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Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

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Abstract

In recent times there has been a rapid increase in the number of Arab postgraduate students in Malaysian universities which typically expect international students to submit dissertations in English. Whilst these students often achieve good qualifications in their home country, many struggle with the cultural or social as well as academic adjustments to a foreign university, to a different culture and to the requirements of undertaking research and writing in a second or foreign language. This paper will investigate the particular cultural as well as language barriers which typically confront Arab students undertaking postgraduate study in Malaysia. As well as identify key challenges faced, it will inquire into the possible strategies for assisting students to more effectively engage with many of the larger cultural barriers and academic challenges faced in language proficiency issues. The paper will report on a study undertaken into the perceptions and experiences of Arab postgraduate students at five Malaysian Universities: UM, UTM, UKM UPM, and IIUM

Introduction

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In the last few years Malaysian Universities have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of Arab postgraduate students. The growing presence of Arab postgraduate students is also associated with cultural and language barriers which affect the academic performance of these students. The notable increasing growth of Arab and other nationalities of Middle East students in Malaysia started a few years after the event of “9/11” in 2001. Although, there is no exact statistical number of Arab students in Malaysia, this growing number is significant. Also they have growing requirements of better support to assist a range of problems and challenges linked to adjusting to academic life in their host country. These students need opportunities to understand culture, to improve language skills, new academic system, and possess a contextual awareness of new communities.

Traditionally, most Arab states instruct their educational institutions to send their students to the West Europe and North America universities and to some extent the former Soviet Union states and East Europe countries according to exchange students’ protocols agreements. Although Arab students all speak Arabic and generally share the same linguistic background, there are slight differences in dialects.. So, we can say they share the barriers of English acquisition but they belong to different academic cultural background due to the different educational systems of their countries. On the other hand, they share almost the same cultural background with slight differences in terms of many factors such as nationality, religion, standard of living, political system etc.

Universities and colleges in many countries, among them the United States, Britain and others rely heavily on international students for their income. For example international students studying in New Zealand earned the country \$1.7 billion and made education the fourth-largest export earner (Perrott, 2003).

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Furthermore, these students have become such an integral part of these universities' campuses. According to Ward (2002), international students are enormously beneficial to the U.S and bring knowledge and skills to the classroom, and new experience to the laboratories, provide campuses with a good level of diversity, create and promote long term relationship between the American educational institutions and abroad. Furthermore, as Hartle (2002) explains, international students help to increase the skills of the local American workforce, as well as boost appreciation for democracy.

Also, *Open Door* (2008, p.3) reports that the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. State Department are especially attentive to this matter and "manage a wide range of academic, professional, and cultural exchanges that include approximately 40,000 participants annually, with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the people of other countries." The same report estimated that there were 623,805 international students in the US in the 2007/08 academic year. In the last few years the enrolment of international students in the United States' higher institutions has declined. In his testimony, the director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues Scott (2007) has outlined three main challenges in attracting international students to the United States and their implications for global competitiveness. These challenges are: (1) the global landscape of higher education is changing and it provides more alternatives for students, particularly as other countries also expand their educational capacity and technology-based distance learning opportunities; (2) the cost of obtaining a degree in the United States is rising, which may discourage international students from enrolling in U.S colleges and universities; (3) visa policies and procedures, tightened after September 11, 2001, to protect U.S national security interests, may have contributed to real and perceived barriers for international students seeking to enter the country.

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Similarly, there are many other countries which are working aggressively to attract international students. This includes Britain which announced the “setting up of a goal of attracting 100,000 more international students to the country in the next five years” (Johnson 2006, p. 16). Furthermore, according to Chun-Fen (2008, p. 8), Japan’s cabinet discussed the plan to accept 300’000 international students as part of Japan’s global strategy and its international commitment to expand flows of human resources. According to "College Enrolment Statistics Canada” (2009) the recent total for international student enrollment in Canada is 123,901 in 2008.

