

Friendship Patterns between International and Local Undergraduates in a Malaysian Public Institution of Higher Learning

By

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Abstract

The number of international students choosing Malaysia as a destination to further their studies is steadily growing. This phenomenon has urged researchers to look for ways to make their study experience in foreign countries more fruitful. One significant area of research has focused on the friendship patterns between international and local students. Research has found that international students often have more friends from their home country and other countries and not the host country. The current study examined the friendship patterns between these groups of students based a survey completed by 63 international undergraduates. It is hoped that this study would be able to provide insights to the local students on the needs of international students in their desire to make friends with local students. Furthermore, the education institutions can be called upon to ensure international undergraduates have a satisfying experience in the context of their friendships with local students.

Keywords: *friendship patterns, interaction, international students, local students*

Introduction

Universities have traditionally maintained a central role in promoting international relations, and increasing solidarity and understanding. The essential part of this movement has been implemented through the internationalization of higher education (Ninnes & Hellsten 2005). The rapid growth of a new form of international education has in the past 20 years made dramatic impact both on furthering intercultural academic exchanges and on its adherent economic prosperity (Altbach & Knight 2007). Internationalization is a phenomenon that is also fast catching up in Malaysia. The higher education industry in Malaysia is blooming at a fast pace. At present, we are witnessing an influx of international students of all levels. The increase in the number of international students is obvious at both graduate and undergraduate levels of study. As a result of this intensification, is the increase in the incoming of international students from countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Singapore, China (Morshidi 2008) and also from the Middle East countries.

According to Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) in a recent study on student mobility, Malaysia is identified as one of the “emerging contenders” of higher educational

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destinations for foreign students. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has made a recent move to transform the landscape of tertiary education. The strategic plan has outlined seven thrusts; the fifth thrust aims to intensify internationalization and to ensure a 10% - 30% enrolment of international students. Malaysia has an approximate of 2% of the international student market, with approximately 55,000 foreign students enrolled in the country's higher education institutions in 2006. The number of foreign students varies according to the private and public sectors. Malaysian higher education will therefore, experience rapid racial and ethnic diversification of its student body. Indeed, demographic projections in the past few years show that increasing ethnic and racial diversity will continue significantly in the coming years.

Statement of Problem

The majority of the research undertaken on the issue of friendship between local and international students at institutions of higher learning reported that local students have relatively favorable perceptions of international students. However, it was found that local students are largely uninterested in initiating contact with their international counterparts and interaction remains low (Ward 2001). This situation is not encouraging as the presence of international students alone is insufficient to foster intercultural friendships.

Based on observation by the researcher in teaching the local and international students in a higher education setting, the local students in Malaysia consisting of multicultural backgrounds (primarily Malays, Chinese and Indians) in a multicultural setting have a high level of interaction among themselves. However, observation indicated that interaction between the local and international students is relatively lower, thereby causing polarization between the local and international students. Observation has also shown that the level of interaction among international students from different countries is higher compared to interaction between locals and internationals.

It has been documented in several studies that a lack of successful interaction can lead to social withdrawal and isolation and potential group based feelings, where local students feel international students are not interested to interact with them and vice versa. It has also been documented that local students can hold stereotypes towards international students as shown in Volet & Ang (1998).

Purpose

In line with the intensification of internationalization plan by MOHE, more international students are choosing Malaysia as their study destination. The composition of the races in Malaysia is very diverse with namely the 3 main ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians. Having a group of diverse international students will further expand Malaysia's ethnic, racial and cultural diversity. This creates a need to look into the issue of interaction through friendship between these two groups of students. Therefore, this study

looked closely at international undergraduate students' friendship pattern with local undergraduate students. The investigation focused on the issues that influence friendship between local and international students in institutions of higher learning in a multicultural context. This study unveiled how interaction between these two groups of students is also determined by patterns of friendship.

Research question

The following question is addressed in this study.

1. What kinds of friendship patterns exist between international and local undergraduates?

Significance of the study

This study was undertaken in Malaysia, which is different from the setting of the previous studies on the same issue in countries such as Australia, America, New Zealand, etc. As a multi racial and multi cultural country, Malaysia is rich with its diversity. To add on to its diversity is the influx of international students that bring their individual diversities. Hence, it is justified to study the friendship pattern among diverse international students and local multi-racial students that takes place in a multi-racial and multi-cultural country.

