their motivation and reality. Individuals without self-adjustment might be sad, disappointed, or desperate. These emotions influence physiological and psychological functions.

The behavior of adjustment is indicated by stress. Stress refers to a threatening or endangering condition toward the existence, well-being, and convenience of individuals. Every individual provides different reactions to manage certain situations with the applied approaches. An individual may act without any burden but another individual may respond to the same situation as a threatening matter. The differences deal with the individual perception, assessment, and evaluation of the encountered situation. Perception, evaluation, and assessment of reality are recognized as individual reality (Desmita, 2010). Any demanding situation of individuals to adapt to may lead to stress for new students and International students (Kamel, 2018; Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

College students are the group of students who have the highest level of stress, both related to academic implementation, social relations and other professional activities (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017; Eisenbarth, 2019; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2013). Stress negatively impacts student's learning and adaptive functioning (Väisänen et al., 2018). However, students will give different reactions to overcome stress (Tavolacci et al., 2013). Coping on stress becomes a guideline for understanding stress reactions. Coping is a process in which individuals try to manage the distance that exists between the demands of individuals and those that come from the environment, and the resources they use in dealing with stressful situations (Väisänen et al., 2018). Coping strategy is an individual's adjustment to stress. Coping can be defined as a cognitive and behavioral effort that is constantly changing, with the aim of managing certain external and/or internal demands that are considered to burden or exceed one's resources in solving them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The researchers (Medina, 2018; Rufaida et al., 2017) found that adjustment in the learning process and peer support could encourage the learners' adaptive success. The other influential matters for adaptive success are motif, self-concept, perception, attitude, skill, interest, and personality. Self-confidence also could influence environmental self-adaption at campus and college. Coping style may also influence psychological adjustment. There were a positive correlation of emotional quotient, coping stress and adjustment at higher education on the nursing care students (Sim & Bang, 2016).

The realizations of coping stress include two strategies: problem-focus coping (PFC) and emotional-focus coping (EFC). The promoted strategy was based on the problems encountered by the informants. Any problems within the range to manage should apply the focused-problem coping strategy. On the other hand, if the problem is not within the range to manage, the applied coping strategy should be an emotional-focused coping strategy.

International students are one of the students who are very vulnerable to experiencing difficulties in psychological adjustment. Problems do not only come from studying in different countries, but they need to face many other things in the academic and non-academic fields. Difficulties in adjusting will increase in international students when they still experience ethnic discrimination, stress in undergoing acculturation, nostalgia attached to their identity that will not be easily accepted by the environment and sentimental feelings (Chen, 2020; Leong, 2015; Zahra Ali et al., 2021).

Having a set of coping strategies can help international students achieve higher levels of academic success and reduce their stress. This is because stress levels that are too high can have a negative impact on the academic and emotional realms of students, which gives rise to a series of unhealthy behaviors (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). International students' emotional problems that are difficult to solve will be overcome if the coping strategies are effective. The result is that stressful situations can be resolved (Shdaifat et al., 2018; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In other words, the use of effective coping strategies facilitates the return of a balanced state of mind, thereby reducing the negative impact of

stress. This is in line with the findings that there is a strong correlation between the stress experienced by international students and their coping capacity (Bani Ahmad & Meriç, 2021).

Previous research on international students has been conducted by several experts. Researcher conducted an in-depth critical analysis of the difficulties faced by international students in terms of psychological adjustment (Alshammari et al., 2023). Researchers have also investigated coping methods and support services that can help these students overcome adjustment difficulties. The subjects of the study were students who moved countries to get education in other countries. Bastien et.al (Bastien et al., 2018) examined 122 foreign students in the United States. Her research wanted to find out the factors that influence the academic adjustment of international students in the U.S. and compare the results with psychological adjustment factors. Another researcher on international students (Bani Ahmad & Meriç, 2021) conducted an experiment by providing online-based stress management psychoeducation to improve the coping skills of international students who moved to complete their studies.

