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**IMPACT OF MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF INTERNATIONAL  
ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA ON STUDENTS' ACCULTURATION**

**PROJECT SPONSOR**

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**Abstract:**

This research aimed to study the effect of exposure to Multicultural environment of educational institutions on the acculturation of its students. The study puts forth many types of research that show the positive effects of intergroup contact between groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds and cultural heritages in reducing prejudice and negative stereotyping towards the out-group. This study investigated whether or not the Internationalization process of the International Islamic University, Malaysia, with a multicultural environment, helps its students to, accept the differences that other cultures bring, be comfortable with differences and also seek diversity of contact. The study employed Miville-Guzman Universality – Diversity Scale, (M-GUDS-S) to collect data by survey method from 400 IIUM undergraduate students selected using Quota sampling. 200 of them were first-year students and the rest were fourth-year students. The result indicated that the multicultural environment at IIUM does lead to Acculturation among students. It showed that the fourth year students were

significantly more appreciative of and comfortable with differences. However, in terms of seeking diversity of contact, there was no significant difference between first-year and fourth-year students. Based on the findings it has been suggested that if efforts are made to establish optimal conditions for positive intergroup contact to take place, intergroup prejudice can be reduced and problems of coexistence in the Muslim countries and communities can thus be addressed.

### **Keywords:**

Multicultural environment, Acculturation, Intergroup contact, appreciation of other cultures, comfort with differences, diversity of contact

### **Introduction:**

The present day scenario calls for a universal community where, everything from governments and organisations to personal relations such as marriages, have become inter-racial, inter-cultural and inter-religious. Due to the migration of people from different places in search of jobs, better lively hood, family and so on, it has now become impossible to live in a society whose members belongs to just one culture, ethnic group, religion or religious group. It is hard to find a society that is not multicultural. Even if most members of a society belong to the same culture, race and religion, differences can still be observed in their adherence to different ideologies, beliefs or practices that separate them within that religion.

These differences especially that which is religious in nature most often than not causes friction unless a conscious effort is made to understand and tolerate these differences. Being sensitive in nature due to its sacredness, it is not always easy for some of the adherents of certain groups to forgo these differences, because it is a threat to their belief system which sometimes if challenged they are at a loss to defend. It can thus be observed that the lack of understanding, acceptance and tolerance has, in turn, resulted in disunity and hostility among the Muslim *ummah*. Dogmatism, narrow-mindedness, close-mindedness are some of the explanation that can be used to understand the reasons for this hostility.

The lack of cooperation and understanding among the Muslims is a great concern that needs to be immediately addressed. Intergroup contact theory according

to Tropp (2011), posits that greater intergroup contact reduces prejudice especially when the interactions between the different groups take place under optimal conditions. Educational institutes, more specifically International Islamic Institutions can be a very fertile ground to widen horizons, foster a sense of understanding and tolerance and also reduce prejudice and discrimination among its students and develop a generation of Muslim community that upholds the unity and expectations Islam requires of its *ummah*/community. One such institution where people of different cultural, racial and ethical background are brought together is International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

The mission of IIUM is to Integrate, Islamize, and Internationalize, its students and curriculum. By Internationalization, the university means to enhance intercultural understanding and foster civilisation dialogues among Malaysians as well as other communities and nations. Through this, the university aims to send out its students with a strong sense of appreciation towards cultures different from their own. It wishes its students to be able to accept the diversity and uniqueness of the different cultures of the world. The university wants its graduates to be able to engage proactively in dialogues with other cultures and to adopt the best characteristics from different cultures and to be able to adapt to other Muslim cultures as well. In order to facilitate acculturation, IIUM provides its students with plenty of opportunities and platforms. It promotes programmes that provide cultural information and sharing like the *Ummatic* week and also programs and events that inculcate a sense of brotherhood between the Muslims in dealing with the suppression and oppression of the Muslim community, for example, the journalism club and the Al Aqsa friends' society.

