

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH HOST NATIONAL STUDENTS

Julie Chuah Suan Choo¹, Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh²

School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
MALAYSIA.

¹ cscju@usm.my

ABSTRACT

Research has found that international students expect and desire quality and quantity of social interaction with host national students as such interaction is generally associated with psychological, social and academic benefits for international students. The satisfaction derived from quality and quantity of social interaction between international students with host national students is also a significant player in institutional choice. This study reports the findings of a study involving undergraduate international students pursuing their first degrees in four higher institutions of learning. Using the quantitative methodology, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to international students with a return of about 318 questionnaires. Results showed that many international students desire quality and quantity of social interaction with host national students especially in the areas of their personal development and academic benefit. Focus group interviews revealed that the quality and quantity of social interaction with host national students were limited especially for international students from the Middle East. Suggestions are made to institutions of higher learning to expedite and enhance support services and activities for international students especially those that involve host national students.

Keywords: Social interaction, quality and quantity, international students, host national students

INTRODUCTION

International Higher Education Post September 11, 2001 has witnessed an upsurge of international student enrolment into Malaysian higher institutions of learning as a result of the efforts of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in intensifying internationalization (Morshidi, 2008). Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) estimated that Chinese students accounted for about 35% of Malaysia's total international student enrolments each year for the past decade, and this was most probably due to the socio-cultural and linguistic similarities between the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and China. However, in recent years, the flow from China to Malaysia has declined as a result of China developing its own higher education system (Morshidi, 2008). As an alternative, Malaysian recruiters widened their search for international students in United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon (Sedgewick, 2004) and their numbers have been growing steadily ever since.

Recently, MOHE announced its aims to attract at least 200,000 international students to Malaysian higher institutions of learning by 2020 (MOHE, 2011). In the internationalization policy outlined by MOHE (2011), one of the outcomes expected was to increase *positive experiences* of international students. From the aspect of challenges of social integration and community engagement, the policy stressed on the importance of integrating the Malaysian community and the international students whereby the Malaysian community "must be able to adapt and accept the international students as part of the community, allowing a full

integration and the delivery of a positive *Malaysian hospitality*" (MOHE, 2011). Additionally, there is a concern voiced in this policy that Malaysians may find it difficult to embrace international students as part of the community.

PROBLEM

Research has found that international students expect and desire a certain level of quantity in their social interaction with host national students and such interaction is generally associated with psychological, social and academic benefits for international students. Ward & Kennedy (1999) found that most international students expect to develop relationships with the host community and such interactions are a major factor in determining their social-cultural adjustment. In Malaysia, host national students with their multiethnic and multicultural backgrounds (Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous groups) have maintained a comfortable level of interaction among themselves doing activities--social, cultural and academic—with one another (Mustapha, Azman, Karim, Ahmad & Lubis, 2009). However, the initial investigations and observations of the researchers of this study revealed that the quality and quantity of interaction between host national students and international students is minimal, thus this situation may lead to loneliness and a sense of dissatisfaction among international students. Consequently, this social distance has brought about closer interactions among the international students themselves especially those who share similar socio cultural backgrounds.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Having a group of diverse international students will further enhance Malaysia's ethnic, racial and cultural diversity. This creates a need to look into the issue of interaction between these two groups of students. Therefore, this longitudinal study with the support and funding from Universiti Sains Malaysia, sought to investigate the quality and quantity of social interaction between host national students and international students in four institutions of higher learning in Malaysia with the hope of gauging some degree of integration between host national students and international students. The research questions for this study are:

1. What is the quantity of contact between international and host national students?
2. What is the quality of contact between international and host national students?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Many studies on international students have been conducted in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the United States of America but in Malaysia, the setting is different from other countries. Malaysia is rich in its multiethnic and multi cultural diversity, thus the presence of international students who bring their individual cultures to Malaysia, would help widen this diversity. In addition, the findings of this study hope to provide data to MOHE in the planning and execution of its internationalization policy especially in "creating conducive environment for international students, staff and researchers such as simplifying immigration procedures and increase the quality of social amenities and safety as well as building a strong and active global network" (MOHE, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Quantity of Contact

International students often experience difficulties in adjusting to campus life in foreign universities and among those difficulties are a state of confusion, feelings of loneliness and helplessness, and very often, feelings of rejection by host national students. As many studies

(Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Volet & Ang, 1998; Evans, 2000; Guifoyle, 2004) have indicated, international students desire frequent contact with host national students in the universities.

