MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia faces challenges in creating a new multi-channelled learning environment where international and local students study, connect and work with one another across classrooms, community and country borders in so many exciting ways. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has made a recent move to transform the landscape of tertiary education where one main thrust aims in intensifying internationalisation and ensuring a 10%–30% enrolment of international students. Malaysian higher education will therefore experience rapid racial and ethnic diversification of its student body. This paper will examine multicultural activities that have been a part of graduate school's work for many years. There is, however, little discussion on outcomes related to diversity initiatives, multicultural programmes and global educational opportunities experienced by the students. This paper reports on the findings of a recent study that has aimed to examine diversity and multicultural awareness that influences the growth and development of graduate students. Taking the case study of Middle Eastern students in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the study unveiled the patterns of interactions between international and local students which consider the quality and quantity of contact, friendship patterns, social support networks and the functional roles of inter-cultural interactions. Furthermore, the findings revealed perceptions of Middle Eastern students on the larger community which involves notions of perceived discrimination, prejudice, tolerance and stereo-typing. The findings of this study would help practitioners understand the influence of student affairs programmes and services that can contribute not only to the well-being of students but also to the enhancing of multiculturalism in Malaysian higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of higher education, in the context of globalisation has created impacts which are far more complex because, the new, economically driven strategies often challenges the more traditional

programmes, student and faculty exchanges, and international higher education cooperation programmes. This has resulted in the analysis of rationales, strategies and mechanisms that respond to the dramatic changes impinging upon higher education today to accommodate new dimensions of thinking, learning and researching while preparing students for highly technological and knowledge-based occupations of the 21st century diverse workforce. In a global spectrum, about 2 mil students study across their borders, and a study suggests that there will be an increase to 8 mil by 2025 (Altbach 2004). The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has made a recent move to transform the landscape of tertiary education where one main thrust aims in intensifying internationalisation and ensuring a 10%–30% enrolment of international students. This is evident through the vision of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education when it had announced its ambition to increase the intake of international students to 60,000 by 2008, "through initiatives that will further highlight Malaysia's top-notch global education system in line with its 'Internationalisation Programme'" (Hassan 2008). This programme is aimed to increase students from the Middle Eastern and North Africa region to 15,000 by 2009. Besides that, the Internationalisation Programme has structured a set of specific objectives to strengthen its bond with Middle Eastern institutions, which will pave way to remarkable educational opportunities available in Malaysia.

The desire for international students to leave their country and pursue their studies overseas are varied from their need to obtain quality higher education, to equip themselves with employable international skills, to establish multicultural relationships with domestic students and to acquire skills that are vital for their country's economy in the age of globalisation and knowledge-based economies. The influx of international students in universities has various benefits for the economies of students' countries of origin, the host country's economy, and international and local students themselves. International students also diversify higher educational institutions by creating a cultural learning environment for domestic students where in the higher education context, multiculturalism involves student diversity that includes a combination of international and domestic students.

Table 1
Foreign students in Malaysia 1999–2006.

Countries	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006
China	79	5976	4837	10849	10447	13564	16754
Indonesia	863	5296	4675	4731	5634	6134	8348
Pakistan	76	361	406	613	1159	1789	1958
India	91	714	497	965	930	1246	1386
Thailand	185	457	580	761	884	950	1126
Yemen	37	138	282	480	696	514	782
Singapore	98	306	278	486	569	486	583
Myanmar	44	301	404	348	458	479	556
Vietnam	22	64	223	303	620	430	489
Oman	2	187	421	401	612	435	863
Sri Lanka	25	157	248	234	481	408	560
Iran	41	122	412	247	374	396	542
Brunei Darussalam	113	265	373	287	341	238	428
Iraq	92	143	348	133	283	256	389
Jordan	111	121	441	134	273	238	352
Saudi Arabia	2	25	327	124	336	106	522
TOTAL	**1881**	**14663**	**14752**	**21096**	**24097**	**27669**	**35638**

Source: UNESCO Database Table 18 (2006)

The present scenario in Malaysia is one that confronts challenges as well as opportunities in addressing the continuous increase in issues of diversity in educational institutions. While international students can provide good opportunities for cross-cultural learning and communication, they may also face many barriers that hampered their learning experiences. By taking their diversity into account, this culturally heterogeneous group of international students has a tendency to experience various dilemmas in their educational ventures and social context. Due to their differences in cultural-education background, international students pursuing their studies in a foreign country found that interacting with local students and university staff as potentially challenging (Bartlett 2002). Brain drain and the loss of cultural identity are seen as the greatest risk of internationalisation (International Higher Education 2002). Therefore, higher education institutions play a vital role in promoting diversity and multiculturalism in the dimension of evolving demographics of student body, the global work environment, the diverse workforce and the necessity for educators to take into account students' cultural differences in their academic practices.

