



## Malaysian Graduates of Middle-Eastern Universities: Perspectives on Human Capital Development

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysian youth who graduate from Middle-Eastern Universities are important and suitable human capital for Malaysia as they are equally knowledgeable and skilful as any local or western university graduates. In fact, the additional components in their study programmes such as Islamic philosophy, principles and ethics based on the al-Quran and *Hadith* form the foundation for integrity and accountability. Science, technology and Islamic knowledge are critical ingredients of human capital development in any organisation to ensure high productivity embedded with integrity, professionalism and accountability. The main purpose of this study was to determine the factors affecting human capital development among Malaysian graduates of Middle-Eastern universities. The factors identified were their preparation before leaving for their studies, their studying practices, their academic achievements, their personality development and their experiences (good and bad) while they were in Middle-Eastern universities. This study used the quantitative design on 386 Malaysian graduates who graduated from Middle-Eastern universities; these graduates were serving in several government and private-sector agencies. The findings indicated that all the independent variables had significant positive relationship with the dependent

variable, that is, the process of human capital development with *r* values ranging from .280 (preparation before going to Middle-Eastern universities) to .546 (personality development). The findings of this study

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suggest that Malaysian graduates of Middle-Eastern universities are an important source of human capital that can steer the future development of the nation alongside their peers who graduate from local and western universities.

*Keyword:* Human capital, Islamic education, Malaysian graduates, Middle-Eastern universities

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysian youth who graduate from Middle-Eastern universities are an important source of human capital for the nation as their knowledge and skills are as good as those of any local or western university graduates. Malaysia needs human capital that is educated and trained in the sciences, technology, economics and management, along with Islamic studies, to achieve and maintain developed-nation status from now and through the years past 2020 according to the country's social, economic and political mould. Building human capital is a continuous process that is achieved through training and lifelong learning which enhances the intellectual, economic and social capacities of an individual to create wealthy, progressive and stable organisations. Therefore, human capital is the total sum of investment in activities such as education and training, health and migration that enhances an individual's productivity in the labour market (Kiker, 1966; Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961 & 1962). More recently, this concept has been extended to include non-market activities such as commitment, motivation and satisfaction (OECD, 2001).

Enhancing the intellectual, economic and social capacities of individuals forms the basic tenets of human capital development. Intellectual capital development is the process of acquiring knowledge and skills in a discipline (e.g. engineering), becoming competent in using latest technology to perform tasks with high creativity and innovativeness and producing high quality products. The economic capital development of an individual relates closely to developing employability traits such as ICT competence, entrepreneurship skills, multi-lingual fluency and soft skills mastery which bring about work satisfaction. Social capital, on the other hand, addresses social factors such as social networking, social support systems, institutions building, trust and norms (Coleman, 1988). It is generally acknowledged that collective action may be established with a greater degree of ease in a community of workers with well-accumulated social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1993).

The importance of human capital in nation building is that it is a "value of workers". The most valuable of all capital is investment in human beings, so-called human capital (Marshall, 1890). This value is produced from the effort invested in time and energy and money spent by workers to gain skills and knowledge required for their working tasks (Adam Smith, 1776). Colleges and universities provide a good opportunity to use a resources-in-network approach to developing social capital. Once they arrive on campus, students may need to rebuild, redirect or refine their social capital in order to exert suitable effect

on achievement or other college-level outcomes (Martin, 2009). Peer networks have the highest effect early in university life. Campus network could support students to enter pathways to professional careers i.e. school teachers, religious teachers, public speakers and motivators. Social networks on campus could also provide information about the programmes as well as assistance with the application process, accommodation, local culture, personal development, academic achievement and gaining new experiences. This relationship is different from family relationships, and personal contacts are likely more important while preparing to study abroad (Martin and Spenner, 2009).