In an Adelaide University Overseas Students' Association survey (2005), it was reported that 42.9% of international students made friends with more than 10 host national students compared to only 14.3% host national students who made friends with international students. The survey also found that both international and host national students spent less time interacting with each other compared with the time spent interacting with students from their own countries. Overall, 60% of the 105 international students in the survey yearn to have more interaction with host national students, while 34.3% desired "much more" interaction with host national students. Similarly in another survey carried out by Yoong (2009) in University of Nottingham in Malaysia, 31.4% of international students found the process of making friends difficult while only 15.4% of the host national students experienced the same difficulty.

An Australian study on loneliness and international students found that 65% of the respondents agreed that they experienced periods of loneliness or isolation (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2007). Causes of loneliness were attributed to the students' longing for their families, difficulties in adapting to the culture, barriers to social networking and overcoming problems. Sawir et al. (2007) quoted Weiss that social networking as opposed to social isolation, provides a "base for social activities" where students can gratify their loneliness, share things in common and find companionship. Many students in the study felt the presence of their "loneliness in their academic work and institutional relationships, sometimes triggered by those relationships". Most of their coping strategies included relationships with intimate friends or spouses, while host national students and university staff members featured the least among their relationships. An obvious conclusion formed would be that international students desire more contact with host national students besides the desire to learn more about the host country's culture.

International students who spent the most time in the host country were found to be more inclined to interact and forge friendships with host nationals (Mak & Tran, 2001). These international students would be more predisposed to grasp and discern the different ethos in the host country unlike their own. Arguably, the length of time spent by international students in the host country can significantly alter their friendship patterns with host nationals. These international students would have an improved sociocultural adaptation towards the host country's culture as well (Endicott, Bock & Narvaez, 2003).

Besides, international students who had more contact with host nationals have been observed to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction (Hendrickson et al, 2011). This in turn would lead to a decrease in the feeling of homesickness and loneliness whilst pursuing their studies abroad. As suggested by Collier and Bornman (1999), competent intercultural communication between international students and host nationals may be shaped and guided by the friendships formed between those two groups seeing that friends typically are more accepting towards the cultures and norms practised by one another. International students who experienced prolonged contact with host nationals are able to easily adapt to life in the host country in addition to facing fewer social difficulties (Hendrickson et al, 2011). What is more, international students who are likely to have positive feelings about the host culture are usually initiated by an increase in contact with host nationals (Hendrickson et al, 2011). It can be said that an increase in contact between international students and host nationals would be beneficial for both parties.

Harrison (2012) observed that progressive relationships that are formed between host nationals and international students would bring about enjoyment for the relevant parties. Therein lies the conundrum as to why some individuals experience and deal with intercultural relationships differently. Having discerned the factors involved, proactive measures can thus be put into place to provide a conducive environment for host nationals and international students to intercultural connect with one another.

Quality of Contact

Based on the model of friendship network put forward by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977), international students tend to have three distinct social cliques, co-national, multinational and host national friends. To understand these terms better, conational friends can be defined as friends from the same country of origin; multinational friends on the other hand are other international friends in the host institution whereas host national friends are friends from the host country. It should then be noted that interaction is the highest between international students and their co-national friends (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977).

What this entails is the minimal presence of quality interaction between international and host national students across different academic environments (Brown, 2009; Ward, 2005). The reason being different cultures appear to be a perceived hindrance for international students to mingle and interact with their host national counterparts (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). This view is further echoed by the research carried out by Ward and Kennedy (1993) who found that Malaysian and Singaporean international students studying in New Zealand are more comfortable and inclined to build relationships with other co-national students as they share a familiar cultural background.