The three studies were explored on international students who moved countries to find out coping strategies, influential factors and efforts to improve coping skills. DMMMSU transfer credit students are international students who only take part of courses from the PGRI Semarang University campus to DMMMSU. Learning takes place online so that students do not experience living in a new place. However, they need to make many adjustments in carrying out academic duties.

The descriptions of coping stress of the students with transfer credit status to DMMSU would facilitate the home university to accompany the students' learning process. Accurate coping stress strategies to manage the problems of self-adjustment would influence the student's academic achievements during the credit transfer program. Appropriate stress management could improve the student's academic achievements. Therefore, appropriate coping strategy selection is important for students with credit transfer program status to adapt and cope with the high-stress tension (Abdullah et al., 2009).

METHOD

This descriptive qualitative research analyzed the data while collecting the data and after collecting all required data. Data analysis is an effort to seek, arrange, and report the obtained data by interviewing, observing, and documenting in an organized manner to understand ((Miles et al., 2014).

Five students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program at PGRI Semarang University participated in an international credit transfer at Don Mariano Marcos University (DMMMSU) Philippines. It's just that in the research process, the fifth respondent could not be contacted further because of the constraints of the signal and time of the study, so the data could not be analyzed. Thus, the respondents of the study were only four people. The character of the subject has or is currently transferring MBKM program credits. Data collection was conducted offline with interviews revealing about the coping stress of international transfer credit students.

Figure 1 shows the flowchart of the research. The researchers used the technique of triangulation to ensure the data validity.

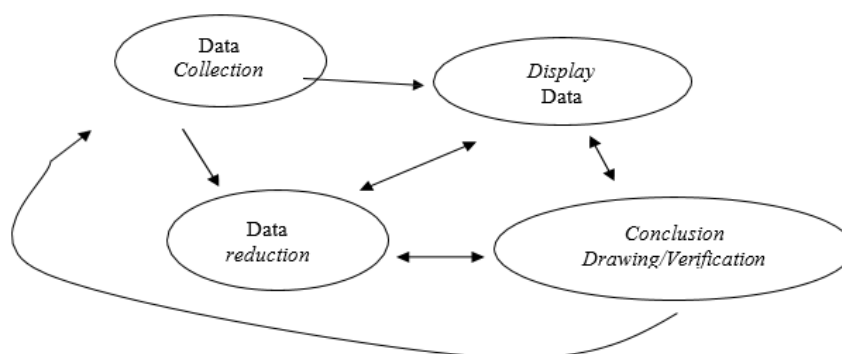


Figure 1. The research flow-chart

The researchers described the coping stress of the students while joining the colleges at DMMMSU Fillipine systematically, factually, and accurately based on the facts and certain attributes.

RESULTS

Table 1. The Research Participants

Aspects	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Initial	AF	PR	KH	MER
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female
Types				
Age	20 years old	20 years old	20 years old	21 years old
Religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female
Types				
Language	Indonesian, English, Javanese	Indonesian, English, Javanese	Indonesian, English, Javanese	Indonesian, English, Javanese
Mastery				
The course taken by the student	<i>Social Psychology (2 Credits), Group dynamic (2 Credits), Entrepreneur Mind (3 Credits), Introduction to counseling (2 credits).</i>	<i>Social Psychology (2 Credits), Group dynamic (2 Credits), Entrepreneur Mind (3 Credits), Introduction to counseling (2 credits).</i>	<i>Social Psychology (2 Credits), Group dynamic (2 Credits), Entrepreneur Mind (3 Credits), Introduction to counseling (2 credits).</i>	<i>Social Psychology (2 Credits), Group dynamic (2 Credits), Entrepreneur Mind (3 Credits), Introduction to counseling (2 credits).</i>

Stress among the students

The researchers found the descriptions of stress in three participants, such as the stress symptom, stress source, and response toward stress. Four participants suffered from stress with physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms. The fifth participant resigned during college.

