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## **The Inclusion of Cultural Diversity in Higher Education Curriculum Design**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports findings of a study that assesses the measures taken by universities in selected South East Asian countries when developing the competencies of students from other countries. This is to address the internationalization thrust of higher education (HE) that constitutes the participation of international students and academics in HE-related activities. Specifically, this study assesses whether the academic programs (a) suit students' diverse backgrounds; and (b) address the cultural background from where the international students come from. Four participants from four different countries participated in this study. Two were HE academic leaders, researcher, and university leader; one was HE researcher and academic; while another was an academic. The data were collected through online in-depth interviewing conducted via email. The results revealed that majority of them perceived that cultural background was not addressed in the academic programs. However, certain courses in the HE institutions did address the host countries' cultural beliefs and traditions. The findings are discussed in the context of higher education institution to enlighten universities and higher education authorities on the appropriate method to design curriculum in universities hosting international students.

**Key words:** Intersection of culture; Universities; Curriculum; Cultural background; International students; South East Asian countries.

### **Introduction**

The ASEAN Economic Community envisions to become the 4th largest economy in the world by 2050 (ASEAN, 2017). The efforts to materialize this vision will significantly improve the livelihood of about 600 million people residing in ASEAN countries, and to achieve this, all efforts are focused on turning the majority into young educated workforce. Given universities have been acknowledged as a center that serves as an important agent of change for the socio-economic structure of a nation (Breznitz & Feldman, 2012; Campbell, 2017), it is imperative upon universities to support and substantiate the ASEAN vision. Universities in the ASEAN countries could strengthen collaboration among themselves or with other stakeholders in order to bring about their countries to a greater level, befitting the theme of thinking globally, and prospering regionally.

Higher education (HE) sector has the mandate to play critical roles in transforming a country via the training of workforce (Harrison, 2017), generation of relevant innovation, and production or reproduction of new knowledge (Lucchesi, 2005). For one, universities have been playing pertinent roles in producing competent individuals, shaping the values and norms of the society, as well as transforming its socio-economic structure. While much of their activities lead to great outcomes that help societies to respond to the increasingly changing milieus, the internalization of the university agenda also forces them to be culturally ready (Agnew & VanBalkom, 2009). A number of initiatives have been taken by universities to bring about more positive impacts not only at home but also on the international platform because they do not only serve for local but also for international students.

The presence of international students enrolling in a university creates a diverse learning environment, and in turn, creates an intersection of culture in a university ecosystem. Burrell, Fleming, Fredericks, & Burrell (2015) reported that the presence of international students at universities in the United States of America has resulted in

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difficulties to understand the different needs of students of diverse backgrounds. This necessitated certain effort to assess the unique experience of international students in order to provide them an effective learning process.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia (now the Ministry of Education) outlines in its strategic plan the need to shape the good values and norms among its beneficiaries by providing quality HE services to not only its citizens but also people in the region (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). This is evident in the formation of a distinct thrust in the Malaysian Education Strategic Plan that focuses on the efforts to bring about positive outcomes to other countries in the near and far. The internationalization agenda of the Malaysian Higher Education system involves the engagement of the international community, both as resources and beneficiaries of HE services. This involves the process to integrate an international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of HE services, including the teaching and learning aspect (Soejatminah, 2009). In fact, the internationalization agenda of the Malaysian Education system has also necessitated sound initiatives that involve participants from the international community. Besides providing national HE programs to international students, there are also international education programs that are offered to local students. They comprised of academic-related activities that involve students, academic members, industries, and community from various nationalities through (a) collaboration with foreign universities, (b) linkage with local and international industries, and (c) adaptation of outcome-based curriculum. All these initiatives are conducted to meet the needs of the international community, and enrolment of more international students (Laguador, Villas, & Delgado, 2014). For instance, in China, Singapore, and Malaysia, there has been a consistent growth in the establishment of branch campus of foreign universities, which in turn increase the enrolment of students in the universities, contributive of the effort to expedite the pace of HE massification; and access to it (Huang, 2007).

### **International Learning Environment**

Asia has become a compelling destination for international students, particularly from within the region. The international community at universities is characterized by the presence of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, ideas, and experiences. An estimated five million students choose to study outside their home countries in 2014 (ICEF, 2015). Besides leveraging on this trend, the need for universities to increase their economic capacity, as well as improve national and global rankings have driven them to put in strategies to increase the number of international students (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Jaroensubphayanont, 2014; Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010).