For that reason, cultural familiarity inadvertently affects the quality of contact between international and host national students both inside and outside the confines of the classroom walls (Ward and Kennedy, 1993; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001; Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004 & Brown, 2009). In this case, the quality of contact can be further diminished between international and host students.

To counter this lack of interaction, Allport (1954) suggested that the quality of contact between individuals from different social backgrounds can be boosted by taking into account mutual understandings, commonalities, equalities and explicit institutional backing, where in the present circumstance would be the university or college administration. Additionally, institutions of higher education can heighten such multicultural interaction by offering the provisions and opportunities necessary to facilitate all students to participate in campus activities (Chang et al, 2004).

When quality interactions involving host national and international students exist, positive psychological well-being can be fostered (Ward & Searle, 1991). Following the research carried out by Parsons (2010), it was indicated that positive outcomes were observed in all aspects from the study when cross-cultural interaction takes place in institutions of higher learning.

Moreover, Chang et al (2004) regarded quality multicultural interaction to be a pertinent factor in accruing a host of developmental advantages ranging from social skill to academic prowess. Other positive effects are that of world-mindedness, widened global perspectives, intercultural competences and general international knowledge (Parsons, 2010). Ward and Kennedy (1993) also suggested that cultural identity can also be improved when host and international students socialise whether or not that interaction happens within the academic confines.

Therefore, to understand better the reasoning for promulgating quality interaction between host and international students, such quality contact can be correlated with mutual personal interests, social circles, intellectual capabilities and academic goals (Chang et al, 2004). From this, multicultural interaction helps in sociocultural adaptation for students to lessen the incidence of discrimination, stereotyping and inequity (Li & Gasser, 2005).

Even though cross-cultural contact between host national and international students is minimal, more can be done to further improve such interaction (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). The reason being, the qualitative aspect of the contact between host and international students is just as imperative as the quantitative side of it. However, Hendrickson et al (2011) found that high quality relationships between international students and host nationals were linked to higher satisfaction and improved psychological acclimatisation.

By examining the linkage between the quantity and quality of contact between host nationals and international students, researchers would be more informed about how these two qualities are somehow not mutually exclusive and rely upon one another to facilitate intercultural contact.

Theoretical Perspectives

Using the functional model of friendship network advocated by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977), it was theorized that international students develop three groups of social interaction, namely conational, multinational and host national friends. Co-national friends are friends from the same country of origin, multinational friends are other international friends and host national 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 host nationals. Therefore, it can be concluded that international students are likely to form intimate relationships with their co-national friends and maybe with their multinational friends to a certain extent, yet their relationships with host nationals are somewhat distant and instrumental.

METHODOLOGY

Using the quantitative approach, this study involved undergraduate international students pursuing their first degrees in four Malaysian higher institutions of learning, namely, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to international undergraduates in the four universities with a return of 318 completed questionnaires.

Participants

The participants in this study comprise international students in four institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The distribution of 318 respondents is displayed in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to universities

<i>Universities</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
UKM	47
UM	57
UPM	62
USM	152

Research Instrument

The two-page questionnaire used in the collection of data was designed by a team of researchers of this study. The questionnaire comprise a demographic section including gender, age of respondents, current year of study, number of years spent in Malaysia and respondents' field of study and the sections on quantity and quality of social interaction. The options in the Likert scale for this section are: "Never", "Seldom", "Sometimes", "Often" and "Always".

Method for Analyzing Data

Item Analysis

Information regarding the interaction was cross-tabulated with the results from a 5-point Likert Scale dealing with the quantity of contact and quality of contact. These items were analysed using SPSS 15.0 for Windows. For the purpose of this study, significance has been set at $p \leq 0.05$.

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used to look for sets of responses which have a high correlation with each other. The internal consistency of the items in each factor of the questionnaire established was checked using Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. The items in each factor were considered reliable as the established readings were high at 0.951.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are presented in two sections. The demographic data are firstly presented, followed by the data for quantity and quality of social interaction.