According to the China Scholarship Council (2008), the number of international students in China reached 195,503 in the 2007-08 academic year. They are from 188 countries and regions and enrolled in 544 universities and colleges, scientific research institutes and other teaching institutions. The Chinese government awarded scholarships to 10,151 students. World Migration Report (2008, p. 105) states that between 1998 and 2004, the number of foreign students enrolled worldwide rose by 52% to 2.7 million with the OECD countries hosting 85% of the total. Knight (2009) estimates that by 2025 the demand for international education will grow to 7.2 million students, a quantum leap, from 1.2 million students in 2000. She believes that certainly not all of this demand will be met by students’ mobility.

The cultural and academic barriers faced by international Students in Malaysia

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In 2006, UNESCO reported the most recent total for international student enrollment in Malaysia is 30,407 international students. A little more than a third of this population came from China. On March 9, 2008, Malaysian newspaper, *The Star* said that the number of international students had increased between 2006 and 2008 by 30%, bringing the overall numbers to 65,000 foreign students enrolled in private and public institutions of higher education last year, compared to 48,000 in 2006. The Malaysian Higher Education Ministry set up an international students division to cope with the increasing number of Arab and other foreign students pursuing higher education in Malaysia and turning the country into a center of educational excellence. The division has been operating since 2007 to facilitate the entrance and management of foreign students who are expected to number 100,000 by the end of this year (2010). These students are distributed in 20 public and 35 private universities all over Malaysia. In addition, Verbik, (2007) believes that at present, Malaysia, Singapore and China have emerged contenders and have a combined share of approximately 12% of the global student market.

Therefore, many of Arab postgraduate students who come to Malaysia found it difficult to adjust to the English language and the education system in the country. There are a number of academic barriers which students need to get adjusted to. Students may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of instructors along with their different teaching styles. They may have difficulty understanding class lectures, making them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions. Moreover, students may find test constructions difficult to comprehend, and they may be

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unfamiliar with testing and grading systems of the university. Those who have low English proficiency may require extra time to read their textbooks. Further, they may not be able to articulate their knowledge on essay exams or research papers due to their limited vocabulary. For many international students, poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in Malaysia. Simple mispronunciation issues can be a major factor. Some Arab nationalities have a very difficult time with the pronunciation of the English language and it can be very frustrating to them. They may be motivated and they may give their full and sincere effort, but still may struggle to learn the English language.

English Language Barriers

It is well known that for many international students the transition to study in a new country is associated with several language problems. Some universities around the world have taken steps to help new students to adjust to these problems. Research indicates that many international students have difficulties and barriers with various aspects of English. The use of English language in both the classroom and social contact situation is a common problem for many Arab students also. To address the concern of the increasing number of Arab students who do not even the basic English skills, Malaysian universities have launched a number of initiatives, including the offering of basic study skills, language support and professional skills development classes. For instance, one of the authors of this paper has been teaching academic writing for these students at the UTM for the three years and has noted that many Arab students lack sufficient English skills.

One of the greatest challenges that Arab postgraduate students face is the communication barrier, since misunderstandings can occur through verbal or nonverbal communication. Transitioning students face a variety of cultural differences that can put tension on their relationships with both

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faculty and peers (Riedlinger, 2008). Research by Liu (1999) indicates that language barriers constitute a significant problem for Chinese students also. Although Chinese students are required to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other equivalent English proficiency examinations before studying abroad, most Chinese students still fear that their English is inferior because they have few opportunities to listen and speak English in China. What Chinese students learn in China is formal standard written English. Therefore most of them have no problem with reading and writing but do have difficulties in listening and speaking English.

Phongsuwan (1997) studied the relationships between college satisfaction and language ability, and academic performance of international students, and found that: (1) there was a significant relationship between communicative language ability (CLA) and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic and/or personal growth, quality of instruction, services, campus climate, and GPA at the level of 05; (2) there was a significant relationship between GPA and satisfaction with campus climate at the level of 05; (3) there was no significant relationship between GPA and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic and/or personal growth, quality of instruction, and services; and (4) there was no significant relationship between CLA and English studied in school system in home country. Finally, CLA contributed to both college satisfaction and GPA. GPA was positively related to satisfaction with campus climate social life, but not academic aspects of the college.