This study looked closely at Middle Eastern students, one of the international groups that make up a significant percentage of international students in Malaysia. The investigation focused on what is learned and how efforts to increase diversity and multicultural awareness influence the growth and development of graduate students. Taking the case study of Middle Eastern students in USM, this study unveiled the patterns of interactions between international and local students which considered the quality and quantity of contact, friendship patterns, social support networks and the functional roles of inter-cultural interactions. Furthermore, the findings also revealed perceptions of Middle Eastern students about the community which involves notions of perceived discrimination, prejudice, tolerance and stereotyping.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Multiculturalism seeks to promote the valuing of diversity and equal opportunity for all people through understanding of the contributions and perspectives of people of differing race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities and disabilities. A multicultural curriculum provides a more comprehensive, accurate, intellectually honest view of reality; prepare all students to function in a multicultural society, and better meet the learning needs of all students (Morey & Kitano 1997). Multicultural activities have been interwoven as part of the graduate school's work for several years but there are many areas that need to be explored in terms of addressing the needs of international students who have multiplied in number. Although efforts are undertaken in order for international students to be able to adapt themselves to their new social environment, further initiatives are perceived as vital to support cultural understanding that fosters a new multi-channelled learning environment where international and local students study, connect and work with one another across classrooms, community and country borders in many exciting ways. In this vein, graduate education is a crucial cluster of contemporary communities that do not only focus in producing knowledge, skills and technological innovations necessary for successful social and economic participation in the global world, but also support cultural understanding that result in encouraging societies that are capable, tolerant and peaceful.

Previous studies have documented the challenges that confront international students with regard to their inability to make cultural adjustments which include adapting to the new educational and social

environment, the pressures of staying away from their homes, language problems, financial strains and lack of friends (Australasian Law Teacher's Association 1995). Based on reports of various other studies, the problems encountered by international students can be categorized into 11 areas namely: financial aid, placement services, English language, academic achievements, health services, socio-personal, admissions and selection, living/dining services, orientation services, student activities and religious services (Galloway & Jenkins 2005). A national study of international students pursuing their studies in Canada, found that there were three conspicuous areas in problems related to establish friendship with Canadian students; language barrier, cultural differences and participating in activities on campus (Walker 1999).

Consistent with these findings, research also indicates the possibility of international students experiencing psychosocial aspects (Grayson 2003). This is reflective in a research which was carried out at the University of Waterloo where the study on Malay students revealed that students who were socially inhibited and as a result had few Canadian friends, or who allocated little time with Canadians, suffered higher stress levels than other Malay students (Berry & Kostovcik 1983). Additionally, a study conducted at Queen's University revealed that Asian students, who preferred to isolate themselves socially, experienced a higher degree of problems in comparison their friends who were sociable with Canadians (Chataway & Berry 1989). Similarly, Chen (1990) stresses that a lack of participation by international students in formal and informal activities in the university is correlated to their poor command in the English language. It is evident that students from one culture will experience some difficulties in coping with their studies and trying to adapt to a different culture and environment. The degree of difficulties will depend on the student's characteristics, the university environment and the differences in the two cultures.

When Furnham and Alibhai (1985) investigate students' preferred companions for 11 different activities, it was found that the preference for host national contact was particularly in three areas which were help with language problems, assistance with academic problems, and an interesting phenomenon, that was going out with a member of the opposite sex. The original study by Bochner et al. (1976) points out that host nationals were relied upon for language and academic assistance. More recently, international students in Canada and Australia are also found to prefer locals for seeking language help and solving academic problems as well as for sightseeing activities (Westwood & Barker 1990). It is apparent that different networks are used for different functions, but as studies from the United States, Britain, Australia, Israel, New Zealand and Singapore

indicate, the host national network is the less salient than the co-national one (Furnham & Bochner 1982; Klineberg 1982; Klineberg & Hull 1979; Nowak & Weiland 1998; Ong 2000; Wiseman 1997).