Demographic Data

A total of 164 (52%) female and 154 (48%) male international students participated in this study. Meanwhile, 22% were in the age group ranging from 16-20 years old, while the majority, 68% of the participants were in the age range of 21-24. Only 8% were aged between 25-30 years old while 2% were aged between 31-35 years old (Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Age Groups</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
16-20 years	22
21-24 years	68
25-30 years	8
31-35 years	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>

The countries where the participants came from include China, Japan, India, Southeast Asian countries such as Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, African countries including Kenya, Nigeria, Chad, Ethiopia and Somalia as well as the Middle Eastern countries.

Quality and Quantity of Social Interaction

Quantity of social interaction

In terms of quantity of social interaction, most of the international students responded favourably to the following items as most of the mean scores are higher than 3.00. 54.8% of the international students generally agreed that they are treated fairly by host national students (mean score = 3.56) while a higher percentage, 65.8% felt that they are accepted by

host national students (mean score = 3.72). Meanwhile, 54.9% often feel happy when they are in the company of host national students (mean score = 3.68). However, it is surprising to find that 55.6% of the international students do not find it easy to make friends with host national students (mean score = 3.40). On the same note, 77.7% do not find their best friends in host national students (mean score = 2.59).

Table 3

<i>Items</i>	<i>Never %</i>	<i>Seldom %</i>	<i>Sometimes %</i>	<i>Often %</i>	<i>Always %</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
I make friends with host national students easily	4.1	11.9	39.6	28.9	15.4	3.40
My best friends are host national students	22.3	25.5	29.9	15.7	6.6	2.59
I am treated fairly by host national students	4.8	9.6	30.8	34.6	20.2	3.56
I am accepted by host national students	4.4	6.3	23.4	44.0	21.8	3.72
I feel happy when I am with host national students	1.9	8.5	32.9	32.6	24.1	3.68
I feel comfortable when I am in the company of host national students	3.5	9.8	31.9	32.5	22.4	3.61

Quality of Social Interaction

Table 4

<i>Items</i>	<i>Never %</i>	<i>Seldom %</i>	<i>Sometimes %</i>	<i>Often %</i>	<i>Always %</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
I discuss cultural issues with host national students	7.9	17.9	32.7	26.4	15.1	3.23
I discuss religious issues with host national students	20.2	22.1	28.0	20.5	9.2	2.76
My friendship with host national students is important to me	2.8	7.5	31.1	30.8	27.0	3.72
I take part in social activities with host national students	12.3	18.9	35.8	20.4	11.6	3.00
My host national friends invite me to join them during meal times	12.9	18.2	34.3	23.6	10.7	3.01
My host national friends invite me to celebrate their festivals with them	19.5	21.7	31.8	17.6	9.1	2.75

As seen in *Table 4*, 57.8% felt that their friendship with host national students is important to them (mean score = 3.72) even though 65.4% agreed that host national students seldom or never invite them to have meals together (mean score = 3.01). Furthermore, 67% admitted that they are seldom invited to take part in social activities with host national students (mean score = 3.00) and 73% felt that host national students seldom or never invite them to celebrate the host national festivals (mean score = 2.75). It is also interesting to note that although a higher percentage (58.5%) of the international students discuss cultural issues with host national students (mean score = 3.23), an even higher percentage (70.3%) seldom or never discuss religious issues with host national students (mean score = 2.76).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are in tandem with Ward's (2001) analysis that international students desire more quality and quantity in social interaction with host national students. As indicated in the studies of Evans (2000) and Guifoyle (2004), many international students

