

# The Business of Education: Improving International Student Learning Experiences in Malaysia<sup>i</sup>

Gordon Slethaug\* and Jesilin Manjula\*

*With some 2.8 million university students going abroad annually for study and an additional 5 million students attending international secondary schools at home or abroad, international education has become big business. However, this growth is seldom accompanied by a “transformative” approach, that is, one “concerned with knowledge sharing and cooperation, and integrating ‘an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching research and service functions of academic institutions’” (Schweisfurth & Gu 2009, citing Knight 1999). To explore international teaching and learning, Slethaug has developed a series of questionnaires designed to evaluate international students’ responses to their learning situations based on a number of relevant academic, administrative, and social factors, including expectations carried over from previous education. Based on two surveys at a Malaysian tertiary institution, the first in December 2009 and the second in March 2010, this paper will: 1) explore a segment of international education in Malaysia from the perspective of administration, the classroom, and social adjustment; 2) compare results within Australian and European contexts to indicate the challenges in higher education; 3) and, on that basis, make some useful recommendations about best practices in international teaching and learning in Malaysia and abroad. It also highlights how universities might work more effectively with international students to meet their needs.*

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Definitions of International Students

In reviewing international education, one critic defines it as “intercultural and cross-cultural education that transcends the geographical and pedagogical boundaries of a particular nation” (Slethaug 2010). In that line of logic, others refer to international students as those “who have chosen to travel to another country for tertiary study” (Ryan & Carroll 2005). The situation is more complicated, however: school students who travel abroad surely count as international students, and a case can be made that those attending international schools and universities on their own soil also function as international students because of their curricula and intercultural student mix, though not with full international mobility. This study, however, focuses on those who do cross actual national borders and engage in study in another country.

These border-crossing students have an effect on their new environment that cannot be discounted; the non-international, indigenous students who share the mainstream in programmes of universities, colleges, and public schools are certainly affected by global education, even though they are not international students (Treloar et al 2000). Indeed, such terms as “transnational” and “borderless” do not just describe international students

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\*Gordon Slethaug and Jesilin Manjula, University of Waterloo, Canada, and Sunway University, Malaysia

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but “the real and virtual movement of students, teachers, knowledge and academic programs from one country to another” (Knight 2002). These innovations in borderlessness and electronic communications serve to remind us that international education is now a multi-billion dollar enterprise, with universities designing new programmes for international students and competing for them.

### **1.2 Research Context and Problem Statement**

In working with international students in Hong Kong, China, and Denmark, Slethaug became increasingly aware that the academic success of international students was dependent not only on effective teaching and learning but a “friendly” administrative and social environment and, to some extent, previous educational background. As a consequence, he designed a series of four questionnaires: a basic survey that would be given once to a group of international students (Appendix 1) and a group of three sequential questionnaires (Appendix 2) that would be given to the same group on three occasions over an academic term or year. He has now administered these in several institutions in four countries—Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong, and Malaysia .

In the fall semester of 2009 Manjula met with groups of international students at a mid-sized Malaysian tertiary institution to find out their willingness to assist in a survey. As a result of these discussions, on December 2009 and March 2010, the “basic” version of Slethaug’s ACE questionnaires was administered to 78 international students, 50 in the first survey and 28 in the second. December was chosen to survey students still in their first semester, and March was chosen to survey those in the second semester and more familiar with the university system. The December sample size was chosen to reflect an adequate cross-section of first-year students who could provide brief written responses. The March sample was deliberately smaller and designed to give the students more time and latitude in answering questions. Thus, the methodology bridges quantitative and qualitative analyses, though weighted to the qualitative.

These students were enrolled in several programmes, especially business, and came from 17 countries, including Bangladesh, Botswana, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. As the nationalities suggest, there were no Westerners (Australians, New Zealanders, Europeans, or North or South Americans) in the survey group. Rather, they consisted of students from the Middle East and Africa who do not often get included in research on international education, which tends to be oriented to East Asia, Europe, and the US. The problem, then was to discover not only how integrated these students were within this Malaysian university but how their responses compared to others from East Asia (particularly Confucian-based cultures) and Western countries that have been more systematically assessed. Strikingly, as we shall see, the findings in Malaysia do echo results and questions about teaching and learning of international students on UK and Australian campuses that include students from Australia, Europe, and the Americas, suggesting the real global dimension to education at this time (among others, see Schweisfurth and Gu 2009).

## **2 Literature Review**

The base of research materials on international teaching and learning has been expanding rapidly in the last decade as students from Asia (China, Korea, and India especially) have gone abroad for undergraduate and graduate education. With the expansion of Asian

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economies, education in the West has become more affordable, and many American, Australian, and British studies have undertaken to understand those international students who are taking an increasing number of places in Western universities. Although the same amount of research has not been produced about Malaysian students studying internationally or about those students from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa who study in Malaysia in great numbers, the results are important in confronting stereotypes and establishing priorities for these international learners.