Bochner et al.'s (1977) classic functional model of interaction suggests that international students operate within three networks of relationships: a primary co-national network whose function is to affirm cultural identity and lend psychological and emotional support, a secondary network of host nationals to facilitate professional and academic aspirations and a third multicultural network whose function is largely recreational. There seems to be some support of this in the research literature. On the whole, research suggests that international students expect and desire contact with their local peers, and positive social, psychological, and academic benefits arise from this contact; however, the amount of interaction between international and local students is low (Bochner et al. 1976; Bochner et al. 1985; Bochner & Orr 1979). Three main issues can be summarized from Bochner et al.'s (1977) classic functional model of interaction which is widely used in the literature for studying social, educational and cultural impacts of international students in terms of their relationships.

The various studies converge in the finding that the incidence of inter-cultural interactions was low but international students had the desire to establish a greater level of contact. The difficulties in developing deep and meaningful relationships between local and international students may have increasingly negative consequences over time. Early impressions and interactions are of great importance in forming later friendships, and initial disappointment may negatively affect subsequent perceptions and attitudes. Consequently, inter-cultural interactions is unlikely to establish instantly but can be materialised through interventionist strategies which would promote effective inter-cultural activities. There had been no studies identified that have explicitly examined the impact of international students on the larger community (Ward et al. 2001). The relationship between inter-national students and the communities in which they reside had been the area for discussion in the international education literature, but there had been hardly any research.

There is considerable discussion in international graduate education where benefits were presumed to arise as a natural consequence of the increasing presence of international students. As a result of scant research, this assumption was based on opinion which was not supported by empirical evidence. Generally, interventions are required to maximise the benefits of internationalisation, and although the outcomes appear promising, there have been limited evaluations that are well-planned to determine it.

The present research is vital to study the impact of multiculturalism on international and local students. Building from the works of research stated above, specifically the framework developed by Bochner et al. (1977), the research highlights four main themes which encompass the following:

- Quality of contact among international students
- Friendship patterns
- Social support networks
- Perception of international students on the larger community

METHODOLOGY

According to statistics derived from the Institute of Graduate Studies, USM (2007), the number of foreign graduate students in this university has steadily increased for three consecutive years from 671 in 2005, to 756 in 2006 and currently to 892 students in 2007. These students have enrolled in a range of 39 Schools, and four Centers of Excellence in the areas of Medicine, Science and Technology, Engineering and Arts. It is helpful to note that the biggest proportion of these international students consists of students from the Middle East.

A survey research method was employed in this study. A three-pages questionnaire, consisting of open-ended questions, was designed, pilot tested, refined and used for data collection.

The first part of the questionnaire comprised items pertaining to demographic information of gender, the type of degree being pursued, year of study and country of origin. The second part comprised questions based on the theme interactions between international and local students which consider the quality and quantity of contact. The third part integrated questions based on the theme friendship patterns, while the fourth part consisted of questions pertaining to social support networks. The final section included questions pertaining to the theme which examines the impact of international students on the larger local community which involves notions of perceived discrimination, prejudice, tolerance and stereotyping. The questionnaire was distributed in November 2007, to 100 Middle Eastern students, enrolled at the USM.

A focus group discussion was conducted in this study where 20 Middle Eastern students were invited to participate. Each session consisted of five people gathered in a room to elicit responses on cultural experiences of students to provide a rich understanding on the impact of

multiculturalism on Middle Eastern graduate students in the university. Responses were tape-recorded and note-taking was employed. The moderator facilitated the two sessions and ensured that there was an equal contribution and discussion from all participants during the focus group discussions.

FINDINGS

In order to examine the patterns of interactions between Middle Eastern and local students, it is vital to analyse the perceptions of students on the patterns of interactions between international and local students which consider the quality and quantity of contact, friendship patterns, social support networks and the functional roles of inter-cultural interactions on their interactions. In addition it was also important to examine the perceptions of Middle Eastern students on the larger community which involves notions of perceived discrimination, prejudice, tolerance and stereotyping. The findings derived from this study reflected the extent to which inter-cultural friendships are fostered and their interactions with the larger community.

Table 2
Quality of contact among international students.

