

ENGAGEMENT IN INFORMAL AND FORMAL CROSS-NATIONAL DIVERSITY AMONG LOCAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of engagement in informal and formal cross-national diversity among local undergraduate students in Klang Valley, Malaysia. A survey design was used to reach out to 1000 respondents who were selected using stratified sampling. The respondents were undergraduate students at three selected higher education institutions in Klang Valley. The findings indicate that the level of engagement for informal cross-national diversity is low and the level of engagement in formal cross-national diversity is moderate. The level of engagement for both types of diversity is not satisfactory and can further be improved to ensure that local students will benefit from cross-national diversity engagements.

Keywords:

Informal cross-national diversity engagement, formal cross-national diversity engagement, undergraduate students, Malaysian context, higher education, diverse campus

INTRODUCTION

Statistics have shown an apparent influx of international students into higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, particularly in the last ten years. With a total of 31,674 international students in 2004, the number increased drastically to 110,000 by the end of 2015 (The Sun Daily, 2015). Additionally, with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan for 2007-2020 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2012) in place, Malaysia aims to enrol a total of 200,000 international students by 2020. Thus in years to come, HEIs in Malaysia can expect more international students within their campus.

An increase in the number of international students will result in a racially diverse campus. A racially diverse campus has its own theoretical and practical implications. A greater number of international students on campus increase the probability of local students to come into contact and engage in interaction with international students. Past studies have shown the benefits of contact and interactions with people who are culturally different. Framed upon Allport's Contact Theory (1954), studies have conceptualised and measured contact in two forms: (i) informal interactions and, (ii) formal contexts in learning about culturally dissimilar others. Numerous studies have found that engagement in both formal and informal diversity contributes to a number of positive educational outcomes such as civic-mindedness (Cole & Zhou, 2013; Denson & Bowman, 2011), self-efficacy and general academic skills (Denson & Chang, 2009) and pluralistic skills (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011).

However, for both informal and formal cross-national diversity to yield positive educational outcomes, we must first ascertain if engagement in formal and informal cross-national diversity occurs at a satisfactory level among local undergraduate students. Within Malaysian context, many studies (Mustapha et al., 2009; Tamam et al., 2013; Tamam & Krauss,

2014) have examined the level of engagement in diversity experiences among undergraduate students; however, these studies examined such engagement at an intra-national level. Limited studies have reported such diversity engagement at a cross-national level in which respondents engage in these diversity engagements with students of other nationalities. According to Kamal and Maruyama (1990), cross-national contacts are more complex as compared to intra-national contacts since within intra-national context, members share some common symbols such as language, food and national customs. Therefore, this study aims to: (i) determine the level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity (InformalDE) among local undergraduate students in Klang Valley, (ii) to determine the level of engagement in formal cross-national diversity (FormalDE) among local undergraduate students in Klang Valley

Engagement in Informal and Formal Cross-National Diversity

Informal cross-national diversity engagement (InformalDE) refers to local students' interactions with international students within informal settings. This type of engagement is unstructured and voluntary. Informal cross-national diversity engagement is measured in terms of its quantity and quality (Bowman & Denson, 2011; Bowman & Park, 2015; Bowman et al., 2016; Mayhew & Engberg, 2010). Quantity refers to the number of times respondents engage in informal cross-national diversity. As opposed to superficial contacts judged on the frequency of interactions, quality interactions are more meaningful and reflect a greater amount of intimacy. Formal cross-national diversity, on the other hand, refers to engagement in diverse activities institutionalised by HEIs in increasing interaction and knowledge about cultural others. Thus the activities are more structured and are carried out within formal settings.

Both quantity and quality are important in diversity engagements; however, a number of studies (Bowman & Denson, 2011; Chang et al., 2004; Denson & Chang, 2009; Hurtado, 2005) found that though quality occurs a lot lesser than quantity, the effects of quality are more significant than quantity. This is because quality exhibits the qualities of the four optimal conditions outlined by Allport (1954) which include equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and authority support.

The literature has shown somewhat consistent findings on the level of engagement in formal and informal cross-national diversity. Many studies (Brown & Daly, 2004; Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007; Leask, 2009; Summers & Volet, 2008; Tamam & Abdullah, 2012) found that both local and international students are not interested to engage in both types of diversity experiences, causing the level of engagement in both formal and informal cross-national diversity ranges from low to moderate. Further, Marginson and Wende (2007) found this lack of engagement occurs both inside and outside of classroom. Findings from Leask's (2009) study using focus groups further explain this lack of engagement. International students claimed that local students are avoiding them, and local students expressed difficulty in working with international students.

