Academic Adjustment of the Middle Eastern and African students into the Malaysian TVE higher education institutions

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Abstract:

In the myriad discourse of internationalization of higher education, the Malaysian technical and vocational (TVE) higher education institutions are in the inclusion of the agenda. This paper analyses the efforts of Malaysian TVE higher education institutions in the attempt to internationalize their education through expanding the number of international students. The focus is then narrowed to one major player of the TVE institution particularly to the trend of its international students' recruitment from the Middle Eastern and African regions. This paper reviews the education system in related regions and outlines how doctoral research is being set up to investigate on the academic adjustment of international students from these regions into the Malaysian TVE setting.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, Middle East and Africa, international students, technical and vocational education.

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to outline the background that informs the scene of a doctoral research that focuses on academic adjustment of international students in a single non-Western institution setting. The paper starts with the bigger view of the discipline, the framework, and brief information on the education system in the institution and the country of origin of the biggest population in the institution, the Middle East and Africa. The discussion then narrows to the gap of literature, and finally towards setting up the doctoral scene.

2. Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of higher education is defined in several ways. Despite of the various attempts to define the term, Knight in particular has attempted towards this effort and her latest working definition describes internationalization of higher education as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' [1].

The definition given by Knight is stratified into three levels; the national, the sector, and the institutional [1, 2]. National and sector levels have big influences on internationalizing higher education through political involvement. These influences include the development of internationalization policies, social and cultural issues, as well as economic or funding. It influences the top-down effect in the process of internationalization. Institutional level plays the role in delivering the ideas prepared by the national and sector levels by providing sufficient and appropriate supports. For example, handling academic issues and facilitating academic exchanges such as students and staff mobility, and research collaboration. Institutional level portrays the bottom-up forces which affect the internationalization process, demonstrating the relationships between all levels involved. The relationship on the role of national, sector and institutional level in the internationalization of higher education is expressed in figure 1.1.

Although Knight's internationalization framework is widely accepted, it was recently extended to another two levels represented by Sanderson [3]; supranational and within-institutional level. These two levels contain other two layers for each level; global and regional layers for the supranational level, and faculty/department and individual layers within the within-institutional level as described in figure 1.2.
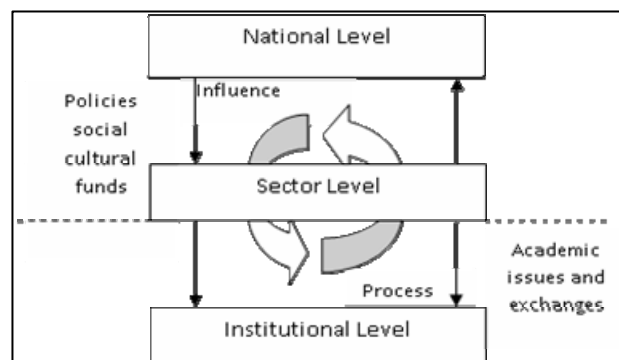

Figure 1.1 The internationalization dimensional framework [1]

In agreement of Knight's established framework, Sanderson justified that the framework did complement the internationalization processes and strategies in the 1990s where there were less rapid movement and activities of internationalization. In the contrary, the framework did not evolve clearly as the definition. Knight obviously has redefined the definition to respond to new challenges and realities and hence become the reason of its wide acceptance by other researchers. For the framework however, Sanderson justified that the internationalization process is now progressing towards an advanced phase of environment which is more mature, competitive and complex. Following the evolvements therefore, Knight's framework as well need to be reviewed to complement the progress.
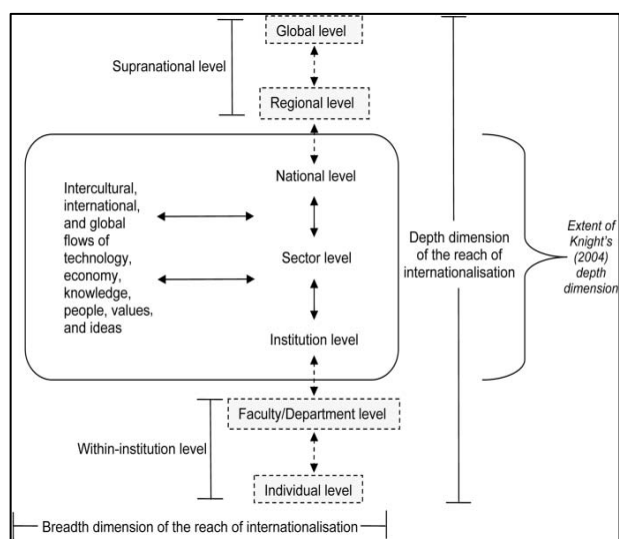

Figure 1.2 The extended internationalization dimensional framework [3]

Although Knight's focus of work is largely to the organizational components, it is important to acknowledge that stakeholders also acted as the driving forces that give effects and being affected by internationalization process and hence, create internationalization outcomes in an active and dynamic manner [3]. Thus, the depth of these dimensions has to be explored. Sanderson further suggested that, to understand the processes and effects of internationalization, it is essential to investigate the purposes, practices and experiences of key stakeholders at all levels to demonstrate the dynamic interactions between the layers. The findings, to some extent, provide an indicator of the education quality which is in line with the ultimate aim of internationalization of higher education.

