

# Embracing Internationalization in Gearing Malaysian Higher Education Towards Global Education

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**Abstract:** Embracing internationalization is the reality in Malaysian tertiary education in this century. Various endeavors and research collaborations have been and are still carried out to achieve the government's vision to position Malaysia as a tertiary education hub in the region. Using phenomenological approach, this study attempts to highlight challenges and strategies towards achieving internationalization of Malaysian higher education. Twelve lecturers from public and private universities were purposively sampled to discuss issues on internationalization of Malaysian tertiary education. Focus Group Discussions using semi structured interview protocol were undertaken. Data analysis and interpretation were carried out through thematic development. The findings revealed all participants are aware of the pedagogical approaches to be in practice to embrace the dynamics of global cultures convening in Malaysian lecture rooms. They highlighted the advantages of having international students from academic and social perspectives. Also included are ways how local students benefit with the presence of international students. These benefits emerged as participants discussed the consequences of Malaysian campus bereft of international students. In-class challenges and strategies to overcome them were deliberated. The findings also informed lecturers, administrators, and policy makers of relevant aspects to consider when dealing with international students at the tertiary level in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** global education, internationalization, international students, tertiary education, phenomenology

## 1. Introduction

Globalization has re-imagined the setting in which advanced education currently happens, as significant worldwide changes are incorporating the world into one broad framework. Globalization, with various changes has been influencing each aspect of life around the planet. One such aspect

incorporates the studies at tertiary institutions of learning. Instructive globalization, which is the cross-public progression of information, thoughts, and skills (Sharma, 2017), has resulted in the growth of internationalization in higher education. As Rizvi (2000, 2005) described, global tertiary education is the new worldwide age. With regards to Malaysia, there has been an increase in international students at institutions of higher learning and like other Asian nations, Malaysia is also focusing on the standards in internationalizing to turn into a global advanced education hub in the region (Shahijan, Rezaei, & Preece, 2016). Another factor that makes Malaysia an attractive destination for students is the fact that Kuala Lumpur is the second most affordable student city in the world for the second year running according to QS Best Student Cities 2019 because the tuition fees and costs of living are cheaper compared with Australia and the United Kingdom (*The New Straits Times*, 2020)

Recent studies (Knight-Grofe, & Rauh, 2016, Wekullo, 2019) have focused on the interaction between local and international students in various institutions of higher learning in Europe, Asia (Lee & Bailey, 2020; Aydin, 2020), Australia (Tran & Vu, 2016), and North America (Tsevi, 2018). These studies reveal a variety of research methods employed in this area and the similar and sometimes divergent findings and conclusions. The primary rationale for internationalization in higher education is for intercultural knowledge exchange (Knight, 2016). According to Schreiber (2011) and Wu and Wilkes (2017), there is a lack of systematic studies to examine the impact of the steady increase in the number of international students on local students and institutions. Such impacts can influence the teaching and learning process significantly and needs to be explored and examined. Through the reviewed literature, it is evident that discourse within higher education has moved towards deeper issues of the learning outcomes, and the nature and quality of interactions among diverse student populations and lecturers. It is also clear that there are gaps in research and more questions need to be asked and answered.

Although there have been several researches that examined the educational experiences based on international students' point of view, there has been little research to examine the possible impact of internationalization on academics and their professional practice in their classroom. Given that there is now an increasing number of an international student in Malaysia, there is a need for a study to explore lecturers' perspectives on providing education to international students in the Malaysian classrooms and the impact of their on the host institutions. Hence, this study was carried out to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How has the presence of international students influenced lecturers' professional practice in the classroom?
2. Based on the lecturers' observations, how has the presence of international students influenced the local Malaysian students in the classroom?
3. What are the challenges faced by lecturers having international students in the classroom?
4. What are the strategies to overcome challenges faced in a classroom with international students?
5. How different do the lecturers' think Malaysian universities would be without international students?

## 2. Literature Review

Internationalization in higher education has been defined as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (De Wit et al. 2015, 29)." This definition throws light on the fact that such a process does not happen automatically, but it requires intention so it could contribute to quality improvement which brings benefits to all including the society (Hans & Altbach, 2020). Overall, the educational institutions are still the main drivers of internationalization.

The European Association for International Education (EAIE) published the 2018 Internationalization Report in Europe which showed the results from a survey that interviewed 2,317 professionals involved in internationalization, from 1,292 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 45 countries (Sandström & Hudson, 2018). The results showed that the main objectives of internationalization were: preparing students for the global world (76%), improving the quality of education (65%), institutional reputation/competitiveness (53%), improving the quality of research (38%), financial benefits (12%), better service to the local community (11%), responding to demographic changes (8%), others (2%). Studies have shown that there are benefits of internationalization.

The benefits include improved academic quality, internationally oriented students and staff, and national and international citizenship for students and staff from underdeveloped countries. For developed countries, revenue generation and brain gain are potential benefits (International Associations of Universities, 2012). It is clear that internationalization is beneficial to the higher education. Many countries all over the world are tapping into internationalization with Europe on top of the list, followed by North America and other countries including Malaysia. According to Soliman et al., (2019) there has been a lack of research investigating internationalization from a strategic organizational perspective. They asserted “Although internationalization can be considered to be an input to various other activities in a university, including teaching and research, it has become increasingly important as a performance measure (or to be more precise, a set of performance measures) in its own right (p.1413)”.