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
1. I establish contact with local students from different courses without problems.	20.0	56.9	18.5	4.6	100
2. I only establish contact with other students from different courses who are of the same nationality as me.	12.3	47.6	27.7	12.4	100

(continue on next page)

Table 2 *(continued)*

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
3. I am discriminated as a foreigner when socialising with my coursemates.	4.6	10.8	56.9	27.7	100
4. I am lonely as a result of less local friends.	9.2	9.2	47.7	33.9	100
5. I am treated with prejudice by other local students.	1.5	21.6	29.2	47.7	100
6. I trustingly confide my problems to local graduate friends.	4.6	52.3	29.2	13.9	100
7. Local graduates are helpful when I have a problem with my language or assignments.	12.3	53.8	20.0	13.8	100
8. My differences as a foreign student are tolerated well by my local graduate friends.	6.2	73.8	12.3	7.7	100
9. I enjoy going out for shopping, outdoor activities and playing games with local graduate students.	18.5	47.7	16.9	16.9	100

Table 2 *(continued)*

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
10. I am invited by my local graduate friends to have meals in their homes with their families.	10.8	27.7	24.6	36.9	100
11. I am willing to learn new cultural beliefs of my local graduate friends.	23.1	61.5	10.8	4.6	100

The findings above were correlated to the analysis of interactions between Middle Eastern and local students, in terms of their quality of contact. A total of 56.9% agreed and 20% strongly agreed (statement 1) that they did not experience problems when establishing contacts with local students from different course. During the discussion, it was noted that students who possessed good proficiency of the English language, communication skills and able adapt to cultural differences, experienced less problems when socialising with local students.

This is evident in the focus group discussions of the international students. The following response was from an Iranian male student who is currently pursuing his doctorate:

> I have usually no problems when establishing relationships with local students. I can talk to them and they understand me but local students are not always friendly towards us. It is we who have to always go up to them and introduce ourselves. Local students are sometimes scared of us too and because of this I am also unhappy about forming contacts with local students and prefer to make friends with Middle Eastern or other international students from the same or different course.

Another girl whose pursuing her bachelors from Jordan responded that:

> I am weak in English and I cannot understand the language of the other students and sometimes the way lecturers speak too. Local students laugh at the way I speak. This makes me nervous. I am shy to make friends with locals. Local students laugh at me when I present my work in class. I am happy just being with my Middle Eastern friends from the same course or another one.

This finding is also reflected in statement 1 as 18.5% disagreed and 4.6% strongly disagreed that they did not encounter problems when establishing contacts with local students. The reasons cited during the discussion as quoted above by majority of the students, could be the cause for the results that 47.6% of students agreed for statement 2, that they only established contact with other students from different courses who are of the same nationality as them. However, it should be noted that 27.7% were not in the habit of restricting their socialising with students of the same nationality.

As for statement 3, although 56.9% of students disagreed and 27.7% strongly disagreed that they were discriminated by local students, the problem does exist to a small extent. This is evident in students' response where 10.8% agreed and 4.6% strongly agreed that they faced discrimination as an international student. It was noted in the discussion, that local students tend to laugh at them during class presentations or answering sessions during classes.

An Iranian male student remarked:

> I try my best to speak and explain well in class but local students laugh at me and my friends at the way we speak. This hurts us very, very much. Although when local students turn to present and speak in front of class, their friends are quiet and even clap hands even though their weaker than us international students. Local students even shake hands with their friends after they have presented but to us no. This is unfair as we do better sometimes.

In response to the next statement, majority of the students (47.7% disagreed and 33.9% strongly agreed) were not facing loneliness as a result of less local friends. This finding reflected that they were socialising among their group of international students as highlighted by a female student from Yemen:

> I do not care if local students do not bother to make friends with me. I have many international students who understand me and I am more comfortable with them. So I am not lonely without local friends.

Findings of statement 5 highlighted that the element of prejudice hardly existed between Middle Eastern and local students as 47.7% strongly disagreed and 29.2% disagreed that local students treat them with prejudice. However, it is to be noted that a total of 21.6% agreed that they were treated with prejudice. In relation to statement 6, the majority of students, who did not encounter problems with local students, were able to trustingly confide their problems to local graduate friends. This was evident as 52.3% agreed and 4.6% strongly agreed to statement 6. Middle Eastern students were also not in the practice of trusting their local friends, where 29.2% disagreed and 13.9% strongly disagreed to statement 6. This finding was related to a response from a male student from Jordan who commented during the discussion:

> I will never trust a local student who is not the same ethnicity as me.
> I only trust my countryman who will never ever betray me.