Brown and Daly (2004) and Cotton et al. (2013), on the other hand, found a slight difference in terms of the level of engagement in formal and informal cross-national diversity between local and international students. Brown and Daly (2004) found that international students are more motivated to engage in cross-national diversity experiences as compared to local students. Brown and Daly (2004) also examined the role of attitude in determining whether or not students would engage in cross-national diversity. They found that the lack of engagement is not attitudinal-based since both international and domestic students indicated a favourable impression of one another. Instead, this lack of cross-national engagements can be explained by various factors such as students' preference to stay within familiar boundaries (Brown & Daly, 2004; Denson & Bowman, 2011). Despite more active engagement of international students,

Denson and Zhang (2010) found that local students demonstrated greater growth in terms of graduate attributes in comparison to international students as a result of the engagement in cross-national diversity. However, most studies focus on international students' engagement in cross-national diversity resulting in the underrepresentation of local students' engagement in diversity experiences within the literature (Jon, 2013; Colvin et al., 2014). Locally, many studies focus on engagement in formal and informal diversity experiences within an intra-national context. At an intra-national level, engagement in diversity experiences is measured based on respondents' contact with other fellow Malaysian students who are mainly the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Contact with students of other nationalities is not included. Tamam et al. (2013) is an example of a study that examined the level of engagement in informal and formal diversity at an intra-national level. The survey was conducted at a Malaysian public university involving Malay, Chinese and Indian undergraduate students. The study found that the level of engagement in diversity experiences as not satisfactory.

A meta-analysis by Bowman (2011) provided a solid evidence for the benefits of engagement in informal and formal diversity. The findings also indicated the stronger role of engagement in informal cross-national diversity as compared to formal cross-national diversity. However, in a survey using longitudinal data set, Chang et al. (2004) found that engagement in formal cross-national diversity has the highest and most consistent effects on student outcomes as compared to informal cross-national interaction. More current studies (Cole & Zhou, 2013; Bowman et al., 2016) have also indicated similar findings, that formal cross-national diversity show consistent effects even post college.

METHOD

Sampling and Data Collection

The population of the study was undergraduate students at three higher education institutions with unique student racial composition characteristics. Based on the statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education, Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology (LUCT) meets the characteristics of Location 1 in which international students are the majority within its population. Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL) meets the characteristics of Location 2 in which there is a balanced composition of local and international students. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) meets the criteria set for Location 3 in which the local students are the majority. Since most universities in Malaysia exhibit heterogeneity characteristics, stratified sampling was used to ensure representativeness of sample across the locations resulting in 1000 respondents involved in the study. At the respective locations, systematic sampling was used to identify the respondents. Respondents were given three days to complete the questionnaires and upon return of the questionnaires, the respondents were given token.

Measurement

Informal cross-national diversity engagement (InformalDE) refers to engagement in voluntary interactions with individuals who are culturally different within informal, unstructured settings. This may include dining, socialising and making friends with international students. Informal cross-national diversity engagement is measured in terms of its quantity and quality. The respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement to ten items on a five-point scale (1= never to 5 = very often). Some of the sample items are "How frequently have you dined with international students in this campus?", "How often do you make friends with international students?" and "How frequently do you share problems with international students in this university?" These items were derived from past studies, and that they have been tested for

validity and reliability in exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses by Yunus et al. (2014) using a Malaysian dataset. The Cronbach’s alpha value of the ten-item informal cross-national diversity engagement model was 0.945.

Formal cross-national diversity engagement (FormalDE) refers to engagement in diverse activities that provide respondents the knowledge about cultural others and opportunities for cross-national interactions within formal, structured settings. FormalDE was measured using six items tapping into respondents’ engagement in diverse structured diversity activities such as enrolment into racial workshops, class assignments and extra-curricular activities. The items are measured using Likert’s five-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). These items were also tested for reliability and validity by Yunus et al. (2014) using a Malaysian dataset. The reported alpha coefficient is 0.831.

In determining the level of engagement of both formal and informal cross-national diversity engagement, the class interval formula is used. Hence, based on Likert’s 5-point scale, a score of 1.00 to 2.33 reflects a low level of engagement; a score of 2.34 to 3.67 reflects a moderate level of engagement; and a score of 3.68 to 5.00 reflects a high level of engagement.