Malaysia has been striving to develop a world-class higher education system that will help transform its production-based economy into a knowledge-based economy by 2020. In the 1990s, public universities were corporatized to become less dependent on government subsidies. With the passing of the 1996 Private Higher Education Act, private higher education began to expand in Malaysia. The government has been clear about its intention of making higher education an export industry. It has adopted several measures to ensure the orderly maintenance of education quality through the National Accreditation Board, and subsequently, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (Chin, 2019). The new higher education system reflects the Ministry’s overriding aspiration to create a higher education system that ranks among the world’s leading education systems and that enables Malaysia to compete in the global economy (MOE, 2015). Malaysia aspires to create a higher education system that ranks among the world’s leading education systems. Its internationalization rationale requires that extensive initiatives and strategies are in place for the country (Munusamy & Hashim, 2019)

UNESCO benchmarking reported that the annual total expenditure of the higher education sector of Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) is equivalent to 16.8% of the annual Government of Malaysia expenditure (Quickfacts, 2018). Conversely, in accordance with the substantial investment in higher education, the output is very low; Malaysia is ranked 42 out of 50 countries (Williams & Leahy, 2018). Therefore, Malaysia’s internationalization approach and rationale require extensive initiatives, strategies, and efforts to fulfil the aim to become an excellent international higher education hub (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2014). According to Wan and Abdullah (2021) Malaysia has undergone a transition from an education host to a provider. They further elaborated that at the university level, internationalization transforms from unilateral to multinational collaborations with international partners.

One of the ten shifts in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 is the internationalization agenda and recognizing this, the Higher Education Ministry Secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur in her welcoming address at the Going Global 2018 Conference said the country has a target to enrol 200,000 international students in Malaysia by the year 2020 and 250,000 in 2025. “Currently, we have achieved 170,3,000 students from over 135 countries. They are from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa” (*The Star*, 6 May 2018). She mentioned that Malaysia Higher Education accessibility has improved significantly from 14% in the eighties to more than 44% in 2016. In fact, she said Malaysia’s Gross Enrolment Ratio in 2016 of 44% is higher than most of the Asean countries, and higher than the world average of 37%. Currently, there are 20 public universities, 37 Polytechnics and 105 Community Colleges. There are 477 private higher education institutions, of which 53 are private universities and 36 are private university colleges.

Education Ministry secretary-general, Datuk Mohd Ghazali Abas in his keynote address at the Seminar on Internationalization of Higher Education 2019 said that “Given the rising cost of education and other related costs at 10 per cent per annum, this sector is expected to generate RM15.6 billion when we hit our target of 200,000 international students by the year 2020,” (*Malay Mail*, 2019). As of March 2019, the enrolment of international students in Malaysia has reached 127,583, of which 70 per cent are from private higher education institutions and the rest from public higher education institutions (*Malay Mail*, 2019). Although the influx of the international student is important both economically and socially, it is also timely and important to acknowledge the need to study the perception of local students and staff, in particular the dynamics of classroom learning with the presence of the international students in educational settings. To date there is little literature in this area. Chin (2019) predicted that the demand for higher education will continue to increase in the next 20 years, Malaysian higher institutions

of learning will be able to widen their market share while strengthening the government's strategy to make higher education an export industry. Shafaei and Razak (2018) recommended that education policymakers and academic administrators ensure successful international postgraduate students' cross-cultural adaptation. Mc Ewan (2013) asserted that knowledge of cultural differences could be used to inform teaching practice to facilitate a smooth cultural adjustment. O'Brien et al. (2019) highlighted the value of intercultural experiences between the local and international students in the classroom. Based on these observations, there is a dire need to delve deeper into this area of research.

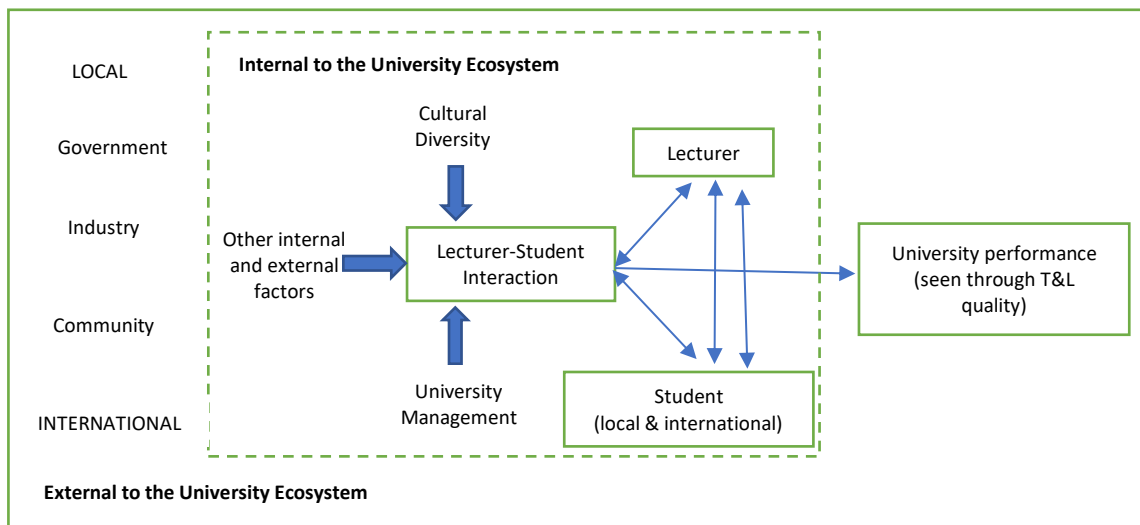
Although the Covid-19 pandemic has dampened the growth of all industries including international education, Further, with the advent of various vaccines in the global market presently, the world is getting ready to get up from the ruins and ashes of the Covid-19 and, like the symbolic phoenix, fly into the new norm soon. This study analyzed qualitative data collected from lecturer's discussion and identified various factors indicating that lectures in both private and public universities embrace global multiculturalism in support of internalization of the Malaysian campus. The study focused on professional practices of lecturers and students' learning experiences in universities because the quality of teaching and learning at the universities are critical factors in ranking of universities globally. The Ministry monitors the quality of teaching and learning as it works in tandem with HLIs to raise student and institutional outcomes (MOE, 2015).