This finding related to that the minority of Middle Eastern students was reserved and trusts their own nationality of friends. Findings for statement 7 explicated the extent of local students' willingness to render help to Middle Eastern students. The majority of Middle Eastern viewed local friends as helpful when they experienced problems pertaining to language or assignments. A total of only 20.0% disagreed and 13.8% strongly disagreed to statement 7.

This finding was reflective during the discussion session when a few responses highlighted this evidently. A female student commented:

> "Local students are selfish and keep all knowledge to themselves."
> Another student responded: "Even when they help, they do it for the sake of doing it. They do not tell us everything that we ask and they help us in a very small way in our assignment."

In response to statement 8, 73.8% of students agreed and 6.2% strongly agreed that local students were able to tolerate their differences. This highlights that local students had high tolerance level with Middle Eastern students. Responses for statement 9 is interesting to note, where

47.7% agreed and 18.5% strongly agreed that they enjoyed the idea of going out for shopping, outdoor activities and playing games with local students.

However, when statement 10 was analysed, local students did practice certain constraints when socialising with Middle Eastern students. The majority of students comprising a total of 36.9% who strongly disagreed and 24.6% disagreed that they were invited by their local graduate friends to have meals in their homes with their families. This finding coincides with students' responses during the discussion session, where a male student from Jordan commented:

> I feel that local students are not warm and hospitable towards us foreign students. We are never at all invited to their homes to meet their family and have meals or socialise with their family members.

Another student had added:

> In our country, we always welcome foreign students to our homes to introduce them to our family members and have meals with us. I wish local students were like that here and this will make us more at home in a foreign land.

This reflects the extent of local students' hospitality towards their Middle Eastern friends which confirms that aspects of interaction and socialising between them were low. In relation to statement 11, Middle Eastern students responded in a positive manner where 61.5% agreed and 23.1% strongly agreed that they were willing to learn new cultural beliefs of their local friends. Findings from discussion correlate too where a male student had responded:

> My friends and I are willing to learn the cultures of Malaysia. We wish that the university will let us participate in programmes that will expose us to the various cultural aspects of Malaysian people.

Another student has added:

> In this way, we will be able to better understand the way of life, language and religion of Malaysian people. Then we can have more local friends.

Table 3
Friendship patterns.

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
1. I communicate with all my local course-mates without problems.	23.1	60.0	9.2	7.7	100
2. I only communi-cate with course-mates from the same country.	12.3	40.0	29.2	18.5	100
3. Local graduates have similar opinions of my friends and I.	9.2	63.1	24.6	3.1	100
4. I seek help from local students when I am confronted with language problems during classes.	3.1	61.5	16.9	18.5	100
5. I seek assistance in my assignments from local students.	4.7	36.9	29.2	29.2	100
6. My group discussions involve local graduate students.	23.1	52.3	15.4	9.2	100
7. I am fond of establishing relationship with local graduate students of the opposite sex.	4.6	35.3	29.2	30.8	100

Table 3 highlights the findings on friendship patterns between Middle Eastern and local students. Majority of students (60.0% agreed and 23.1% strongly agreed) did not encounter problems with communication when interacting with local course mates. Responses to statement 13 evidences that Middle Eastern students had the tendency to restrict their socialisation pattern within their network where 40% agreed and 12.3% strongly agreed that they only communicate with course mates from the same country.

During the focus group discussion, a female student had responded:

I am more comfortable mixing with my friends who are the same nationality as me. They understand my feelings and treat me well.

Another male student commented:

The guys from my country socialise the way I like and this make me stick to them happily. I don't need local friends.

As for statement 14, the majority (63.1% agreed and 9.2% strongly agreed) of students were in the opinion that local students have stereotype opinion of Middle Eastern students. This finding is also reflected during the discussion, where a female Iranian student responded:

Local students keep telling us that we are all the same. The ways we speak, behave and think are similar.

Another student similarly responded:

This opinion of local students hurt us very much because we are humans too and are different in many ways. They cannot say that we are all the same.

Students to a large extent (61.5% agreed and 3.1% strongly agreed) responded (statement 15) that they seek help from local students when they are confronted with language problems during classes. A male student in the discussion commented:

I always sit beside a local student in class. Why? I ask them to translate certain difficult words or sentences used by the lecturers and local students are always helpful.