The Quran (al-Baqarah, 2:30-33) mentions that God created human beings to become *khalifah* (vicegerent); a unique position endowed with authority delegated from God to man to fulfil “consciously” (not by force) the divine patterns on earth. To support this mission of being a *khalifah*, God has endowed mankind with the highest intellectual capacity among all creation. God created man with knowledge to support his mission as *khalifah* on earth. With knowledge and intellectual ability to think, a human being is able to discover the basic laws of the universe and, at the same time, employ different resources of the universe for his purpose. Trust (*amanah*) embodies the role of a *khalifah*. *Amanah* (trust) is a concept that implies that in all his actions, man should choose to prosper the earth by making the best use of available earthly resources and fully utilising the

virtues inherent in him to discover the earth (Mohamed Aslam & Hafas, 2009). As an employee, man can avoid becoming involved in corruption and abuse of power if he follows the basic tenets of human capital based on his role as *khalifah*, which emphasises trust, accountability and professionalism.

In developing positive *akhlaq* (good and acceptable) human capital in Malaysia, Islamic education enhances the individual’s strength to focus on balancing internal and external pressures in dealing with challenges and temptations (Ahmad Munawar *et al.*, 2011). Za’aba, quoted by Asmah (2009), said that unwavering *aqidah* (practice) and *akhlaq* are not inherited but achieved via training and practice with strict adherence to the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Ibn Khaldun, as quoted by Muhsin Mahdi (2001), emphasised that positive human behaviour development would depend on how far a human being was willing to exploit his thoughts to gain knowledge.

The majority of Malaysian youth who graduate from Middle-Eastern universities specialise in Islamic studies (Syari’a, Usul Fikh and Usuluddin) and only a small percentage of them pursue medicine, dentistry and engineering. Most of those who major in Islamic studies are primary and secondary schools teachers who go on to teach Islamic subjects. They are, by and large, instrumental in moulding young minds to become good and responsible future citizens by inculcating good behaviour (*akhlaq*) based on *al-Quran* and *Hadith*, besides educating and exposing

students to Islamic knowledge, practices and ethics, which together form the foundation to building future human capital with the necessary characteristics of integrity, accountability and professionalism.

The objective of this study was to determine whether Malaysian graduates of Middle Eastern universities are important human capital for nation building. Human capital in this study is defined as having three basic components i.e. intellectual capital, economic capital and social capital (dependent variable). Factors that influence intellectual capital, economic and social capital (human capital) are the independent variables of the study. Based on the literature and experiences of the authors dealing with graduates of Middle-Eastern universities, it can be concluded that five factors combine to influence human capital development. They are: (1) preparations prior to embarking on a study programme in Middle-Eastern universities; (2) Adaptability while studying at Middle-Eastern universities; (3) academic achievements in Middle-Eastern universities; (4) personality development during the stay in the Middle East; and (5) experiences acquired while studying in Middle-Eastern universities.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study are:

- i. To explore the experiences of graduates of Middle-Eastern universities prior to their leaving for their studies, the adjustments made while studying in a different environment, and their

academic achievement, personality development and the experiences;

- ii. To determine the levels of human capital development comprising intellectual, economic and social capitals of graduates of Middle-Eastern universities; and
- iii. To determine the relationships between the independent variables (graduates' experiences) and the dependent variable (human capital development).

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study used survey questionnaires to collect data from Malaysians who have graduated from Middle-Eastern universities. The study was carried out in seven (7) states in Malaysia: Johor (southern zone), Selangor and Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur (central zone), Kedah (northern zone), Terengganu and Kelantan (eastern zone) and Sarawak (East Malaysia). The populations of this study were graduates of Middle-Eastern universities residing in the selected seven states, while the sample was randomly chosen with the help of the Division of Islamic Education, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

The researchers developed the instrument for this study based on the research focus and the study objectives. The study used a 4-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; and 4=strongly agree. The questions were developed to measure preparation before going abroad, accommodation while studying in the Middle Eastern Universities, academic achievement, character building while

studying, bad and good experiences while studying and the creation of human capital development. In addition, the respondents had to choose and prioritise three statements in ranking order from each variable in their perspective. The data collection process took place in each respective state using the group method, where the respondents answered the questionnaires and researchers were present to help clarify questions that might be read as being vague. A total of 386 respondents participated in the study. After data collection ended, data analysis was immediately carried out using SPSS version 17.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