## **2.2 Research Framework**

The Contingency Theory, a management-related theory proposed by Fred Edward Fiedler in 1964, serves as the theoretical basis underpinning this study. This theory is flexible, multi-faceted and has many implications (Moniz, 2010) and thus suitable to be adopted for use in different fields of research, including education. It highlights effectively led organizations rest on the leaders' personality as well as the context in which they operate. Two styles of leadership were identified: task-motivated which refers to task accomplishment, and relationship-motivated refers to interpersonal relationships.

Central to this contingency theory are three factors namely the leader, the member and the task structure that determine favorableness of different situations to the organization (Northouse, 2007, p.114-115). In this study, the leader is assumed to be the lecturers in the classroom. And the students as members. The leader-member relations deals with the general atmosphere of the group and the feelings such as trust, loyalty, and confidence that the group has for its leader. Task structure, is related to task clarity and the means to task accomplishment. The position of power, relates to the amount of reward-punishment authority the leader has over members of the group. This theory provides a strong underpinning when considered and applied simultaneously for equitable education for all students and the demonstration of their collective learning. The relationship between the organization and environment and the productivity of a structure has been studied to determine which patterns are more effective in the Contingency Theory body of literature (Derr & Gabarro, 1972). They further highlight that this theory is flexible and calls for leaders' experience, expertise, and judgement to manage situations specific to different organizational environment. In line with Derr and Gabarro (1972), Corey (2016) asserted that lecturers as leaders play a significant role in the ability to be successful in a variety of situations including classrooms.

Thus, the Contingency Theory is used in this study to relate to the roles played by lecturers and the university administrators as leaders in higher education. A classroom is seen as a collective while the students' academic performance is the measure of the productivity of the collective, as well as the organization. The collective achievement is the product of the interrelationship of the lecturer and the students' performance (Cohen et al., 1989). Within the education context as presented in this study, this theory is applicable to lecturers where the success of the university depends on their overall competency. Improved performance and successful development of students rely on how the lecturers design teaching and learning experiences that address individual needs, while fulfilling industry expectations and addressing various challenges of a culturally diverse classrooms (Hagerbauer, & Volet, 2014; Hougen, 2014) as highlighted in Figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1 Research Framework**

With internationalization of higher education, this is an ever-present challenge in the Malaysian classroom presently. Universities, both public and private, have the responsibility of arranging for consistent, high-level professional development for lecturers, just as proposed for schools by Lewis-Spector and Jay (2011, p. 14); when teachers receive suitable training and support, they learn and apply the necessary components of instruction, and their students achieve greater success (Hougen, 2014). Benediktsson and Ragnarsdottir (2019) put an emphasis on applying culturally responsive teaching methods in classrooms with diverse student populations. In terms of internal and external factors, the students are challenged by all kinds of emotional, social and psychological pressures due to multiple reasons. Hence, lecturers must be able to provide support. This is emphasized by Bender et.al (2019) where they found a positive overall association between social support and international students' psychological adjustment. In addition, Brunsting et al. (2021) also stressed the importance social support from local students and lecturers for international students social-emotional adjustment.

### 3.0 Research Methodology

This paper is a part of a larger scale funded research on internationalization of higher education in Malaysia. The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing phenomenology design which is appropriate as the researchers explore the lived experiences of university lecturers in Malaysia. Phenomenology was chosen because the essential goal is immediate examination and depiction of a phenomenon as intentionally and consciously experienced, which include feelings, memory, awareness, and practical actions of the research participants. A purposive sampling was employed based on the following identified criterion: the research participants must represent the racial diversity of Malaysia, experienced teaching both local Malaysian and international students in the same classroom and have at least five years of work experience as lecturers in institutions of higher education in Malaysia. In total, twelve senior lecturers from different faculties from private and public universities finally agreed to participate (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: FGD respondents

	University category	FDG	Respondent Code
1	Private	1	PR1
2	Private	1	PR2
3	Private	1	PR3
4	Private	1	PR4
5	Public	2	PU1
6	Public	2	PU2
7	Public	2	PU3
8	Public	2	PU4
9	Private	3	PR5
10	Private	3	PR6
11	Public	3	PU5
12	Public	3	PU6

Data was obtained via Focused Group Discussions (FGD) protocol with semi-structured interview questions. There were nine questions to support the research objectives and research questions Every lecturer responded to each question in detail, and all their responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed and interpreted using thematic development. Due to the pandemic and lack of access to meet face-to-face, all FGD recordings were done via Zoom and audio recording. The FGDs were conducted in 3 sessions i.e., 4 private university lectures, 4 public university lecturers, and a combination of 2 private and 2 private university lecturers. Each FGD took approximately one hour to have balanced involvement by all participants.