IIUM aspires to create a Muslim *Ummah* that can unite the world. But for this, the students should be able to lay aside their prejudices and negative stereotypes. And most importantly, the university should provide an environment that encourages intergroup contact. The above-mentioned research show that prejudices and negative stereotypes against out-group can be reduced by bringing people from different groups together under optimal conditions. These optimal conditions can include the ones mentioned by Allport (1954, as cited in Tropp, 2011); equal status between groups, common goals, cooperation between groups, and support of institutional authorities, law, or custom. Bringing students of diverse racial/ethnic background and cultural heritages, into daily contact "may sow the seeds of conflict or compassion (Jones, 1994, p. 39)"

### **Background:**

According to the 2013 census, Muslims are estimated to comprise of 23% or 1.6 billion of the world's total population (DeSilver, 2013). After Christianity Islam is the largest religion and Muslims are widespread across the globe. The Muslim population is thus very diverse. They differ in language, race, nationality, ethnicity, culture and so on. Due to globalisation, migration in search of jobs, marriages and education and various other reasons, Muslim society has become more interracial and intercultural. The widespread Muslim population is not just confined to their specific culture or traditions but is exposed to several others' as well. It has now become impossible to live in a society whose members belong to just one culture or ethnic group. This inevitable exposure calls for more understanding and tolerance. It requires that Muslims realize and accept the diversity of their fellow Muslims. Thus according to the importance of understanding and valuing cultural diversity is more significant in the present circumstances.

Even if most members of a society belong to the same culture, race and religion, differences can still be observed in their adherence to different viewpoints, beliefs or practices that separate them within that religion. These differences especially that which is religious in nature most often causes friction unless a conscious effort is made to understand and tolerate these differences. It can be observed that the lack of understanding, acceptance and tolerance has, in turn, resulted in disunity among the Muslim *ummah*.

A good starting point to reduce the disunity and enhance intergroup acceptance and tolerance is multicultural educational institutions because educational institutions teach students to be objective and rational about their arguments and teach them not be dogmatic and blind followers of a particular view. As has been shown in some research, if intergroup contact and multicultural environment have a significant impact on reducing disunity and intergroup conflict, then research should be done to determine whether this theory is applicable in Muslim context.

### **Objectives:**

1. To evaluate if the multicultural environment at IIUM fosters positive intergroup contact among its students.
2. To analyse the extent to which the students of IIUM are able to tolerate, accept and appreciate the differences of other cultures as a result of their exposure to different cultures.
3. To provide insight on the extent to which the internationalisation process at IIUM succeeds in the acculturation of its students.

### **Methodology:**

1. The researchers have used quantitative approach in analysing the relevant data for this research.
2. Survey method using a structured questionnaire (Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale) was used to collect data.
3. The instrument was modified by researchers to suit the present population based on pilot study.
4. 400 IIUM students from different cultural background were selected using quota sampling procedure.
5. 200 participants were selected from 1<sup>st</sup>-year students and the other 200 were from 4<sup>th</sup>-year students.
6. The data was analysed using independent sample t-test.
7. Existing literature has been used to justify some of the findings.
8. For triangulation, other similar studies were referred to.

### **Findings:**

1. The level of acculturation among fourth-year students ( $M=194.68$ ,  $SD=19.81$ ) was shown to be higher than that of first-year students ( $M=189.69$ ,  $SD=17.23$ );  $t(200)=2679$ ,  $p(0.008)<0.05$ .

2. The result indicated that the fourth year students showed a significantly higher appreciation of oneself and others ( $M=60.09$ ,  $SD=6.36$ ) compared to the first year students ( $M=58.03$ ,  $SD=5.32$ );  $t(200)=3.498$ ,  $p(0.001)<0.05$
3. Fourth year students ( $M=66.74$ ,  $SD=8.52$ ) were more comfortable in dealing with individuals from diverse backgrounds compared to the first year students ( $M=64.95$ ,  $SD=7.98$ );  $t(200)=2.155$ ,  $p(0.032)<0.05$ .
4. The independent sample t-test showed that there was no significant difference among the first year ( $M=66.70$ ,  $SD=7.38$ ) and fourth year ( $M=67.85$ ,  $SD=8.18$ );  $t(200)=1.474$ ,  $p(0.141)>0.05$  students in terms of seeking diversity of contact.
5. The students' appreciation for other cultures and communities implies that they value the impact intergroup contact has on their personal growth and self-understanding (Bhaskar, 2011).
6. An increase in the degree of comfort in dealing with students from diverse backgrounds indicates that the students develop an appreciation and are not disturbed by the differences and similarities in other students that are different from them (Bhaskar, 2011)
7. Results show that students failed to show an increase in seeking diversity of contact, which is the behavioural component of MGDUS. The students' response to this subscale indicates that they do not show an increased interest in participating in cultural and social activities of diverse groups. Although intergroup contact has positive impact on them, they do not take the extra initiative to establish intergroup contact.
8. Preferring to engage in contact with members of one's own culture and community is a natural observable fact as far as human beings are concerned. IbnKhalidun's (1967) concept of *asabiyyah* can be used to explain this aspect of human nature. *Asabiyyah* according to him is an important principle required for the survival, development and sustenance of a community or a nation. It is the sense of belonging that the people of that community or particular group have which prompt them to collectively strive for their development and establishment.

