



## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: CULTURAL SPACE AMONG PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA



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### ABSTRACT

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The article aims to examine cultural diversity levels and problems among students in Malaysian public universities (PU) covering six cultural diversity criteria, namely ethnicity, language, religion, gender, socioeconomic status as well as mental and physical abilities. Respondents consisted of 330 students who had met two requirements: coming from different varieties of cultural backgrounds and were students of semester three and above. The research instrument used was a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire consisted of 30 item questions. The findings showed that Cronbach's alpha value showed strong reliability of more than 0.7. Actual study findings showed that the language, gender and religion criteria were at high; medium level for mental and physical abilities and ethnicity criteria; low level for socioeconomic status criterion. As for the problems of cultural diversity, all six criteria showed low level. Correlational relationship between the problems of cultural diversity criteria also demonstrated that each criterion had a weak significant relationship between the overall cultural diversity with an  $r$  value of less than 0.29 ( $p < 0.01$ ). It was discovered that socioeconomic status criteria needed to be emphasised as the criteria level value was still low and should be given attention. It can be concluded that there were almost no cultural diversity problems among PU students. The implication of this study is expected to facilitate the designing of strategic plans to address the issues among the various cultures in Malaysia.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature of understanding and the acceptance of cultural diversity among public university students in Malaysia. This study uses a new quantitative approach to students at public universities. This study documents important evidence in facilitating students with productive ethnic relation courses at the university level.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Racial diversity in Malaysia has created a variety of socio-cultural patterns which is a lifestyle practice and civilisation of society, emerging from self-interest and tendency of the society regarding various aspects of life, to provide satisfaction and stimulate the development of the community life. Cultural diversity is based on the

principles and concept of a nation-state that emphasises on regional, linguistic and cultural unity. It has been accepted in response to the national management by incorporating cultural diversity in political society (Journet, 2009; Kastoryano, 2009).

Cultural diversity is a special characteristic that exists in Malaysia as the result of different religions and races of the people. Thus, this cultural diversity is strongly emphasised as one of the six aspirations of the education system in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The system aspiration states "an educational system that offers sharing of experience and value to children by respecting diversity" (National Education Blueprint 2013-2025). This effort aims to produce people who are proud to be known as Malaysians despite being born of different ethnicities, religions or economic statuses. The formation of this national identity will create a Malaysian society that understands one another, unites towards a harmonious society (Shamsul, 2012).

Cultural diversity is often associated with national unity and integration which is the main agenda that has been the focus of state leadership since the beginning of independence. Various slogans, mottos and watchwords as well as programmes have been organised for the purpose of strengthening unity and inter-racial relations via various policies planned (Sarjit and Charanjit, 2010). According to Ding (2014) national unity that is closely related to security and which can determine the national development is the basis in the sustainability of our prosperity. Therefore, every Malaysian has to play an active and positive role as an agent to reduce racial conflicts on the one hand and improving national unity on the other.

The evaluation of cultural diversity can basically be seen through six criteria which include ethnicity, religion, language, gender, socioeconomic status and mental and physical abilities (Banks and Banks, 2016). Each of these criteria has its own distinct groups such as ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians are under ethnicity, and religious groups of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are under the criteria of religion, which then make up a Malaysian society. From the educational context, according to Riojas *et al.* (1996) four levels of awareness on cultural diversity via education are discovery of ethnic identity, knowledge development in language and literacy proficiency, refinement in the methods of teaching and learning the cultures, and selection of teaching styles.

Thus, in order to study the diversity of Malaysian cultures, a special observation on the diversity of Malaysian society needs to be done thoroughly and deeply involving all ages. Each age group will play a different role in the development of a nation state. Therefore, the research of this article focuses more on cultural diversity research in the context of education among Malaysian Public University students in Malaysia who are the asset of the nation and country.