Adjustment: 'fitting in' one-way vs. two-ways

In earlier research, adjustment was viewed as the targeted phase after a series of excitement, shock; anxiety and stress are gone through by the sojourners [e.g. 4, Lysgaard in 5, 6]. Yet, after the introduction of the idea that learning process is actually a dynamic experience, adjustment is seen as the interactive process between the student and the new environment which is directed

towards 'fitting in' appropriately to the new institutional context [7-10]. 'Fitting in' however, is vague and should be described as neither a simple nor direct process. It needs how Matsumoto [11] described it as 'affective evaluation of one's life' [11] which explains the capability of a person to critically reflect their own personal previous experiences and upbringings at the same time appreciate and negotiate the new experience which is often different from their norms to function accordingly and effectively in the new environment. The new environment consist variables which is also responsive towards changes, including the changes of norms which respond to the existence of international students [e.g. 12, 13, 14]. Thus, the new environment is not only for international students. Having a significant number of international students in an institution is also a new environment for the host members of the institution. Following this, scholars suggest that intercultural awareness is promoted to the existing society in the new environment [14]. By being aware of the other's differences and similarities, the existing culture creates flexible environment and sustainable education [15].

Due to this whole experiences, the whole scenario then of learning and teaching become both a challenge and opportunity. The progress of internationalisation of higher education is no longer politically student export industry, yet is towards a sustainable education that emphasises social and personal benefits to all the individuals involved [14-16]. It offers mutual learning and personal growth which is nurtured through personal motivation and understanding as well as institutional support [17]. To adjust in a multicultural environment is no longer viewed as monotonous efforts done by international students, nonetheless a reciprocal learning development for both international students and the host members including the academic staff. When both parties accordingly 'adjust' to the academic environment they are involved in, both should be able to accommodate the learning and teaching through understanding, negotiating and responding positively to the needs of each other, the curriculum is made accessible for the diverse cultural backgrounds [15, 18]. It is this stance that this doctoral study makes in looking into adjustment of international students. This study uses the term mutual adjustment, which emphasises adjustment is a reciprocal effort from both international students and academic staff.

3. The culture synergy model
The model and its emphasis

The culture synergy model is the only model that explicitly emphasises the development from the view of academic cultural transition involving both international students and academic staff. This model describes the theory of intercultural stereotypes and the applicability in promoting mutual adjustment in the case of different academic cultures. The model was first developed based on the study of different stereotypes between Chinese students in a British setting. It was originally developed by Jin in 1992 and continued to be significant to date in related disciplines from the collaborative work of Jin and

Cortazzi [19, 20]. It has also been used in other research concerning the adjustment of international students with focus on adjustment as reciprocal efforts from international students, and the host members [13].

There are contradictions on intercultural stereotypes that emerged from the Chinese students. One of them is they perceive teachers teaching should not be questioned, instead should be received and obeyed. For British educators however, their stereotype thinking was for students to participate and express their thoughts to allow interactive interactions so that they could facilitate and guide students to be more creative and independent. Although either party could not be perceived as the correct method to learn or to teach, the common scenario would be that international students are simply required (either consciously or unconsciously) to assimilate host nations ways. This forms a one-way adaptation, and often there will be conflicts in learning and teaching expectations from both which normally mismatch from each other. In such cases, changes do not happen cognitively, therefore there will be negative influence on interactions and hinder what Cortazzi and Jin described as 'culture learning' in academic activities. Jin further proposes for a process of 'culture synergy', a process that requires both teachers and students to acknowledge the culture of one and another.

Jin's culture synergy model got its name from the definition of synergy which means 'working together'. Briefly, the model reflects the theory it explains – 'culture synergy means that people from two or more cultures, working in an academic environment, interact systematically, cooperating for a common purpose with an attitude of being willing to learn, understand and appreciate the other's culture without loss of their own status, role or cultural identity' [20]. Culture synergy promotes the idea of adjustment as a bidirectional process, and that adjustment has to be from reciprocal efforts between the international students and academic staff, towards a mutual adjustment. This has the same purpose of integration that is promoted in the adjustment theories, the understanding that has been promoted by Davis regarding the importance of intercultural awareness in the new era of international education, and the main factor that influences the use of this model in this study.