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In his exploratory research studied international students' perceptions of their experiences in New Zealand, Li (2003) discovered that many students held strong negatives views about the quality of education received. This is indicated by the following comment::

Teachers' teaching competence, course content, and teaching approaches. Some teaching approaches and methods were considered incompatible with students' learning concepts, such as classroom involvement, participation, spontaneous and interactive teaching, group work, and meaning-focused classroom activities. It was pointed out that teachers' lack of linguistic, pedagogical and intercultural communication skills (p. 15)

Cultural Barriers

Cultural differences present additional challenges for Arab and other international students. Adjustment issues concern the degree to which a students' native culture is similar or different in comparison with the local Malaysian culture. In addition to language issues, international students' relation to other cultures may affect their academic performance and learning responses. For instance, students from some countries may have been taught that it is a sign of disrespect to look directly at lectures when they are speaking to them, or to differ in opinion from these of their lecturers. Understanding the audience expectations differ between cultures as well. Students may have been taught to state their opinion directly in discussions. They may have also been taught not to speak in class unless called upon. Depending on their school culture, they may have had more experience memorizing information than criticizing arguments or asking questions. For this reason people from such cultures may be more hesitant to speak up in class discussion than other students. Their writing may also rely heavily on abstract and passive constructions that obscure the direct presentation of their ideas.

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Riedlinger (2008) explained that often problems surrounding transition and adjustment to life can be attributed to anxiety and some time associated with fear of failure. She added that perhaps the most trying aspect of the international students' experience is the fact that while most students undergo a similar adjustment process, they have to deal with their emotions in isolation. Wang and Frank (2002) found out that some international students from Asian countries are particularly sensitive to the need to "save face." If one is providing assistance or instruction for an Asian student and asks if the student understands, it is likely that the student will state that he or she does understand, even if the student fails to understand or is unsure. A response indicating that the student does not understand may reflect negatively on the student and on the instructor. In contrast, directness and assertiveness in communications are generally valued by American students and scholars.

Trice (2001) in her study on faculty perception on graduate students stated that the international students wanted their institutions to help facilitate cultural adjustment by focusing on interaction between American and foreign student. This involved discussion forums for international students to share their experiences, and faculty members' understanding of international students' limitations. Faculty members were aware that language problems were greater than any other issue and many acknowledged the difficulties in cultural adjustment. International students in Malaysia are afforded the opportunity of meeting people of diverse cultures and sub-cultures within Malaysian society, including different ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, different economic and social classes. There is also exposure to different gender roles. International Students experience how individuals in Malaysian society view their place in the society differently. Study in Malaysia provides exposure to multiple and diverse cultural perspectives

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through a unique environment. Furthermore, students interact not only with host nationals, but also with other international students and faculty from diverse cultures and nationalities.

On the other hand, Ramburuth (2001) focused on cross cultural learning behavior in relation to international students because of a pressing need to understand the learning styles, needs and expectations of these student. He explains that despite the strong waves of internationalization in Australia, there is still “insufficient understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds approach their learning, or how they may differ in their learning behavior from local students” (p.1.).

Academic barriers

As newcomers, international students face multiple pressures that may affect their academic performance. Foremost among these is their level of English language proficiency (accent, pronunciation, slang, etc.). But there are many other pressures that may also be encountered. Many international students report that they find the instruction in their classes fast-paced because they must make a number of adjustments. This is not only in relation to language and communication styles, but also in terms of the Malaysian educational system and other cultural and social differences. This is all while trying to absorb new materials and ideas.

Grayson (2005) identifies the nature of the English language problems faced by domestic and international students in four universities to assess the academic achievement of different origin and language groups. He indicates that it is clear that in all four universities, large numbers of

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international and domestic students have shown that they have various aspects of language which were reflected in their implications for academic achievement.