### **Conclusion:**

It was seen that if efforts are made to bring about positive intergroup contact under optimal conditions, intergroup prejudice can be reduced. Problems in the Muslim countries and communities can thus be addressed to an extent if they take the initiative to establish optimal conditions for positive intergroup contact to take place. This includes bringing about an environment of positive interactions, amending laws and rules that promote discrimination against the minorities, foreigners and members of other groups.

In this respect, one of the main problems that need to be addressed in many Muslim countries are their approach to immigrants and the minority population of their countries. The GCC nations are home to about 15 million immigrants, of which most are Muslims and from the south Asian countries (Glazov, FrontPage magazine, 2012). But, although conditions are improving, unfortunately, some of these courtiers still have no proper working conditions, healthcare and housing facilities. In addition to this, the immigrants and foreigners suffer from inferior status and sometimes inhumane treatment. Their conditions are further aggravated by lack of labour laws in some of these countries. There can also be seen discrimination in wages of the employees according to the nationality or racial background of the person.

Such conditions only increase the possibility of discrimination and prejudice among people. Hence a change from this is crucial. More efforts should be made by the government of Muslim countries to establish equal status between groups, bring them together with common goals and also provide avenues for intergroup contact and cooperation among different groups to take place. Any form of discrimination and unfair treatment should not be tolerated.

A step that can be taken in this direction is to have educational institutions that bring together people from different communities. This will provide an opportunity for students to engage in positive intergroup contact with students from diverse background from a very young age. Similarly, establishing institutions that are open to different groups of the society; bringing together people from different background into the workforce based on their ability and talent rather than their nationality and providing optimal conditions for them to work together, are some of the means by which positive intergroup contact can be ensured. Taking necessary steps in this manner is crucial to the development and coexistence of a multicultural community

and developing among people a feeling of unity. The results clearly indicated that the multicultural environment of IIUM leads to acculturation among its students.

### **Output:**

1. Through this research the Research Assistants who were from KOED has learnt a great deal on issues related to acculturation, social solidarity and addressing related issues in the Muslim communities.
2. One of the research assistants was able to produce a master thesis related to Muslim Higher Education context. Although her research is not directly related, she was able to develop certain ideas and arguments for her research on critical pedagogy based on her readings and experiences with this research.
3. The second research assistant is currently developing her Master thesis based on this issue. Her topic is IIUM students' experience of intergroup contact on social solidarity.
4. A conference paper was developed and presented at International Conference on Humanity and Social Sciences organised by International Economics Development Research Center in Rome held on 14-16 July 2016.
5. A journal article based on this research on the topic "Impact of Multicultural Environment of Islamic Educational Institutes on Students' Acculturation" was developed and has been accepted by International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. It is currently awaiting publication.
6. This research has helped to know the trend of educated Muslim youths towards different cultural and divergent groups within the religion when they come into contact with each other. The present study helped to scientifically analyse this problem and provided some insights and directions to the steps needed in facing this issue of Muslim unity and tolerance.
7. This research helped to realise the importance of multicultural environment of educational institutions in fostering harmony and tolerance among Muslim students.
8. The research can have an impact on a societal level. Since this research tries to analyse the role of one of the best International Islamic Universities in acculturation, the result of this research will help in considering further steps



that can be taken by the different Islamic universities in their acculturation process.

9. Completing this research on acculturation has given the researchers a confidence, motivation, ideas and insight to continue research works into other aspects of multiculturalism such as social solidarity and unity feeling.
10. A new research proposal was developed by the researcher in order to do an extensive study on Malaysia's multicultural educational structure and the proposal was submitted for FRGS grand.

### **Future Plan of the research:**

This research on acculturation needs to be further extended in terms of exploring other elements of it, like social solidarity and different aspects of students' experiences of multicultural environment by conducting research in these areas. We are positive that a demand for a research of this nature that addresses and provides solutions for the issues of disunity and lack of solidarity faced by the Muslim world today is always there.

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