Malaysia with its strategic location, and the increasing education cooperation among ASEAN countries have also seen an increase in the flow of international students (Malaklolunthu, & Selan, 2011). As of December 2014, Malaysian HE institutions have received 135,502 enrollment of international students (ICEF, 2015), making Malaysia jumped in the rankings of UNESCO's latest International Student Mobility Survey from 12th to the ninth place. The top sending countries for Malaysian institutions are Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Yemen, Sri Lanka, and Libya (The Sun Daily, 2015). By March 2018, there were 171,513 international students from about 174 countries who studied in Malaysian public and private HE institutions. (MOHE, 2018).

In Singapore, international students made up about 18-20% (or about 52,000) of the total undergraduate intake (Ling, 2014; Lur, 2011). In Thailand, the flow of international students increased from 4,343 in 2002 to 20,309 by 2011 (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). In the Philippines, the number of international students has more than doubled over the last year with 26,000 in 2011 to more than 61,000 in 2012 (Ateneo De Manila University (2013). In Indonesia, there are about 5,700 foreign students (Lukman, 2016). Asian universities and colleges; local and private, are therefore experiencing cultural intersection with the presence of many international students.

Several strategies have been put in place to attract more international students including achieving institutions global recognition ranking, securing scholarships opportunities, establishing efficient immigration policy, providing state of the art facilities, and even conducting rigorous branding and promotion of the host countries (Samokhvalova, 2017). In fact, these are also some of the factors that influence students' choice of place to study. While supportive policies and impressive infrastructure have been taking place to facilitate internationalization, there are still some challenges facing international students. A number of studies have shown international students experiencing challenges adjusting to culture, climate, health care, accommodation, financial and language limitations (Akhtaruzzaman & Hoque, 2011; Mahmut et al., 2010; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), and experiencing more stress and anxiety (Andrade, 2006), attributable to, among other reasons, their learning processes which could be related to intercultural interactions, and international understanding (Johnson, 2016; Ward, 2001).

Given the fact that the presence of people from different cultures would lead to the occurrence of cultural intersection, there seem to be an interesting emerging issue concerning the trend of importing and exporting HE activities or services, causing some extent of debates on HE reform in many countries in this region at both policy and institutional levels (Huang, 2007). This is due to the presence of challenges in communication and understanding of each other with differing values, beliefs, norms, as well as priorities (Rehm, 2003). The cultural background of different participants in a university forms essential bases of their underlying values, beliefs, and norms; and in turn, influence their behaviors and attitudes towards certain issues they involve in. Nonetheless, despite the many reports on the presence of international students studying in universities, little has been done to study the extent to which the participants' different cultural backgrounds are addressed in the programs offered at universities.

### **The Present Study**

The ways universities play roles in educating the society should accommodate the needs of the diverse population of students. This entails the planning of HE services that are relevant to the need of students, and the society they come from. In other words, in providing good initiatives of educational programs to participants of a different culture, the content and approaches adopted by the provider must recognize and embrace the cultural background of the participants. DuBrin (2014) accentuated this importance adding that any program that involves international community must address the participants' diversity, requiring the organizer to take into account, respect and enjoy a wide range of cultural and individual differences. Any programs that involve participants of different cultural background will only have genuine impacts if the design of the program is informed by the socio-cultural background of the participants. This suggests that the development of education curriculum should also take into account the background of its participants. This warrants for a study to assess whether education programs at universities in ASEAN countries consider such differences when designing education curricula.

The study assesses if HE providers have acquired knowledge about the culture of people from different places; and cultivate the positive feeling and behaviors towards people of other culture. Unlike other studies (i.e., Mahmud et al., 2010; Trice, 2003) which focused on international students' challenges, this study addressed the perspectives of HE subject matter experts (academics, HE researchers, and HE leaders). This study examined the harmony between the content of the academic program with international students' cultural background. Specifically, this study assesses

- a. whether the content of the academic program in universities take into account the cultural background of the society from which the international students come from?
- b. whether the international students are equipped with the skills to understand the customs, traditions, and beliefs of people in the destination culture?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study came from four ASEAN countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Brunei. They have been contacted by the researchers through the official and personal network. The participants from Thailand and Indonesia are academic members, researcher in higher education research as well as university leader. The participant from Brunei is an academic member, while the participant from Malaysia is an academic member and higher education researcher

### **Design**

The data were collected through online in-depth interviewing conducted via e-mail, a viable means of data collection activities that can be the alternative to face-to-face or telephone interview (Meho, 2006). It was semi-structured in nature that involves multiple e-mail exchanges between the researchers and participants over an extended period of time. The information provided by a participant was not shared with other participants hence information from a participant was not influenced by other participants which might occur in virtual focus group discussion (Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002).

