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## INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON THE LOCAL STUDENTS' LIFE EXPERIENCES

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### Abstract:

This research explored the local students' interaction with their international peers and investigated whether they consider the inclusion of international students has positively or negatively affected their education experiences. This study found that the local students were somewhat comfortable as they did not mind having international students on campus. They value the interactions that they had with the international students as they got to learn about different cultures and broaden their worldview. The local students revealed that they do face challenges in working in group activities or assignments with international students due to differences in English language abilities and attitudes towards the quality of work and time management. They also expressed interest and willingness to participate in university events or programmes that would enable them to socialise with the international students. They believe that universities should organize more events that would encourage interaction between local and international so they could form a stronger bond. It is recommended that strategies be put into place by both private and public universities to organize meaningful events or programmes that would foster greater understanding and appreciation of diversity on campus and promote a harmonious environment for a conducive multinational campus.

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**Keywords:**

Internationalization, International Students, Local Student, Life Experiences

## Introduction

UNESCO benchmarking reported that the annual total expenditure of the higher education sector of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) is equivalent to 16.8% of the annual Government of Malaysia's expenditure (*Quickfacts*, 2018). Conversely, in accordance with the significant investment in higher education, the output can be considered very low where in relation to output Malaysia is ranked 42 out of 50 countries (Williams & Leahy, 2018). Therefore, Malaysia's internationalisation approach and rationale require extensive initiatives, strategies, and efforts to fulfil the aim to become an excellent international higher education hub (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2014).

The primary rationale for internationalisation of higher education is for intercultural knowledge exchange (Knight, 2016). Although there are several researches that have examined the educational experiences based on international students' point of view, there are only a few researches that have examined the possible impact of internationalisation on local students and the host institutions.

## Background of The Study

As a result of globalization, numerous changes are affecting every facet of life around the world. One such facet includes the lives of students at tertiary institutions of learning. Globalization has redefined the context in which higher education now occurs, as profound global changes are integrating the world into one extensive system. Educational globalization which is the cross-national flow of knowledge, ideas, and competencies (Sharma, 2017) has resulted in the growth of internationalisation of higher education.

As Rizvi (2005) described, international students are the new global generation. In the context of Malaysia, there has been a growing influx of international students in institutions of higher learning. Like other Asian countries, Malaysia is paying more attention to the criteria in internationalizing the higher education system to become an international higher education hub in the region (Shahijan, Rezaei, & Preece, 2016). The Higher Education Ministry Secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur in her welcoming address at the Going Global 2018 Conference said the country has a target to enrol 200,000 international students in Malaysia by the year 2020 and 250,000 in 2025. "Currently, we have achieved 170,000 students from over 135 countries. They are from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa" (*The Star*, 6 May 2018). She mentioned that Malaysia Higher Education accessibility has improved significantly from 14% in the eighties to more than 44% in 2016. In fact, she said Malaysia's Gross Enrolment Ratio in 2016 of 44% is higher than most of the ASEAN countries and higher than the world average of 37%.

Currently, there are 20 public universities, 37 Polytechnics and 105 Community Colleges. There are 477 private higher education institutions, of which 53 are private universities and 36 are private university colleges. The Higher Education Ministry is eyeing earnings of RM6 billion through a projection of 200,000 international students in the country by 2020. Although

influx of the international students is important both economically and socially, it is also timely and important to acknowledge the need to study the local students' perception in particular the dynamics of classroom learning with the presence of international students in educational settings. To date, there is little literature in this area.

### **Problem Statement**

Internationalisation has become a key driver of change in higher education, both in developed countries and in emerging and developing societies (deWitt, 2019). deWitt (2019) asserted that in the period 2010–2020, in addition to the number of international students doubling to 5 million, there has been an increase in franchise operations, articulation programmes, branch campuses, and online delivery of higher education. When it comes to Malaysia, there has always been a realisation of the positive impact of international students' enrolment on the country's economic growth. Therefore, Malaysia also aims to increase its GDP through education services. This was highlighted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) by setting a target of 250,000 international students by the year 2025. According to the Education Ministry secretary-general, Datuk Mohd Ghazali Abas, from the data, Malaysia has made an average of RM7.2 billion per year from revenue sources like tuition fees, living expenses and other services during a student's course of study in the country. He said, "Given the rising cost of education and other related costs at 10 per cent per annum, this sector is expected to generate RM15.6 billion when we hit our target of 200,000 international students by the year 2020," in his keynote address at the Internationalisation of Higher Education 2019 Conference (*Malay Mail*, 12 Sept 2019). As of March 2019, the enrolment of international students in Malaysia had reached 127,583, of which 70 per cent are from private higher education institutions and the rest from public higher education institutions.