#### 4.0 Findings

The findings of this study are presented based on the research questions guiding this study. All data is from responses of lecturers from both private and public universities.

##### 4.1 How has the presence of international students influenced lecturers' professional practice in the classroom?

Questions on four different aspects - pedagogical approach and classroom setting, accessibility and student engagement, lecturer confidence and reaction to cultural differences – were posed in relation to the lecturers' professional practice. In reference to the way they teach, most of the private and public university lecturers confirmed that their focus is on how best to address the course or subject matter, and that there is no difference in their pedagogical approaches due to the presence of the international students. PU1 claimed that *“Let’s say I have a class of 25 students total, usually there are around 2 international students. And sometimes we do not even know we have international students especially like if they are from Myanmar or from Indonesia.”* PU3 from another public university claimed that *“In terms of the teaching approach, like me, I still use the same technique and approach of teaching.”* Another lecturer, PU2 concur by stating that *“Basically I am confident and they [the international students] don’t really affect me much in terms of how I teach.”* However, other lecturers especially those from the private universities did highlight that they made special adjustments in their online classes. PR1 said, due to the presence of international students, there was a need to change the timetable because of different time zones and this was done after discussing with students attending the classes locally. She also disclosed that university administrators readily agreed to the request for change in class time and all necessary changes were made in the system. This adjustment had a positive effect as students were more responsible and committed after the change of time slot. The adjustment and improvisation by the lecturers match the situational needs of the students and this is in line with the Contingency theory (Derr & Gabarro, 1972; Hagerbauer, & Volet, 2014; Hougen, 2014)

Accessibility-wise, connectivity was a major concern for both local and international students. To support this drawback in conducting online class, lecturers PR1, PR3 and PR5 provided materials that can be accessed by students even if they cannot get connected during class time. Meanwhile, PR2 highlighted that he did recordings so that time zone difference and attendance do not become an issue. So did PR3 who recorded his lessons, and he further added that hands-on subjects needed special camera

and lightings. PR3 also studied tours virtually to allow international students' participation during the Covid19 pandemic. In addition to the recordings, PR2 shared he too had to change assessment methods to cater for the international students during pandemic. For example, exception was made to lab-based subjects which, otherwise, are not allowed to take place virtually in normal circumstance because only the person demonstrating gets the experience of carrying out the experiment. Problems in conducting assessments resulting from connectivity issues were highlighted by all the private university lecturers (PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, PR5 and PR6).

When asked how they embrace student diversity and ensure student engagement, PR2 mentioned that he practices inclusiveness in class through group assignments. Also, he uses group discussion as a teaching strategy and students become very active and they share their experiences from their cultural perspectives. This finding is consistent with Knight (2016) where he found that internationalization will bring about intercultural exchange of knowledge. According to him, international students sometimes feel a sense of isolation, so lecturers should show care. He avoided using local and cultural jargons/accents. PR2 and PU2 highlighted that usually, language is one of the issues common to students from China and Middle East countries, resulting in decreased student involvement in the classrooms. Especially, this is evident among first year students for they lack English language proficiency. Sometimes lecturers need to translate terms for better understanding. Due to poor spoken proficiency in the English language, some international students cannot communicate well. To address this issue, PU3 who uses English when teaching, would occasionally revert to a language that the international students in her class are familiar with. According to her, *"In terms of communication, there wasn't much issue because the Indonesian students do speak English and on top of that, they are also well versed in Bahasa Melayu hence making communication bearable."* However, this strategy of hers contradicts the practice in private universities where lecturers are not allowed to use any other language as language of instruction except for English.

PR3 reported his class has become more interesting as there is opportunity to share practices from different countries. However, the international students' presence has no influence on his confidence level to lecture. Nonetheless, PU3 from a public university said *"My level of confidence.... initially there were some apprehensions on my side. Because it was my first time teaching international students."* Then, she added that *"But I approach them the same way I normally do with our own student"* where she finally concluded, *"... there is not much difference, but I had to spend a little bit more time showing and teaching them on certain concepts or terminologies or techniques unlike our students who mostly can-do things on their own because they have the basics – especially the diploma students."* Other benefits of having students with diverse, global backgrounds include extensive use of case studies, class discussions and assignments where students are required to make comparisons from different sociocultural perspectives.

