**LEARNING AND EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA.**

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One of the major problems faced by international students is how to gain understanding of the host academic culture. This is because their patterns of academic expectations was based on their previous learning experiences. Although they have left their home country, they still retain, wherever they are, the common system of standards of perceiving, evaluating and acting (Kramsch 1998). Therefore, students from different cultural background develop distinctive belief about learning expectations and achievements. As a result if the expectations between the host lecturers and international students are different, they may become a barrier to interaction and communication between them. And their encounters with academic culture are mediated by a language that is not their first language. As a result most common academic problems experienced by these students in their study pertained to language difficulties (Nicholson 2001). Due to the complex relations between language and culture it is important that academics should be aware of possible aspects of international students’ different cultural competence. The main aim of this study is to investigate the problems of adaptation to Malaysian research universities academic culture among international postgraduate students. The findings of the study will highlight the intercultural differences in academic expectations that will benefit both the foreign postgraduates students and the universities’ staff. An understanding of differing expectations may help to bridge the academic learning culture of between them.

**Introduction**

An academic culture can be understood in terms of the social, political and ideological factors that shape academic pursuits within a given discipline, and the different commitments and careers that scholars develop given these factors (Lu, 1998: 23). Understanding the host’s academic culture is paramount to overcome major problems faced by international students. In order to achieve cultural competence and cultural performance, students should learn the host language and perhaps some host non-verbal behaviour so that he or she could be understood and accepted. In recent years, there has been a steady flow of international students across national boundaries from approximately 400,000 in 1970 to over one million in 1986 (Paige, 1990:163). More recently, with globalization and internationalization of universities all over the world, the mobility patterns have increased. The same scenario is also being experienced by universities in Malaysia. Thus, it is most pertinent for international students to gain a better understanding of the host academic culture.

One of the aspirations of research universities is to inculcate research culture amongst members of academic staff and students. Therefore, the intake of the postgraduate students is given priority. In promoting the internalization of the universities, efforts are made to attract more candidates for postgraduate studies (both local and international). The students who enter the research universities have to comply to the academic culture which may be different from what they would have expected.

It is reported that the number of international students have increased between 2006 and 2008 (The Star, March 9, 2008). The increase is up to 30% with a total number of foreign students to 65,000 enrolled in both the private and public higher institutions in Malaysia. Verbik (2007) claims that Malaysia, Singapore and China are competing with each other in becoming the leader in global student market business.

Language is a means of access to culture. At the same time, language is also part of culture and medium through which culture is both represented and constructed. For international students, communication in second language takes place in a second language culture. One of the major problems faced by international students is how to gain understanding of the host academic culture. This is because their patterns of academic expectations were based on their previous learning experiences. Although they have left their home country, they still retain, wherever they are, the common system of standards of perceiving, evaluating and acting (Kramsch 1998). Therefore, students from different cultural background develop distinctive belief about learning expectations and achievements. If the expectations between the host lecturers and international students are different, they may become a barrier to interaction and communication between them. In addition, their encounters with academic culture are mediated by a language that is not their first language. The most common academic problem experienced by these students in their study pertained to language difficulties (Nicholson 2001). Research indicates that many international students have difficulties and barriers with various aspects of English language (al Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010). Due to the complex relations between language and culture it is important that academics should be aware of possible aspects of international students’ different cultural competence. Studies on academic culture should include the following aspects:

* Structures of universities e.g hierarchy
* Titles of and roles of the academics
* Values and ways of communication
* Expectations of ways of learning and teaching between students and lecturers
* Where responsibility for successful learning is thought to lie.

This research embarks on the issues that when students come to a different learning culture which values creativity and independence (especially at the postgraduate level), they may face the challenge of relying on themselves. It is important, then, to know that these differences in expectations in different learning cultures may result in failure for students if they are not aware of the differences. Different learning culture might lead to academic problems because of different expectations from both sides when the foreign postgraduate students pursue their education outside their own countries (Chen, 2006). They may be not aware of the new expectations in their academic studies. Culture is of great importance to the learning organizations including universities.

According to Johnston and Hawke (2002), learning culture can be defined as the existence of a set of attitudes, values and practices within an organization which support and encourage a continuing process of learning for the students as well as staff. A learning culture is said to exist in an environment where teamwork, collaboration, creativity, and knowledge processes exist that have a collective meaning and value. For students to improve their learning they need to understand the learning culture of an organisation or institutions. Hence, understanding the host institution’s learning culture is becoming a dominant theme in new environments as students strategise to adjust, adapt and socialise in the host culture of particular institutions. If students are more aware of their home culture, different learning styles, frustrations in adjusting to academic life and in overcoming cultural shocks, and by helping them adjust to the host academic culture they could become more successful learners.