Due to the importance of internationalisation to the economic growth of Malaysia, researches focussing on international students' experiences have been gaining momentum. The review of recent researches (Knight-Grofe, & Rauh, 2016, Welkulo, 2019) showed that researches have been carried out in Europe, Australia, and North America and have focused on the interaction between local and international students in different institutions of higher learning. These studies found that a variety of research methods were employed and there were similar and divergent findings and conclusions. Through the reviewed literature, it is clear that discourse within higher education has moved towards deeper issues of learning outcomes, and the nature and quality of interactions among diverse student populations. In addition, it points out that there are gaps in research, thus more questions need to be asked and answered. According to Schreiber (2011) and Wu and Wilkes (2017), there is a lack of systematic studies to examine the impact of the steady increase in the number of international students on local students and host institutions. Given that there is now an increasing number of international students in Malaysia, there is a need for a study to explore local students' perspectives of sharing education with international students in the Malaysian education context.

### **Literature Review**

The studies on internationalisation gained momentum beginning early 2000. Barger (2004) investigated the impact of international students on local students in U.S. institutions of higher education through quantitative and qualitative analyses. Eight areas of impact were identified: educational experience, cross-cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural competence, the academic environment, international interest, the role of the institution, perception of international students, and interest in cross-cultural interaction. Quantitative analysis of the study showed

that local students are generally positive about all eight aspects. Qualitative analyses further support these quantitative findings. Barron (2006) examined local students' perception of sharing education with international students in Australian classrooms. The study found that while the majority of local students' view international students from a positive perspective, a sizeable proportion of students considered that there are too many international students and that a number of racist incidents appeared to have taken place on the campus. A quarter of the respondents also considered that the standard of quality of their educational experience had been negatively affected by the number of international students. Dunne (2009) explored local students' perception of intercultural contact with international students at an Irish University. The study found that the local students perceive intercultural contact to be associated with heightened uncertainty and anxiety as well as demanding. Language barrier and the need to adapt communication styles are also cited as important issues affecting intercultural encounters.

Montgomery (2009) conducted a study which focused on students' perception of working with diverse groups in a British university. It was reported in the study that many students considered cross-cultural group work as part of their learning experience, which potentially prepares them for work in international contexts. The study also found that students tended to minimize the divide between cultures. Ngobia (2011) investigated the interactions between local and international university students and the impact of internationalisation on local students. The local students reported that internationalisation affected them both positively and negatively. Among the positive benefits stated are improvement of intercultural communication levels, and personal development. They also cited language barriers and the unfamiliarity of social mannerisms as factors that contributed to the negative impacts of internationalisation. Schreiber (2011) conducted a qualitative study to explore the interactions and perceptions of international students from the local students' point of view. The study found that local students generally viewed favourably the presence of international students on campus. However, the students cited several difficulties resulting from internationalisation, such as language barrier and perceived unapproachability of international students. Weber (2011) explored the impacts of internationalisation on international Chinese and local Canadian students' intercultural relations. The study reported that the students learned from their intercultural interactions, but sometimes the interactions led to frustration or defensiveness and strengthened the beliefs that it is difficult to relate with those who were culturally different. Lack of mutual understanding of cultures was also cited as a barrier to intercultural communication. The primary rationale for internationalisation in higher education is for intercultural knowledge exchange (Knight, 2016).

Although there have been a number of researches that examine the educational experiences based on international students' point of view, there has been little research to examine the possible impact of internationalisation on local students. According to Schreiber (2011) and Wu and Wilkes (2017), there is a lack of researches to examine the impact of international students on local students. Given that there is now an increasing number of international students in Malaysia, there is a need for a study to explore the areas.