In relation to statement 16, though 36.9% agreed and 4.7% strongly agreed that they seek assistance in their assignments from local students, an equal portion of 29.2% disagreed and strongly disagreed. In the discussion session, a male Jordanian student comment was:

> "Local students are selfish and never tell what we need to know when we approach them when having problems in the assignment." Another student added: "Sometimes they help us but we know that they are not honest and never really tell us exactly what we need to know."

Statement 17 revealed that Middle Eastern students like to include local graduate students in their group discussions (52.3% agreed and 23.1% strongly agreed). A Palestinian student remarked:

> Not all local students respond when we invite them for group discussions. We like the idea of local students in our discussions because they will be able to contribute from different perspectives.

The majority of students agreed to his comment. Responses to statement 18 signified the patterns of inter-cultural friendships that were established with the opposite sex. Interestingly, a total 35.3% agreed and 4.6% strongly agreed that they were fond of establishing relationships with local students of the opposite sex.

Findings in Table 4 were reflective of students' responses to the theme relating to social support networks. Statement 19 was highly indicative of students' state of being unaware of various governmental or private organisations in the society that will benefit them as an international student. A total of 24.6% disagreed and 36.9% strongly disagreed to this statement. Similarly, during the discussion, it was found that students were unaware of various organisations that will benefit them. An Arabian student commented:

> The university should let us know more about government and private organisations which we could rely on for support in terms of catering to our various needs.

Table 4
Social support networks.

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
1. I am aware of various government and private organisations in the society, which will benefit international students.	10.8	27.7	24.6	36.9	100
2. I am reliant on various government and private organisations to help me to cope in a foreign country.	4.6	10.8	56.9	27.7	100
3. I seek emotional support from various government or private organisations.	10.2	9.4	47.7	32.7	100
4. I seek help from people of various government or private organisations to solve my problems as an international student.	5.7	11.8	56.6	25.9	100
5. People from various government or private organisations do not discriminate me when I participate in their activities.	23.5	56.7	16.9	2.9	100

As a result of students' ignorance of government and private organisations that exist in the society, statement 20 revealed that 27.7% strongly disagreed and 56.9% disagreed that they were reliant on various organisations to help them to cope in a foreign country. A student had expressed his concern during the discussion emotionally saying:

> I feel lost sometimes in this foreign land with no family and less friends. I have nowhere to turn to and if the university is able to let us foreign students know more about the various organisations in the society; this will be of great help to relieve us of certain burdens. If I can participate in these organisations, then I will be able to socialise and this will be helpful.

Additionally, statement 21 highlighted that students were not able to seek emotional support from various government or private organisations, due to their ignorance of the various kinds of organisations that exist in Penang or Malaysia. A total of 47.7% disagreed and 32.7% strongly agreed to this statement.

Statement 22 also evidently pointed out that students were unable to seek help from people of various government or private organisations, in order to solve their problems as international students (56.6% disagreed and 25.9% strongly disagreed). A student from Oman stated during the discussion:

> I wish that I knew of organisations that will help me solve my financial state.

While another added:

> I wish I could get help for my emotional well-being and counseling by professionals will be helpful.

Findings from statement 23 revealed that 56.7% agreed and 23.5% strongly agreed that people from various government or private organisations did not discriminate them when they participate in particular activities. The element of discrimination is hardly prevalent in various government or private organisations.

Table 5
Perceptions of students on the larger community.

Statements	Scales (%)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
1. I communicate well with local people when socialising out of campus.	32.6	47.4	11.5	8.5	100
2. I am treated with discrimination by local people.	7.8	10.9	57.6	23.7	100
3. I am perceived as a stereotype Middle Eastern student by local people.	15.8	22.5	51.7	10.0	100
4. I am satisfied with the treatment of officials at various government organisations.	23.7	32.6	23.7	20.0	100
5. I am satisfied with the service of the staff at various government or public organisations.	28.9	41.4	20.7	9.0	100
6. I do not encounter problems with the community when using public transport.	15.6	24.4	30.5	29.5	100
7. I do not encounter problems with the community when eating at public places, shopping and on vacation.	54.4	23.6	12.3	9.7	100

Statements pertaining to Table 5 highlighted the findings related to the theme about perceptions of students on the larger community. Findings correlated with statement 24, unveiled that majority (32.6% strongly agreed and 47.4% agreed) of Middle Eastern students were able to communicate well with local people when socialising out of campus. Similarly, a male student from Iran commented:

> Malaysian people are warm and friendly. When they do not understand me at the bank, airport or restaurants, I am asked to repeat my speech and these officials or workers try very hard to understand me.