## **Instrument**

The interview questions have been developed based on a literature review to determine whether universities consider the cultural background of international students who study in their institution. Five open-ended questions were developed to answer the two research objectives of this paper. These questions were subjected to a review by one subject matter expert (SME). The questions also enquire the efforts to equip these students with the skills to understand the customs, traditions, and beliefs of people in the destination culture. The data gathered from the participants have represented the HE subject matter experts, giving credence and precision to the data. This substantiates the truth value of the qualitative data, an equivalent concept of validity in quantitative research. The consistency of the information given by the participants contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings, a concept which is equivalent to the concept of reliability in quantitative research. The word-processed responses in the email allow researchers to have rich verbatim descriptions of their view on the scopes enquired (Noble & Smith, 2015).

## **Data analysis**

The data analysis involves a systematic, iterative process of identifying and making meaning from common themes guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase guide to qualitative analysis.

## **Findings**

### **The linkage between the content of the academic program and the cultural background of international society**

Three of the participants mentioned that cultural background was not explicitly addressed in their academic programs. The participant from Thailand, who is also a director of a program shared "I don't think we adjust any content of our program....we don't do it." This is due to the fact that the university has very few international students.

Similarly, an academic from Indonesia also responded that "we only provide international student office to help international student deal with their problem." Although support is offered to all international students, it is more technical or psychological in nature, and not in terms of the academic program. The same participant shared that an advisor has been appointed to manage international students' issues.

Another participant from Brunei believes there is an integration element in the curriculum that may expose the students to the variety of cultural background among international students. She, however, is unsure of the extent of the integration. She stated that "Brunei does have exchange studies program, that allows their students to study abroad for a semester or a year. In return, students from participating countries send their students here. This has become an opportunity to add the diversity of cultural awareness for the students involved. Additionally, there are scholarships for international students, as an opportunity for the students to experience an international ambiance for international students. There is also an international office that assists the students to accommodate to the university in Brunei."

Interestingly, a participant from Malaysia however stated that there is a good extent of content in an academic program that takes into account the cultural background of international students..... The participant responded "Good, syllabus and examples mostly are international." To her opinion, the syllabus of courses, and examples used for teaching in classes are mostly international. She also reiterates that it is the lecturer's responsibility to be sensitive and to use materials that can be applied to student from any cultural background.

### **Understanding of the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the destination culture**

All the participants were asked about the extents to which their students were equipped with the appropriate skills to understand the customs, traditions, and beliefs of people in the destination culture. In Thailand, the undergraduate students were provided with general education subjects. Within these subjects, students are exposed to other cultures by participating in various activities such as role-play (by playing roles of other cultures) and performing cultural dances. Specifically, the participants mentioned that "we provide our undergraduate with general education subjects. Some of subjects ask students to study about other cultures. They performed activities like performing arts from other cultures for example cultural dances. They conduct a play to take roles from other cultures....We invited international students to attend our festivals."

In Indonesia, a subject known as Cross-Cultural Psychology is offered at the undergraduate level, although this subject is not a compulsory subject. In this subject, students learn about how cultures influence human behavior, specifically how people's thoughts, feelings and actions vary across cultures. The university where this participant works at also has an international office that deals with students' exchange program. As a preparation before students are sent overseas to pursue their studies, they will have to attend a cultural training. Cross-cultural awareness is also encouraged by organizing an exchange student program. The participant detailed out by putting that "Another program to increase cultural awareness is through cross-culture expedition. We used to bring our student for one-week field trip to ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia... Students need to write a report on their cultural observation in those country and compare them to Indonesia culture. In our university, cross-cultural psychology is not really emphasized, but one of the university value is "kearifan lokal" which is more into indigenous psychology. Our students are encouraged to know more about various Indonesian culture. Therefore, several cultural learning programs are organized by the university including "Wayang" show. It is one of the Javanese culture, traditional dance as one of the extracurricular, teaching our students to be aware with the Indonesian handcraft and many more." The aim of this program was to observe cultural similarities and differences. The Indonesian students who attended this program prepared reports about their cultural observation. In the participant's opinion, however, the emphasis is more of making Indonesian students aware of their own culture instead of identifying the different cultural background of international students.

The participant from Brunei however, reported that there is no specific course that assists international students to assimilate in the country they are studying in. She acknowledged that there are differences between the culture in Brunei and culture of international students. The researcher from Malaysia reiterated that there is poor effort to formally promote understanding among students of various backgrounds. Nevertheless, she witnessed frequent interactions among students in hostels and classes that help build the understanding. She points out that "The target home country seems to focus more on implementing and highlighting their own values, which may be of importance for them to inculcate. I am unsure or unaware, however, of specific course units that we can undertake to focus on cultural and lifestyles sensitivities that are of difference to the home country."