Researchers seem to agree with each other that when there is less cultural dissonance, there is more learning taking place (Bennett, 1995). The shorter their transition from their home learning style, and the quicker their adaptation to the new overseas setting, the better their success in their study overseas. Many students especially those from cultures where rote/traditional learning still prevail might find that lectures and some tutorials in formats of workshops and/or seminars, where students are supposed to contribute more in class and do a lot of reading and research after class a culture shock. Group study which is more widespread in some universities would need students to be active participants in them. Students are supposed to give oral presentations, which is a basic skill but they have less practice in some home practices. Instead of designated course textbooks, sometimes students are given handouts for lectures only, and a list of supplementary reading materials or books or articles which can be available in library or posted online. For some courses, there are exams; but for some, students are only supposed to do assignments. Thus it is of utmost importance to create an inclusive learning environment for international students and to do this we need to know their home learning culture, their expectations and needs.

The general aim of the study is to investigate the problems of adaptations of international postgraduates students to the academic culture of UKM. Specifically the study will:

1. Identify the academic culture of the international postgraduates students.
2. Examine the cultural gaps between the students and the host.
3. Suggest ways to bridge the difficulties of different academic cultures to enhance teaching and learning processes.

**The Study**

The study employs a quantitative research designs. The instruments used will be a set of self report questionnaire which was administered to 54 international postgraduate students enrolled in UKM. Out of 54 respondents, 37 are male and 13 are female. 4 of them did not indicate their gender. The pie-chart below shows the distribution of gender of the respondents.



Figure 1 Gender

Majority (n=29) of the respondents are second year students, while 16 of them are in their first year, 2 in the third year and 1 in the fourth year. The figure below shows the number of years of studies among the respondents.



Figure 2 Year of Study

Most of the students (n=29) are second year students, while 16 of them are in their first year, 2 in their third year and only 1 in the fourth year.



Figure 3 Level of Study

The table above shows the level of studies among the respondents. 26 of them are doing their PhD in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 16 are doing their MA, 9 are doing MSc and only 1 doing MLL. Majority of the respondents indicated that they have been staying in Malaysia from 1-3 years while 7 mentioned that they have stayed for 3-5 years in this country.



Figure 4 Length of Stay in Malaysia

The respondents were also asked to indicate their country of origin. And the table below shows the distribution for the country of origin of the respondents: 16.7% students come from Iraq, and similar percentages (16.7) of students come from Libya. 14.8 % are from Iran. 13.0% comes from Jordan and 11.1 % are from China. The rest of the respondents are from Yemen (3.7%), Bangladesh (3.7%), Indonesia (3.7%), Palestine (1.9%), and Nigeria (1.9%). 13.0% did not indicate their country of origin.

Table 1 Country of Origin



The study employs a quantitative research designs. The instruments used will be a set of self report questionnaire. The questionnaire is administered to 54 international postgraduate students enrolled in UKM. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, namely Academic Conventions and Academic Ethics. For Academic Conventions issues are pertaining to: 1. Student Learning Behaviour, 2. Group Collaboration in academic task, 3. Rules of presentation (Oral and Written), 4. Methodology, 5. Justification and 6. Critical Thinking. As for Academic Ethics the issues are: 1. Plagiarism, 2. Ethics in academic Writing, 3. Penalties and 4. Ethics in Examinations. We asked the students to indicate the situation of academic culture in their country and in Malaysia.

**The Findings**

The findings are also divided into two sections: academic conventions and academic ethics. Under the section of academic conventions, the items included are:

a. students learning behavior

b. group collaboration in academic tasks

c. rules of presentation of assignments (oral and written presentation)

d. methodology

e. critical thinking

While under the section academic ethics, the items included are:

a. plagiarism

b. ethics in academic writing

c. penalties

d. ethics in examination

To discuss the findings of the study we will begin with Section A: Academic Conventions and we will discuss the following:

1. Students’ learning behavior

The students were asked to respond to issues pertaining to learning behavior. It is found that punctuality in attending lectures is more important here in UKM where the 92.6% of the students responded as important as opposed to 88.9% in their country. The students find that being punctual is important in both countries but found that in UKM the expectation is higher 92.6% compared to 83.3% in their own country. They also perceived that keeping appointments with university administrators is more important in UKM (81.5%) than in their own country (70.4%).