According to Laad & Rudy (1999) the finding of their research indicates a faculty member's instructional style can be a barrier rather than a bridge to students learning. Faculty members should attempt to use alternative examples in conjunction with international students' culture and they should also explain the context, and they should be more flexible. In addition, Trice (2000) believes that the faculty members could play a significant role on international students learning experience. The study revealed that faculty attitude, teaching style and appreciation of native cultures of international students are critical in students' learning.

Lin (2002) points out in his research on Chinese postgraduate student in the U.S. that there is a conflict between students' own learning styles and the American way of teaching and learning. These students could use their prior knowledge as resources for their individual learning, "they had positive learning experiences. Learning challenges for these students included language proficiency in classroom discussions, a lack of training in research skills, a lack of exposure to current research in related fields, and a lack of cultural knowledge or understanding". Furthermore, Xu (2003) in his research about Chinese students' adaptation to learning in an American university emphasized that they had experienced difficulties caused mainly by the language deficiency and the lack of awareness of the great differences in teaching and learning between their home institutions in China.

The obstacles faced by Arab students in Malaysia: Research findings

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The questionnaires were distributed to (326) respondents who made up the Arab postgraduate students population. These students are studying in different majors at five Malaysian universities; Universiti Malaya - University of Malaysia- (UM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) – National University and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM.). The questionnaire was designed to cover three main areas: 1) to examine their English language proficiency barriers; 2) to study the cultural barriers; and finally 3) academic barriers that Arab postgraduate students are facing. This study examined Arab students from 15 Arab countries out of 22 Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Libya,, Somalia, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Algeria, Oman, Egypt, Palestine, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Morocco. Table No. 1 shows the number of students of each country where students lived prior to studying in Malaysia.

Table 1. Nationality of Origin

Country	Number of Students
Iraq	72
Saudi Arabia	61
Yemen	36
Sudan	27
Somalia	24
Libya	21
Egypt	17
Algeria	13
Syria	11
Palestine	9
United Arab Emirates	9
Oman	8
Jordan	8
Lebanon	5

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Morocco	5
TOTAL	326

Language barriers

Most of the Arab graduates students who would like to join Malaysian postgraduate programs take one to one and a half years to complete a required English language program prerequisite. This is if they did not meet the initial criteria of 550 points in TOFEL or 6.0 in IELTS. There is a slight difference in the score that is required by these five universities.

The data shows that 166 (50 %) of the respondents agreed that the lessons taught in these respective academic English programs are generally suitable to their needs in learning English. 160 (49 %) of the respondents agreed that tests and quizzes conducted were suitable to assess their level of English proficiency. 130 (39%) of all the respondents agreed that the duration of the English course was appropriate to their needs in learning English. The data further shows that 100 (30%) of the respondents were satisfied with their English program at their respective universities. But only 116 (35%) of them felt that the lecturers are helpful in assisting them in learning English. The respondents indicated a low 39% (139) percentage of satisfaction about the suitability of the duration of their English course when matched to their learning needs. Similarly as Table 2 also indicates, only 34% (112) were satisfied with prescribed textbooks.

Table 2. Arab Postgraduate Students' Perception about English Language Programs

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No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I like the English Program that I joined at my University	28(8.58%)	100(30.67%)	40(12.26%)	120(36.80%)	38(11.56%)
2	The Lessons taught are suitable with our needs in learning English	20(6.13%)	166(5.092%)	30(9.20%)	80(24.53%)	30(9.20%)
3	The lecturers are helpful in assisting us learning English	30(9.20%)	116(35.58%)	70(21.47%)	50(15.33%)	60(18.40%)
4	Tests and quizzes conduct suitable with my level of English proficiency	50(15.33%)	160(49.07%)	26(7.97%)	50(15.33%)	40(12.26%)
5	Duration of the English course is suitable to our needs in learning English	40(12.26%)	130(39.87%)	36(11.04%)	70(21.47%)	50(15.33%)
6	The textbooks used are suitable for us	36(11.04%)	112(34.35%)	20(6.13%)	88(26.99%)	70(21.47%)

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The survey further showed that only 58 % (190) of students thought that their language learning laboratories were sufficiently good. A majority of 60% (196) believed that provided audio-visual materials (listening and speaking CDs, language learning software, etc.) were inadequate for their needs. In addition, as Table 3 represents, the data revealed a high percentage of the students thought that the library services at their universities (55% or 180), the provision of reference books (67% or 220), and student internet access (74% or 244) were generally inadequate.

