

**INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS,
MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND
ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY AMONG
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN SELECTED
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAD	Awareness to Diversity
AATT	Attitudes towards Diversity
ASD	Sensitivity to diversity
CDAI	Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory
CIRP	Cooperative Institutional Research Program
HE	Higher Education
IWC	Intercultural Willingness to Communicate
ME	Multicultural Experience
MEE	Multicultural Experience Event
MEI	Multicultural Experience Interaction
MES	Multicultural Experience Student Engagement
MSS	Michigan Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
PADAA	Pluralism and Diversity attitude assessment
SH	Shyness
SC	Self-Confidence

**KARAKTERISTIK INDIVIDU, PENGALAMAN PELBAGAI BUDAYA DAN
PENERIMAAN KEPELBAGAIAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR
SISWAZAH UNIVERSITI AWAM TERPILIH DI MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Kebanyakan penyelidikan adalah tentang hasil kesan interaksi antara budaya dan kepelbagaian dalam pengantarabangsaan pendidikan tinggi dan pertumbuhan pelajar. Namun, masih kurang penyelidikan tentang perbezaan pengalaman pelajar dalam pelbagai budaya (dalam bentuk penglibatan pelajar, penglibatan dalam aktiviti dan interaksi dengan pelajar yang berlainan budaya dan warganegara) dalam kalangan pelajar siswazah tempatan dan antarabangsa yang boleh mempengaruhi penerimaan mereka terhadap kepelbagaian. Bahkan, penyelidikan tentang kesan interaksi bagi karakteristik individu pelajar tempatan dan pelajar antarabangsa dalam mempengaruhi pengalaman kepelbagaian budaya dan penerimaan kepelbagaian terutamanya dalam konteks Malaysia sangat kurang. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memeriksa tahap penerimaan kepelbagaian dalam kalangan pelajar siswazah di tiga universiti awam di Malaysia. Kajian ini juga membandingkan perbezaan penerimaan kepelbagaian pelajar siswazah tempatan dan antarabangsa. Kajian perbandingan ini adalah satu usaha untuk memeriksa sama ada perbezaan dalam tahap pengalaman pelbagai budaya (iaitu tinggi, sederhana, dan rendah) adalah berkaitan dengan penerimaan kepelbagaian pelajar siswazah dari aspek kesedaran kepelbagaian, sikap ke arah kepelbagaian dan sensitiviti terhadap kepelbagaian. Selain itu, kajian ini juga memeriksa sama ada karakteristik individu pelajar siswazah seperti sifat rasa malu, keyakinan diri dan kesediaan antara budaya dalam berkomunikasi mempunyai kesan interaksi terhadap perbezaan penerimaan kepelbagaian berdasarkan pengalaman pelbagai budaya. Sampel kajian adalah pelajar siswazah tempatan dan antarabangsa di tiga universiti awam di Malaysia. Data kajian dikumpul secara dalam

talian. Respons yang boleh digunakan dan lengkap yang diperoleh daripada 398 orang responden dianalisis menggunakan Analisis Deskriptif, *T-Test* dan MANOVA. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahawa tahap kesedaran pelajar siswazah terhadap kepelbagaian, sikap terhadap kepelbagaian dan sensitiviti kepada kepelbagaian masing-masing adalah tinggi, sederhana dan sederhana. Selain itu, tidak ada perbezaan yang ketara antara pelajar lepasan ijazah tempatan dan antarabangsa dari segi penerimaan mereka untuk kepelbagaian. Keputusan analisis juga menunjukkan bahawa terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan antara pelajar siswazah bagi pembolehubah terpilih dalam menerima kepelbagaian berdasarkan tahap pengalaman pelbagai budaya. Tahap pembolehubah terpilih karakteristik individu pelajar siswazah (sifat rasa malu, keyakinan diri dan kesediaan antara budaya untuk berkomunikasi) tidak mempunyai kesan interaksi yang signifikan terhadap perbezaan penerimaan kepelbagaian berdasarkan pengalaman pelbagai budaya. Penemuan kajian ini adalah salah satu daripada pelbagai usaha empirikal yang telah diperoleh bagi membantu memahami kepelbagaian budaya melalui pengantarabangsaan pendidikan tinggi di Malaysia. Berdasarkan dapatan kajian ini, pengkaji turut membincangkan implikasi teori dan implikasi praktikal terhadap penerimaan kepelbagaian dalam pendidikan pengajian tinggi. Secara keseluruhannya, dapatan kajian ini memfokuskan kepada penentuan karakteristik individu dalam aspek kepelbagaian di peringkat pendidikan tinggi.

**INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS, MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCES
AND ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY AMONG POSTGRADUATE
STUDENTS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

ABSTRACT

Much research exists on the effect of intercultural interaction and diversity engagement on the internationalization of higher education and students' growth. However, not much exists on how differences in the multicultural experiences (in forms of students' engagement, participation in events and interaction with other students of different cultures and nationality) of local and international postgraduate students can influence their acceptance of diversity. Even less exists on the interaction effect of individual characteristics of local and international students on the relationship of their multicultural experiences and acceptance of diversity especially in the context of Malaysia. This study is an attempt to investigate the level of acceptance of diversity among postgraduate students in three public universities in Malaysia. This study also compares how local and international postgraduate students are different in terms of acceptance of diversity. This causal-comparative study is an attempt to examine whether the difference in the level of multicultural experiences (i.e. high, medium, and low) is related to the postgraduate students' acceptance of diversity namely awareness of diversity, attitudes towards diversity and sensitivity to diversity. Further, the study examines whether postgraduate students' individual characteristics including shyness, self-confidence and intercultural willingness to communicate has any interaction effect on the differences of acceptance of diversity based on their multicultural experiences. The samples of this study were selected purposively from local and international students at three public universities in Malaysia. Data collected

through an online survey. Responses from 398 usable and completed questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis, T-test and MANOVA. The results show that the level of students' awareness to diversity, attitude towards diversity and sensitivity to diversity is high, moderate and moderate respectively. Moreover, there is no significant difference between local and international postgraduate students' in terms of their acceptance of diversity. The results show that there is a significant difference between postgraduate students' selected variables of acceptance of diversity based on their levels of multicultural experiences. Different level of selected variables of students' individual characteristics (shyness, self-confidence and intercultural willingness to communicate) has no significant interaction effect on the differences of acceptance of diversity based on multicultural experiences. The findings of this study are just one of the various empirical efforts that have been completed to help understand the cultural diversity through internationalization of Malaysia higher education. Based on the findings, the study discussed theoretical and practical implications for the acceptance of diversity in higher education. Overall, the results of the study advance prior research in the area of diversity in higher education by shedding light on the determinants of individual characteristics.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is about the multicultural-competence of postgraduate students in selected public universities in Malaysia, both local and international students. The study focuses on exploring relationships among variables, between students' multicultural experiences and acceptance of diversity, and how the relationships are dependent on student personal characteristics. The study employed a causal-comparative approach, by comparing acceptance of diversity of three independent groups of participants that are different on their levels of multicultural experiences (high, medium, and low) as a categorical variable. The study also used a 3 X 3 factorial design to explore if differences in acceptance of diversity based on levels of multicultural experience depend on levels (high, medium, and low) of personal characteristics. The study used three instruments that were adopted by the researcher based on several related instruments. All instruments went through factor analyses before data collection, and eventually, each instrument was found to have three dimensions. The study was done with local and international postgraduate students of three selected public universities, which were found to have greater numbers of international postgraduate students. The study was based on Bennet's Development Model of Cultural Competency (2004) and Alport's (1958) Contact Theory improved by Pettigrew (1998).

This thesis has five chapters. Chapter One: Introduction introduces the thesis, starting with giving the background of the study, the research objectives, and research questions.

1.2 Background of the Study

Globalization has economically, politically, and socially pushed higher education in the 21st century toward greater international involvement. Over the years worldwide, globalization has encouraged student international mobility in higher education (henceforth HE). This brings developing countries in Asia having a significant number of international students and they have begun to draw foreign students to their universities through various strategies. Besides earning prestige and income, their purposes of attracting foreign students were to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The challenges of internationalization are promoting intercultural interaction and reducing diversity challenges, and HE is expected to guide students and help them to attain multicultural skills and knowledge.

In many societies, social interaction among community members is prone to face problems, such as lack of efficient communication, anxiety, and distresses, when there is a rise in diversity (Cox, 1993). As a remedy, tolerance and acceptance contribute to the well-being of community members. Acceptance consists of behaviors and attitudes of the people within a pluralistic milieu (The United Nations, Year for Tolerance, 1995), which would result in the cohabitation of individuals within assimilated communities. To benefit from the advantages of diversity through internationalization of HE, students need to appreciate other people's cultural and ethnic dissimilarities while being aware of beliefs and manners which could affect

interactions (Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute, 2004). As such, HE has a significant duty in offering students a chance to encounter cultural diversities. In this regard, HE is expected to promote the cultural awareness of those who are in tertiary institutes. This can be achieved by engaging the teachers and learners in a diverse educational atmosphere and by enhancing their tolerance and acceptance of diversity (Weber & Dolgova-Dreyer, 2007). The internationalization of HE can provide such an environment for teachers and students and prepare learners for an important educational goal of internationalization which is surviving in intercultural and international settings. Since cultural skills and sensitivity have been shown to play a key role in education within the globalization period (Saenz et al., 2007), acceptance and respect among the students need to be prompted via internationalization of HE (Stier, 2004a). Eventually, the students who are future leaders and policymakers of all organizations would develop a sense of sensitivity to and increase their diversity acceptance to work efficiently in the international markets around the world (Saenz et al., 2007). In such a context, postgraduate students are required to involve seriously in formulating their future as well as being world leaders henceforward.