### *1.1. Cultural Space in Multicultural Education in Malaysia*

Multicultural education is an idea, an education reform movement, and a process with a primary goal to change the structure of institutional education for gender equality, disability, racial diversity, ethnicity, language and culture in education (Banks and Banks, 2001). In addition, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) defines multicultural education as a responsive culture practice. While Nieto (2004) defines multicultural education as "anti-racism education" which is an important process for all students. This education is also featured as learning through experience, creative experience activities and relationships with local communities. Each individual has his own 'cultural space' where he can understand the life paths of the people around as the result of the relationships between humans as well as between humans and the environment through the expression of life. In addition, Choi (2009) defines various cultural spaces as spaces in which various cultures disperse and produce multicultural phenomena.

According to Choi (2009) cultural space characteristics include, firstly, having a multicultural space that brings about phenomena related to cultural exchange and coexistence. Cultural space is a stage for cultural exchange which was formed by the movement of human history and culture (Keith, 2005). Secondly, cultural space with regard to cultural exchange policies and plans and the blending that disperses globally and locally. Thirdly, a

cultural space includes normative ethics and ideals of democracy which assume the recognition of cultural diversity. A multicultural space is a recognition space that acknowledges the cultural diversity of its members.

In the context of Malaysia, a country with pluralistic society creating differences between ethnics in terms of culture and religion and has a cultural space. However, every person is given the freedom to practice religion and culture (Nazri *et al.*, 2011). In politics, the election of leaders is determined by an election that gives recognition to justice to the people. In terms of economy, the introduction of national development policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Development Policy, the Five Year Development Plan, the National Education Policy, the National Culture Policy, the National Welfare Policy have considered the views of the people despite the Malays getting privileged positions as stipulated in the Federal Constitution through Article 153 (Syed, 2007).

Multicultural education is manifested in the efforts of the Ministry of Education through a curriculum that continually improves the education syllabus in the aspects of nationhood, civic and history at schools to strengthen community solidarity value among students (Samsudin, 2016). This is in line with the aspiration of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) to create a Malaysian society with a spirit of love for the nation, unity and compassion, fostering patriotism value and multicultural awareness must be applied from the early years of schooling. This is because patriotism is often associated with loyalty and love for the country itself. A person is considered patriotic when his belief, practice and action conform to the characteristics of patriotism based on love and loyalty towards the nation (Nik, 2002).

At the higher learning institutional level, in 2007, the Ministry of Education has made it compulsory for all Public Universities and followed by Private Higher Learning Institutions to make the Ethnic Relations Module a compulsory subject (Siti *et al.*, 2017). This compulsory subject has its own distinctive value-added as students are not only assessed based on classroom knowledge and skills in Malaysia current issues but it is also a feature in the development of an ideal citizen (Robiah and Zahara, 1992). Nationhood subjects such as Ethnic Relations are a tool of political socialisation for students. In this regard, it emphasises on knowledge of the country's history, government system, basic constitutional principles, government procedures and legislative matters. This effort is in line with the nation's objective to ensure its citizens possess political education so that Malaysia can achieve the status of a developed nation by 2020 with a high percentage of political literacy.

Hence, in attempting to develop a society with high political literacy, efforts and strategies to reach this phenomenon need to be constantly renewed and modified to meet the contents and needs of the multicultural society in the country. Studies on multicultural education among Public University students in Malaysia should cover the cultural diversity element itself as well as examine the current issues and problems.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Study Location, Population and Sample

This study was conducted using quantitative method involving a questionnaire instrument. The study was carried out on Malaysian Public University (PU) students comprising 20 PUs all across Malaysia under the management of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and particularly conducting the policies outlined by the ministry. Selection of the study sample was based on two requirements of the study sample selection that had been specified; that the sample has to comprise various cultural backgrounds and must be a student of semester three and above. These two requirements were to ensure that the cultural diversity in Malaysian society would be portrayed in the study sample as well as the need to ensure that the selected students had become adaptive to the university atmosphere. Due to those reasons, the sample of the study was directly selected among the students who were in the PU Student Representative Council in order to comply with these sampling requirements Table 1.

Table-1. Total Number of Respondents.