Among the most important of these studies has been the Chinese learner “debate,” beginning with Watkins and Biggs (1996, 2001) and then moving to studies by Ryan and Carroll (2005), Clark and Gieve (2006), Jin and Cortazzi (2006), Coverdale-Jones and Rastall (2009), and Ryan and Slethaug (2010). A considerable portion of this debate centers on the issue of rote memorization, which has been such a prominent feature in the Western perception of the Chinese and other Asians. A negative view of rote learning has contributed heavily to the deficit picture of Asian learners as hierarchical, subservient to authority, over-polite and passive, lecture-oriented, unwilling to speak out in class, and incapable of critical thinking (Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos 1999). A counter but also stereotypical view at work in the public imagination is the surplus view of the Chinese as quick learners, hard workers, and especially good at math and science. This surplus view has also attached itself to South Asians (especially Indians) because they have done extraordinarily well in American education, professions, and business. Although most studies have reversed these deficit and surplus views, they linger in the public imagination and even with university teachers, who, according to Ninnes and Hellstén (2005) feel some exhaustion not only from such public perceptions but the reality of the intercultural challenges of international students in the classroom.

### 2.1 Internationalising Education: The Example of Malaysia

As in other global places, the international student market has become increasingly important to Malaysia, more than doubling in five years, and the government is committed to offering quality education in teaching and learning. In Malaysia, the higher education system consists of more than 20 government-funded universities, 5 foreign university branch campuses, 20 private universities, and 396 private colleges. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (*MOHE Report 2009*), as of 2008, there were more than 70,000 foreign students out of a total 450,531 registered students. This is roughly 2.5% of the total of international students (See Figure 1). These international students mainly come from East Asia (China, Korea, and Indonesia), South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Pakistan), West Asia or the Middle East (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Yemen), Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania), and the Eastern European Block. Malaysia is also a net exporter of students, but this study does not explore their experiences.

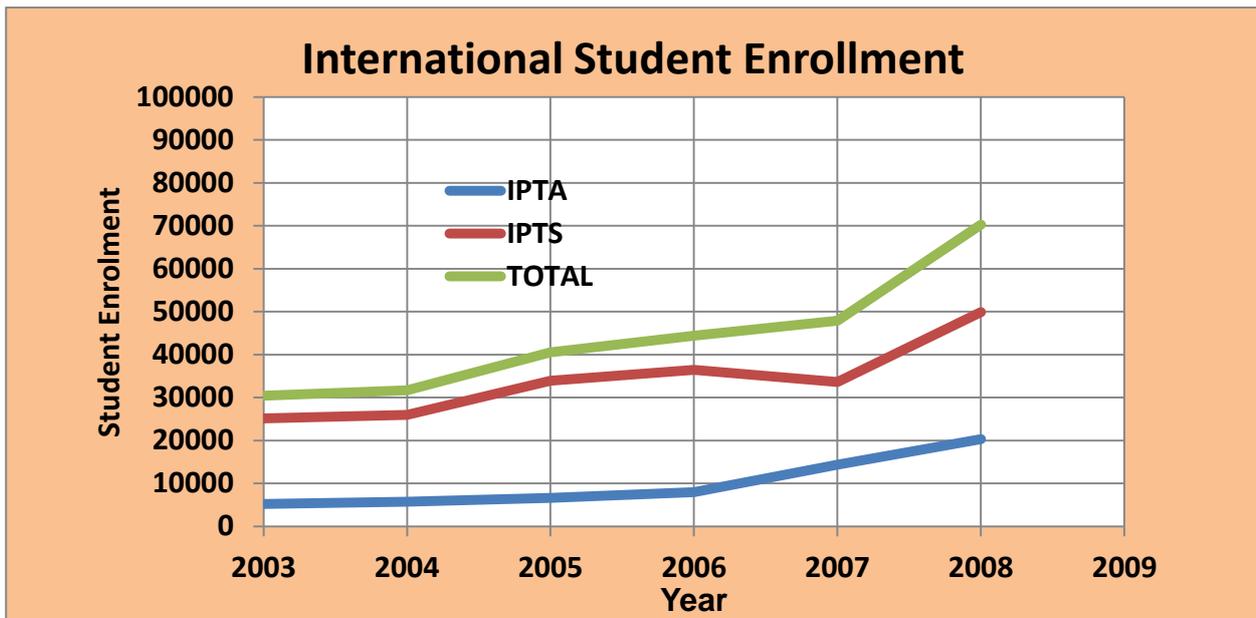


Figure 1

(IPTA = public institutes of higher learning and IPTS = private institutes of higher learning)