RESULTS

Of the 1000 respondents involved in the study, slightly more than half (54.6%) of the respondents were female, 42.5% male and 2.9% did not indicate their gender. Slightly more than half of the respondents are in the 19 to 21 age category suggesting that most of the respondents were in their first year. Majority of the respondents (70.8%) were Malays, 12.3% were Chinese and 12.9% were Indians showing that all ethnicities are well-represented in the sample. The number of respondents from the three HEIs (LUCT, IUKL and UKM) is comparable based on stratified sampling.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents by Gender, Age, Ethnicity and University

Variables	Percentage			
	All N=1000	LUCT n = 300	IUKL n = 301	UKM n = 399
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	42.5	42.3	53.2	34.6
Female	54.6	56	45.8	60.1
Missing	2.9	1.7	1.0	5.3
<i>Age</i>				
19-21	56.9	58.3	23.9	80.8
22-24	39.4	39.6	66.1	19
25	3.7	2.1	10	0.2
Mean	21.37	21.24	22.51	20.61
SD	1.62	1.58	1.46	1.25
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Malay	70.8	71.7	56.1	81.2
Chinese	12.3	10.0	16.9	10.5
Indian	12.9	13.3	22.3	5.5
Bumiputera	2.9	3.3	3.0	2.5
Others	1.1	1.7	1.7	0.3

Level of Engagement in Informal Cross-National Diversity (InformalDE)

As reflected in Table 2, the level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity for the full sample is generally low. Nearly half of the respondents (48.5%) are found to be least engaged, another 35.5% are moderately engaged and 16% are highly engaged in informal cross-national diversity. This is consistent with the mean ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.02$) which is below the theoretical midpoint score.

The breakdown of the level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity by institutions provides a clearer pattern of the engagement. At LUCT (international students are the majority) and IUKL (with a balanced composition of local and international students), the respondents indicate a higher level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity. At LUCT, almost half of the respondents (41%) are moderately engaged and 22% are highly engaged in InformalDE. The mean is slightly below the theoretical midpoint score ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .99$). At IUKL, more than half of the respondents (51.8%) are moderately engaged and 16.3% are highly engaged in InformalDE. The mean is slightly below the theoretical midpoint score ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .90$). On the other hand, at UKM (local students are the majority), a majority of the respondents (69.4%) show a low level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity, a small number (25%) indicate a moderate level of engagement and a very small number (5.5%) have a high level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity. The mean ($M = 2.000$, $SD = .912$) is below the theoretical midpoint score. From this finding, it can be observed that respondents at locations with a greater number of international students seem to have a higher level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity.

Table 2 Mean and Distribution of Respondents by Level of Engagement in Informal Cross-National Diversity (InformalDE)

Level of Engagement	All	LUCT	IUKL	UKM
	N = 1000	n = 300	n = 301	n = 399
Mean (SD)	2.51 (1.02)	2.84 (.99)	2.86 (.90)	2.00 (.91)
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	48.5%	37%	31.9%	69.4%
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	35.5%	41%	51.8%	25%
High (3.68 – 5.00)	16%	22%	16.3%	5.5%

Note: LUCT=Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology, IUKL=Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, UKM=Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
On Likert's 5-point scale

Level of Engagement in Formal Cross-National Diversity (FormalDE)

As shown in Table 3, respondents indicate a slightly greater level of engagement in formal cross-national diversity as compared to informal cross-national diversity. For the full sample, a majority of the respondents (45.7%) are moderately engaged in formal diversity. The mean is also slightly higher ($M = 2.694$, $SD = .867$) than the mean score for informal cross-national diversity.

When disaggregated by institutions, the engagement in formal cross-national diversity seems to show a similar pattern with the level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity. Respondents at LUCT (international students are the majority) and IUKL (a balanced composition of local and international students) show a higher level of engagement in FormalDE as compared to respondents at UKM (local students are the majority). LUCT shows that majority of the respondents (45%) moderately participated in FormalDE. This percentage corresponds with the mean ($M = 2.922$, $SD = .878$) which is very close to the theoretical midpoint. At IUKL, more than half of the respondents (56.5%) are engaged in FormalDE. As for UKM, more than half of the respondents (54.9%) show a low level of engagement in FormalDE.