Zone	Public University (PU)	Number of Samples
North Zone	Universiti Utara Malaysia	19
	Universiti Malaysia Perlis	22
	Universiti Sains Malaysia	20
Middle Zone	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris	20
	Universiti Malaya	17
	Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia	16
	Universiti Teknologi Mara	25
	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	26
	Universiti Putra Malaysia	16
	Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia	17
	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia	11
South Zone	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka	14
	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia	5
	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	10
East Coast Zone	Universiti Malaysia Terengganu	13
	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin	18
	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan	12
	Universiti Malaysia Pahang	18
Borneo Zone	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak	11
	Universiti Malaysia Sabah	20
Total		330

Source: Student Affairs Department of each public universities.

## 2.2. Study Instrument

The questionnaire was constructed by dividing it into three sections in which part A was respondents' background. While Section B was related with the questions based on the six criteria of cultural diversity by Banks and Banks (2016) which included ethnicity, language, religion, gender, socioeconomic status as well as mental and physical abilities where each contained five items. Section C contained the questions regarding cultural diversity problems which covered the problems in ethnicity, language, religion, gender, socioeconomic status as well as mental and physical abilities Table 2.

Table-2. Study Instrument.

Section	Description	Variable	Number of item	Item Source
A	Respondent Background	Age	4	Self-built according to the needs of the study
		Sex	2	
		Ethnic	4	
		Religion	5	
		Education Program	4	
		Field of Study	8	
		Semester of Study	7	
B	Cultural Diversity	Household income	6	Built and modified from Banks and Banks (2016)
		Language Criteria	5	
		Economic Criteria	5	
		Mental and Physical Potential Criteria	5	
		Gender Criteria	5	
C	Issues in Cultural Diversity	Religion Criteria	5	Built and modified from Banks and Banks (2016)
		Ethnic Criteria	5	
		Language Criteria	21	
		Economic Criteria	21	
		Mental and Physical Potential Criteria	21	
Gender Criteria	20			
Religion Criteria	21			
Ethnic Criteria	21			

Source: Banks and Banks (2016).

### 2.3. Instrument Reliability

Table 3 shows the reliability of the variable and criteria elements with the Cronbach's alpha value that measures the internal consistency of variables. According to George and Mallery (2003) the Cronbach's alpha value is classified based on reliability index classification where the value range of 0.90-1.00 is considered very high, 0.70-0.89 is high, 0.30-0.69 is moderate and 0.00-0.30 is low. The results of the analysis showed that the Cronbach's alpha values were at high and very high classifications, which exceeded 0.70. The instrument of this study had high reliability based on George and Mallery (2003) classification.

Table-3. Reliability of Study Questionnaire.

Variable	Criteria	Number of Items	Alpha Cronbach
Cultural Diversity	Language Criteria	5	.743
	Economic Criteria	5	.867
	Mental and Physical Potential Criteria	5	.787
	Gender Criteria	5	.889
	Religious Criteria	5	.826
	Ethnic Criterion	5	.881
Issues in Cultural Diversity	Language Criteria	21	.977
	Economic Criteria	21	.985
	Mental and Physical Potential Criteria	21	.979
	Gender Criteria	20	.977
	Religious Criteria	21	.983
	Ethnic Criterion	21	.979

Source: George and Mallery (2003).

## 3. STUDY FINDINGS

### 3.1. Respondents' Background

The total number of respondents involved in this study was 330 students consisting of 165 males and 165 females of 267 ethnic Malays, 26 ethnic Chinese, 11 ethnic Indians and 26 ethnic Sabah Sarawak. From the 330 respondents, 287 students were Muslims, 19 were Buddhists, 15 were Christians and nine were Hindus. Based on the household income fraction, the survey respondents were consisted of B40 and M40 household income families. B40 household income is a family with income of RM3000 and below while the M40 is a family with income of RM6275 and below (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). The B40 income showed a percentage of more than 50 per cent of the total study respondents Table 4.

Table-4. Respondents' Background.