Table 2 Punctuality

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Punctuality | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Attending lectures/tutorials/lab | 11.1 | 88.9 | 7.4 | 92.6 |
| 2 | Appointment with lectures/tutors | 16.7 | 83.3 | 7.4 | 92.6 |
| 3 | Appointment with university administrators | 29.7 | 70.4 | 18.5 | 81.5 |

1. Group collaboration in academic tasks

As for contribution of ideas in group projects the respondents perceived that it is more important to do so in UKM (83.3%) rather than in their country (68.5%). 87.0% of the students found that respecting ideas contributed by group members as important here in UKM while 83.3% of them said it is also important in their country. The use of appropriate non-verbal language is found to be important in UKM (81.5%) compared to 74.1% in their country.

Table 3 Group collaboration in academic tasks

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group collaboration | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Contribution of ideas in group project | 31.5 | 68.5 | 16.7 | 83.3 |
| 2 | Respect ideas from group members | 24.1 | 75.9 | 13.0 | 87.0 |
| 3 | Use polite language in group discussion | 13.0 | 87.0 | 5.6 | 94.4 |
| 4 | Use appropriate non-verbal language (gestures, facial expression, body language etc). | 25.9 | 74.1 | 18.5 | 81.5 |

1. Rules in presentation of assignments – oral presentation

Adhering to specified topics during presentation is considered more important in UKM (85.2%) as compared to 75.9% in their country. Using appropriate language of introduction in presentation is perceived to be more important in UKM (94.4%) and 81.5% in their country. The respondents also found that using appropriate body language during presentation is expected more in UKM (87.0%) than in their own country (77.8%). In UKM, the use of audio visual aids such as power point is more demanded of the students (90.7%) whereas in their country, it is less demanded (68.5%). Adhering to time allocation for presentation is practiced less in their country (75.9%) than in UKM (87.0%).

Table 4 Rules in presentation of assignments – oral presentation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Oral Presentation | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Adhere to specified topic of presentation | 24.1 | 75.9 | 14.8 | 85.2 |
| 2 | Use appropriate language of introduction (self, topic) during presentation | 18.5 | 81.5 | 5.6 | 94.4 |
| 3 | Use appropriate body language during presentation | 22.2 | 77.8 | 13.0 | 87.0 |
| 4 | Make use of audio visual aids e.g powerpoint during presentation. | 31.5 | 68.5 | 9.3 | 90.7 |
| 5 | Adhere to time allocation | 24.1 | 75.9 | 13.0 | 87.0 |

1. Rules in presentation of assignments – written presentation

The respondents of the study considered adhering to the conventions of written essay/assignment/report (e.g. introduction, body, and conclusion) more important in UKM (94.4%) than in their own country (79.6%). The practice of citing procedures is found to be less important in their country (77.8%) than in UKM (94.4%).

Table 5 Rules in presentation of assignments – written presentation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Written Presentation | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Adhere to the convention of written essay/assignment/report (intro, body, conclusion). | 20.4 | 79.6 | 5.6 | 94.4 |
| 2 | Use proper citation procedures | 22.2 | 77.8 | 5.6 | 94.4 |

1. Methodology in doing research

Students are expected to do more research-based assignment in UKM (88.9%) compared to their own country (72.2%). Following that, planning a proper research procedure is reported to be more important in UKM where 92.6% of the respondents agreed as opposed to 87.0% in their country.

Table 6 Methodology in doing research

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Methodology | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Doing research-based is compulsory | 27.8 | 72.2 | 11.1 | 88.9 |
| 2 | Following/Planning a proper research procedure is important. | 13.0 | 87.0 | 7.4 | 92.6 |

1. Critical thinking

The respondents found synthesizing ideas as more expected of them (94.4%) compared to 77.8% in their country. They also found that in writing the literature review, voicing their opinion is expected to be more important in UKM (81.5%) than in their country (70.4%). They are also expected to present their arguments critically in UKM (87.0%) compared to their country (75.9%).

Table 7 Critical thinking

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Critical Thinking | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Synthesising ideas  | 22.2 | 77.8 | 5.6 | 94.4 |
| 2 | Voicing your opinion in the literature review | 29.6 | 70.4 | 18.5 | 81.5 |
| 3 | Presenting arguments critically | 24.1 | 75.9 | 13.0 | 87.0 |

2. ACADEMIC ETHICS

1. Plagiarism

The respondents agree that using people’s work as their own is unacceptable in both learning environment (70.4% in their country, and 72.2% in UKM). They also found that paraphrasing ideas from original sources in more important in UKM (75.9%) as opposed to 66.7% in their country.