Table 3 Mean and Distribution of Respondents by Level of Engagement in Formal Cross-National Diversity (FormalDE)

Level of Engagement	All	LUCT	IUKL	UKM
	N = 1000	n = 300	n = 301	n = 399
Mean (SD)	2.69 (.87)	2.92 (.88)	2.88 (.80)	2.38 (.82)
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	33.3%	33.7%	29.9%	54.9%
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	45.7%	45%	56.5%	38.3%
High (3.68 – 5.00)	13.2%	21.3%	13.6%	6.8%

Note: LUCT: Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology, IUKL: Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, UKM: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
On Likert's 5-point scale

Based on the percentage and mean score for both informal cross-national diversity engagement ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.02$) and formal cross-national diversity engagement ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .87$), the respondents seem to show a slightly higher engagement in formal cross-national diversity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study was carried out to determine the level of engagement in informal and formal cross-national diversity among local undergraduate students in selected universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The findings indicate a low level of engagement in informal cross-national interactional diversity and a moderate level of engagement in formal cross-national diversity. In general, the level of engagement for both types of diversity is not satisfactory.

The low level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity (InformalDE) is not new. This finding concurs with most studies done on interracial interactions within higher education contexts (Brown & Daly, 2004; Eisenclas & Trevaskes (2007); Leask (2009); Summers & Volet (2008). Locally, studies by Mustapha et al. (2009) and Tamam and Abdullah (2012) on level of engagement in informal intra-national diversity indicate similar finding which implies that even among multi-ethnic Malaysian respondents, the level of engagement in interaction was found to be low and not satisfactory.

In further understanding the pattern of engagement in informal cross-national diversity (InformalDE), the findings are disaggregated by the institutions. The institutions demonstrate unique types of student composition in which LUCT has international students making the majority; IUKL has a balanced composition of local and international students; and UKM has local students making the majority. Based on the descriptive data, respondents at LUCT and IUKL demonstrated a higher level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity (InformalDE) as compared to UKM. It seems to imply that a greater number of international students on campus increase the probability of engaging in informal cross-national interaction. UKM, with the least number of international students, shows a low level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity among its respondents.

A low level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity indicates that local students do not engage much in voluntary interactions within informal settings with international students. Despite the known benefits of intergroup interaction towards various educational outcomes, local students do not seem to capitalise on this resource. Summers and Volet (2008) acknowledged the reservations that local students face in engaging in cross-national interactions. A plausible explanation to this reservation is the preference towards in-group members. Some studies (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007) found that the lack of informal cross-national interaction could be due to students' preference to stay within familiar boundaries. This can further be explained by Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions which theorises that members of the collectivistic culture tend to favour in-group members who are similar. Thus, in the context of this study, the respondents' lack of engagement in informal cross-national diversity could be due to their preference engaging in informal interactions with their fellow Malaysian friends rather than with the international students.

A low level of engagement in informal cross-national diversity also indicates that informal cross-national diversity occurs at a superficial level, which means that informal cross-national diversity engagement demonstrates quantity and thereof lack of quality. This should be a cause for concern since earlier studies have indicated the importance of quality over quantity in cross-national interaction. Quality of interaction is paramount and that quantity does not equate quality (Leask, 2009). Therefore, informal cross-national diversity engagement must not be left to chances instead it must be systematically planned and executed. Hence, higher education institutions must play their pivotal role in manipulating or planning such activities.

As for formal cross-national diversity engagement, the findings indicate a moderate level of engagement. The engagement in formal diversity is slightly higher than engagement in informal cross-national diversity. This finding concurs with the literature (Bowman, 2011; Glass, 2011; Jon, 2013; Tamam & Krauss, 2014).

Analysis according to the institutions revealed a similar pattern with informal cross-national diversity engagement. Institutions with greater number of international students (LUCT and IUKL) show a greater level of engagement in formal diversity among their respondents as compared to UKM which has a very small number of international students. Due to students' preference to stay within familiar boundaries (Arkoudis et al., 2013), engagement in formal cross-national diversity may be more tolerable since it is institutionalised and not self-initiated thus explains a greater level of engagement as compared to informal cross-national diversity. This is pertinent as a number of studies (Chang et al., 2004; Bowman et al., 2016) found that formal diversity has a more consistent effect on student outcomes as compared to informal cross-national interactions.

The findings have somewhat indicated that student racial composition seems to play a role in the level of engagement in informal and formal cross-national diversity. The role of student composition was not much explored in earlier studies, particularly within Malaysian setting thus the contribution of the present study. This was feasible since the study involved multiple sites

which exhibit unique characteristics in terms of student racial composition for data collection. Nonetheless, the finding is based on descriptive data. In further understanding the role of student composition in terms of its direct and indirect effect, more advanced statistical analyses can be used.

In conclusion, higher education institutions must play an active role in institutionalising activities that promote engagement in cross-national diversity among the students. Intervention programmes should be designed to include both the informal and formal types of engagement and with much consideration given not only to the quantity but also the quality of the programmes.

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