Source: Report from Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia 2009

No.	Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2009-2010
1	USA	586,323	572,509	565,039	564,776	690,923
2	UK	275,270	300,055	318,400	330,080	415,585
3	Australia	218,654	236,142	255,925	281,633	320,170
4	France	221,471	244,335	255,585	265,039	278,213
5	Germany	227,026	246,136	246,334	248,357	244,776
6	China	77,715	110,844	141,087	162,695	238,184
7	Canada	46,381	41,338	42,590	39,008	161,679
8	Japan	109,508	117,302	121,812	117,927	132,720
9	Singapore	50,000	N/A	72,000	N/A	97,000
10	New Zealand	47,121	50,450	47,369	42,652	93,000
11	Malaysia	30,390	31,664	33,890	44,390	90,501

Figure 2

Source: The Observatory on borderless higher education, 2007 and 2010 Atlas of Student Mobility - Website of the Institute of International Education (<http://www.atlas.iienetwork.org>)

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 The Basic Ace Questionnaire and Its Implications for Malaysia

In their responses, international students reflected on the perceived value of teaching and learning, the diversity of the student population, the adjustment of adapting to campus life and the culture of Malaysia, and the administrative support provided to help with this adjustment. In many ways the responses of recently-enrolled December students were similar to those more seasoned March students, but frustrations about administrative processes diminished sharply as students became more familiar with the system. Early

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issues of admission, subject registration, and add-drop information were no longer mentioned, and students thought food and accommodation needs were adequately handled by administrative personnel. While some 25% of the December group wished the staff to go further in administrative assistance, these issues became nearly irrelevant for students longer in the system, who could then focus on fulfilling higher-order needs such as consultation on coursework, complex academic topics, individual and group study skills, and graduation requirements.

In the area of teaching and learning, this group of students thought this Malaysian university emphasized hard work, structured coursework and assignments, required tutorial attendance, and extensive note taking for end-of-the-year examinations. Although some would like to see a greater emphasis on application of theory in and out of classrooms, most thought that this university gave them ample opportunities for this. These comments are echoed in many universities across the globe because most are still lecture and exam oriented with more thought given to the application of theory than might be the case in secondary schooling. The emphasis on lectures and exams rather than discussion and alternative ways of testing may reflect a general tendency in universities to have larger classes than in secondary schools, even to fill them to excess to meet the realities of tighter budgeting.

Socialization needs, including social interaction, need for acceptance, sense of belonging, and personal achievement tended to remain a concern among all the international students, though somewhat diminished by the middle of the second semester. A clear majority of these international students thought of themselves as integrated in the classroom, but another thirty-eight percent (38%) did not, and several others qualified their responses. These issues of integration may be beyond the instructor's domain, but are part of a worrisome global trend for international mobility because they indicate that institutions need to look carefully at intercultural adaptation and readily take on social responsibilities beyond offering routine administrative assistance when seeking to admit these students. This, too, is probably part of a global phenomenon and requires transformative thinking.

Some challenges these questionnaires reveal, both by their explicit statements and phrasing, that correspond to issues that others raise (Burns 1991; Jones, Robertson & Line 1991; Leask 1999; McInnes 2001; Ryan 2000; Hellstén & Prescott 2004) include:

- Differences in cultural communication
- English-language usage
- Critical-thinking skills
- Technology skills
- Participation in group discussions and other shared learning
- Concerns about memorization and lack of initiative
- Academic literacy styles
- Assimilation in and out of the classroom

For academics facing issues of student diversity in public universities in Malaysia, these realities can pose other questions about pedagogies (Kaur & Manan 2008). As Scott (2005) mentions, "our students now represent multifarious histories, expectations, and responses; and these are continually being shaped and reshaped in an interaction of student agency with socio-culturally and politically formed pedagogical imperatives."

### 4 Results/Analysis

#### 4.1 Generation Y Students, Learning, and Technology

Whether from Asia, Africa, Europe, or the Americas, these international students have grown up in an environment of unprecedented economic growth, prosperity, technological interconnectedness, and global mobility, although the penetration of these differs significantly across the globe. Comprising most of the 660 million upwardly mobile and ultra-connected Asians, among the rest, they are called Generation Y (Gen Y or Millennials) and were born between 1980 and 2000 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2009). (The international students in this study were born between 1988 and 1994.) In China, they roughly number 200 million, in Japan 15 million, and in Hong Kong 1.4 million. India alone graduates almost 5 million Gen Y students from university every year. All these numbers combine to make this youthful generation a vitally important part of Asia's and the globe's national economies and cultures, but these stunning demographic changes present real challenges for culture, business, and education.

