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ITINERANT MIGRANTS - A CASE STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS
AND ADJUSTMENT OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS
IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

The world today is witnessing a rapid breakdown of cultural barriers as more people migrate, either temporarily or permanently, from one society to another. The study of this phenomenon is of special interest to social scientists. For geographers the study of the process of migration and immigrant communities has long been a major branch of inquiry. Relatively little however, has been done on temporary forms of migration. This thesis is concerned with one group of itinerant migrants in New Zealand - Malaysian university students.

An attempt was made to examine the characteristics of the selection process, the cultural, sociological and personal background of the student migrants, and their distribution and other characteristics in New Zealand. These characteristics were compared with those of other groups of migrants, foreign students, local students and people in the society of origin and the society of study. The study also examined the adjustment of the students in New Zealand and the relationship between the characteristics of the students and their adjustment.

The main tool of investigation was a postal questionnaire developed specially for this study. It was supplemented by personal observations and experience as an overseas student in New Zealand. The questionnaire was administered to a random sample comprising 30 percent of the total Malaysian student population in New Zealand universities in 1973. Out of 415 questionnaires posted, 285 were returned. Four were not completed and one rejected, leaving 280 respondents in the final analysis.

A number of hypotheses were made on the characteristics and the relationship between the characteristics and the adjustment of the students, based on personal observations, migration studies and previous researches on overseas students, in New Zealand and overseas. The hypotheses on the characteristics include an expectation of the predominance of

young, male and single student migrants who are privately financed and come from urban areas and middle socio-economic class backgrounds. The results indicated that the characteristics were as predicted and were therefore similar to other migrants in general though there were several differences which were expected due to the very specific nature of the migration, viz. for educational purposes.

Predictions on the relationship between the characteristics and adjustment cover characteristics such as religious background, rural-urban origin and socio-economic class. It was predicted that those with backgrounds closest to the New Zealand norm are best adjusted, for example on religion Christians were expected to be best adjusted, followed by those with no religion and non-Christians being least adjusted. For situational characteristics such as type of accommodation, duration of stay and friendship with New Zealanders it was predicted that the more exposed the students were to the New Zealand society the better would be the adjustment made. Most of the predictions emerged as expected.

The study is exploratory and the findings tentative. It is only one approach to a complex research area. Its significance, if any, lies in its illustration of the potential of research in this field.

PREFACE

One of the most striking developments in New Zealand's educational institutions in the last decade has been the growth of the overseas student population. From 960 in 1959 the number had risen to 4374 from 52 different countries in 1972. Overseas students have become a feature of the way of life in New Zealand, especially in the university cities.

With a group from such diverse cultures and backgrounds the overseas students provide a useful research area for the social sciences. In addition to learning more about the cultures, the selection processes, cross-cultural contact and adaptation, attitude change and re-adjustment, the information uncovered may be of assistance in helping foreigners adapt to their host countries.

This study attempts a geographical approach, viewing the process as an itinerant form of international migration. It examines the characteristics and adjustment of one particular group of overseas students. Their characteristics were compared to those of migrants in general, other student migrants, the home society and the host society. The study also investigates the adjustment of the students to the new environment and attempts to relate the characteristics of the students to their pattern of adjustment.

The comparison of characteristics between the sample group and the other selected groups was limited by the availability of data and the measurement of the adjustment was carried out with the aid of a scale designed specially for this study. Statistical checks were made to determine the significance of the relationship between the characteristics and the adjustment pattern.

The present study is only a pilot survey and the investigator is well aware that the findings are only tentative. If it could stimulate more detailed studies of overseas students in New Zealand then its purpose is amply fulfilled.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Mr A.C. Walsh, for his patient guidance, invaluable advice and warm encouragement both in conversation and correspondence throughout this study. My gratitude is also due to Professor K.W. Thomson who showed special interest in this research and to the staff members of the Geography Department, Massey University, who were most generous in giving useful advice and assistance.

Officials concerned with overseas students in the Department of Labour, Department of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Malaysian High Commission to New Zealand have been most kind in providing statistical information. The Registrars of universities in New Zealand willingly supplied names and figures of Malaysian students and arranged for the distribution of the questionnaires. Finally, the survey would not have been possible without the co-operation of the Malaysian students in New Zealand who not only filled in the questionnaires but added much useful comment as well. To them all, and many others who have helped in one way or another, my sincere thanks.

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Leo Ann Mean

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