Table 2. Stress symptoms of participants

Stress symptoms	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Physical symptoms	Cold sweat, nervous	Beating heart	Shaking	Cold sweat
Psychologically Symptoms	Panic, anxious	Panic, anxious	Panic, anxious	Fear, anxious
Behaviorally Symptoms	Sleeping pattern	Dietary pattern	Stress	Sleeping pattern change

The stress sources

The observable stress sources during college were the implementation of a credit transfer system, the learning process, and the learning evaluation. The students did not completely join the credit transfer system implementation so they still took the regular credits in Indonesia at the same time. The researchers found three participants took 30 credits during the semester. The adjustments during the learning process were observable in the language, learning method, course presentation, and evaluation differences. The participants struggled to adapt to the difficult language and accent. They also struggled to understand the materials since they were lack of proper understanding. The learning method only focused on module implementation for each course. The course sessions were only focused on module discussions. This learning habit was different from the UPGRIS students.

The lecturers of DMMMSU did not apply various learning media while teaching. This matter influenced the material understanding of the students. The courses also had limited interactions even with the peer-classmates for further discussions. The discussion also occurred in a group chat on

Facebook. This implementation was not familiar with the implementation of learning media in Indonesia. Most classes applied the lecturing method that did not facilitate students to join the course. Moreover, the lecturers also did not require the students to activate their cameras. This matter makes the participants feel lonely during the online class. The lecturers also did not facilitate the discussion process so the discussion did not run properly. The other difficulty was - the Google Meet implementation with a direct connection to Google Classroom was not available in Indonesia. This situation provided a specific challenge for the students. The third participant lived in an area with Internet network issues. This matter hindered the course progression.

The other hindrance was - the different evaluation process. The test lasted for a limited duration. This matter became a stressor for the students. The other stressors included the emergence of the storm during the course. At that moment, the courses were off for two weeks. In some areas, the Internet networks were poor and made the students miss the information.

From the various data above, it is grouped that stress symptoms come from academic demands, interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal and environment. Academic demands in the form of adjustments to academic systems and processes that are different from the learning process at school. The stressor of interpersonal relationships stems from limited interaction with college friends. The source of intrapersonal stress has to do with time management. The stormy natural environment is also a source of stress for credit transfer international students.

The Responses toward Stress

The statement of the fourth participant indicated that the participant had various responses toward the encountered stress. The first participant was anxious to keep up and balance the course activities at the two universities. For the second participant, the participant was anxious due to the course demands. The third and fourth participants found that language and habitual differences made them anxious.

In the indicator of cognitive impairment, the first participant had difficulties concentrating. The second and the fourth participants were also easily distracted while concentrating. For the third participant, the participant admitted some distraction when the participant attempted to join two classes at the same time.

Coping strategies

In this research, the third participant applied some coping strategies proposed by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) to manage the motion after divorcing her husband. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) explain that coping has two main functions: problem-focused coping and emotional-focused coping. The applied coping strategies within problem-focused coping include planful problem-solving, confrontation, and social support search for instrumental reason. On the other hand, focused problem coping tends to control the emotional responses, such as distancing, escaping, or avoiding, promoting positive reappraisal, self-control, acceptance, responsibility, and social support search for emotional reason.

Participant 1

The participant did not apply many coping strategies. The participant only struggles to join the classes (planful problem-solving). The participant also consulted the lecturer (social support search for instrumental reasons). Then, the participant decided to create a learning group (planful problem-solving). The remaining strategy was - focusing on the emotional approach to cope with the stress. The participant also searched the social support from peers to calm the feeling instead of improving the focus of solving the problems (social support search for emotional reasons).

While applying the distance coping strategy, the participant tended to behave as if the participant did not encounter problems. In this case, the participant attempted to only look from the good side. The participant also applied an escape coping strategy by imagining the ideal situation and attempting to apply it. The participant also applied the positive reappraisal strategy to persuade that everything would be fine.