Respondent background		N	%
Sex	Man	165	50.0
	Women	165	50.0
	Total	330	100
Religion	Islam	287	87.0
	Buddha	19	5.8
	Christian	15	4.5
	Hindu	9	2.7
	Total	330	100
Races	Malay	267	80.9
	Chinese	26	7.9
	India	11	3.3
	Ethnic Sabah / Sarawak	26	7.9
	Total	330	100
Household income	B40	179	54.2
	M40	151	45.8
	Total	330	100

Source: Research findings.

### 3.2. The Level of Cultural Diversity of Public University Students in Malaysia

The level of cultural diversity of public university students in Malaysia was identified through the values of mean (M), standard deviation (SD) and level. The level categorisation was done based on the scale by Landell (1997) as in Table 4. Score 1.00-2.33 is in the low level category, score 2.34-3.66 is in the moderate level category and score 3.67-5.00 is in the high level category Table 5.

**Table-5. Cut Off Point Level for Each Study Variable.**

Scale	Level Interpretation
Score 1.00 - 2.33	Low
Score 2.34-3.66	Moderate
Score 3.67-5.00	High

Source: Landell (1997).

Table 6 shows the level of the cultural diversity of public university students in Malaysia divided into six criteria, namely language, socioeconomic status, mental and physical abilities, gender, religion and ethnicity. The overall level of the cultural diversity of public university students in Malaysia was at a moderate level with the value of  $M=3.55$  and  $SD=.509$ . For the language ( $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=.682$ ), gender ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=.880$ ) and religion ( $M=4.34$ ,  $SD=.617$ ) criteria were at high level respectively. Meanwhile, mental and physical abilities ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=.745$ ) and ethnicity ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=.885$ ) criteria demonstrated moderate levels. The last one is the socioeconomic status criterion, the findings showed that the level of this criterion was at low level with  $M=2.44$  and  $SD=.943$ . This demonstrates that socioeconomic status criterion needs to be highlighted at higher education level in line with the human development concept that emphasises on the principles of development sharing and human wellbeing (Kiky and Junaenah, 2015).

**Table-6. The level of the Cultural Diversity among Public University students in Malaysia.**

Element	Low level		Moderate Level		High Level		M	SD	Overall Level*
	N	%	N	%	N	%			
Overall culture diversity	4	1.2	205	62.1	121	36.7	3.55	.509	Moderate
Language	11	3.3	156	47.3	163	49.4	3.71	.682	High
Socio economic status	165	50.0	132	40.0	33	10.0	2.44	.943	Low
Mental and physical capabilities	26	7.9	203	61.5	101	30.6	3.33	.745	Moderate
Gender	15	4.5	105	31.8	210	63.6	3.92	.880	High
Religion	1	0.3	49	14.8	280	84.8	4.34	.617	High
Ethnic	30	9.1	145	43.9	155	47.0	3.57	.885	Moderate

\*Source: Landell (1997).

### 3.3. The Level of Cultural Diversity Problems of Public University Students in Malaysia

The level of cultural diversity problems among public university students in Malaysia was identified through the values of mean, standard deviation and level. Level categorisation was done based on the scale by Landell (1997) as previously shown in Table 4. Table 7 shows the level of cultural diversity of public university students in Malaysia which was divided into six criteria, namely language, socioeconomic status, mental and physical abilities, gender, religion and ethnicity. The overall level of cultural diversity problems among public university students in Malaysia was at low level with the value of  $M=1.35$  and  $SD=.566$ . The findings also showed that the problems of all six criteria were at low levels where the language ( $M=1.40$ ,  $SD=.633$ ), socioeconomic status ( $M=1.33$ ,  $SD=.633$ ), mental and physical abilities ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=.880$ ) gender ( $M=1.37$ ,  $SD=.617$ ), religion ( $M=1.25$ ,  $SD=.572$ ) and ethnicity ( $M=1.31$ ,  $SD=.592$ ) problems showed low levels for both criteria.

This demonstrates that there were less problems on cultural diversity among Public University students in Malaysia based on all six criteria through higher educational efforts. The efforts by the Ministry of Education making it compulsory for all Public Universities to make the Ethnic Relations Module a compulsory subject seemed

to be successful in strengthening the ethnic diversity gap among students (Siti *et al.*, 2017). Multicultural education can be seen through the efforts of the Ministry of Education via curriculum that continually improves the syllabus related to nationhood, civic and history in schools to strengthen the value of community solidarity among students (Samsudin, 2016).