Information gathered from UNESCO's Database in 2006, highlighted that foreign students in Malaysia from 1999 to 2006 came from China, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Yemen, Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, Oman, Sri Lanka, Iran, Brunei Darussalam and others. In this sense, the cultural diversity has widened even more, thus, emphasizing the urgent need to study the extent of the diversity and the tendency of the students to experience dilemmas in their academic vocation and social context. Due to differences in cultural and education background, foreign students may encounter challenges and barriers while interacting with local students (Bartlett 2002). Previous studies such as (St. John-Ives 2005) on interaction between local and international students have focused on the benefits of intervention programmes for international students but very few have conducted in depth assessment on the nature of interaction in terms of friendship patterns in a multicultural context.

Many questions arise in relation to the international students' diversity, their conception of multicultural activities and their educational outcomes as a result of their interaction with local students in Malaysia who come from equally diverse backgrounds. The findings of the study will be able to offer some insights to introduce practical initiatives and intervention programmes.

Findings from this study will be able to provide data to MOHE in the planning and execution of its internationalization plan. It is undeniable that doing research into the aspects of interaction related to international students is much more beneficial to sustain and further improve internationalization. On the other hand, as mentioned in the literature

review, the nature of interaction between the international and local students that involves students “social health and well being” also gives impact to their academic achievement. Therefore, the results of this study and future studies would be of importance to institutions of higher learning in terms of the internationalization planning by MOHE based on the influx of foreign students to Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

The functional model of friendship network was described by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977). They claimed that international student have three social groups, co-national, multinational and local friends. Co-national friends are friends from the same country of origin, multinational friends are other international friends and local friends are friends from the host country. International students tend to have different relationships with each of these groups of friends: personal relationships with co-national friends, recreational and social relationships with multinational friends, and academic and professional relationships with local friends. In other word, international students tend to have intimate relationship with their co-national friends and maybe with their multinational friends up to some extent, yet their relationships with locals are somehow distant and instrumental.

Literature Review

Friendships have long been noted as a major contributor to emotional well-being and sojourner adjustment. Friendships are an important component as they enhance social life; provide support and a source of information and motivation to students (Evans 2000; McInnis, et al., 2000). Most students including international students expect to make friends (Burns 1991; Kantanis 1998; Peel 2000). A network of friendship is essential to a good adjustment process and academic success (Evans 2000; Thomas 2000; Ryan & Twibell 2000). Peer support is also essential (Lantona & Browne 2001). Peers help develop good learning, listening, writing and oral skills students need to socialize with domestic others (Wang 2004). The interaction patterns of international students have therefore been the focus of much research. Some of the studies that researched on the friendship patterns between international and local students will be discussed in this section of literature review.

A study conducted by Trice and Elliot (1993) revealed that 83% of the Japanese students preferred to discuss personal problems with other Japanese compared to only 57% who chose to study English with other Japanese. International students in Canada and Australia were also found to prefer locals for seeking language help and solving academic problems as for sightseeing activities. Similar findings have been reported from international students in Japan (Tanaka et al 1994). Furnham and Alibhai (1985) also queried students on their preferred companions for 11 different activities and found that the preference for host national contact was in three areas with language problems, help

with academic problems, and surprisingly, going out with members of the opposite sex. The original study by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) found that the host nationals were relied upon for language and academic assistance.

Lack of English language proficiency not only leads to overseas students feeling ill-prepared for life in Australia, it also impacts considerably on their ability to make friends with local students. In a study by Richardson (2007) it was clear that nearly all of the respondents 89% hoped to establish friendships during their stay in Australia, but 77% of the participants remarked that they had experienced difficulties making friends with Australians. The data of this study suggest that a perceived lack of competence in their ability to communicate in English reduced the overseas students' attempts to forge relationships with their Australian peers a great deal.

In a study by Brown & Daly (2004) it was reported by students that people from other ethnic backgrounds were less likely to initiate friendship. They also felt that they were less confident, has less common ground, and that it was more difficult to express dissenting ideas and to get information. They were also similar in their perception of their commonality of conversation topics with people from different ethnic groups. International students also stated that they found it harder to make friends cross-culturally, but that they would persist with attempts after initial lack of interest from locals. They also reported more close friends with co-nationals than with students from a different ethnic group. This study also found that when students did interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds it tended to be for academic rather than social activities.