### Research Questions

The following are the research questions for the study:

RQ 1: How do the local students perceive their interaction with the international students?

RQ 2: What is the influence of international students on the local students' life experiences?

RQ 3: In what way are the local students willing to be involved with international students in the future?

### Methodology

The data was collected using both survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The survey was administered online and data was gathered from 342 respondents which comprise undergraduates from both public and private universities in Selangor, Malaysia. All the students have had experiences interacting with international students. Semi-structured interview questions were used. The FGD was conducted among three groups of undergraduates from public and private universities in Selangor. The first group comprised of students pursuing degree programmes at public universities, the second group were undergraduates from private universities and the third group, a mixture of both public and private universities' undergraduates. All three groups have a combination of male and female participants with a total number of four participants in each group. There were nine questions to support the research objectives and research questions. Every student responded to each question in detail. Due to the pandemic and lack of access to meet face-to-face, all FGD recordings were done via Zoom and audio recording. Each FGD took approximately one hour to have balanced involvement by all participants.

The researchers maintained ethical practices in doing research by protecting the identity of participants and respecting participants by obtaining written permission from them. The participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis technique employed was thematic analysis and it was carried out to identify popular trends in the responses.

### Results and Discussion

Past studies on internationalisation in Malaysia examined the dynamics of education experienced by local students with the influence of international students. This study mirrored the study by Barger (2004) who investigated the impact of international students on local students in institutions of higher learning using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

However, for this study the data on the impact of internationalisation was gathered from both the public and private universities. Hence, the first part of the study was based on survey data gathered from a total of 342 respondents comprising local students from selected private and public universities is presented in this section.

The second part of this study involved FGDs with both private and public university undergraduates.

The survey was conducted to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do the local students perceive their interaction with the international students?

RQ 2: What is the influence of international students on the local students' life experiences?

RQ 3: In what way are the local students willing to be involved with international students in the future?

To answer RQ1, Table 1 presents survey data for discussion. Table 1 shows that the majority of local students (81.1%) had experienced small group discussions with international students,

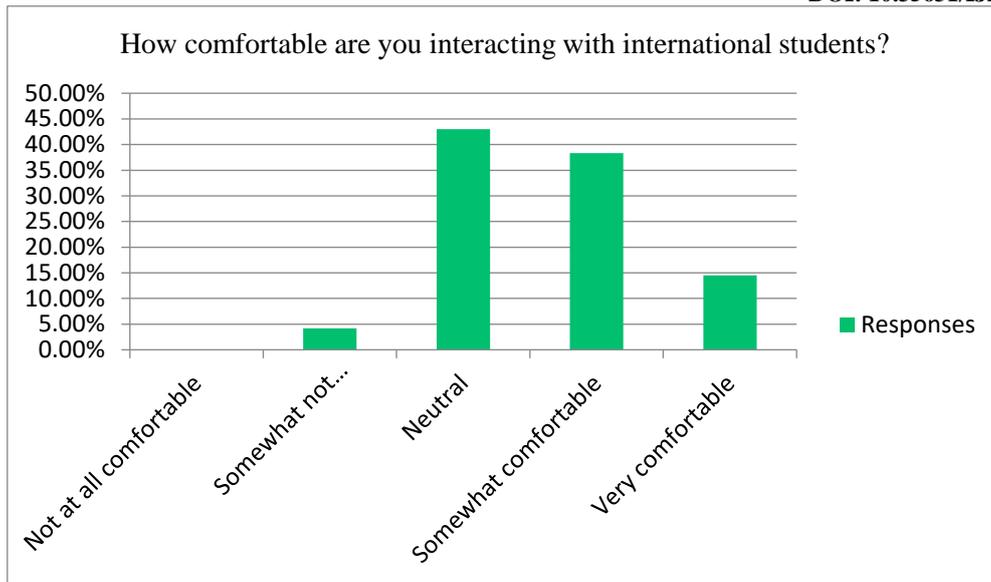
and all these students have experience talking to international students outside of class (80.1%). This shows that both local students and their international counterparts are not alienated from one another. The local students also have group projects with international students (73.5%) and 70.0% had international citizen as their lecturers. About 62.4% participated in campus activities with international students. However, only a small number (23.3%) had work experience with international students outside the campus environment.