A different understanding of education has been suggested by educators who emphasize the individual or collective significance of learning. It is an exceptional multilevel learning experience when students are exposed to ‘other’ cultures with its features, social prospects and language requisites. In such a milieu, it is useful to promote students’ awareness of other cultures and to enhance their intercultural acceptance (Stier, 2006). In the internationalization context of HE, promoting cultural diversity within academia would provide optimal social prospects for intercultural learning.

The absence of interactions or communications among local and international students has been reported to deprive students of the advantages associated with the internationalization of HE (Volet & Ang, 2012). A lot of studies have demonstrated that promoting efficacious intergroup contact and developing cross-cultural cooperation in international HE is possible (Broido, 2004; Saenz et al., 2007). HE would be capable of crossing the borders of countries. Nevertheless, internationalizing HE would not automatically assure interactions among cultures and needs the policy to be for such HE institutions.

In the Malaysian context, as reported by Arokiasamy & Krishnaveni (2012), there has been a considerable growth in the number of international students in Malaysia and the liberalization of HE in the country. There is compelling evidence that the market of international students at public and private tertiary institutions in Malaysia had a remarkable year-on-year rise from 1997 till present. As some predictable trade profits have been gained through offering numerous foreign programs in Malaysia, the country is now experiencing a growth in its pursuit of becoming a net exporter of tertiary education set by 2020 (Lee, 2009; Tapsir, 2016).

According to the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) (2011), both the policy of internationalization of HE and creating ideal citizens and optimal human capital have turned HE into an excellent platform for different diversities. This environment might boost the students' awareness of cultural diversity and make them more capable of understanding others. Based on the policy of internationalization, it is necessary for the Malaysian community and international students studying in Malaysia to interact with one another and international students should be socially integrated. To this purpose, the awareness of the community of the

benefits of internationalization should be raised. To successfully promote such integration, raising the awareness and sensitivity of both native and international students about cultural diversity is a necessity.

As a reaction to the need for mutual acceptance of local and international students as vital priorities of Malaysian internationalization of HE, the current research was conducted to investigate how multicultural experience in diverse settings of HE in Malaysia can promote the acceptance of diversity among local and international students and examine how individual characteristics play a role in this regard.

As a result of the internationalization of universities in Malaysia, students and academic staff can experience a multi-ethnic and multinational setting promoting a unique opportunity for developing international communication skills in university environments. The Malaysian institutions of HE through the internationalization of HE can provide a diverse environment in which students would have a great opportunity for individual growth and learning. Apart from such positive experiences, some students may face different challenges in communicating and integrating with people of different cultures.

1.2.1 Internationalization of Higher Education in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multi-religion nation. While the overall population of Bumiputera is 61.8%, the Chinese make a noticeable share of 22.6% and the Indians are 6.7% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010).

Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia (MoHE) intends to change the prospect of tertiary education focusing on the internationalization of HE. Liberalization and democratization of education in Malaysia have witnessed a sharp

rise in the number of international students since the Higher Education Act was enacted by the government (Ghazali & Kassim, 2003). Based on National Higher Education Strategic Plan (Pelan Strategik Pengajian Tinggi Negara, PSPTN), Malaysia aims to be the hub of excellence by growing internationalization of HE as one of the strategic thrusts, while guaranteeing a 10%–30% registration of foreign students in HEIs by 2020.

The objectives of the internationalization of HE are to build world-class graduates and promote innovation through research and development. This strategic thrust has encouraged the Malaysian government to promote the reputation of Malaysia as a developing candidate in the international market of overseas students in Asia and around the world by increasing the quota for the registration of international students (Arokiasamy & Nagappan, 2012). Through the phases of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan, the Ministry of Higher Education has consistently considered the importance of international students (Chong & Amlı, 2014).