#### **4.2 Based on the lecturers' observations, how has the presence of international students influenced the local Malaysian students in the classroom?**

According to both the private and public university lecturers, having international students has a positive influence on the local Malaysian students. Often, the international students create the room for exposure to other global academic practices, ideals, and principles. PU5 and PR1 drew attention to certain social values that they learn from their international counterparts which include being more aware of and tolerant towards sensitive issues related to ethnicity, gender, and other cultural matters. With reference to cultural exchanges in the classroom, PR1 claimed it is awesome, and that exchanges do excite the whole class to get to know another culture better as suggested by McEwan (2013). She even had casual talks with the international students to engage them in the lesson. Using mixed group discussion enhances critical and creative thinking skills, and students design out of the box for solutions. Meanwhile, a public university lecturer said that sports is another area where Malaysian students gain from the presence of international students: *"...they become friends...playing sports together, doing class activities together. It's good."* One other advantage of having international students indicated by PR1 is that both local Malaysian and international students are pushed to speak in English language. This creates a conducive environment for students to communicate effectively. Aside from in-class interactions, all the above also took place during campus-wide activities.

Academic or intellectual exchanges in the classes also led to exchanges of technical and/or procedural know-how. These exposures encourage our local students to experiment with new ideas. For example, PU1 who is from a public university shared that generally the international students in his class are more studious and thorough in their work. Also, the international students “...are more meticulous in the manner they submit they work while Malaysian students take it easy”. So, when local Malaysian students notice the way assignments and presentation are prepared, they are motivated to put in extra effort to complete their own assignments. Meanwhile, PU3 drew attention to the international students bringing to class a fresh breath of academic experiences. According to her, “*Even the way they actually come up with their presentation, is very different...our students tend to be very straightforward but the Indonesian student – the one by the name of Taufik, when he presented his assignment, it was like a cultural show staging (like poetry recital, very artistic) hence making it interesting. The presentation would have a story plot with history embedded in the storyline – therefore making the whole thing nice and refreshing.*” She pointed out that this different presentation approach led to other creative ways of sharing or staging students’ work.

The presence of international students was also found to have livened up and enriched the experiences of both local lecturers as well as local students as highlighted by Schreiber (2011).

#### **4.3 How different do the lecturers’ think Malaysian universities would be without international students?**

There were several interesting views on Malaysian university landscape without international students. The first was an insight by PR1 from private university who predicted that every university then would be just an extension of the Malaysian secondary schools. Students may possibly be bored and not even care to speak in English, and the lecturers might be using more Bahasa Malaysia in the lecture rooms. She explained that all Malaysian campus could transform into bilingual or multilingual environments with a mixture of local languages to deliver course contents for better understanding. Another private university lecturer, PR3 too lamented there will be no need for the use of English language as the language of instruction. Apart from PR1 and PR3, no other lecturers echoed similar concerns relating to English Language probably because it is being used in most tertiary-level classrooms and is even a compulsory medium of instruction in one of the public universities.

Next, all participants in unison believe there will surely be lack of diversity in the classroom and on campus. PR2 who leveraged on the presence of international students by using authentic case studies from their countries of origin to make lessons and in-class discussions interesting believes “*Diversity will provide quality education*” which “...is good exposure for our students.”. He said without international students, universities will definitely lose global exposure in education. In similar vein, PU1 felt Malaysian students’ best opportunity to learn about other cultures is through personal interactions with students and lecturers from other countries. In fact, the presence of international students compelled lecturers to know and understand diverse cultures as proposed by McEwan (2013) for cultural transition in the classroom. PU3 disclosed “*I also started to study and learn about my students and their background as the class went on.*”

Last, a number of the participants claimed that without international students, not only will Malaysian university campuses be less lively or “*not happening*” but also, they will be missing certain educational dimensions that the international students bring to campus life. The educational dimensions are psychosociological in nature as suggested by PU1 who claimed that Malaysian students “... are motivated to perform by just observing the effort put in by international students.” However, he did admit “*I intentionally highlight in class and show well submitted assignments so that our students get motivated as well.*” PU3 echoed similar sentiment with regard to how the international students affected her students were; she found them “... become more driven when they see that the Indonesian students really put a lot of effort in their presentation and other assessments...and they started to push themselves to do better.” PU3 further explained that our students will miss out on learning new techniques as well since the international students came with different skills-set. According to her, “*In the case of our students, the students get to learn from one another and to some extent they motivate one another ...they are able to work with people from different background and culture ...and forced to actually try communicate in English.*” All these instances show that the international students served as role model and as push factor for local Malaysian students to strive harder, to begin thinking



differently, to collaborate with other nationalities as well as be competitive. Hence, the increase in the number of international students has brought positive influences in terms of revenue, quality of education and global ranking (MOE, 2015; Malay Mail 2019) Thus, not having international students around may diminish or inhibit these positive dimensions from flourishing.

#### **4.4 What are the challenges faced by lecturers having international students in the classroom?**

Language issue appear to top the list of challenges faced by the lecturers when dealing with international students. The challenge may reside in both lecturers as well as students. PR6 said some lecturers might be challenged if their language proficiency is low as the language of instruction in all private universities is English. PR2 added that there is a constant awareness that the language to be used on campus is English. This could be a challenge for lectures who do not use the English language often. Meanwhile, PR2 and PU2 claimed students from China and Middle East are weak in the English language and this is often the problem among first year students. Translating some key terms did help for PR2. But PU3 from a public university said, *“What makes it challenging only focused on the content [of the subject]...making certain they understand the new things [or concepts] being taught. But otherwise, when it comes to [day-to-day] communication, so far okay. They find terminologies difficult.”* So, the international students seemed to manage basic communication using English language but have problems when comprehending the course contents. Style of writing is another language-related issue highlighted by the lecturers during the discussion. A private university lecturer, PR1 said, *“Style of writing is different and it’s difficult to understand.”* And this was also echoed by PR2, *“Writing of international students is generally difficult to understand. More time to understand their writing.”*