Table 3. Facilities Available in Learning English Program

No.	Facilities	Good	Average	Poor
1	Language Laboratories	190(58.28%)	110(33.74%)	26(7.97%)
2	Library	30(9.20%)	116(35.58%)	180(55.21%)
3	Audio Visual Material (Listening and speaking tapes, language software, etc.)	60(18.40%)	70(27.47%)	196(60.12%)
4	Reference Books	40.(12.26%)	66(20.24%)	220(67.48%)
5	Internet access	32(9.81%)	50(15.33%)	244(74.84%)

Likewise, the Arab students did not evaluate their programs highly in terms of the focus of listening, speaking and reading skills. 64% (210) of students thought that their was poor focus on second language listening skills. 53% (174) of students similarly that the English speaking skills focus of their course was poor. However, as Table 4 indicates there was a more positive view of the course focus on reading and writing skills in English as a second language.

Table 4. How Arab Students Evaluate the English Program Skills

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No.	Skill	Good	Average	Poor
1	Listening	40(12.26%)	76(23.31%)	210(64.41%)
2	Speaking	72(22.08%)	80(42.53%)	174(53.37%)
3	Reading	204(62.57%)	72(22.08%)	50(15.33%)
4	Writing	204(62.57%)	82(25.15%)	40(12.26%)

To sum up, the central finding of the survey was that less than half of the Arab student respondents believed that they received adequate quality of and preparation from the university language programs for international students. Another key finding was most students do not think the lessons taught were adequate for the English learning needs. Some of contributing reasons for these problems and general sense of satisfaction were identified as follows: (a) the classes being ‘too big’ (in some cases more than 40 students in one class); (b) the “regular” absence of the lecturers; and (c) “too many holidays”.

It is worth mentioning that due to these limitations and student complaints two cultural attachés from Arab embassies have already visited one of these five universities and raised this matter with people in charge English language programs. The respondent feedback suggests that it is time for universities to take serious measurement to update and revise its English programs as well as building more modern (i.e. digital) language learning labs.

Academic Challenges

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Arab students from different academic cultures have experienced different teaching/learning systems in their home countries. The participating Arab students in this study from UM, UTM, UKM UPM, and IIUM all came from 15 Arab different countries. Therefore, their cultures and education systems are different from Malaysia. The data shows that most of the Arab postgraduate students (61% or 200) at these five Malaysian universities have given high priority to their academic activities. This is especially so in terms of relationships with lecturers and 52% (or 172 students) saw this as a requirement of academic success. The data revealed a number of other significant findings. 74% (242) saw a significant structural difference between the style of teaching and learning in universities in Malaysia and those in their home countries. Another interesting difference is that many Arab students indicated that they accustomed to higher education with a more specialized focus than is the case in Malaysia. The comments of the respondents also indicated that many Arab students come from cultures in which it is not easy to approach the lecturer about the discomfort they are experiencing during their studies. In addition, the comments reveal that Arab students may also feel that they have no one to turn to discuss these problems. As also indicated in Table 5, participants also report changes in their academic plans, and lack of certain types of assistance.