In this regard, the ministry has publicized its plans for overseas students and has emphasized that the vision of Malaysia's global education system is in agreement with its “Internationalisation Programme” (Hassan, 2011). Such a vision has promoted more diversity within academia. This program aims at raising the number of international students to 15,000 from the Middle Eastern and North Africa regions by 2009. According to this program, Malaysia would attract 100,000 overseas students by 2010 and its goal is to attract 200,000 overseas students by 2020 (Ideris, 2014) and 250,000 ones by 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Malaysia also considers the internationalization of HE as the capacity to generate revenue for the country. In 2010, each international student almost had RM 30,000 expenditure per year while he was studying in the country and the amount is practically RM 2 billion for about 70,000 international students residing in Malaysia (Malaysia Higher Education Statistics, 2011). Therefore, the growth of the number of international students in HEIs in Malaysia is the priority in the internationalization of HE by the Malaysian government and consequently by MoHE. Some of the rationales for the internationalization of HE in Malaysia are as follows (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011):

1. Developing the potentials of talented people, inspiring innovation and creativity in the country, and elevating Malaysia economically and culturally.
2. Promoting competitive geopolitical and economic relationships with other countries in the region through enhancing the mobility of students, promoting the cultural diversity of the society, and raising students' intercultural awareness and understanding.
3. Developing human capital and a source of revenue generation especially for HEIs, improving the capacity of HEIs in every aspect to meet the international standards and to make Malaysian brands of HEIs.

1.2.2 The policy of Internationalization of Higher Education in Malaysia

The Internationalization Policy for HE in Malaysia framed based on its national purposes, through Vision 2020, National Higher Education Strategic Plan and New Economic Model. This policy introduces an outline highlighting the different aspects of internationalization for 10 years (2010 – 2020) and advertises Malaysia as a well-

known education hub internationally while underlining the significant roles of the HEIs in nation-building.

A well-educated population is essential for the transformation of Malaysia as a well-developed country to achieve Vision 2020. Therefore, HE is a vital sector in directing Malaysia towards this transformation by preparing internationally competitive human capital for the country (MoHE, 2007). The internationalization of Malaysian HE, as drawn in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) is crucial to be internationally recognized for the HEIs in terms of the quality of student and staff and their scholarly contribution. The policy of the internationalization of HE in Malaysia gives international recognition to the HE of Malaysia (MoHE, 2011). This policy aims at increasing the number of international students to 200,000 by 2020.

Internationalization Policy for HE in Malaysia focuses on six different aspects including student and staff mobility, academic programs, research and development, governance and autonomy as well as social integration and cultural engagement (MoHE, the internationalization policy of 2011). These vital aspects have been accentuated in the policy of internationalization to promote HEIs with the aim of 200,000 international students by 2020. The policy of internationalization of HE proposes to enhance the quantity in admission and the quality of requirements of education, to support international students upon the completion of their studies and make their experiences in university memorable. The objectives of the policy of internationalization are as follows:

1. Recognizing the important components of internationalization of HE in Malaysia and taking an instant action for its promotion.

2. Improving the current activities of internationalization based on the benefit of all included.
3. Ensuring that current internationalization activities are in line with Malaysian national aims.

Meanwhile, the anticipated outcomes of the above-mentioned policy are predicted as follows (MoHE, 2011):

1. Increased growth of international students in the country
2. Improved inside and outside international mobility among students in the country
3. Boosted the positive experience of international students in the country

Both the institutions of HE and the immediate society will benefit from the flow of overseas students due to the internationalization of Malaysia's HE (Olson, 2005). Consequently, the policy of internationalization emphasizes both social integration and community engagement (MoHE, 2011). Therefore, the Malaysian society is anticipated to welcome foreign students' cultures and to appreciate others as a key component of the society and this will help the Malaysian society to ultimately gain the finest benefit from internationalization (Tange, 2009).

The critical endeavor highlighted under Malaysia's internationalization of HE is to increase internationalization activities continuously and effectively. The activities attempt to simplify immigration procedures, to increase the quality of social services and safety, and to generate an advantageous environment for international students.

It is important that HEIs pay special attention to international student experiences in HE because such experience will result in marketing through the words of mouths or customer- experience marketing (Abdul Rahman, 2013; Slethaug & Manjula, 2012; Taylor, 2010). It is significant to mention that one of the best ways of marketing is to highlight a positive experience of satisfied international students when they go back to their countries (Taylor, 2010).

International students will experience a lot of difficulties both in academic and social environments because of their cultural differences (Banumathy & Vikneswaran, 2008). They may face problems in their learning and emotional adjustment. They may experience anxiety and loneliness (Akiba, 2008; Banumathy & Vikneswaran, 2008). They might face language and communication difficulties or struggle in engagement with local students (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012; Slethaug & Manjula, 2012).