Other than language, both private and public university lecturers admitted to feeling somewhat challenged dealing with the international students’ behaviors and attitude brought about by their different worldview, values and upbringing. PU1 believes to be a good instructional leader and be able to successfully manage a multifaceted class requires sound knowledge on, as well as skills to address, multicultural issues. This finding is consistent with the Contingency theory as outlined in Derr and Gabarro (1972) and the idea that a leader’s preference i.e. instructional leader plays a significant role in the ability to be successful in a variety of situations including in the classrooms. According to PU1, friction often result between and among students, especially more so when they fail to realize the inherent causal factors. PR1 related one example where his Malaysian students felt their international counterparts are not committed to the task given by him which later became an issue during group work. “Personality clash” is another issue raised by two lecturers. PU1 and PU3 pointed out a few students from specific parts of the world appear defiant and display disruptive behaviors, possibly due to their personal experiences having hailed from either war torn and poverty-stricken countries. There are also other issues encountered by the lecturers as indicated by PR5: *“Attendance of students to class from certain countries is a challenge, as well as punctuality is an issue.”* But to be fair, not coming at all or coming late to class are also challenges that lecturers found common among several hardcore local academic offenders.

#### **4.5 What are the strategies to overcome challenges faced in a classroom with international students?**

There were two main challenges highlighted in the previous section; the first deals with language issue which in turn influence in-class engagement, and the second is attitude-related issues arising from the international students’ multicultural background. To overcome the first challenge, four lecturers (PR1, PR2, PU1, PU3) suggested individual or personal engagements to encourage participation and get to know international students within the classroom. These small talks can take place before class begins or in between activities in class. Another strategy to promote participation among international students in class would be through the use of technology as suggested by PU3: *“Now with technology and all, we can use technology to show (like social media used in teaching and learning) and to also use technology to collaborate.”* WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Telegram, WeChat, and YouTube are some of the social media popularly used by educators worldwide as teaching and learning tools, medium to promote cooperative learning between and among students, and for submission of academic tasks.

In the process, the students have no choice but to have to interact with one another using English. Albeit using technology can most certainly promote learning engagement, and probably do so more effectively, PR2 firmly believes that traditional face-to-face approaches remained relevant when he said *“I ensure that in group work, students write the role they played or the work they contributed in the group work.”*

Meanwhile, to overcome the second challenge relating to attitude, several lecturers pointed out both the lecturers and the local Malaysian students need to have, or be trained to have, empathy as well as better understanding of their international friends implied in the following interview transcripts:

*“There was a PhD student who sounded rude because he has a rebellious nature. But I understand that he speaks like that because of his background so during his viva there were some issues that we had to address.”* (PU1)

*“But the challenges will have to do with personality and perhaps in-class adjustment having to deal with different quirks/behavior. But basically, our students did well in terms of dealing with their international colleagues.”* (PU3)

The need to understand other culture also applies to the international students; they should also be given time and opportunity to learn as much about the people and culture of the host country. Both international and local students should be given as much time as possible to engage with one another while respecting differences. This finding concurs with O’Brien et al. (2019) where they emphasized that cultural knowledge can be enhanced through intercultural encounters and engagement. PU3 asserted *“To consider the different content of the subject and to make some adjustment in terms of the assessment. If before the assessment is more skewed to the local context and culture...so by having them, we need to also consider how they (the international students) can benefit and learn about us and maybe about other people, culture and their art.”* PU2 even commented that the local Malaysian universities must have specific strategies that will allow intercultural learning and exchanges that would benefit both international and local students. This finding concurs with Wu and Wilkes (2017) where a positive intercultural learning and exchanges may result in many international students perceiving the host country as their host home and want to stay. In addition, this will also prepare local students to explore postgraduate programs abroad.

#### **4.6 Incidental findings**

In the process of analyzing data collected in this study, we identified findings that were incidental. These incidental findings are presented below:

##### **4.6.1 Critical reflections on pedagogical practices**

Earlier it was reported that the presence of international students has no impact on the lecturers’ confidence. However, for several lecturers, having international students have resulted in thought-provoking questions about their personal pedagogical practices. One lecturer in particular - PU3 – deliberated rather extensively how having taught international students changed her. She became more critical of how local students learn and how she could improve the way she teaches. According to her, *“I realised there are some benefits and interesting difference [with the way they learn] so it is something I learnt and I took the liberty to make some improvements with regard to how I expect students to present - meaning to also include historical-cultural elements in greater depth.”* She has used ideas presented by international students to enhance her pedagogical approaches by stating that *“Plus I noticed the students would present all first in a poetic/artistic manner and only later that they explain why or how their artwork is as such. So, I take it that I can use different approaches when getting student to present – whether to approach things point on (straightforward) or have the bigger idea presented first and then provide reasons later.* The process of reflecting on her own teaching practice has also boosted her self-confidence when she said *“And as the lecturer also I learn a lot of things when I teach them. I found that I did okay”*. The acceptance of her teaching by international students led to her feeling *“...confident and after teaching them I felt more confident since the students accepted me and the fact, they understood what I taught meaning I have done right. Meaning, the way I teach is okay.”* In short, having international students in class can be a bench-marking mechanism by which

Malaysian lecturers can compare how they fare at the international level - a process deemed critical in improving pedagogical practices as well as developing teaching efficacy. This is in line with the suggestion from the Education Blueprint where quality of teaching and learning is the critical factor for the university global ranking (MOE, 2015).