**Table-7.** The Level of the Cultural Diversity Problems among Public University Students in Malaysia.

Element	Low level		Moderate Level		High Level		Min	SD	Overall level*
	N	%	N	%	N	%			
Overall Cultural Diversity Problem	306	92.7	24	7.3	0.0	0.0	1.35	.566	Low
Language	233	70.6	73	22.1	24	7.3	1.40	.633	Low
Socio economic status	256	77.6	51	15.5	23	7.0	1.33	.633	Low
Mental and physical capabilities	223	67.6	85	25.8	22	6.7	1.41	.631	Low
Gender	231	70.0	79	23.9	20	6.1	1.37	.617	Low
Religion	272	82.4	40	12.1	18	5.5	1.25	.572	Low
Ethnic	258	78.2	54	16.4	18	5.5	1.31	.592	Low

\*Source: Landell (1997).

**3.4. Relationship between Cultural Diversity and the Problems in Cultural Diversity Criteria**

Correlational relationship between the cultural diversity and problems in cultural diversity criteria was classified according to the Cohen (1988) strength of relationship/correlation which was interpreted in three categories, namely weak (0.10 <r< 0.29), moderate (0.30 <r< 0.49) and high (0.50 <r< 1.0) Table 8.

**Table-8.** Classification of the Strength of Relationship/Correlation.

R	Relationship Interpretation
0.10 to 0.29	Weak
0.30 to 0.49	Moderate
0.50 to 1.0	Strong

Where is +1.00 <r <-1.00.

Source: Cohen (1988).

Table 9 shows the correlation between cultural diversity and the problems of cultural diversity criteria, namely language, socioeconomic status, mental and physical abilities, gender and religion. Overall, the table shows that every problem of cultural diversity criteria has a weak significant relationship with the overall cultural diversity where r value is less than 0.3, p<0.01. This demonstrates that the problem in terms of language, socioeconomic status, religion and ethnicity are seen as having a stronger relationship with the overall cultural diversity compared with gender and religion which is in line with the opinion of Nazri *et al.* (2011) stating that every individual in Malaysia is given the freedom of religion and culture without seeing each of these aspects as a constraint in life.

**Table-9.** Correlational Relationship Between Cultural Diversity Criteria.

Variable	Overall culture diversity	
	r	p
Language Problems	.247 **	.000
Socio Economic Status Problems	.246 **	.000
Physical Mental Potential Problems	.196 **	.000
Gender issues	.167 **	.000
Religious Problems	.226 **	.000
Ethnic Problems	.218 **	.000

\*\* is significant at p <0.01.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The cultural diversity level among Public University students in Malaysia for the six criteria of cultural diversity has evidently demonstrated that language, gender and religion criteria were at high average levels while the mental and physical abilities as well as ethnicity criteria were at moderate average levels. However, as for the socioeconomic status criteria, the findings showed that this criteria was at a low average level which means that this element needs to be emphasised and given attention to in improving the cultural diversity of students at the PU level. In terms of cultural diversity problems, the six criteria were at low average levels. This shows that there is almost no cultural diversity problem among PU students. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be able to assist in the designing of strategic measures to address the issues concerning multicultural communities in Malaysia, starting at the level of students who are pursuing their studies at higher learning institutions. To examine the problems of cultural diversity even deeper, it is suggested that further studies to be conducted by involving focused groups such as the minority groups of Malaysians such as ethnic Chinese, Indian, and Sabah and Sarawak. This is because there are not enough studies that focused on the cultural diversity problems faced by the minority groups of Malaysians, besides the cultural changes that are taking place in the Malaysian society today. Therefore, in creating a Malaysian society that is culturally diverse, living in harmony and unity, continuous efforts of all parties, whether from the society or the government, are necessary to make Malaysia a prosperous and peaceful country. Cooperation between all parties is important to build a Malaysian nation that has a truly deep love for the country.

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