Diss (2003) maintained that friendship patterns may be potential factors preventing international students from socializing with local friends. In her study of international students' social ties, she had attempted to illustrate their friendships. She found that international students who scored high in REO (relationship establishing orientation) tend to have more multinational friends than those who scored lower in RMO (relationship maintaining orientation), and those who scored low in RMO had more co-national and less local friends than others.

Several other studies on friendship patterns between domestic overseas students in some Western universities reveal that language barriers, perceived or real culture differences, the lack of confidence and intercultural relational skills are obstacles that prevent international students from having satisfactory and meaningful contact with host students (Arthur 2004; Ward & Masgoret 2004). Researchers in the field of psychology (Leung, 2001) underscore the critical link between friendships with host students and the cultural, emotional psychological well-being of sojourning students. Most studies also correlate the academic success rate of international students with the positive relationships they enjoy with host nationals.

A study by Chang, Astin and Kim (2004) identified that African Americans who are enrolled at institutions in the two highest diversity levels (4 and 5) are substantially less likely than their Asian American and Latino classmates and their same-race counterparts at less diverse institutions to study with students from different racial/ethnic groups.

In a later study by Pandian (2008) on the friendship patterns between Middle Eastern and Malaysian students, it was identified that majority did not encounter problems with communication when interacting with local course mates and they also seek help from local student when they are confronted with language problems during class. The Middle Eastern subjects also agreed that they like to include local students in their group discussions. As for seeking help for assignments from local students, there was equal agreement and disagreement among the Middle Easterners. The overall findings of Pandian's study (2008) indicated that interaction between international and local students is low among Middle Eastern and local students in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Middle East students possess the desire to establish greater contacts with local students and seek positive social, psychological and academic benefits.

Methodology

A survey research method was employed in this study. A one-page questionnaire developed by the researcher, consisting of 10 items needed students to respond based on the 5 point Likert scale beginning from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. Respondents were selected from a public institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

Data Analysis & Findings

In order to examine the friendship patterns between international and local undergraduate students, it is vital to analyse international students' views on the factors that determine their influences their decisions in making friends with local students. The findings derived from this study reflected the reasons to which inter-cultural friendships are fostered.

Demography

Demographic information was gathered through eleven aspects – gender, age, marital status, accommodation, year of study and course, nationality, number of years spent in Malaysia, type of sponsorship and lastly, highest language qualification and grade. 63 international undergraduates participated in the survey, whereby 47.6% were males ($f = 30$) and 52.4% were females ($f = 33$). In terms of age group, 22.2% were in the age range of 19-20, 69.8% were in the age range of 21-23 and 8% were in the range of 24-29 years old. In terms of marital status, 95.2% were single while the remaining 4.8% were

married. Most of the students were living in either hostel (58.7%) or rental (33.3%). As for the year of study, 66.7% were in their first and second year of study and 33.3% were in their third or final year of study. Most of the students are from China (78.8%), Indonesia (9.5%), Iran (3.2%), Saudi Arabia (1.6%) and Thailand (6.3%). 95.2% of the students were here to study on their personal sponsorship. As for the number of years spent in Malaysia, 69.8% have spent 2 to 3 years in Malaysia. 12.7% have spent 18 months and 11.1% have spent 4 – 5 years in Malaysia. 61.9% were enrolled in Management course, 15.9% in accounting and others in a variety of courses such as Biology, Housing Building and Planning, Chemistry, Mass Communication, Computer Science, Industrial Technology and Humanities. As for the students highest English language qualification 46% had undertaken IELTS, 7.9% TOEFL, 17.4% had taken the in-house Intensive English Program at the university and 20.6 % unrecorded.

Data in this research (Table 1) indicated that international students established friendship with local students when it concerns certain issues. The issues are to (1) gain new perspectives in academic issues (mean score is 3.56); (2) improve English language (mean score is 3.83); (3) improve communication skills (mean score is 3.79); (4) enhance networking for professional development (mean score is 3.68); (5) understand the culture of local students (mean score is 3.89); (6) help them to learn foreign languages (mean score is 3.79); (7) establish close relationship with local students (mean score is 3.62); (8) discuss personal issues (mean score is 3.30); (9) make friends as local students are friendly (mean score is 3.79) and (10) make friends as local students are helpful (mean score is 3.67).