At the institution level, HEIs must be committed to creating a positive experience for international students. This can be achieved through the provision of academic and social facilities and the creation of opportunities for interactions in the culturally diverse context of Malaysia.

To increase international students' positive experience in Malaysia, the policy focuses on International students' social and community engagement. The policy leads HEIs to encourage mutual interactions among local and international students through different programs such as Community engagement activities and Cross-cultural integration programs. These programs are organized by different sections of universities, for instance, international office or local and international communities.

Internationalization Policy for HE in Malaysia has a specific sector for Social Integration and Community Engagement. For this sector, the policy statements are as follows (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011):

1. Increasing awareness of local students of the importance of international students to the country. Local students should accept international students and realize the benefits promoted by their attendance in a diverse context. They also should prepare a welcoming environment for their international counterparts. To this end, raising local students' awareness of the culture of international students and enhancing their acceptance of differences in culture is vital. For this purpose, MoHE is responsible to inspire local students to join events and activities organized for international students by international offices. Examples of such activities are international student exhibitions and celebrations, cultural events, and food markets.
2. Focusing on integration programs to promote interactions between local and international students. HEIs should increase adaptation and understanding of students by involving them in different social-intercultural programs, language programs (Bahasa Malaysia and foreign languages) and homestay programs for international students. In addition, for promoting the social integration of international students, a balanced combination of local and international students in curricular and co-curricular activities is necessary.
3. Raising international students' awareness of different cultures. To promote this policy, HEIs should accommodate students from diverse nationalities in residential halls of universities. In addition, they should increase cross-cultural events and activities among international students.

An appropriate framework needs to be put in place to cover the critical aspects of the policy and to increase the quality and quantity of internationalization of HE in Malaysia. This framework needs to improve the effectiveness of organizational management in universities, to make international students' experience more positive and to increase the capacity of internationalization in HE by promoting student and staff mobility.

As a result, universities play a key role in producing adept students capable of working and interacting efficiently with the ones from different cultures (Mori, 2000; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). Understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of such dissimilarities should be integrated into students' programs (Radin Umar, 2009).

1.2.3 Internationalization of Higher Education and Diversity Issues

With the trend of globalization and multiculturalism, there is an outstanding rise in HEIs over years. The number of international students residing in other foreign countries has been on the rise. It is expected that the demand for international education would reach 7.2 million international students in 2025 while this rate was 1.8 million in 2000 (Ajitava & Prabir, 2007). This growing demand forces universities to modify their priorities. In the internationalization of HE, universities have a significant role in developing students' intellectual and intercultural competence and help them be tolerant of differences and to face challenges associated with the multicultural environment of HIs. The students need to adjust to cultural diversity in this environment and to be competitive in the fast fluctuating global marketplace (Deaton, 2017).

Intercultural competence is one of the factors that could impact the personal, professional and social life of students that prepare them for intercultural environments and enhance their social relationships (Coffey, Kamhawi, Fishwick, & Henderson, 2013). Intercultural competence comprises values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors essential for appropriate and efficient acceptance and interactions with culturally different individuals or groups of people (Deardoff, 2006). Intercultural competence qualifies students to develop positive and useful relationships with other students having different values and culture (Barrett, 2013).

The over-all notion for multicultural diversity in universities promoted by the internationalization of HE has been reported to be promising and increase students' ability to interact with different cultures and decrease their prejudice (Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004; Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson, Zuniga, 2009). However, numerous studies have highlighted the challenges of diversity in HE implying that colleges and universities do not promote positive interactions among diverse races and ethnicities (Benton, 2001; Ibarra, 2003).

Despite the advantages of diversity within the universities, it is assumed that diversity could simultaneously generate psychological and emotional challenges (Mustafa et al., 2011). Some of these challenges include anxiety, enmity, or avoiding interactions with others (Tange, 2008; Plant & Devine, 2003) as well as feeling unwanted and isolated (Rankin, 2003; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). Other challenges include decreasing cognitive and emotional resources (Sorensen et al., 2009). Additionally, the absence of interactions in the international setting of HE might result in prejudice and tensions (external conflicts) among dissimilar populations (Miell & Dallos 1996).

Different studies in the literature have investigated the impact of study abroad on students' outcomes. Some of these studies have found that racially/ethnically diverse educational experiences can be useful (Hurtado et al., 1999; Milem & Hakuta, 2000; Orfield, 2001, Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014, O'Brien, et al. 2019) to educational outcomes (Gurin, Dey & Hurtado, 2002; Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014), can affect learners' creativity, academic and social growth (Milem, 2003; Pittman, 2012), or result in better learning or influence other performances associated with their universities (e.g., Maruyama et al., 2000; Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson & Zuniga, 2009). Moreover, the students have to earn high-level and professional degrees preparing them to grow into leaders in societies (Gurin, Dey and Hurtado, 2002; Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014).