Table 5. Academic System and Arab Postgraduate Students' Challenges

No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Academic system is different from my own country	26(7.97%)	200(61.34%)	20(6.13%)	50(15.33%)	30(9.20%)
2	I face academic difficulties	16(4.90%)	230(70.55%)	8(2.45%)	26(14.11%)	26(7.97%)

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3	Lectures are helpful to solve my academic difficulties	20(6.13%))	170(52.14%)	12(3.68%)	64(19.63%)	60(18.40%)
4	Academic difficulties are affecting my achievement	18(5.52%))	220(67.48%)	20(6.13%)	36(11.04%)	32(9.81%)
5	Methodology of teaching is different from my own country	40(12.26))	242(74.23%)	18(4.90%)	20(6.13%)	8(2.45%)

Cultural barriers

Cultural differences can have an adverse effect on Arab students' ability to develop their language skills and academic performance. The data shows that a low 27% (90) of Arab students at Malaysian universities do not think they suffer from cultural difficulties at university. On the other hand, 68% (224) of all respondents indicated that the emphasis on multiculturalism in Malaysia is a positive for international students. 80% (262) of the respondents agreed that Malaysia is a multi-religious country where people are free to practice their own religion. At the same time, 59% (192) of respondents indicated that they generally saw Malaysian people as welcoming towards foreigners or people from different ethnic backgrounds. Yet the data shows that 47% (156) of Arab students have difficulties finding their favorite food living in Malaysia, and 52% (170) are satisfied at resources or places appropriate for their personal needs. Furthermore, as Table 6 reports, 47% (140) of all respondents indicated that Malaysia's lifestyle and culture is similar to their own.

Table 6. Arab Students' Cultural Challenges at Malaysian Universities

No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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1	I have serious cultural difficulties	22. (6.74.%)	90(27.60%)	18(5.52%)	156(47.85%)	40(12.26%)
2	Multicultural identity in Malaysia is good for international students	20(6.13%)	224(68.71%)	30(9.20%)	18(5.52%)	34(10.42%)
3	Malaysia is a Multi religion country; you are free to practice your own religion	18(5.52%)	262(80.36%)	16(4.90%)	20(6.13%)	10(3.06%)
4	People are welcoming towards foreigners/ people from different ethics backgrounds	34(10.42%)	192(58.89%)	20(6.13%)	50(15.33%)	30(9.20%)
5	I have difficulties to find my favorite food	30(9.20%)	156(47.85%)	30(9.20%)	60(18.40%)	50(15.33%)
6	Limited places available to find my own personal needs	36(11.04%)	170(52.14%)	20(6.13%)	60(18.40%)	40(12.26%)
7	Malaysia's lifestyle and culture is similar to my own	22(6.74%)	144(44.17%)	20(6.13%)	80(24.53%)	60(18.40%)

Table 7 identifies the most troublesome problems encountered by Arab students studying in Malaysia. 54% (178) indicated that the academic barriers were their biggest problem. 35% (116) identified language problems as their main grief. A smaller number of just on 10% (32) were particularly worried about cultural barriers.

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Table 7. Most Troublesome Problems faced by Arab postgraduate Students

the most important troublesome problems	Number of students	Percentage %
Academic challenges	178	54.60%
Language challenges	116	35.58%
Cultural challenges	32	9.81%

Conclusion

International postgraduate students in every country face a range of cultural, academic and often language barriers which they must deal with to achieve successful completion of their studies and academic accreditation. Like other such students Arab students in Malaysia are exposed to views often different from those in their home countries. Living in a different cultural context requires adaptation to the new cultural environment, to the learning of new languages, and also to different contexts of academic education. The present study has thus identified the most troublesome problems encountered by the Arab postgraduate students at five Malaysian universities. These problems faced were ranked as follows: first, academic difficulties; second, languages difficulties; and third, cultural difficulties. The fact that most of the Arab students are Muslims – as is the Malaysian population in general - may explain the lessor figure for cultural challenges. This is despite how many students did link cultural factors to their perception of academic challenges.

A significant number of students were concerned about language barriers. Some of these saw language issues being linked to the cultural obstacles faced. However at all the five universities surveyed, a majority were concerned that the English language learning programs preparing them for academic study were not adequate for their needs and purposes. Amongst other ways in which Malaysian universities might explore greater level of support for Arab and also other international

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students, a key focus might be the improvement or enhancement of the English language courses. Such courses might also incorporate a focus on increased cultural awareness of the local context, as well as being better linked to the particular requirements of academic research and writing.

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