4. Internationalization of the Malaysian TVE

The pressure to internationalize impacted the education system in Malaysia including TVE sector that was first developed for national agenda [21, 22]. The interdependence of countries had increased the mobility of students to search for the best education they could get. For Malaysian higher education institutions therefore, this condition has forced them towards providing graduates that is competent in the international industry market [23]. Institutions started to compete to fulfill the demand of high skill and competent workforces that could master practical and theoretical knowledge and skills[24]. The debates on the importance of such workers, to some

extent are the responsibilities of the Malaysian TVE institutions [25, 26].

In the higher education level, the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN) particularly felt the impact and hold the responsibilities to react to such demanding global market [27]. MTUN universities have started their efforts of internationalization by making their education attractive. Thus to date, MTUN universities have been collaborating with foreign universities as well as recruiting a number of international students that increases each year in various TVE courses. Until 2010, the official number of international students in MTUN institutions was 521 international students and 710 in the end of 2010 in both bachelor and postgraduate degree [28]. These students, in hierarchical order, come from Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa and other neighboring South East Asian countries (MTUN universities websites).

5. The major player – the Malaysian Technical and Vocational University (MTVU)

Among MTUN institutions, the Malaysian Technical and Vocational University (MTVU, a pseudonym) is the most active university in recruiting international students. Although the other three MTUN universities do listed recruiting international students is one of their agenda in their internationalization strategies, to date their focuses are towards collaboration of research and international industries (MTUN universities websites). There are international students enrolled in their courses, yet still very minimum compared to MTVU. In addition, international students in MTVU consist more than 80% of the population of international students among MTUN universities. For this reason, MTVU was chosen as the research site for this particular study.

International students were first recruited in 2004 and as in 31st of March 2010 MTVU has more than 200 international students. These students are 90% male undergraduate students from the Middle Eastern and African continent (North and East specifically) particularly from Libya (31.8%), Yemen (18.5%) and Somalia (27.2%) (Statistical report of international students, personal email comm., MTVU international officer, 31 March 2010). The rest are from neighboring South East Asian countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Columbia and Brunei. Majority are enrolled in the engineering disciplines which are civil, electrical and mechanical. Hence, any descriptions and discussion in latter part focuses majorly to engineering disciplines. MTVU requires students entering courses in the engineering discipline to have at least a diploma qualification or equivalent which is recognized by the government of Malaysia and approved by the senate of the University.

The structure of curriculum in engineering disciplines in MTVU follows the demand for MTUN institutions. Thus, it was designed in an emphasis applied knowledge skills which are hands-on and application of lecture learning in the real world of work. Students

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enormously involved in applied engineering subjects that comprise project type of assignments, calculation in lectures and tutorials, site visits, laboratory sessions and industrial training. Some courses also include field work and industrial visits throughout their candidature. In the final semester of a student's candidature, each student completes a work placement in industry to give them exposure to the world of work for the engineering profession. The placement allows students to apply the hands-on skills they learned while in MTVU into the real situation.

Education in the Middle East and Africa

There is scarcity of research focusing on education system in the Middle East and African continents. Research accounts only one tenth of one per cent of the world's research combined [29]. However, growing interest of research in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries was revealed after the governments exhibited significant commitments to human capital growth through education [30]. International students in MTVU largely come from these regions, except there are a number of students from a country in East Africa. For this specific country, there is almost no research or reliable information that is related given by trusted sources such as the World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Thus, this section provides overall discussions highly angled to the countries in the MENA regions.

In brief, the quality of education is least susceptible in comparison to other developing countries. This is due to substantial differences on curriculum structures and contents, inadequate resource management, and negative attitudes towards the importance of Mathematics and Science [31, 32]. Although access to education to date is improved with particular financial progress in oil-exporting, the task to serve education to its tremendous young population is huge and challenging [33]. The most concern issue is the rate of limited school facilities that could suffice the demographic pressure. Besides this, the pressure is also to the low education opportunities and gender inequalities [34].