Gen Y students certainly have more privileges than students in previous generations, and international students may have more than others. Still, in Malaysia they come from diverse social and educational backgrounds, so that the most important challenge is the classroom itself. According to this survey, whether students come from lecture-oriented teaching cultures in Indonesia, Nigeria, or Yemen, British programmes in Botswana or Kenya, or international schools in Pakistan, they universally favor (upwards of 95%) an interactive classroom between teachers and students. Indeed, students from India and Pakistan found that instead of PowerPoint slide shows, they would "prefer book reading and taking notes" from effective lectures. This preference for an interactive classroom concurs with Reid's findings (2002) at Australia's Macquarie University, in which students from Asian backgrounds claimed to value interactive discussion over conventional lectures. As this survey and Reid have discovered, students do want the knowledge and opinions of the lecturer, but they also want to hear what other students think and have a chance to express their own views. This survey indicates that international students have many thoughts about how this could be accomplished (open discussion, study groups, class debates, teachers as facilitators), but they expect to connect with, not answer to, their lecturers, and the manner of communication has to be mostly dialogue, not didactic monologue.

Related to this preference for an interactive classroom is the reputed preference for memorization among Asian students. Though many Westerners (and lecturers everywhere) continue to cherish the deficit view that Asian students prefer rote-learning, will not enter into discussion and debate, and want to remain passive in classrooms, comments by Asian and African students in this survey seriously challenge that assumption, as have many other studies (Burns 1991; Leask 1999; Jones, Robertson & Line 1999; Ryan 2000, 2010; McInnes 2001; Biggs 2001; Hellstén & Prescott 2004; Clark & Gieve 2006). A number of students in the survey noted that their previous schooling was based on rote memorization of lectures, but, with only an exception or two, wanted that changed in their university work. They may appreciate that some deep learning begins with memorization, but value the opportunity to share in interactive classroom dynamics, bearing out relatively early comments by Biggs (1999) to that effect. Indeed, students were quite critical if they found that "mere" memorization was required. Some students from Iran, the UAE, and Nigeria, for example, felt that a requirement of memorization in some courses must go beyond "spoon-feeding," and prepare them to be tested on criticality. At

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this point, then, there would appear to be a disconnect between instructors' justification of their tendency to lecture and receive their words back on an examination (Hellstén & Prescott 2004) and the students' direct assertion that they want an interactive classroom in which memorization is not the standard.

Central to innovation in the classroom and the successful assimilation of students into an interactive educational process are the instructors themselves. As one of the students from Bangladesh remarked, when she came to Malaysia her basic expectation was that "instructors are clear, interaction is good, [and] learning is improved." Others from Pakistan and Indonesia noted that they wanted a structured approach with good lectures and assignments that would teach them something. Still others from Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Yemen hoped that the teacher would be fair and "friendly." One student said, "So, I want teacher to encourage that like mum and dad....yes, to take care of them (other international students) a lot . . . ."

When combined, these comments suggest that along with lecturing and interactive engagement, students want a personable, connected, friendly, and absolutely fair instructor. For these international students, education is not remote, but direct and immediate, and they need a friendly face and neutral atmosphere to facilitate their learning. Some might consider this a "parenting" requirement, but it is part of the culture of care that must be present for international students to adapt successfully to their new environment. As the Council for International Education (UKCOSA 2004) has noted of international students in the UK, this enabling context is every bit as important as the institutional learning frameworks. Academics, then, need to gauge whether the students understand their communication, feel well mentored in the classroom, and find it a comfortable learning atmosphere. In Asia, however, it is not always easy to find out what the students are really thinking about the classroom because, as a gesture of politeness and respect, students do not feel comfortable offering criticism. Teaching international students, then, requires an extra sensitivity to create a positive classroom atmosphere, friendliness, and fairness.

The international setting of the classroom creates another challenge for instructors because these students do not have identical academic training, and many (particularly in technological subjects such as computing) found that the instructor expected them to have a firm background in areas that they have never studied. This creates deep anxiety for the students who, sometimes, can find tutors to help (at the student's own expense), but often are not able to find assistance and have to settle for lower or failing marks. To really help, the universities might introduce bridging programmes and/or parallel supporting structures to offset such incidents of failure due to poor foundation knowledge in basic subjects. In Malaysia, the Intensive English Programme, elementary Mathematics, college study skills, and basic computing have been offered to international students since the 1990s to bring them uniformly up to speed. There are, however, some international and home students alike who have entered the system with minimal entry qualifications and lack commitment to college education and willingness to learn in and outside the classroom, and no special means will likely help these students.

Another important classroom issue for international students concerns technology. Gen Y students have grown-up in a "time-compressed, fast-forward environment" (Tasseron 2001) and expect nothing less than an iPhone, WIFI, a laptop, and an iPad. Old fashioned letters and greeting cards are fading as instant messages and email alerts on desktops, laptops and mobile phones replace traditional communication modes for these students.

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They also want multi-media presentations in class and interaction between students, teachers, and technology and are easily bored if classrooms are not fast moving and technologically savvy. Being online in the classroom and at home is a necessity, and students who come to Malaysia expect, and find, that technology is often more advanced and better used than in their home countries. This comment came from students from almost every country, including Nigeria, Yemen, and the UAE. Gen Y students take for granted that classrooms should have the most recent, innovative, and stimulating visual technology, but they also want instructors to be focused, clear, and articulate. In addition, they want an interactive, student-centered environment. A downside of miniaturized digital technology, high-speed internet technology, and highly entertaining video games might be short attention spans and the seeming necessity of sensory excitement, but international students did not raise this issue in their comments. Indeed, Dessler (2008) argues throughout this topic on Gen Y that their capacity for using information technology will make them the most demanding, high-performing students who channel their energies in areas that best suit their learning capacities.