**Table 1: Local Students' Interaction with International Students and Lecturers**

	Yes	No
1a. Have you participated in any campus events or activities with international students?	62.44%	37.56%
1b. Have you participated in any small discussion groups with international students?	81.09%	18.91%
1c. Have you worked on any group projects with international students?	73.58%	26.42%
1d. Have you had any lecturers who were international citizens?	69.95%	30.05%
1e. Have you talked with any international students outside of class?	80.57%	19.43%
1f. Have you worked with any international students outside campus?	23.32%	76.68%

RQI is also answered by the following findings on how comfortable were the local students in their interaction with the international students. Findings presented in Figure 1 shows that local students are somewhat comfortable (38.3%) and very comfortable (14.5%) interacting with international students and a bigger percentage with a neutral attitude of 43.0%. This comfortable feeling demonstrates the local students' positive attitude and willingness to interact with their foreign friends. These findings supported earlier findings by Schreiber (2011) that local students viewed international students favourably.

**Figure 1: How Comfortable the Local Students Were in Their Interaction with International Students**



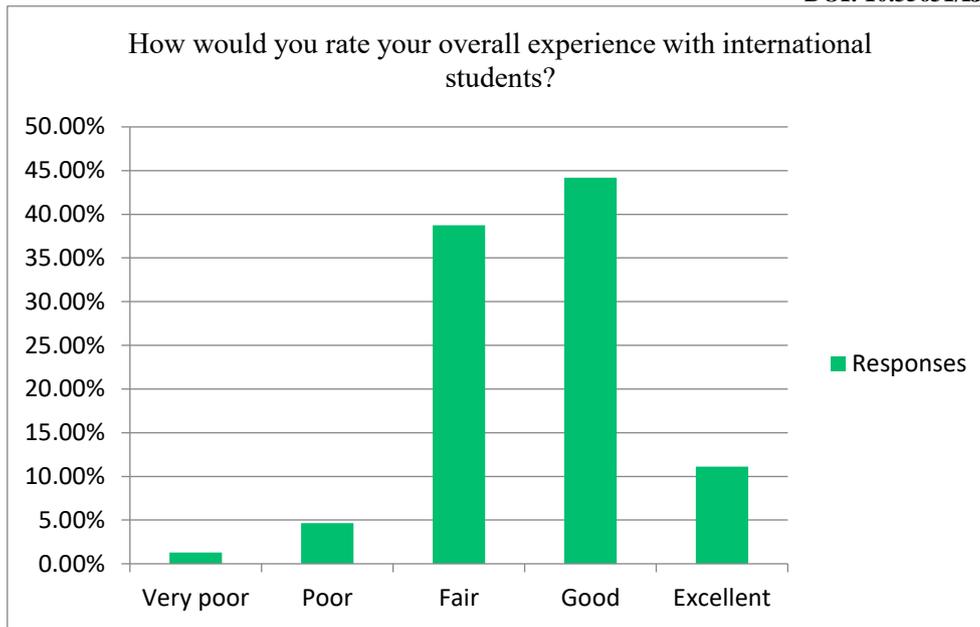
From the FGD, students expressed the following:

S5: whatever it is, I don't mind having international students...I try to be open and interact freely with them.

S8: there must be some kind of tolerance...I am ok being friends with international students. I am used to having people from different cultures around.