Table 8 Plagiarism

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Plagiarism | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Disagree | Agree | Disagree | Agree |
| 1 | Using people’s work as your own | 70.4 | 29.6 | 72.2 | 27.8 |
| 2 | Paraphrasing ideas from original sources | 33.3 | 66.7 | 24.1 | 75.9 |

1. Ethics in academic writing

In both learning environment, it is not acceptable to ask someone else to write essays/assignments/theses and reports (79.6% in both UKM and their own country). In the respondents’ own learning environment, asking someone to edit essays/assignments/theses are almost equally acceptable (51.9% disagree and 48.1 % agree) whereas in UKM, the respondents found that they are expected to have their work edited (44.4% disagree and 55.6% agree). Taking work previously by the seniors is unacceptable in both learning environment, however, it is found that it higher in UKM (72.2%) as compared to 66.7% in their own country. In UKM, students are expected to adhere to specific academic writing styles (90.7%) while it is less expected in their own country (77.8%).

Table 9 Ethics in Academic Writing

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Ethics in Academic Writing | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Disagree | Agree | Disagree | Agree |
| 1 | Asking someone to edit your essay/assignment/thesis is acceptable | 51.9 | 48.1 | 44.4 | 55.6 |
| 2 | Taking work previously written by your seniors as your own is acceptable | 66.7 | 33.3 | 72.2 | 27.8 |
| 3 | Adhering to specific writing style is important | 22.2 | 77.8 | 9.3 | 90.7 |

1. Penalties

Most of the respondents agree that penalties are expected to be carried out if they cheat in examinations (74.1% in their own country and 72.2% in UKM). They also expect the students to be failed if they are found to plagiarize their work (68.5% in their country and 70.4% in UKM). It is important to note that, the respondents equally agree (50.0% and disagree (50.0%) that they should not be penalized if they are found to have cheated or plagiarized in preparing their academic tasks in their country whereas in UKM 51.9% agree that they should be penalized and 48.1% disagree.

Table 10 Penalties

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Penalties | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Disagree | Agree | Disagree | Agree |
| 1 | You should be expelled for cheating in examinations | 25.9 | 74.1 | 27.8 | 72.2 |
| 2 | You should fail if you are found to plagiarise | 31.5 | 68.5 | 29.6 | 70.4 |
| 3 | You should be penalized if you are found to have cheated/plagiarised | 50.0 | 50.0 | 51.9 | 48.1 |

1. Ethics in examination

Findings on ethics in examination favour cheating in examination, bringing notes to the examination hall and sharing answers with another candidate in their own learning environment is not acceptable than in UKM. Cheating in examination 81.5% in their own country and 75.9% in UKM agree that it is not allowed; bringing notes to the exam hall 74.1% in their own country and 66.7% in UKM and sharing answers with another candidate 68.5% in their country and 61.1% in UKM.

Table 11 Ethics in examination

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Ethics in examination | Own country | UKM |
|  |  | Not important | Important | Not important | Important |
| 1 | Cheating in exams is not allowed | 18.5 | 81.5 | 24.1 | 75.9 |
| 2 | Bringing notes to the examination hall is prohibited | 25.9 | 74.1 | 33.3 | 66.7 |
| 3 | Sharing answers with another candidate is not allowed | 31.5 | 68.5 | 38.9 | 61.1 |

**Conclusion**

International postgraduate students in every country are expected to face problems in culture and academic adaptations. The findings of the study suggest that the respondents have differing learning experiences and expectations in their own country and in their host country. The differences reported by the research are in terms of academic conventions and academic ethics. For academic conventions the problems are found in the adaptation of a. students learning behavior b. group collaboration in academic tasks, c. rules of presentation of assignments (oral and written presentation), d. methodology and e. critical thinking. The respondents in this study come from 11 different countries. Therefore, their cultures and education systems are different from Malaysia. The findings reveal that there are structural difference between the style of teaching and learning in UKM and their home countries. In order to bridge these differences, it is suggested that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia should provide some kind of support to ensure that the postgraduate international students able to adapt to the new academic culture. One of the supports is by offering courses to create awareness about the new academic culture. Such courses might also include cultural awareness of the local context, as well as other pertinent academic skills such as academic research and academic writing. And in some instances, UKM may need to offer basic study skills, language support and professional skills development courses.

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