This is not to say that such innovations as interactive teaching and new technology are altogether simple for international students: they may have difficulties in adjusting to new teaching situations. Of interest in this regard is that the ACE questionnaire March results concerning teaching and social environment (as well as the administration mentioned above) were much more positive than in December, and it was clear that by that time most of the students had adapted well to the learning situation on campus. Even up to March, we might have expected that students from the more traditional learning systems of Yemen and Bangladesh would yearn for formal structures, lectures, and memorization, and not so quickly wanted a technologized student-centered classroom, but generally this was not the case. There was, to be sure, a hint of a cultural yearning for what they had experienced before, but, overall, students from traditional-education environments almost immediately wanted a more non-traditional, interactive one. Similarly, in the social sector, in leaving the security of home, many did yearn for the familiar, and new language and cultural experiences could be distressing, especially for recent arrivals (Hellstén & Prescott 2004), but international students wanted to adapt and displayed a solidarity among those who came from the same country and gave the perception that they could stand on their own in a foreign land.

In this respect, international students are little different from home students undergoing the transition to a university academic culture (Levy, Osborn & Plunkett 2003; McInnes 2001). Nonetheless, Biggs (1999) and Krause (2001) report that for some international students, this transition is fraught with greater uncertainties than for locals about fitting into disciplinary cultures, especially in academic writing genres, and this anxiety could unsettle their whole programme.

Students, in general, however, develop the ability to work out their position within disciplinary cultures, being able to guess at what is important as sanctioned disciplinary practice within the first semester or two of commencing studies. More research is needed into the acquisition of disciplinary know-how that seems readily accessible by students in universities, but, as Biggs and Watkins noted more than a decade ago (2001), the fact that many Asian students continue to rank in the top levels of university courses in international destinations testifies to their ability to adjust well in a variety of teaching cultures and disciplinary and genre expectations. For the university, positive student perceptions about this transition to their academic and social environment are vital for there can be economic consequences: a positive overall experience could translate into lucrative word-of-mouth

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referrals to fellow students in their home country, or, with negative comments published on the internet, it could mean economic disaster.

### 4.2 The Classroom Environment: Physical, Emotional, and Intellectual Spaces

In *Teaching Abroad* (2007), Slethaug identifies the characteristics of the classroom environment as containing physical, emotional, and intellectual spaces. University campuses in Malaysia generally have very good facilities, so that physical spaces are usually not a problem—though too many students filling those spaces could be. As noted above, in intellectual spaces, some education systems and/or instructors give priority to teachers and lectures (the majority), while others prefer to engage students in discussions (the minority). In either case, globally, both international and home students need to feel that their learning does not suffer from inadequate teaching, poor assessment strategies, weak learning environments, and oppressive attitudes of teachers or fellow students. In this mental space, they need to be assured that theirs is a level playing field, where they can learn about themselves and their cultural heritage and be assured of equal treatment regardless of race, class, gender, religion, or age. Several students mentioned that they wanted intercultural or multicultural learning in the classroom, and as one student put it so well, he/she wanted “teaching which is free of favoritism, open to questions, broadens the students’ information, and motivates them to learn.” This kind of reflective thinking fosters “flexibility and change[s] everyday requirements for the accommodation of diversity in the teaching and learning settings” (Ryan & Carroll 2005).

Catering to a limited group of students and not being available for consultation during office hours are two significant issues in an international classroom which need to be looked after in order to assure that the students do have an appropriate mental space in which to complete their work. Malaysian universities have tried to address these issues through the various kinds of interventional teacher counseling and the introduction of stiffer requirements.

### 4.3 Communication Issues

In the mental space of an international classroom, fluency in English has become a key to well-being. All students come to these international programmes with a certain level of English—depending upon a combination of their country of origin, previous schooling, and present academic programme—and they want this standard maintained, if not improved. During class discussions and group studies, they feel self-conscious and critical if conversational flow (both theirs and the instructor’s) does not come naturally in English: they want to use English well and fear to mispronounce words or use incorrect grammar. The students also expect instructors to have a high level of English speaking, writing, and pace. They do not wish the lectures to be too fast or too slow. Lecturers who speak too quickly may not be understood, and instructors who speak too slowly can be boring, so students prefer instructors and classmates who have a regular pace, and can boost the students’ self-esteem and the braveness in class by treating them as ‘equals.’