Some other groups of studies have examined the influence of internationalization of HE and its diversity on improving students' personal development, attitude towards other cultures, cross-cultural awareness, and global thinking (Kitsandas & Meyers, 2002; Kitsantas, 2004; Tarrant , 2010) and students' knowledge of other cultures are reported to improve their abilities to communicate across cultural differences, and reduce prejudice (Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson, Zuniga, 2009).

Lots of studies have focused on the impact of studying in multicultural universities on changing students' intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation (Maharaja, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Deaton, 2017; Scally, 2015; Stebleton, Siria & Cherney, 2013; King, Perez, & Shim, 2013; Anderson & Lawron, 2011; Pedersen, 2010; Zarnick, 2010; Maharaja, 2009; Kehl & Morris, 2008; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton and Hubbard, 2008).

While there is a plethora of cultural-diversity research on Malaysian ethnic relations, there is a dearth of research on multicultural relations among local and international students in HE. Many studies on interracial relations on university campuses in Malaysia show that lack of interactions among races is still an issue that can negatively affect national goals (Aziz et al., 2010; Santhiram, 1995; Yeoh, 2006). According to the study conducted by Tamman et al. (2016) on ethnic-related diversity engagement whether the class or society can contribute to intercultural sensitivity among Malaysian undergraduate students. The study also found that the level of informal ethnic-related diversity experiences among the students is low and the level of informal ethnic- experiences is fair and needs to be further improved.

Another research (Tamam, 2013) among undergraduate students in Malaysia, has investigated the influence of interracial interaction expectation and campus racial environment perception on attitude towards interracial interaction and the levels of interracial interaction and show the low level of inter-ethnic interaction among students. It also indicates that Chinese students have more regular inter-ethnic interactions than Malay students. In her study, Abdullah (2009), has highlighted the inefficiency of the Malaysian government's endeavors in promoting the national integration of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Table 1.1

Intercultural Communication Researches in Malaysia

Author (s)	Population	Published Articles/Conference paper/Master or Doctorate Thesis	Findings	Gap
Singh and Jack (2018)	International postgraduate students, professional and academic staff	The benefits of overseas study for international postgraduate students in Malaysia	Being in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment and having interactions with different students with different cultural backgrounds expanded the cultural horizon and increased their cultural awareness, sensitivity.	Qualitative
Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017)	International students	Identity and intercultural competence: Probing students' experiences in Malaysian campuses	Cultural understanding and language ability were key factors in developing intercultural competence.	Qualitative, only international students
Yunus (2016)	Local and international undergraduate students	Engagement in informal and formal cross-national diversity among local undergraduate students in Klang Valley, Malaysia	The level of diversity engagement in an informal context is low while this level of engagement in formal is moderate; the institute with a higher number of international students, the level of diversity engagement in formal situations was higher.	Undergraduate postgraduate students, not acceptance of diversity
Tamam, E. & Krauss, S. E. (2014)	Local undergraduate students	Ethnic-related diversity engagement differences in intercultural sensitivity among Malaysian undergraduate students.	Students with a higher level of ethnic-related diversity engagement showed a higher level of intercultural sensitivity.	Undergraduate students, only local students; Not acceptance of diversity

Table 1.1 (continued)

Regis et al., (2014)	Taiwanese exchange students	Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education	Taiwanese students had less engagement with local Malaysian students though they shared many similarities with them in terms of culture.	Qualitative
Khodabanelou, Karimi, and Ehsani (2015)	Iranian postgraduate students	Challenges of International Higher Education Students in a Foreign Country: A Qualitative Study.	The individualistic nature of Malaysian culture and the neglect of Iranian lifestyle.	Qualitative; Only Iranian postgraduate students
Tamam, E., Idris, F., Tien, W. Y. M., & Ahmad, M. A. (2013)	Local undergraduate students	Influence of expectation and campus racial climate on undergraduates' interracial interaction.	Ideological asymmetry was much interesting to the minority (i.e. Chinese) than the majority or dominant group and the Chinese were not segregating themselves.	Undergraduate students, only local students; Not acceptance of diversity
Sam et al., (2013)	Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese postgraduate students' s	Academic Adjustment Issues in a Malaysian Research University: The Case of Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, and Vietnamese Postgraduate Students' Experiences,	The results of the study showed that postgraduate students held a positive attitude towards social and academic life in Malaysia. Regarding social adjustment, the study found that this cohort of students was also actively participated in social events and were members of different organizations.	Qualitative; only attitude
Tamam & Abdullah, (2012)	Local undergraduate students	Influence of ethnic-related diversity experiences on intercultural, sensitivity of students at a public university in Malaysia	the level of ethnic-related diversity experiences among the students was fair but need improvement.	Undergraduate students, Not awareness and attitude to diversity
Zuria Mahmud, Salleh Amat, Saemah Rahman,	postgraduate international students	Challenges for International Students in Malaysia: Culture, Climate, and Care	Malaysia culture was a barrier to internationalization because Malaysian people were	Qualitative