MENA countries reflect similar learning and teaching pedagogical method in primary, secondary and tertiary level. Students fully rely on their teachers whose pedagogy was almost solely on illustrating concepts during lectures and reading from textbooks [31] . Assessment methods are entirely exam-oriented where rewards are given for the absorption of knowledge usually transmitted by the teachers in class and the sources the students have read [35, 36]. Therefore, memorizing is a vital skill, and almost no applications on concepts are learned. In secondary education, teachers are regarded as absolute authority and are respected by students. Teachers normally do the knowledge searching and inform the students the knowledge they have to know. With this style of teaching, students prefer to be told exactly what and how to learn new things [37]. The

common language for the MENA people is Arabic [38]. Influenced by the spread of Islam in educational reforms, Arabic is commonly used as the formal language with English is taught as a subject from secondary school onwards [39]. English language in the society is used among those who have had education from an English based school and largely by the expatriates and academics. Information in TVE is as well limited. What is known to date is the education of TVE does not provide significant impact on labor markets [33]. This is because the common situation of early dropouts and children labor does not promote further education and higher training. However, the privatization and acknowledgement of World Bank towards these countries have assisted the awareness of continuous education and thus, governments of the MENA countries started to improve and expand their education system towards enhancing practical and generic skills [30].

6. Gap of literature

The discourse on the adjustment of international students dominantly focus on the movements of Asian students to a Western developed country such as the US, UK, NZ and Australia [e.g. 13, 40, 41]. Accordingly it is identified that the pattern of the current discussion is on the 'western situation'.

This study basically decentralises the trend. It is interested on the adjustment of Middle Eastern and African international students to a Malaysian higher education, specifically to a TVE discipline which is engineering field. Countries such as Singapore, China and Malaysia have been recently raised as the international education hubs and the number of international students in these countries have significantly grew [15]. These differences are definitely important, to at least discuss later on where the concept of internationalization, the idea on mutual adjustment and the understanding of culture synergy model could lead to further knowledge. Apart from that, the Malaysian TVE context offers contributions to new dimensions in the literature on international student experiences. The Malaysian TVE context might reveal new information in expanding the understanding of international students' academic adjustment. The differences in background of the study should complement the current information of challenges in academic environment encountered by international students.

7. Setting up the research

As a way of addressing these significant gaps, a doctoral study is proposed that will research the learning experiences of international students and the teaching experiences of academic staff in MTVU. MTVU has experienced the most rapid growth of international students largely from the Middle East and Africa. Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews situated in an interpretive qualitative methodology, we aim to explore the learning and teaching experiences from approximately ten international students and ten academic staff through focus group and individual interviews. The method

adopted is the best fit for the research because experience is 'socially constructed' [44 p. 8] and the goal is to achieve 'rich', 'particularistic' and 'heuristic' characteristics [45 pp. 43-44]. The findings will then illustrate the current degree of reciprocal adjustment that is happening in the institution from learning and teaching perspectives. The information will be used to indicate future steps that could be taken by the institution to ease the transition of international students as well as to support academic staff towards better quality in learning outcomes.

In the first instance, MTVU highlights that approximately 90% of international students in Malaysian TVE institutions come from Africa and the Middle East (Malaysian TVE institution international officer, 2010, pers. comm., 30 March). The key similarity among the students themselves and the society is the shared religion, that is, Islam and values associated with Islam [33]. The similarity plays an important factor in international students' decision to study in Malaysia [23]. The Malaysian education system which respects the practice of Islam (i.e. prayer time, code of ethics and behaviour) plays an important role as religion is the way of Islamic Middle East people lead their lives [42]. Thus, it is anticipated that this similarity would somehow affect the adjustment of these students. In addition, discussion on learning adjustment from students coming from these regions and how religion and religious values affect learning experiences of international students is scant in the current literature.

Second, Malaysia is a South East Asian non-English speaking country. The first language for Malaysian people is Bahasa Melayu while international students from Middle East and Africa in this context largely use Arabic [33]. English however, is used widely in the society and is the mode of instruction in MTVU. What remains unknown is how the use of English accents, jargons, terms and idioms in the culture of the students and staffs affect adjustment in learning and teaching.

Third, there are limitations with the literature concerning international students' adjustment in TVE institutions. TVE universities in Malaysia are established as skill-based institutions. Part of the programs offered in Malaysian TVE universities are engineering, technical and vocational education, information technology and technology management. The academic programs prepare students for professional and managerial TVE personnel such as engineers, TVE educators, information technology officers and surveyors [Ahmad cited in 43]. The information that might emerge from this dimension is the international students and academic staffs' adjustment that is related with learning and teaching practical skills and hands-on.

8. Conclusion

As a whole, beyond these discussions on academic adjustment of international students is the paucity of such study in a South East Asian non-English speaking country such as Malaysia. This paper focuses on how the Malaysian TVE situation offers possibilities for expanding our understanding of academic adjustment from the 'western situation' into a Malaysian TVE context. These dimensions can contribute to new knowledge to the existing discussion on adjustment of international students, the current discourse on the theories of mutual adjustment and the idea on internationalization of higher education.

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