In summary, from the responses, most international students may be equipped with the destination culture's heritage through subjects (like the general education subjects), students' exchange programs, field trips (i.e., cross culture expedition), or cultural performances. They are exposed to their destination country's cultural heritage by way of festivities, or probably through their own personal experiences. It is also found that all of those interviewees expressed a similar view when enquired about the consideration of the cultural background with the academic program. All of the participants believed that they were not aware of the academic program being tailored based on the international students' cultural background. This may be due to the low number of international students in the university, or perhaps, there are other programs (such as field trip) that are thought to have addressed the cultural diversity. Interestingly, it seems that in two of the countries interviewed, the focus is more on the culture of the destination country. This means, in many countries, the programs in universities emphasized on promoting their own cultural heritage instead of embedding the other countries' cultures in the teaching and learning processes.

## Conclusion

The enrolment of international students has led to the presence of diverse culture, values, language, and lifestyle in a learning environment, hence requiring the need to increase cultural awareness and appreciation (Andrade, 2006). The presence of the international community in a university creates some dynamic changes in the process of acquiring and disseminating knowledge; developing skills; and enhancing abilities. It is important, therefore, that teachers/lecturers learn how to create environments that acknowledge the cultural diversity that students of various backgrounds have their classrooms (Adams, 1992). Universities should realize that they have the responsibilities to embrace differences or diversity and in turn integrate it in the university life, including in the teaching and learning processes. This would encourage diversity development that ultimately result in meaningful university experience among students, including international students who expect a high standard of HE program (Kanji, Malek, & Tambi, 1999). They expect the knowledge and skills acquired throughout their enrolment would prepare them to become good professionals when they return to their country. Such expectation makes it pertinent for universities to best serve their international students (Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010).

This study has assessed whether the content of the academic program is in harmony with international students' cultural background. The study found that there is a lack of awareness on whether the content of academic programs has taken into account the cultural background of international society. Despite the awareness on the international content of academic programs, the participants reported that international students were exposed to activities which enhance their understanding of the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the destination culture.

The findings show that international students have, to some extent, been exposed to activities which may enhance their positive experience while enrolling in Malaysian universities. With regards to whether the content of acknowledge and extent of skills they acquire would be relevant to their country, little has been done by curriculum developers to ensure that curriculum contents are relevant to the context of the community where the international students come. This does not benefit a principle which underscores the essentiality to equip students with the competencies they genuinely require in order for them to fully function in their society (Cavanaugh, 2018). Students and graduates of universities must be ready to become the catalyst of progress, to become the agents of development and prosperity for their nation, and improve their, their family and society, quality of life. It is expected that once the cultural factors be taken into account, the programs offered by universities which host international students would be of much benefits to the international community.

The findings necessitate HE policy makers and universities to strategically devise activities that provide substantiated impacts to students, societies, and industries at local and international levels. The efforts must take cultural aspects into account, including students' cultural background. A number of interventions could be adopted by universities in their efforts to strengthen the delivery of the academic program so that it is suitable for students of international backgrounds. The interventions can be implemented at student, human resource, techno-structural, and strategic levels (Cummings & Worley, 2015).

1. Student level: Engaging international students to identify their need and assess the expectations; and outreaching ex-students or alumni, such as through Tracer Study, to evaluate the relevance of their academic program in relation to their career and life activities after graduation;
2. Human resource level; Training curriculum developer to acknowledge the need for having input from students, alumni, and stakeholders when developing curriculum. They should be trained to incorporate international input in university curricula.
3. Techno- Structural level; Conducting periodical curriculum review which emphasizes the need to embed internationally relevant input in academic programs; and establishing Board of Studies which consist of international members.
4. Strategic level: Engaging various parties from multi-national organizations, foreign missions (diplomat from foreign embassies); international alumni to become members in Board of Studies.

The above measures are expected to bring about more information which serves as bases to augment the content structure as well as pedagogical approach in university teaching and learning processes. The identified needs of students of different cultural backgrounds will enable curriculum developers to design internationally-informed curricula which take into account their different circumstances. Students may have a more meaningful learning process if they know that their study program suits their country's need or circumstances, being aware that they would be able to use and transfer the knowledge when they return to their country.

One limitation with this study however concerns the research design which was qualitative in nature. Therefore, it cannot be extended to the wider populations. Another limitation is attributed to personal biases that participants may unintentionally committed due to their personal experiences and awareness about curriculum contents and culture in the context of their teaching and learning. Thus, future study should include more participation from all ASEAN countries, and take into perspectives both the academics' and students' participants to allow for triangulation of data. Despite these limitations, the findings of the present study allow for the understanding of the extent universities incorporate cultural diversity in the designs and development of their curriculum to support the growing number of international students in their respective universities. The implication for this finding points to the importance of policy and practice in specific HE to include subjects or courses that can create cross-cultural awareness and diversity.

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