The applied self-control strategy of the participant included ignoring the problems and being transparent to solve problems. The participant also applied acceptance coping by realizing that the courses were the personal choices and actions to change the current situation.

Participant 2

The participant applied the plan problem-solving by understanding the problems and struggling to solve the problems, creating a plan and executing the plan, struggling to change the situation, finding a solution, and reflecting on the previous experience. The participant applied the social support search for instrumental reasons. The participant searched for information from other individuals about the encountered problems and considered the given suggestions. For emotional reasons, the participant shared the participant's feelings with their closest friend and received sympathy from the participant's friend. The participant applied a distance coping strategy by seeing the good sides of the problems. The participant also applied an escape coping strategy by expecting the current situation would change and find personal convenience.

The participant applied self-control coping by keeping the feeling alone, preventing other individuals' curiosity about the problems, and being transparent with herself. The participant also kept the feeling of not being influenced by other stressful matters. Then, the participant also applied an acceptance coping strategy by criticizing herself, realizing her presence triggered the problem, making a self-promise to change the situation, and being ready to take responsibility for the current situation.

Participant 3

The participant also applied planful problem solving by understanding the problems and struggling to solve the problems, creating a plan and executing the plan, and struggling to change the situation. The participant also applied the social support search for an emotional reason by telling the participant's feelings toward family and close friends. On the other hand, the instrumental reasoning of the participant included the efforts to search for information from other individuals about the encountered situation, tell the problems, and ask for suggestions from expert individuals. The participant also applied positive reappraisal by believing the condition would be fine. The participant also applied self-control, such as preventing other individuals to know about the problems, being transparent toward herself, keeping the feeling not to be influenced by other stressful matters, and reflecting on the excellent examples to solve the problems. Then, the applied responsibility acceptance included criticizing herself, realizing that her existence brings problems, making a personal promise to change the current situation, and feeling ready to accept the responsibility to change the situation.

Participant 4

Generally, the participant managed the problems by preparing questions to discuss collaboratively. The participant had a Philippine friend that shared the information about the Google Meet links and other missing information. The participant also had assistance from the lecturers to share the materials in English language instead of Tagalog. Then, the participant managed the course schedule when the schedule overlapped each other with two devices.

The participant applied the plan problem solving by understanding the current problems and struggling to solve the problems. The participant created the plan and executed the plan. The participant attempted to change the situation to be better and find solutions by reflecting on the previous experience. The applied social support search was focused on the instrumental reasons by searching for information from other individuals about the encountered problems. Then, the participant considered the suggestions. For emotional reasons, the participant shared the participant's feelings with their closest friend and received sympathy from the participant's friend. The participant applied a distance coping strategy by seeing the good sides of the problems. The participant also applied an escape coping strategy by expecting the current situation would change and find personal convenience.

The self-control coping strategy of the participant included the effort to keep the feeling personal, preventing other individuals to know, being transparent toward herself, and keeping the feeling not to be influenced by other stressful matters. Then, the applied responsibility acceptance included personal

criticism, self-realization of the source of the problems from the personal presence, belief in the personal promise to change the current conditions, and readiness to take responsibility and change the situation.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, international student mobility and presence have been seen as one of the indicators of campus diversity, internationalization, and a source of increasing income for higher education institutions (Bista, et.al., 2018). In the implementation of international internships, student participation in this program will provide a wider learning experience for students and add value to both the internship provider and the university that sends its students. Students of the MBKM international internship program undergo a different learning system from their home country, namely Indonesia. When reviewed further, they can be categorized as part of international students. Therefore, they must acculturate the new environment, culture, language and learning system even though international internship program students do not live in other countries. This acculturation is predicted to hinder their academic progress and mental health. If international students only experience low stress in acculturation, then they will be able to adjust well (Gündüz & Alakbarov, 2019; Zhang, 2012).