Table 1 : Mean Scores of Friendship Pattern

ITEMS	MEAN	STD. ERROR	STD. DEV
1. I discuss academic issues with local students.	3.56	.108	.857
2. Friendship with local students helps me to improve my English language.	3.83	.117	.925
3. Friendship with local students helps me to improve my communication skills.	3.79	.111	.883
4. My friendship with local students enhances networking for professional development.	3.68	.101	.800
5. Friendship with local students helps me understand their culture better.	3.89	.106	.832
6. Friendship with local students helps me learn foreign languages.	3.79	.108	.852
7. Friendship with local students helps me establish close relationship with them.	3.62	.114	.906
8. Friendship with local students helps me discuss personal issues with them.	3.30	.125	.994
9. I make friends with local students because local students are friendly.	3.79	.109	.864

10. I make friends with local students because local students are helpful.	3.67	.111	.880
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Table 2 highlights the findings on friendship patterns between international and local undergraduate students. 55% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that they developed friendship with local students to discuss academic issues. However, it was not identifiable why 34.9% were unsure on this matter. Responses to statement 2 evidences that friendship with local students helps international students to improve their English language (58.7% agreed and 19.0% strongly agreed). As for statement 3, the majority (55.6% agreed and 17.5% strongly agreed) of students were in the opinion that local friendship with local students helps to improve their communication skills.

Students to a large extent (58.7% agreed and 9.5% strongly agreed) responded (statement 4) that they seek friendship with local students to enhance network for professional development. In relation to statement 5, it was revealed that (60.3% agreed and 17.5% strongly agreed) international students are of the opinion that friendship with local students helps them understand the local students' culture better.

Statement 6 revealed that international undergraduates like to establish friendship with local students to help them learn foreign languages (54.0% agreed and 15.9% strongly agreed). In this context, one of foreign languages for international students' is Malay language, which is the official language of Malaysia. Statement 7 was also highly indicative of international students' needs to establish close relationship with local students through friendship. A total of 49.2% agreed and 12.7% strongly agreed on this statement.

A total of 61.9% international students strongly agreed and 14.3% agreed (Statement 9) that they establish friendship with local students because they are friendly. However, in terms establishing friendship with local students to help them discuss personal issues with the locals (Statement 8), it was found that 31.7% were unsure of this idea, 15.9% disagreed and 4.8% strongly disagreed. Additionally, Statement 10 further supports the previous statement that friendship with local students is established because local students are helpful (61.9% agreed and 9.5% strongly agreed).

Table 2: Friendship Pattern

	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1. I discuss academic issues with local students.	1.6	7.9	34.9	44.4	11.1
2. Friendship with local students helps me to improve my English language.	1.6	11.1	9.5	58.7	19.0
3. Friendship with local students helps me to	1.6	7.9	17.5	55.6	17.5

improve my communication skills.					
4. My friendship with local students enhances networking for professional development.	1.6	6.3	23.8	58.7	9.5
5. Friendship with local students helps me understand their culture better.	3.2	1.6	15.9	60.3	17.5
6. Friendship with local students helps me learn foreign languages.	3.2	1.6	23.8	54.0	15.9
7. Friendship with local students helps me establish close relationship with them.	3.2	6.3	28.6	49.2	12.7
8. Friendship with local students helps me discuss personal issues with them.	4.8	15.9	31.7	39.7	7.9
9. I make friends with local students because local students are friendly.	3.2	4.8	15.9	61.9	14.3
10. I make friends with local students because local students are helpful.	3.2	7.9	17.5	61.9	9.5

Discussion

Findings of this study in terms of exploring the friendship pattern showed that international students have the desire to make contact with local students. The study demonstrated that respondents showed evidence that international students possess the desire to establish friendship with local students and seek positive academic, social, and psychological benefits. In the context of friendship patterns, international students were more keen to develop friendship with other international students to discuss academic problems, to improve English language and communication skills and lastly to increase multicultural understanding.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, recommendations to the relevant parties such as university administration, local students and international students are put forward for the purpose of enhancing the friendship pattern between international and local undergraduate students. Higher education institutions have to adopt interventionist strategies to develop cross-cultural interactions. Certain strategies that can be applied are peer-peering of local and international students. It is suggested that future research should investigate the effects of higher education institutions implementing interventionist strategies to enhance friendship patterns between different student groups.

Conclusion

The international students also acknowledged the importance and effectiveness of an undergraduate student body in building good relationships between local and

international students. Whether the undergraduate student body is performing its function is an area that should be studied further. In addition, rather than simply encouraging international students to be more resilient and to assimilate to the local culture and language, university staff and local students could be made more aware of the need to create a sustainable multicultural and multilingual environment for the international students.

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