*Respondents' Profile*

The percentage of respondents selected from the seven (7) states were about the same, with Johor, Terengganu and Selangor at the top of the list at 19.2%, 16.1% and 15.8% respectively. Almost half (46.4%) of the respondents were between 30 and 35 years old, made up of 54.4% males and 45.6% females. A high majority (94.3%) were married and had a Bachelor of Arts degree (99.5%). Egypt was the most popular destination for study among the respondents (77.5%), followed by Jordan (18.1%) and Saudi Arabia (2.6%). A good majority of the respondents (93.5%) indicated that their work now was relevant to the field of study they had pursued (see details in Table 1). Most of the respondents received loans from the Federal and State government agencies while they were studying. Some received tithes (*zakat*) from State governments as well as from individuals from within

Malaysia and abroad. Two thirds (66.3%) of the respondents indicated that the financial aid they received had been sufficient while 31.9% had faced financial difficulties.

TABLE 1  
Respondent Profile (n=386)

Respondent Profile	Freq.	%
<b>Location</b>		
Selangor	62	16.1
Johor	40	10.4
Kelantan	51	13.2
Terengganu	61	15.8
Kedah	74	19.2
Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur	44	11.4
Sarawak	54	13.9
<b>Age</b>		
<30 years	41	10.6
30 – 35 years	179	46.4
36 > years	166	43.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	210	54.4
Female	176	45.6
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	364	94.3
Single	22	5.7
<b>Level of Study</b>		
BA	384	99.5
Master	2	0.5
<b>Country of Study</b>		
Egypt	299	77.5
Jordan	70	18.1
Saudi Arabia	10	2.6
Morocco	4	1.3
Iraq	2	0.5
<b>Type of Work Relevant to Field of Study</b>		
Yes	361	93.5
No	25	6.5

*Preparation before Leaving for Study in Middle-Eastern Universities*

The respondents answered questions related to their experience of preparing themselves for the study programme in the Middle-Eastern universities. Some of the preparations included attending a competency training programme in the Arabic language and understanding the basics of Arabic culture and application for financial aid. Slightly more than one third (35.5%) of the respondents indicated that they had not fully prepared while 18.1% said that they had been ready. They also suggested that learning and becoming competent in the Arabic language, both written and oral, was very important. An intensive language training programme conducted between three (3) and six (6) months provided them with the opportunity to learn the Arabic language. In addition, an orientation programme was also organised for them to discover and understand Arabic

culture and the education system followed by Middle-Eastern universities (Table 2).

*Adaptation While Studying in Middle-Eastern Universities*

The respondents related their experiences in adapting to a new environment. Student adaptation to a different culture can be seen as both psychological (coping with teaching and learning), and socio-cultural (learning what it takes to “fit in” with the new culture and foreign language) (Ward, 2001; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Ostensibly, these two types of adaptation support one another, with certain caveats (Berry, 2005). The study found that only 16.6% of the respondents had adapted quickly while 39.9% were slow in adapting to the new environment (Table 3). The longer they took to adapt and to adjust, especially in the teaching and learning environment, the longer it took to achieve academic excellence. The Malaysian

TABLE 2  
Preparation before Leaving for the Middle-Eastern Universities

Preparation	Freq.	%
Not prepared	137	35.5
Moderately prepared	179	46.4
Prepared	70	18.1
$\bar{x}$ : 23.2 SD:2.7 Range: 9-28		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Preparation Before Leaving for Middle-Eastern Universities in the Respondents' Perspective		
Preparation Before leaving	Priority	
Compulsory for students to attend intensive Arabic Language study for at least three months	Extremely important	
Achieve at least a 65% competency score in oral and written Arabic Language	Important	
Institute an orientation programme to expose students to Arabic culture and teaching and learning system in Middle-Eastern Universities	Equally important	



Student Association and the Malaysian Student Department helped by organising talks on the education and administration systems followed by Middle-Eastern universities to quicken the acclimatisation process of new students. This was to allow the new students to better understand the needs and requirements of their new learning environment. New students were also encouraged to make friends with local students so that they could learn the Arabic language faster and therefore, be able to perform well academically. All these contribute towards helping new students to settle down as quickly as possible and be reasonably accommodative to the demands and challenges of the local community.