Looking further, a person's ability to adapt to new situations as a means of overcoming difficulties can be influenced by a variety of factors. Some of these include personality traits, previous life experiences in other cultures, language competence, cultural distance, social support networks, coping stress, and expectations. Specifically, the most influential factors on the adaptability of international students are the feeling of security in a new environment, the existence of social activities that can be done with college friends, the existence of counseling services to help overcome difficulties and the existence of comfortable communication opportunities with lecturers (Alshammari et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2019; Gündüz & Alakbarov, 2019).

The results of this study found that respondents experienced a process of adjustment to the credit transfer implementation system, the learning process and learning evaluation. Students have difficulty in doing time management, understanding foreign languages, confusion in understanding different speaking accents, responding to differences in learning methods, passive interaction with friends during the lecture process and after lectures, differences in lecture presentation and different evaluation processes. When grouped, stress symptoms in students come from academic demands, interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal and environment (Musabiq & Karimah, 2020). In academic demands, mastery of foreign languages greatly affects the stress of international students. International students who have difficulty understanding languages will be more likely to have difficulty understanding lectures, understanding classroom readings, and articulating their knowledge in presentations and/or essays (Bastien et al., 2018; Gebhard, 2012).

There were a variety of physical, psychological and behavioral responses to stress faced by international student respondents. Symptoms of physical stress appear in the appearance of cold sweats, palpitations, trembling body, and easily feel nervous. Psychological symptoms are displayed with an attitude of panic, fear and anxiety. Furthermore, behavioral symptoms due to stress appear in sleep pattern disorders, eating patterns and depressed behavior. This symptom will have a lot of physical impact resulting in fatigue and fatigue (Musabiq & Karimah, 2020).

Various strategies can be used by international students of credit transfer programs to respond to sources of stress and mitigate the impact of stress. The regulatory mechanism is done by regulating thoughts and emotions to reduce or minimize stressful events in a skillful way. The mechanism or strategy is known as coping strategy (Lambert & Lambert, 2008).

Specifically, international students manage stress by recognizing problems as they arise and promptly finding effective solutions. They decided to make clear plans so that lectures went well, consult lecturers when they found academic difficulties, make decisions to study in groups and ask for help from friends to translate lecture materials that still use Tagalog into English so that they can be understood easily. The respondents' stress coping strategies focused on the problem. This strategy is known as problem focused coping (Sawhney et al., 2020; Zaman & Ali, 2019). In general, individuals who use problem-focused strategies will take direct steps to deal with problems by directing thoughts directly or making direct resolution efforts, as a measure of managing stress (Moos, 1993).

Universities need to equipped international students to be able to managing stress through adequate psychological services. The provision of counseling services will help them overcome personal difficulties, so that they are more reflective in solving their problems and getting social support. If the university assists students both before and during their studies in an international program by providing stress management interventions, students can limit their difficulties. Counseling services will improve personal, social and academic welfare for students undergoing international programs. This is because when students understand the right coping strategies, the risk of mental health disorders will be minimal (Buizza et al., 2022; Julal, 2013). Furthermore, the practice of group counseling in international program students will encourage the improvement of student welfare by building psychological abilities, such as hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism (Page et al., 2019; Prasath et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Every participant applied specific coping strategies to manage the stress being an international college students. There were three types of coping strategies based on problem-focused coping, such as plan problem solving, confrontation, and social support search for instrumental reason (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Atressful conditions in physics and psychology occurred due to internal and environmental demands. These matters became the stress and stimulated individuals to react. The environment of an individual especially family determines the support for the individual to cope with the problems (Schabracq et al., 2002).

All participants applied coping strategies, such as planful problem-solving, confrontation, social support search, distance, escaping or avoiding, positive reappraisal, self-control, and self-acceptance responsibility (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The results showed the three participants attempted various coping strategies and maintained the most convenient coping strategy for them. The third participant tended to seek social support, such as information, suggestion, and sympathy from the family and church community. Then, the second participant tended to prioritize personal control as the stress-coping strategy. The third and fourth participants focused on the responsibility as the firm mental foundation to manage daily problems.

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