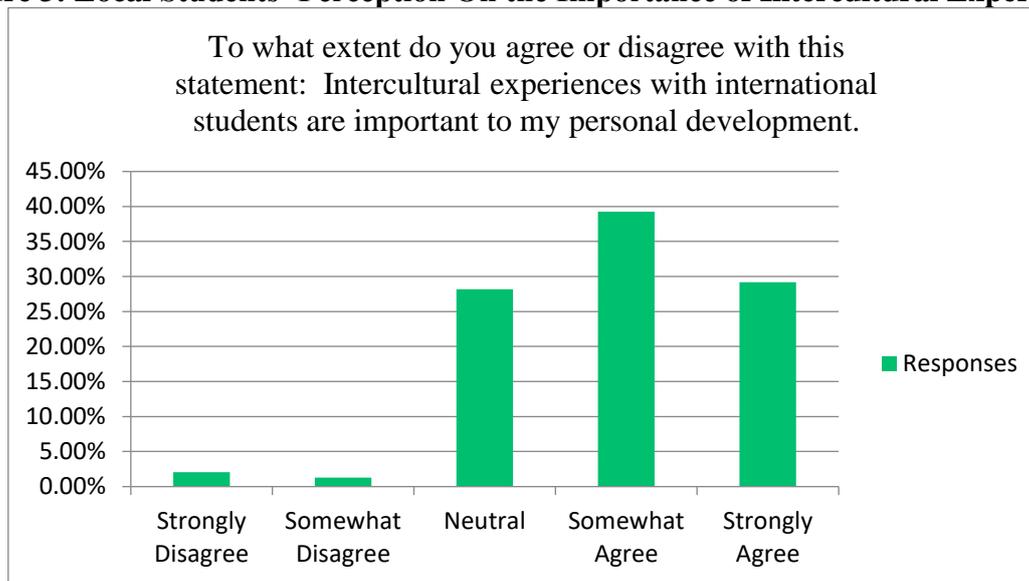
With regards to life experiences of local students brought about by interaction with international students, as raised in RQ2, the findings in Figure 2 shows that 44.2% said "good" to "excellent" experience (11.1%). And 38.8% said "fair". Only a very small percentage (5.9%) cited poor or unfavourable experience with the international students. According to Khawaja and Dempsey (2008), life experience helps to develop a sense of belonging and provide valuable emotional and instrumental support among the local and international students.

**Figure 2: Local Students Overall Experience with International Students.**



These findings on life experience gained from the interaction of local students with international students are also supported by other findings from the survey. Figure 3 shows that 39.3% of the total students surveyed said “somewhat agree” and 29.2% “strongly agree” to the question on whether the intercultural experiences with international students are important to their personal development. This shows more than 50% of the respondents were positive that the interaction with international students was important for their personal development. About 28.2% was somewhat neutral in this matter. And a very small number reported “somewhat disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” (3.3%) that the interaction with the international students was negative and was not good for their personal development and does not bring personal benefits to them. These findings concur with previous findings by Yefanova, Baird and Montgomery (2015) and Ngobia (2011) which emphasized that interactions between local students and international students in teaching and learning have a number of benefits including the development of cognitive skills, effective intercultural communication skills and an increase in cultural self-awareness and self-development.

**Figure 3: Local Students' Perception On the Importance of Intercultural Experiences**



Students were found to value intercultural experiences. They said the following during the FGD.

S9: I personally feel that maybe if we do not have international students, we wouldn't be able to know much about the culture of different countries are than just learning from the books or doing research. I think that having international student, we get to get like hands-on learning on the different cultures.

S12: So, the aim of me studying in a campus like this is that I want to meet more people and especially international students. So, I would say that the university or the campus would be dull and metaphorically dull. So, having students from different cultures add colours into the campus would benefit me personally.

RQ2 is also supported by another set of data that showed simple evidence on the willingness and readiness of local students to make friends with international students on campus. Table 2 shows the majority of the respondents among local students are willing to make friends or develop friendships with international students. About 46.5% have 1 to 3 international friends while 37.5% have more than 4 international friends. This showed that 84.0% of the respondents have international friends compared to only 16% who do not have any international friends.

**Table 2: Number of International Students as Friends**

How many friends have you made on campus who are international students?

Answer Choices	Responses
None	16.02%
1 to 3	46.51%
4 or more	37.47%

However, it is interesting to note that regardless of the students' appreciation of the benefits they reap from their involvement with international students, a few of the students made

revealing comments about the challenges they faced in the group assignments when they shared some comments on having international students as team members in classroom assignments or tasks. Their first challenge is the language barrier due to international students having a low level of English language mastery.

S1: So, to be honest, like I mentioned just now... I have worked with many international students in class and they don't really speak English well. But I'm actually amazed at how they are using the translator to get their work done. And when the work is being sent to me and I'm surprised because like... not clear... maybe they can't write well in English.