*Academic Achievement*

Table 4 indicates that 45.1% of the respondents did not achieve satisfactory academic results while 17.6% had a good standing academically. To achieve a

good academic standing, the respondents suggested that all students (new and senior) must attend all classes and tutorials, and consult professors/lecturers regularly, especially to clarify lectures which they did not understand. A mentor-mentee system where senior students with a good academic standing take care of new students would also help to boost the new students' confidence besides offering a conducive and committed learning environment. This aligns with what Martin (2009) indicates i.e. that peer networks could provide information to facilitate academic success such as choosing suitable classes, consulting lecturers whenever they do not understand the lecture notes, sharing course material and being aware of campus programmes.

*Positive Personality Development*

Personality development in the school/university environment is usually associated with students' involvement in co-curricular

TABLE 3  
Adaptation to a New Environment

Adaptation	Freq	%
Slow in adapting	154	39.9
Moderately fast in adapting	168	43.5
Fast in adapting	64	16.6
$\bar{x}$ : 23.1 SD:2.6 Range: 8-28		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Adaptation to a New Environment in the Respondents' Perspective		
Adaptation to a New Environment	Priority	
Malaysian Student Associations and Malaysian Student Department to organise talk by university officials on academic and administrative matters	Extremely important	
Make new friends from local students to learn the Arabic Language and get tips on academic matters	Important	
New students should settle down quickly to accommodate to the demands and challenges of the local community	Equally important	

TABLE 4  
Academic Achievement

Academic Achievement	Freq.	%
Not satisfactory	174	45.1
Satisfactory	144	37.3
Good	68	17.6
$\bar{x}$ : 23.9 SD:2.5 Range: 14-28		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Academic Achievement in the Respondents' Perspective		
Academic Achievement	Priority	
Students should attend all classes	Extremely important	
Students should consult lecturers when they do not understand the lectures	Important	
Develop mentor-mentee system between senior students and new students	Equally important	

activities or activities outside of the classroom setting. Data in Table 5 indicate that 18.4% of the respondents were active in co-curricular activities and had developed positive personality traits, especially in carrying out leadership functions. About half (47.2%) of the respondents had yet to develop a positive personality. There were suggestions by respondents that students could develop positive personality and leadership traits by enrolling in leadership courses organised by the Malaysian Student Department in collaboration with student associations.

*Experience (Good/Bad) while Studying in Middle-Eastern Countries*

A good majority (83.1%) of the respondents had come across distinctive experiences while studying in the Middle-Eastern countries. Students had good experiences acquiring in-depth formal and non-formal knowledge, especially from events

conducted in mosques, outside lecture hours in the evenings and at the weekend. In fact, the non-formal education provided breadth and depth in understanding Islamic concepts and application which could not be covered in formal classroom situations. On the other hand, students had bad experiences coping with manners exhibited by people of different cultures, which they deemed as not being acceptable to most Malaysian students (see Table 6).

*Development of Economic Capital*

One of the components of human capital development relates closely to the employability (or marketability) of graduates. Directly or indirectly, employability of graduates contributes to the economic development of a nation. The data in Table 7 indicate that slightly more than half (53.1%) of the respondents contributed directly to the economic development of Malaysia immediately upon graduation



TABLE 5  
Personality Development

Personality Development	Freq.	%
Not satisfactory	182	47.2
Satisfactory	133	34.5
Good	71	18.4
$\bar{x}$ : 23.7 SD:2.6 Range: 14-28		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Personality Development in the Respondents' Perspective		
Positive Personality	Priority	
Regular leadership courses organised by Malaysian Students Department in collaboration with student associations to provide knowledge on leadership responsibilities	Extremely important	
Provide opportunities to students to lead programmes organised by Malaysian Student Department	important	
Students sit on committees to plan, implement and evaluate programmes organised by Malaysian Student Department	Equally important	