Table 1.1 (continued)

Noriah Mohd Ishak (2010)			perceived as shy people who rarely expressed feelings or interacted with strangers.	
Pandian (2008)	Postgraduate international students	Multiculturalism in higher education: a case study of middle eastern students' perceptions and experiences in a Malaysian university	the frequency of interaction between international and local students was reported to be low; international students reported that did not face any problems with local students because of the high level of tolerance of host students.	Only international students; Not acceptance of diversity
Tamam & Hwai (2003)	Local and international postgraduate students	Coping with cross- cultural interactional and relational difficulties: Strategies used by African graduate students in a local Malaysian university.	The factor of communication difficulties of African postgraduate students, a problem in social interaction with the locals, cultural differences is a major factor.	Qualitative, Not acceptance of diversity

Another study by Taman (2009) has reported that inter-racial contact contributes significantly and positively to interracial attitudes of Malaysian students from two ethnicities of Chinese and Malay. The results demonstrate that there is inter-racial friendship among students in universities. Table 1.1 details the focus of available research on cultural diversity and intercultural relations in Malaysia

Moreover, experiences through different cultures of local and international students sometimes have been reported as a challenge (UNITE, 2006; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Some studies have reported that getting students of different cultures and nationalities together to study in an internationalized environment is not adequate to increase the development of students' intercultural competence (Deaton, 2017; Hammer, 2012).

In the Malaysian context, the experiences of overseas students of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes have been documented in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (Pandian, 2008). So far, no research has investigated the effect of multicultural experiences on local and international students' intercultural competence

Theorists and scholars have reported that intercultural contact and multicultural experiences cause different problems. Intergroup contact theory of Alport (1954) and Pettigrew (1998) suggest that contact and intercultural experiences would help people to develop a positive attitude towards others and reduce bias and discrimination. Such attitudes may help them develop intercultural competence. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, also, argues that individuals may be restrained by ethnocentrism (a tendency to favor their own group members and avoid other cultures) based on their experiences with other cultures.

The effect of contact (multicultural experiences) among local and international students on students' acceptance of diversity has not been scrutinized in Malaysia. Acceptance of diversity in this study is defined as intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity.

1.3 Problem Statement

For the betterment of current and forthcoming generations as well as sustainable development, it is fundamental to promote diversity as a human development factor. Globally, the optimal education for acceptance has been the objective of UNESCO programs since the organization was established. It is testified that acceptance of diversity is a precondition for peace (UNESCO, 2008). Therefore, preparing individuals for a diverse community attitudinally and raising their

acceptance towards diversity is really imperative in this era which progressively mirrors the impacts of globalization. To attain human development, HE can serve as a platform to develop certain skills and interests to benefit from cultural diversity.

As it has been documented so far, a considerable increase can be observed in the movement of overseas students across many countries as well as Malaysia. While further multifaceted effects have been accordingly exerted due to diversity in HE, there is an urge to adopt innovative policies and programs. The fact is that such international students of universities need to fill out job openings and handle duties in societies. Therefore, they are expected to obtain multicultural expertise, knowledge, and sensitivity if they are intended to be efficient within their diverse communities (Zhai & Scheer, 2004). However, the absence of interactions between local and overseas students has been reported to be one of the main factors negatively influencing the internationalization process in HE in different countries (Bochner & Orr, 1979; Bochner et al. 1985; Volet & Ang, 2012).

It has been reported by Tinto (1993) that the paramount predictors of the students' satisfaction with college would be related to their academic and social integration experiences (DeAngelo, 2014). Accordingly, their decision to attend a college would be affected by such factors. As showed by Brunsten et al. (2000), integration could be hindered due to student diversity, principally during the initial year of college and there is a relationship between the diversity of the students and their drop-out proportions.