Another Libyan girl added:

> I am very happy at the way I am treated at banks especially where the officers are very kind and helpful.

Statement 25 revealed the finding that majority (57.6% disagreed and 23.7% strongly disagreed) of students were not discriminated by the Malaysian community. During the discussion, a male student from Yemen stated:

> When I go to shopping complexes, pubs, public library, bank, and government or private hospitals, I am treated fairly and well-respected by the people. I have absolutely no problems and my friends have no complaints about this.

However, findings in relation to statement 26 revealed that though 51.7% disagreed to this statement, it is to be noted that 22.5% agreed and 15.8% strongly agree that they were perceived as stereotype Middle Eastern students by the community. Discussion session unveiled that there were certain circumstances in which students experience, and these unpleasant experiences sometimes reflect this problem which is not however considered rampant.

Students' responses to statement 27, communicate whether they were satisfied with the treatment of staff at private or governmental organisations. A total of 32.6% agreed and 23.7% strongly agreed. Similar responses were gained from the discussion session. A female student from Iraq commented:

I am most happy with clerks, doctors and nurses at private or government hospitals or clinics. They treat me well with respect, polite and attend to my needs. In Malaysia I dare say that I get better treatment than my own country back home.

Another student was supportive of her and remarked:

Yes. My problems are well-addressed by officials at the bank or post office and for me, these two places are important.

Consequently, statement 28 points out those Middle Eastern students were basically satisfied (41.4% agreed and 28.9% strongly agreed) with the service of the staff at various government or public organisations. At the discussion, students communicated that they were happy with the services of staff at banks and post office, officials at the airport, hospital staff and other service providers. In relation to statement 29, 30.5% disagreed and 29.5% strongly disagreed that they did not encounter problems with the community when using the public transport.

During the discussion students had expressed their grievances. A Palestinian male student stated emotionally:

I went to the wrong place and missed my appointment with the doctor at a private hospital. When I asked the driver, he refused to help me and chased me to sit. I was left with no choice but to sit and guess where I should get off.

A few other students had communicated their problems with the public transport in terms of unpunctuality, irregular services, conditions of buses and problems with the attitude of the bus drivers. Statement 30 highlighted that 54.4% strongly agreed and 23.6% agreed that they did not encounter problems with the community when eating at public places, shopping and on vacation. Discussion findings relate similar responses where an Iraqi male student commented:

Malaysian people are pleasant. The workers at restaurants are polite and warmly treat me. This makes me happy to eat at Malaysian restaurants. Staff takes the trouble to explain the menu. I am particular cos I can't take spicy food.

The majority of students at the discussion communicated that they did not experience major problems when dealing with the community at large.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study in terms of exploring the quality of contact, and friendship patterns, showed that the extent of interaction between international and local students is low among Middle Eastern and local students in USM. The study demonstrated that participants showed evidence that Middle Eastern students possess the desire to establish greater contacts with local students and seek positive social, psychological and academic benefits. The perceptions of Middle Eastern students on the social support networks were that they required greater exposure to the various government and private organisations, in order to maximise the potential benefits of the various organisations. As for their perceptions in relation to the larger community, it was shown that only certain circumstances involved notions of perceived discrimination, prejudice, tolerance and stereotyping but these encounters were infrequent and not rampant. According to Kim (2001), cross-cultural adaptation has been a focus of study for decades and international students need to adopt with cultural patterns of host environment, in order to overcome challenges encountered. 'Strategic interventions' (Smart et al. 2000) can play a role in addressing the impacts of international students on local students, educational institutions and the host community. The following strategies have been administered, evaluated and proven to foster positive inter-cultural perceptions and relations (Ward et al. 2001):

- Peer-pairing programmes aim to integrate collaboration between international and local students who have frequent outings and experiences together after classes. Peer-programmes are used to assist international students to adapt to a new cultural and educational environment. They have also been used to successfully increase inter-cultural interactions. Their socialisation occurs in campus or outside the vicinity of the university. The initial purpose of peer-pairing programmes was to enable international students to adapt to the new environment and research enhances the idea that inter-cultural interactions and cultural awareness are enriched.