TABLE 6  
Experiences (Good/Bad) While Studying

Experience	Freq.	%
A little	143	37.0
Moderate	178	46.1
A lot	65	16.8
$\bar{x}$ : 25.3 SD:2.4 Range: 16-32		
Ranking of Importance of Good/Bad Experiences While Studying in the Respondents' Perspective		
Experiences	Priority	
A lot of opportunities to acquire knowledge outside of classroom setting	Extremely important	
I am proud to have been able to acquire knowledge in the land of the prophets.	Important	
I value the experiences I acquire from Islamic history found in Middle-Eastern countries.	Equally important	

while the rest (46.9%) gained employment within a year after graduation. Malaysians who graduated from Middle-Eastern universities should acquire ICT knowledge and skills, master the English language and participate in training programmes conducted by ministries and government agencies to improve their marketability.

*Development of Social Capital*

The second component in human capital development is social capital development. Social capital relates to the individual's ability to positively interact with others such as peers, superiors or subordinates. The skills involved in social capital development include communication, problem solving, decision-making, leadership and team

TABLE 7  
Level of Economic Capital Development

Economic Capital Development	Freq.	%
Low	181	46.9
Moderate	139	36.0
High	66	17.1
$\bar{x}$ : 22.8 SD:2.7 Range: 10-28		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Economic Capital Development in the Respondents' Perspective		
Economic Capital Development	Priority	
Graduates of Middle-Eastern universities must acquire knowledge and skills in ICT.	Extremely important	
Graduates of Middle-Eastern universities must be competent in the English language to improve employability.	Important	
Graduates of Middle-Eastern universities must participate in training programmes conducted by ministries and government agencies to improve employability traits.	Equally important	

TABLE 8  
Level of Social Capital Development

Social Capital Development	Freq.	%
Low	211	54.7
Moderate	49	12.7
High	126	32.6
$\bar{x}$ : 58.7 SD:6.4 Range: 25-72		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Social Capital Development in the Respondents' Perspective		
Social Capital Development	Priority	
I appreciate and value ideas and comments from other people in discussions about a programme or a problem.	Extremely important	
I keep an open mind in listening to differences in views from peers.	Important	
I treat all peoples alike regardless of their status.	Equally important	

work with others to strengthen and improve social networking of high performing organisations. Table 8 shows the level of social capital development among graduates of Middle-Eastern universities. Slightly more than half (54.7%) had low social capital skills while about one third (32.6%) had high social capital skills. In

the respondents' perspective, graduates of the Middle-Eastern universities should appreciate ideas and comments from others and be open-minded in listening to differences of opinion. Of equal importance is the fact that as government officials, they should treat all people alike regardless of status.

*Development of Intellectual Capital*

Intellectual capital is the third component of human capital development which focusses on knowledge and skills acquisition to function efficiently and effectively in carrying out tasks for personal as well as for organisational productivity. Intellectual capital development is closely related to lifelong learning, where an individual learns and acquires the latest technology and keeps abreast with latest developments in his/her field of interest, which forms the basis for creative and innovative inventions for personal, organisational and national benefits. About 40.2% of the respondents in this study acquired low intellectual capital capacity while 19.9% and 39.9% acquired moderate to high intellectual capital capacity respectively (Table 9). Youth who graduated from Middle-Eastern universities have a vast potential to develop into credible human capital if their intellectual capacities are

broadened to include knowledge and skills in ICT, competency in the English language (in addition to the Arabic language) and relevant soft skills. They have all the potential to do so.