International students also want a global English accent, which increasingly is seen as more akin to North American than British usage. These students, especially those who come from Botswana, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and the UAE where English is the official language, are used to a high standard of usage in the classroom and prefer less intrusion of local dialectal variations such as the Malaysian slang “errr,” “lah,” “hmmmm,” and “yeah.” Malaysian universities are taking steps to address this issue, and the need to curb

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such usage of slang has been highlighted during pedagogy training for new lecturers. (Very diplomatically, these problems were communicated to those instructors during class observations by their immediate superiors and during peer evaluation sessions for the senior instructors in the classrooms). In general, lecturers and instructors in Malaysia use a high standard of English in their lectures, and lecturers with poor command of English would generally not go past the preliminary interviews for teaching jobs or mock teaching session. Moreover, except for a few public universities, lectures in Malaysian universities nationwide are conducted in English, which further accommodates and appeals to international students to study here in Malaysia.

### **4.4 Assessments and Recommendations for Malaysia**

To this point, the paper has addressed the survey results and compared them to studies of international students elsewhere. Part of this project is, however, to take a transformative approach and suggest ways in which Malaysian institutions—and others—can focus on ways to improve the learning environment of international students. Primary goals include developing better mechanisms to ease the process of international-student integration into a university, building up a culturally sensitive curriculum, enhancing a reflective and inclusive teaching culture throughout the university, and seeking to improve teacher-student communication. Having effective mentoring programmes and offices is critical, but making explicit the curriculum, coursework project, assignment requirements, and their discourses is a good departure point in any event (Garcia 1991; Leask 1999). Many course overviews and project requirements in Malaysia have taken on this approach for some time, as early as in the 1990s when international students started studying in Malaysia.

### **4.5 Mentoring Offices and Programmes**

The route to international student success ideally depends on a cooperative blending of home and host cultures, but conventionally the destination culture expects international students to adjust to the “host country’s beat” (McLean & Ransom 2005). Certain Australian universities, however, have implemented bridging and mentoring programmes to assist international students in their transition to a new and different student environment (Jones, Robertson & Line 1999; Leask 1999; Ryan 2000; Austin, Covalea & Weal 2002). The creation of these programmes has gone some distance in decreasing students’ social isolation and loneliness. This is a strategically transformative step, and it requires resources. As noted by Hellstén and Prescott (2004) for institutions lacking these resources (and even those who have them), a “cost-effective way is the formation of focus groups that contain impartial representatives of the international student body who convey student views to academics and other staff.” This forum can give the students a voice while taking away the embarrassment caused by individual students violating their sense of politeness by commenting negatively on their instructors.

Another important step would be setting up a contact office linked to an online service and staffed by academics and experienced cross-cultural mentors, beyond the role of the international student offices in campuses worldwide. As students pointed out in the questionnaires, many of the questions of incoming international students are general in nature and can be addressed through a regularly updated online webpage. More complicated questions could be answered by the mentors. Still more complicated emotional issues could be referred to counseling offices that generally exist now, though the counselors may have to acquire background in intercultural communication to become

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aware of common views and perceptions in other cultures. Such a facility would meet the immediate needs of international students and the deeper need for social and emotional support—a culture of care—and would help to solve the perceived weakness in administrative support among international students in Malaysia and worldwide.

The ethic of care is an expectation for learning among many international students, as indicated by the respondents who stressed that they wanted “friendly” teachers, but this might also be facilitated by trained professionals. That would solve part of the problem of the lack of availability of staff referred to by students, which might be due to the omissions of tenured teachers, but as Hellstén and Prescott note of Australia (2004), is more likely related to the hiring of part-time staff who go from campus to campus and do not have regular office hours or space. Not all part-timers are in this group as many are dedicated and in demand for their teaching. The situation in Malaysia has improved in many universities, where compulsory consultation hours (4 hours per week), offices, and shared workstations have been provided. This helps to avoid an impression that inadvertent unavailability can be “interpreted as obstructing the students’ progress toward the completion of the degree,” a concern directly linked to international marketing of education (Hellstén & Prescott 2004; also Rizvi 2000). Regardless of the causes, it is a problem in need of an appropriate solution.

### **4.6 Enculturation**

As Hellstén (2002) remarked of international students coming to Australia, “learning the culture of the host institution is a major element of the successful transition into a new learning environment . . . but the process of enculturation into academic and disciplinary know-how is often perceived as one of trial and error and largely unavailable to new students.” (Also, see Krause 2001; Biggs & Watkins 2001; McInnis 2001; Ramburuth 2001). Several of the students indicated that enculturation into an academic discipline may be their most significant and difficult feat.

One of the most valuable solutions to this problem could be the appointment of a cultural mediator or cross-cultural consultant housed in a contact office or available in each faculty. To bring cross-cultural consultants onto the teaching teams would recognize the value they bring to the delivery of curriculum and their assistance to the cultural outsiders in understanding the teaching and learning environment, especially the expectations and requirements or particular academic disciplines.