#### 4.6.2 Psychosocial support for international students

While probing into how the presence of international students pose as challenge to the local students and lecturers, three lecturers raised the issue of challenges faced by international students. PU2 specifically suggested that *“The university may want to look at the challenges that these students face and perhaps come up with strategies.”* He continued that often international students have financial problems and need assistance. PR2 asserted that some students from certain countries have very different academic and social backgrounds and their struggles in the Malaysian classrooms are real; they feel a *“sense of isolation “*, and lecturers should *“show care.”* Reacting to the culture shock they experienced due to the difference in academic system and the need for support to get accustomed to the system, *“Students from certain countries tend to form groups and impose pressure for their demands.”* (PR1). This finding concurs with Bender et.al (2019) where they found a significant relationship between social support and international students’ psychological adjustment. This is supported by Brunsting et al. (2021) where they highlight the importance of international students receiving social support from local students and lecturers to assist in their social-emotional adjustment. This scenario clearly shows poor support system in some universities for the international students upon their arrival, to adjust and acclimatized without feeling threatened. The participants in this study are suggesting not only detailed study be carried out to examine real challenges experienced by international students in the Malaysian context, but also specific strategies offered to support them.

#### 4.6.3 International students and internationalization strategies

The study’s objective was to investigate how international students impacted Malaysian classroom, specifically in relation to how teaching and learning took place. However, during the interview, PR3 shared *“Another benefit of having international students in class is that they will promote the Malaysian universities abroad”*. This is also the sentiment shared by PU1 who highlighted *“These international students are actually ambassadors for the Malaysian universities and we must ensure that they have a pleasant experience on our campus.”* The notion of international students becoming ambassadors to the universities they attend is not new since there have been many instances whereby through word-of-mouth, prospective students have become interested to attend Malaysian universities as indicated by PU2; *“If they are good usually when they go back to their countries it is like they bring our good name.”* The research participants further suggested ways how international students could be roped to help with internationalization agenda of universities, as follows:

*“Having research collaborations with foreign universities. Students can also become members of local and foreign study-related association members.”* (PR1)

*“We can conduct short courses overseas so that the university is promoted abroad.”* (PR2)

*“We can have international competitions to internationalize the local Malaysian universities.”* (PR3)

In line with Soliman et al., (2019), Malaysian universities have engaged in strategies to support internationalization. They further asserted *“the need for universities to identify where they are and where they want to be; and hence what actions need to be taken to drive forward their international strategies more quickly (p. 1424)”*.

### 5.0 Recommendations

The findings of this study have led to several recommendations as a pathway for Malaysian universities to embrace internationalization.

First, based on the influence of international students’ presence on lecturers’ pedagogical approaches, we recommend that not only should lecturers be knowledgeable in managing offline and online classes but also in providing varying levels and degrees of assistance to students if they are

unable to follow the teaching and learning sessions. The daily lesson tasks, activities, assignments, and assessment methods must cater for the individual needs of learners. The support that students may need can be either physical in form or emotion in nature; these include the likes of additional reading materials, access to learning tools, applications or virtual laboratory, tips to learn better and words of encouragement. To address students' learning needs effectively and efficiently, the lecturers must be competent. Attending continuous professional development courses leading towards pedagogical enhancement and IT upskilling is deemed necessary to ensure they are sufficiently tech savvy to manage offline and online classes efficiently and effectively. All lecturers should also be responsible and be ready with teaching materials to deliver content effectively in both physical and virtual classrooms.

Second, with reference to classroom setting, accessibility and student engagement, lecturers must extend professionalism and accommodate students' requests to change time of lecture so that all students have access to the course lecture time. Some students, due to technical problems or difference in time zones, struggle to attend lectures. This also ought to include accommodating students with disabilities so that no student is deprived of their opportunity to gain higher education due to physical challenges they face in life.

Third, across the board universities and faculties should engage local and international students in group discussions, case studies, and debates. These classroom approaches will provide a platform that can support the international students socially and emotionally. These exchanges and discussions create communication possibilities within the classroom that can go beyond. As highlighted by the lecturers, international students need language support and this can be approached within the classroom through group work, presentations, and discussions. Lecturers must creatively support international students by grouping students to create on-going daily language scaffolding activities within each lecture.

Fourth, Malaysian universities should ensure that there are sufficient opportunities and platforms available for hassle-free cultural transition. As suggested by a few of the research participants, various on-campus and off-campus cultural activities should be the norm in our tertiary education system; international students should be exposed to numerous and varying encounters including local cultural events and festivities to understand and embrace the Malaysian social and cultural practices and values. Such scaffoldings by the universities would offer a dual-pronged utility; the local lecturers and students will get to understand foreign cultures better, while the international students get to engage in lived-experiences of the Malaysian culture and values. This effort will also address the challenges local lecturers face with negative attitudes and behaviours among some international students. The integration of cultures in a respectful manner – a crucial process in ensuring internationalization – would henceforth imbue harmonious environment for the international students in Malaysia. The international students' testaments of awe-inspiring experiences academically or otherwise are critical as they will be Malaysia's outbound ambassadors to the world.