*Relationship between the Dependent Variable and the Independent Variables*

Table 10 shows the relationship between human capital development with five (5) independent variables. The relationship is significant at 0.05 level with ‘personality development’ having the highest r value of .546 among the independent variables, followed by ‘academic achievement’ (r = .440), ‘adaptation while studying in a different environment’ (r = .421), ‘experiences (good/bad) while studying in Middle-Eastern universities’ (r = .401) and ‘preparation before leaving for study in Middle-Eastern universities’ (r = .280). These relationships indicate that the variables

TABLE 9  
Level of Intellectual Capital Development

Intellectual Capital Development	Freq.	%
Low	155	40.2
Moderate	77	19.9
High	154	39.9
$\bar{x}$ : 46.3 SD:5.0 Range: 19-52		
Ranking of Importance of Factors Contributing to Intellectual Capital Development in the Respondents’ Perspective		
Intellectual Capital Development	Priority	
Intellectual capacity through knowledge acquisition is important to an individual and the nation.	Extremely important	
With knowledge and skills one can help oneself but, more importantly, one can help others.	Important	
Knowledge is the basis for one to be creative.	Equally important	

selected for this study were appropriate and relevant in explaining the objectives of the study. Regression analysis was carried out to determine which particular variable(s) contributed the most to explain the variance on human capital development.

Data in Table 11 indicate that three variables i.e. ‘adaptation while studying in Middle-Eastern universities’, ‘personality development’ and ‘experiences (good/bad) while studying in Middle-Eastern universities’ contributed to the variance in human capital development. Together, the three variables explained 39% ( $R^2=0.39$ ;  $F(5,100)=14.43$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) of the variance in human capital development of Malaysian youth who have graduated from Middle-Eastern universities.

**CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study focusses on three components of human capital development i.e. economic capital, social capital and intellectual capital. The three capitals are closely related to investments in education and training as well as to lifelong learning in order to remain productive and competitive in a challenging global market. In developing a dynamic and progressive workforce, the study shows that learning in a classroom situation (formal) and outside of classroom situations (non-formal) are both important as they ensure a dedicated and committed human capital who are willing to go the ‘extra mile’ to achieve personal, organisational and national goals. Graduates of Middle-Eastern universities

TABLE 10  
Relationships between Human Capital Development and the Independent Variables

	Human capital	Preparation before leaving	Adaptation while studying	Academic achievement	Personality development	Experience (Good/Bad) while studying
Human capital						
Pearson Correlation	1	.280**	.421**	.440**	.546**	.401**
Sig.		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	386	386	386	386	386	386

\*\* Correlation significant at 0.001 (1-tailed)

TABLE 11  
Regression Analysis of the Variables

Variables	Beta	t	Sig.
Preparation before leaving	-.042	-.447	.656
Adaptation while studying	.338	3.371	.001*
Academic achievement	.016	.160	.873
Personality development	.262	2.621	.010*
Experiences (good/bad) while studying	.229	2.491	.014*

Note:  $R^2=0.39$ ;  $F(5,100)=14.43$ ;  $p<0.001$

are no different from graduates of local or other western universities in terms of knowledge and competencies.

In fact, graduates of Middle-Eastern universities have an advantage over their counterparts from local or western universities in that they learn Islamic subjects based on the al *Quran* and *Hadith* which promote integrity and accountability and demand the highest level of professionalism in their dealing in everyday life. The education system followed by Middle-Eastern universities integrates these qualities in the study curricula. Having been exposed to these qualities, Middle-Eastern universities graduates tend to demonstrate honesty, reliability, productivity and quality in whatever task assigned to them.

Proficiency in the Arabic language is a must for students who wish to study in Middle-Eastern universities. They go through intensive training in the Arabic language and must obtain a minimum B grade in the language before they can be accepted into any Middle-Eastern university. Orientation programmes are essential for prospective students to understand Arabic culture and the foreign education system, especially the assessment system. Alumni from Middle-Eastern universities can also share their experiences and give “tips” to prospective students. One important implication drawn from this study is that a systematic and formal arrangement by relevant agencies is a consideration that is worth the effort of pursuing to prepare prospective students before they embark on a study programme in Middle-Eastern universities.

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