Concerning Malaysia, it's HE would subsequently encounter speedy racial and ethnic diversification within the student bodies and this happens via the policy of

internationalization of HE. The fact is that such policy would result in further diversity within the HE setting and it would demand an intense modification by HE to ultimately present new horizons of thinking, learning, and research. Otherwise, cultural diversity might be misinterpreted, and this would lead to social exclusion or struggle in the community and even in university settings (Hurtado, 1992; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). International student mobility is reported to be facilitated by the positive attitude of the host country and addressing barriers and constrictions (Morshidi, 2008). Barriers would include the challenges related to the acceptance of cultural diversity. Furthermore, acceptance has been said to be a requirement of social integration (Bennet, 1986). Therefore, considering the increased international mobility and multicultural diversity of universities, the capabilities to deal with cultural diversities is imperative. Besides, this unique multicultural environment could be beneficial for the development of students' intercultural competence and acceptance. Despite its importance, less attention has been given to postgraduate multicultural experiences and challenges related to such experiences in the university environment in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, there are reports accentuating that lack of interactions among Malaysian diverse ethnicities is per se a challenging concern. For example it is reported that there is segregation among diverse ethnics (Yeoh, 2006; Aziz et al., 2010), low level of inter-ethnic interaction among students (Tamam, 2013), and low level of inter-ethnic diversity engagement in the class and outside among students which need to be further improved (Tamam, 2016). Some surveys publicized the existence of racial tensions, the dearth of integrity, little interaction or inter-communication among Malaysian students of diverse ethnicities (Mustapha et. al., 2008; Rashid & Amin, 2010).

What follows is a summary of the gaps identified in the related literature of diversity:

1. A lot of studies exist on the influences of students' diversity experience on their academic and social outcomes in the Western, especially in the United States (Denson, & Bowman, 2013). Most of these studies are on the relationship between students' diversity experience and their cognitive development.
2. Majority of the research on this issue has focused on undergraduate, high school, or college students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, et al., 1996; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini & Nora, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hillygus, 2005; Zukin et al., 2006; Bowman, 2013) and there is a dearth of research on the postgraduate students. Since the students are considered intellectual capitals playing a substantial role in fostering the communities and they are able to take essential and sensitive jobs in the future. For this reason, their awareness of diversity and new thoughts are important in developing any community.
3. There is a large bulk of research showing that the students' diversity experience would positively influence their learning and readiness for accepting diverse workplaces and communities; nonetheless, it is argued by some researchers that diversity can have negative and different effects on their social integration and adaptation. As for Malaysia, there are few studies investigating the outcomes associated with diversity initiatives, multi-ethnic plans and international educational chances practiced by students (Pandian, 2008).

4. Most of the studies on diversity in university environments in Malaysia have been conducted on undergraduate students (Taman, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014), while most of the international students in Malaysia are postgraduate students.
5. Less exists on the impact of multicultural experiences on intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity especially among postgraduate students in Malaysia.
6. Previous studies have separately contributed to the literature on the multicultural experience, diversity engagement and intercultural sensitivity (Lian, 2011; Regis et al., 2014; Yunus et al., 2016), the current study concerns how multicultural experience of students can influence their intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity (i.e. acceptance of diversity in this study) in a higher education context.
7. While some of the reviewed studies show that the multicultural society of Malaysia has failed to promote interactions between international and local students, some argue the opposite (Lian, 2011; Singh & Jack, 2018; Pandan, 2008). This study intends to demonstrate local and international postgraduate students' level of multicultural experience.

It is noted that students who choose to study abroad often encounter difficulties such as language barriers, fear, and anxiety to integrate with local students. These problems reduce interactions between local and international students (Deaton, 2017; Peacock, 2010). Other individual characteristics that are associated with communication may also influence their acceptance of diversity. There is a dearth of research on the influence of individual characteristics of local and international students on their

acceptance of diversity. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by presenting the results from a casual comparative study examining if individual characteristics can change students' level of diversity acceptance. Moreover, this study attempts to assess and then compare multicultural experiences and acceptance of diversity between local and international students.

1.4 Research Objectives

From the discussion above, the current research established the following objectives:

1. To determine the level of postgraduate students' acceptance of diversity (which includes awareness of diversity, attitude towards diversity and sensitivity to diversity) in public universities in Malaysia.
2. To determine if there are any significant differences between local and international postgraduate students in terms of their acceptance of diversity (i.e. awareness of diversity, attitude towards diversity and sensitivity to diversity) in public universities in Malaysia.
3. To examine if there is a possible causal relationship between postgraduate students' multicultural experiences (i.e. student engagement, interaction, and event) and their acceptance of diversity (i.e. awareness of diversity, attitude towards diversity and sensitivity to diversity) in public universities in Malaysia.
4. To examine there is an interaction effect of different levels of postgraduate students' individual characteristics (i.e. shyness, self-confidence and intercultural willingness to communicate) and multicultural experiences