Fifth, it would be good practice to encourage all lecturers to take on teaching of international students as a core requirement. This exercise should function as an on-going professional development exercise in local universities as our lecturers seem to bench-mark their teaching skills through teaching international students and this enhances their confidence level as well. The notion of a lecturer as a reflective practitioner has been around for more than four decades. However, for one to seriously and actively engage in the activity can be infrequent as most lecturers tend to be inundated with entertaining students, engaging in research activities, dealing with managerial issues, and attending to many other tasks. But if reflections in-action and on-action are practiced, both personal and professional growth of the lecturers will certainly be enhanced. Assessment of teaching may result in innovative ways to approach teaching, to help students learn better, and to improve lecturer-student relationship.

Sixth, a campus without international students would be disadvantageous to the local educational environment, thus, this study recommends that local universities strive to have more international students on their campuses to create a global presence in the classrooms and on campus, as local students are driven in a myriad way with the presence of international students in campus and in the classrooms. More effort to market and promote local universities and their programs must be taken as a concerted effort between the government and private sectors such as hosting educational fairs abroad. The offer of scholarships to foreign students at partner universities should be augmented and the process of partnerships with foreign universities should be fast-tracked.

The seventh recommendation lists the critical roles that university administrators and management play in embracing internationalization. As university leaders, they must fulfil the requests to accommodate made by the lecturers, which is often at the request of students. Accommodating to and meeting international students' needs is critical as it forms positive view towards the service quality that universities offer which, in turn, can escalate the nation's aim to be an education hub in the region. Often, the university administrator and management being lecturers themselves, are responsible for ensuring offered education programs are relevant globally, with course contents that are well designed to accommodate internationalization. This can be achieved through curriculum review meetings to revise contents and assessment methods. It is also important that content revisions consider input from student representatives, local and international, so that topics covered are pertinent to and meaningful for every learner. Pedagogy training is a must so that lecturers can implement effective instructional practices and develop authentic assessment protocols which will safeguard the overall education quality. Apart from training related to professional practices, the lecturers ought to be trained on social justice and differentiated instruction as well. This will prepare the lecturers, even the senior ones, on managing issues on multiculturalism, discrimination, and social justice in education. Sharing the Malaysian education philosophy with local and international students is one way of introducing and embracing internationalization of the Malaysian campus.

The university administrators and management must also provide language courses to support international students who come from countries that have little support for the English language. The research participants highlighted that this is a challenge they face in the classroom and precious classroom time is wasted due to international students lack of proficiency in the English language. It must be a practice across the board for all Malaysian universities to provide suitable English language courses for academic purposes. Such courses can be offered as a paid or free of charge course as an effort to embrace international students on the Malaysian campus. These language courses can be offered as audit course such that signing up for a support course will not jeopardize the students' academic performance if they do not perform well.

Other than being supportive on academic matters, university administrators and management also ought to encourage socio-cultural activities on and off campus. The research participants repeatedly raised the fact that campus activities help ensure cultural integration among students and lecturers. This can be done by offering financial and infrastructure support for student bodies and faculties to host activities on a regular basis. The dynamics of campus activities to embrace internationalization cannot be slighted. This is the opportunity for the international students to show-case their culture and even introduce their country representation from the embassy or high commissions to the university, lecturers, and other students. In short, both the private and public university lecturers agree that they will be able to perform their role as leaders in the classroom effectively and efficiently given there is strong and dynamic support from the university administrators and management.

## **5 Conclusion**

This study is part of a large-scale funded research that focused on lecturers' views on internationalization. The findings informed them of their role as leaders, serving as stanchion to the government's effort to make Malaysia a regional education hub (Shahijan et al., 2016). Both public and private university lecturers are seen to have embraced global multiculturalism fully to promote internationalization of the Malaysian campus but there remain areas where their roles could be better supported to allow international students receive the much needed psychological, social, and academic scaffoldings. The respective universities should therefore take note of the challenges highlighted in this study and the strategies to overcome those challenges for the existing ecosystem for internationalization be improved further.

## **6 Suggestion for Future Research**

This research was carried out based on Focused Group Discussions (FGD). This was a good platform for lectures from both private and public universities to share their views and practices. In future, researchers can consider conducting a survey to gather data on lecturers' perspectives on

internationalization of the Malaysian campus. Such a survey will provide a broad perspective of the general feel of Malaysian lecturers. It would also be interesting to observe classroom to document Malaysian lecturers' professional practices within the classroom. These classroom observations will also be able to provide researchers with data on the exchanges between Malaysian lecturers and the international students. Future research can also explore international students views on internationalization of the Malaysian campus and to gather their views on improvements that can be exercised to accommodate short-comings in current practices.

## 7 Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 managed the overall research progress, budget, and overlook the writeup of the whole article. Author 2 wrote the research methodology, synthesized the findings and refined the overall write-up of the report. Author 3 prepared the literature review. Author 4 carried out the FGDs for group 1 and interpretation of the results. Author 5 carried out the FGDs for group 2 and interpretation of the results. Author 6 carried out the FGDs for group 3 and interpretation of the results.

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