have difficulty in interacting with host national students which may result in feelings of loneliness and helplessness. In terms of quantity of social interaction, a high percentage of the international students found it difficult to make friends with host national students which could be due to a less conducive environment. At the same time, a possible explanation for the lack of best friends in host national students could be due to a communication barrier between international students and host national students as postulated by Ward, Bochner & Furnham (2001).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As postulated by Ward (2005) and Brown (2009), the failure of communication between international students and host nationals has detrimental implications on the quality of social interaction. International students value interactions with host national in terms of learning the host culture and improving their language acquisition. Nevertheless, if inapproachability is deemed to be an obstacle in their efforts to reach out to the host community, the consequences might be somewhat harmful to the progress towards intercultural competence whereby it could induce anxiety and alienation in some individuals (Harrison, 2012). Therefore, promoting the long-term benefits of engaging and interacting with international students to host national students and encouraging international students to interact and engage more outside of their studies are some of the suggestions made to institutions of higher learning to expedite and enhance support services as well provide a more conducive social environment for international students. The implication of a low quantity and quality of social interaction between international and host national students may affect institutional choice and the enrolment of more international students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to acknowledge that this research was supported by a grant from the Division of Research and Innovation, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bochner, S., McLeod, B. M. & Lin, A. (1977). Friendship patterns of overseas students: A functional model. *International Journal of Psychology*, 12, 277-297.
- [2] Brown, L. (2009), A failure of communication on the cross-cultural campus. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. Retrieved October 10, 2010 from <http://jsi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/13/4/439>
- [3] Chang, M. J., Astin, A. W. & Kim, D. (2004). Cross-racial interaction among undergraduates: Some consequences, causes and patterns. *Research in Higher Education*, 45 (5), 529-553.
- [4] Collier, M. J. & Bornman, E. (1999). Core symbiosis in South African intercultural friendships. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23 (1), 133-156.
- [5] Evans, M. (2000). Planning for the transition to tertiary study: A literature review. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9(1), 1-13.
- [6] Furnham, A. & Alibhai, N. (1985). The friendship networks of foreign students: A replication and extension of the functional model. *International Journal of Psychology*, 20, 709 - 722.
- [7] Guilfoyle, A.M. (2004). *Exploring the spaces in-between institutional services provided and international postgraduate student experiences*. 18th IDP Australian International Education Conference. Sydney, Australia.

- [8] Harrison, N. (2012). Investigating the impact of personality and early life experiences on intercultural interaction in internationalised universities. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36, 224-237.
- [9] Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D. & Aune, R. K. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35, 281-295.
- [10] Internationalisation policy for higher education Malaysia 2011 <http://jpt.mohe.gov.my/PEMASARAN/Internationalisation%20&%20Marketing%20of%20OHE%20Seminar%202011%20Presentations/Book%20%20Internationalisation%20Policy%202011.pdf>
- [11] Li, A. & Gasser M. B. (2005). Predicting Asian international students' sociocultural adjustment: A test of two mediation models. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29, 561-576.
- [12] Morshidi, S. (2008). The Impact of September 11 on International Student Flow Into Malaysia: Lessons Learned. *IJAPS* . Vol. 4, No. 1 (May).
- [13] Montgomery, C. & McDowell, L. (2009), Social Networks and the International Student Experience: An International Community of Practice? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13:4, pp. 455 -466.
- [14] Parsons, R. L. (2010). The effects of an internationalized university experience on domestic students in the United States and Australia. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14 (4), 313-334
- [15] Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C. and Ramia, G. (2007), Loneliness and international students: an Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol.XX No.X,
- [16] Sedgwick, R. (2004). Middle Eastern students find options at home and elsewhere. *World Education News and Reviews*, November/December. Retrieved December 29, 2007, from <http://www.wes.org/ewener/04Nov/Feature.htm/>
- [17] The University of Melbourne (2005). Survey of final year international students on their experience of the University of Melbourne
- [18] Verbik, L. and Lasanowski, V. (2007). International student mobility: Patterns and trends. *The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education*, UK (September).
- [19] Volet, S., & Ang, G. (1998). Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for intercultural learning. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 17, 5-23.
- [20] Ward, C., Bochner, S & Furnham, A. (2001). The psychology of culture shock. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- [21] Ward, C. & Kennedy, A. (1993). Psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transition: A comparison of secondary students at home and abroad. *International Journal of Psychology*, 28, 129-147.
- [22] Ward, C. & Searle, W. (1991). The impact of value discrepancies and cultural identity on psychological and sociocultural adjustment of sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 15, 209-225.
- [23] Yoong, H.L. (2009), Problems and stress among students in an international campus. *The International Journal of Learning*, 16:4. Retrieved September 15, 2010 from <http://www.Learning-Journal.com>