### **4.7 Internationalization of Curriculum**

The universities’ responsibility toward the international students they take in and the development of cultural openness need further study and implementation because of their value to both international and home students (Rizvi 2000). Commitment to internationalizing the curriculum needs to be fostered and innovative solutions need to be sought to re-evaluate existing curriculum content, enhance capacity, and deliver more effective international programmes while still preserving the best existing pedagogy. This could be a massive task, unless the curriculum design and development is well moderated and managed with respect for local best practices. Beyond that, cross-cultural information sessions could examine culturally and spiritually divergent traditions and discourses.

A diversity-centered curriculum would promote the view that internationalization is everyone’s responsibility, an underlying premise of Leask (1999) who argues that the

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internationalization of higher education requires strategies that enable individual needs for communication. For this reason, Australian universities have experimented with employing staff with Asian backgrounds to teach commerce and business to international students with Asian backgrounds (King & Hemmings 2000). Those with such international training and background can readily contribute to international teaching and learning especially when, as Kalantzis and Cope (2000) suggest, other staff members are part of the process and appreciate the underlying rationale. Hiring instructors and staff members from some of the same countries as the international students could help to challenge long-held, dominant views of teaching and learning in Malaysia and engage in valuable intercultural learning.

### 4.8 Recommendations for International Students' Learning At Large

Many countries (among them Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, UK, and US) are eagerly courting international students to offset declining enrolment in some universities, especially when they come with full funding (Wan et al 1992), but, as the ACE questionnaires have demonstrated, more importantly they bring diversity and fresh perspectives on learning. Expectations brought from the international students' home countries coupled with the need to embrace changes have provided new perceptions of what is acceptable and desirable in Malaysian higher learning and can be used as the basis for recommendations on international learning and teaching, which requires continuing rethinking and implementing of intercultural policies and procedures in strategic planning (Hellstén 2002). Indeed, Hellstén and Prescott (2004) Hawkins and Bransgrove (1998), and others have made such recommendations in Australia, which we can build upon. To facilitate this transformative process, the universities might:

- Survey students to discover who the international students are and to demonstrate that the university accepts diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Investigate the customary discourses, genres, and conventions of different cultural groups. This might include culturally specific behavior governing tone of voice, body language, and contact in intercultural communications. (Hellstén and Prescott 2004)
- Explore different religious and cultural traditions with sensitivity and inclusiveness.
- Conduct a needs analysis to discover how international student priorities can be met within the classroom and translated into staff-development programmes.
- Research and demystify the problems international students face as learners in unfamiliar academic and social contexts.
- Maintain open communication systems and feedback channels to discover the challenges for international students who participate in courses and classrooms, which may not be anticipated or gauged by academics, support staff, counselors, advisors, or fellow students. See whether the university could provide special assistance for international student orientation and welfare (Hawkins and Bransgrove 1998). Such assistance can provide cultural bridges for students, families, and instructors.

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- Develop communication strategies between international students and staff to increase cultural understanding in the ways pedagogy and practice can be mediated (Hellstén 2002). Establish dialogue between international students and academics about communicative differences in pedagogy.
- Provide opportunities for academic staff to reflect on the pedagogy of international teaching and learning as well as the policies governing internationalization and diversity (Stier 2003).
- Create mechanisms to ensure that quality outcomes and student satisfaction accompany the delivery of teaching programmes.
- Explore what constitutes high-quality teaching and learning for international students and academics, taking into consideration varying practices and perceptions, Western and Eastern cultural perspectives, and the meaning of “quality” and “teaching” (Hellstén & Prescott 2004).
- Create intercultural institutes to learn and provide a research base about the backgrounds of international students.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on a case study in a business programme taught in Hong Kong and Adelaide, Leask (2004) states that lecturers can best transform their teaching through productive and committed relationships with cultural “others.” She argues that for transformation to begin, academics and non-teaching staff must understand that language and cultural values in “communicating and interacting with culturally different others” are psychologically intense” with the “risk of embarrassment” and “failure” (Paige 1993). Universities need to provide ample opportunity to discuss intercultural teaching and learning issues to respond to the needs of international students by integrating culturally inclusive practices. In this way, risk can turn into reward.

Striving to develop critical engagement, self-reflection, and sensitivity in communication between “self” and “others” (Papademetre 2003) will benefit international and home students alike, ensuring a culture of care for all students. Although, arguably, good teaching is recognizable no matter what the venue (Garcia 1991), all learning is contextually embedded, and local conditions affect pedagogy and educational style even when national curricula and pedagogical considerations appear to dominate (Slethaug 2007). As the responses of international students in Malaysia have indicated in this study, there is work to be done in integrating the international and the local, developing academic cooperation among different groups, and creating a supportive intercultural classroom environment. When this is accomplished in Malaysia and elsewhere, students will thrive in their learning environment, truly value their personal and material investment, and help to create better societies at home and abroad.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> A variant of this essay will appear in Coverdale Tricia (ed.) 2012, *Transnational higher education in the Asian context*.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Basic ACE Questionnaire for International Students:**

Please indicate:

Academic program \_\_\_\_\_  
Year in program \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of time at this university \_\_\_\_\_  
Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_  
Gender \_\_\_\_\_

**Please answer the following questions.**

#### **Questions on Previous Learning in Relation to Present Context**

- 1) Why did you come to this country and university to study?
- 2) Describe and analyze the mode or culture of teaching and learning of classes in your homeland and/or your previous school, college, or university.
- 3) What are the similarities and differences in teaching and learning here and in your previous education?
- 4) Are there ways of doing things that you miss in the classroom here, and are there ways they could be included?