- Inter-cultural cooperative learning strategies are conceptualised as effective in fostering inter-cultural friendships in the field of education. Although research highlights that majority of international and local students seek preference to confine themselves to their own network of nationality but on the contrary, studies have suggested that inter-cultural group work decreases stereotypes and increases the

motivation and willingness of students to work with members of other groups. Ward et al. (2001) stressed the fact that the classic literature on cooperative learning in ethnically diverse classroom setting, despite the fact that it had been generally conducted with nationals of a single country, there is evidence that it has the potential to promote academic excellence and foster inter-cultural friendships in international scenarios.

- ▪ Residential programmes are noted to successfully integrate inter-cultural activities across a range involving inter-cultural activities in all aspects of student life, skilled and committed support persons to implement the programmes and high level of engagement on the part of participating students. These programmes have unveiled positive outcomes in terms of inter-cultural knowledge, increase in inter-cultural interactions and higher number of inter-cultural friendships.

Cultural adaptation is related to the necessity of 'understanding and manifesting behaviours' that are accepted in the host culture (Copeland & Griggs 1985). It was also perceptively pointed out that there were various contributing factors for enhancing cultural awareness and understanding which range from language skills, non-verbal communication patterns; social interaction patterns; behavioural communication which includes gestures, gaze and postures; emotional communication; interpersonal behavior patterns and rules; and patterns of social reasoning (Adelman 1988). Arguably, by indulging in conflict resolution and inter-cultural effectiveness skills (Bochner 1982), adaptation to host environment was encouraged through acknowledging the idea of challenges encountered when confronted with them and evade ignoring these particular problems.

Consequently, Harris and Moran (1987) has proposed solving cross-cultural problems based on the idea of "describing, analysing, and identifying the problem from both cultures' point of view; developing a synergistic strategy; and performing a multicultural assessment of effectiveness". When international students are able to comprehend various inevitable cultural problems from the viewpoint of the host culture, then this will promote one's own understanding of cultural characteristics, which perceives situations as problems. The basis for effective adaptation to cultural differences is by engaging oneself to learn culturally appropriate behaviours and experiencing problem-resolution procedures which will pave the way to adopting inter-cultural effectiveness to manage psychological stress, communicate effectively, establish interpersonal relationships, adapt to another culture and successfully merge with the various social systems.

CONCLUSION

This study looked closely at Middle Eastern students, one of the international groups that make up a significant percentage of international students. The investigation focused on diversity and multicultural awareness that influences the growth and development of graduate students. Taking the case study of Middle Eastern students in USM, this study indicates the pattern of interactions between international and local students which consider quality contact, friendship patterns, social support networks and the functional roles of inter-cultural interactions. The main challenges encountered by Middle Eastern students were that they possess the desire to have an improved quality and greater contact with the local students, establish stronger bonds of friendships with their local friends and seek greater exposure in terms of the various kinds of social support networks.

Research has evidenced that the high rate of international students in higher education institutions, results in various challenges (Smart et al. 2000). This study has highlighted that the presence of international students, even in large numbers, is insufficient in itself to promote inter-cultural interactions, to develop inter-cultural friendships and international understanding. However, it is vital that situations must be structured to strategically foster these processes. Studies have also revealed that students, both local and international, perceive it, as the responsibility of educational institutions to increase and enhance inter-cultural interactions. Therefore, higher education institutions should play a role in promoting awareness of cultural impacts in relation to interactions between international and local students by implementing Peer-Pairing Programmes, Cooperative Learning and Residential Programmes which is vital to the aspect of the functional roles in inter-cultural interactions. International students should also be exposed to various establishments of social support networks, to ensure that they participate in external affairs and are able to solve their challenges that are encountered as a result of their status as international students studying in a foreign land. There is much to unveil in terms of social, educational, and cultural implications of internationalisation as these factors are creating new dynamics of internationalisation, at the institutional level and both within national systems of higher education and at the international or regional levels. Hence, it is evident that the desired outcomes of internationalisation did not occur immediately but can be realised through concerted efforts and strategic interventions to maximize the benefits.

From the data of this research, the study has provided insights and a better awareness of Middle Eastern students' experiences, in terms of cross-cultural impacts with the larger community and the magnitude of fostering

inter-cultural friendships with local students. While the findings of this study were not necessarily definitive due to the small sample and single location, it is nevertheless hoped that practitioners understand the influence of student affairs programmes and services that can contribute not only to the well- being of students but also to the enhancing of multiculturalism in Malaysian higher education sector.

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