#### **Questions on the Present Learning Context:**

- 5) Do you prefer lectures\_\_\_\_; interational classes\_\_\_\_; or some combination\_\_\_\_?
- 6) Describe the kind of teaching that you like.
- 7) What expectations do you bring into the classroom about instruction, interaction, and learning?
- 8) What improvements could be made in teaching and learning in your classes?
- 9) What role do you expect to take in class?
- 10)What are your views on authority, and how do they affect your classroom participation and attitude?
- 11) Do you feel comfortable with the presentation of material and style of learning?  
Please explain.
- 12) Do you feel the class prepares you well for your end-of-term “examination” (final project, essay, or written test)

### Questions on the Academic and Social Context:

13) Do you feel integrated in the classroom?

14) Do you feel integrated out of the classroom?

15) Was the administration helpful in getting you settled here?

16) Has it continued to be helpful for your particular need as an international student?

17) In what ways are you able to get into the local culture, if you wish to?

18) Are you working? If yes, explain the job. If no, would you like to? Explain.

## **Appendix 2**

### **ACE Questionnaire 1: Foundational Questionnaire for International Students**

- To be administered at the beginning of term to all international students in a particular class or course of study. The results of this questionnaire should be reviewed by the teacher and, ideally, a group looking into incorporating international students.

Please indicate:

Academic program \_\_\_\_\_

Year in program \_\_\_\_\_

Length of time at this university \_\_\_\_\_

Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

1. In your opinion, what is the best way to find out student attitudes to international teaching and learning?
2. In your experience, what are the most critical stages or areas in your adaptation to this university as an international student? Describe briefly your experience with the following:
  - a. application information and procedure
  - b. on-site administrative guidance and assistance when you arrive
  - c. on-going administrative assistance
  - d. additional instruction in English
  - e. classroom teaching and learning
  - f. information about work opportunities
  - g. ways to connect with the local culture
  - h. personal life
  - i. other
3. In a questionnaire for international students concerning classroom instruction, interaction, and learning, what are the five most important questions or issues?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
  - e.

**ACE Questionnaire 2: Follow-Up Form for International Students on Evaluating Present Teaching and Previous Experiences.**

- Administered near the beginning of term to the same students who submitted ACE Questionnaire 1.

Please indicate:

Academic program \_\_\_\_\_  
Year in program \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of time at this university \_\_\_\_\_  
Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_  
Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following five questions. For each of the first two questions you might address the length of classes each week and the number of teaching weeks in the term, the amount of reading required, a description of a typical class, and the amount and kind of memorization, analysis, and understanding.

1. Why did you come to this country and university to study?
2. Describe and analyze the mode or culture of teaching and learning of classes in your homeland or previous institution (if located in another country).
3. What are your perceptions of similarities and differences in the mode of teaching and learning in this country and your homeland/previous institution.
4. Describe the kind of teaching that you prefer.
5. What improvements could be made in teaching and learning in your classes?

**ACE Questionnaire 3: Questions for Personal Interviews or Focus Groups (Whether Structured, Unstructured, or Semi-Structured)**

Questions for these focus groups or interviews will depend upon how the first two questionnaires were answered. If international students indicated that their main problems were academic in nature, then these questions should focus on that. If the students indicated that their main problem was administrative, then that should be the focus, etc.

Please indicate:

Academic program \_\_\_\_\_  
Year in program \_\_\_\_\_  
Length of time at this university \_\_\_\_\_  
Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_  
Gender \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions on the Learning Context:

1. What expectations do you bring into the classroom about instruction, interaction, and learning?
2. Which do you prefer: lecture \_\_\_\_; interational classes \_\_\_\_; or some combination \_\_\_\_?
3. What role do you expect to take in class?
4. What are your views on authority, and how do they affect your classroom participation and attitude?
5. Do you feel comfortable with the presentation of material and style of learning?
6. Are there some ways of doing things that you miss in the classroom, and are there ways they could be included?
7. Do you feel the class prepares you well for your end-of-term "examination" (final project, essay, or written test)

### Questions on the Social Context:

8. Do you feel integrated in the classroom?
9. Do you feel integrated out of the classroom?
10. Was the administration helpful in getting you settled here?
11. Has it continued to be helpful for your particular need as an international student?
12. In what ways are you able to get into the local culture?