S5: I had a few misunderstandings in class... maybe they use words that they should not use in the situation... I would get upset but after a while, I noticed that they don't know the implication of the words they use... so, it's like a language barrier thing.

The second challenge is the work submitted by international team members does not meet the requirements set by the lecturers

S7: I had difficult times with some students. They are not being able to cooperate with me... well, because, like, not to say they are lazy, it's just that different people have different ways of working on something. So, most of them would like on the last minute and get work like it's just too short and definitely not meeting what is required in the assignment.

S2: not just if the international students are familiar with completing assignment based on the requirements given... most of the time, I will improve my team members' work. It will just be time consuming to get them to fix their work, so I just get it done.

S11: I can get be so frustrated because they don't understand that they need to check for plagiarism or simple grammatical mistakes before submitting their work. This is a basic requirement! But they don't pay attention to it. And sometimes they literally just copy and I can find the answers on some websites. So that's very frustrating.

The last challenge is time management. During the FGD, some local students expressed frustration that their international peers are not able to keep to the agreed time for meetings or tasks to be completed.

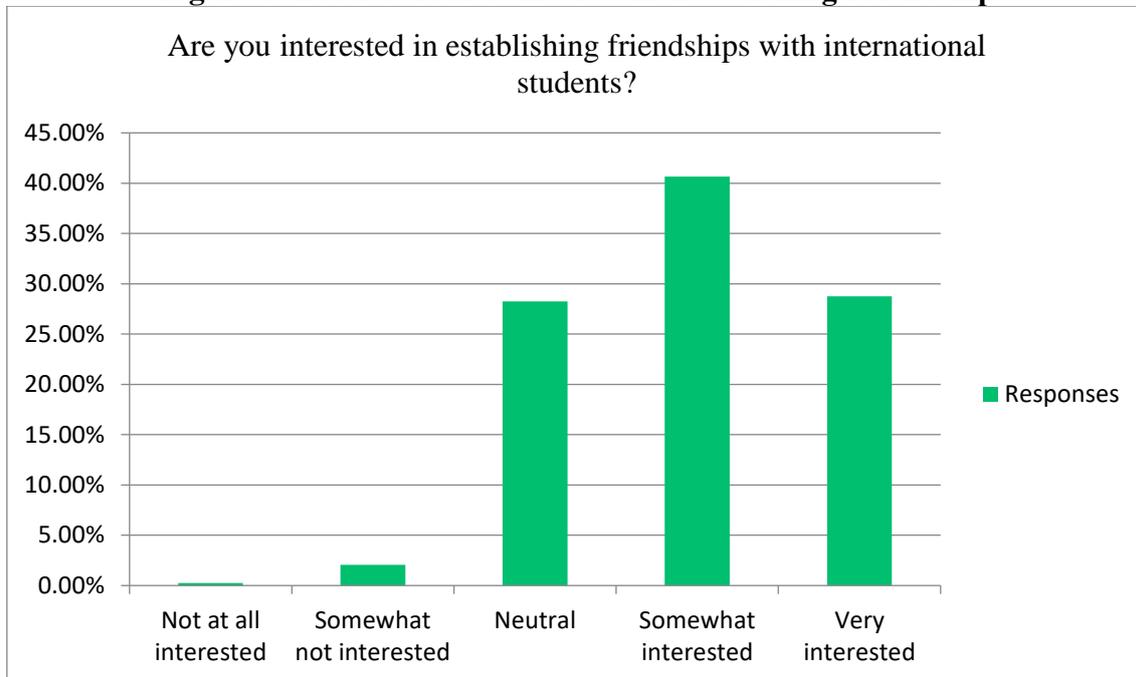
S3: they have different way of time management... how can I put it... for example, when we have a plan at 10 am, the international students would assume, that they will arrive one hour late or half an hour late. It is like Malaysian time... you know... it's like that! But, in Malaysia now, everyone is punctual... no more Malaysia time... where I came from, hahaha... the new Malaysia... we are really punctual!

These responses reflect that although the local students appreciate having international peers on campus, they also face challenges in the classrooms due to the differences in abilities and attitudes.

Several sets of data from the findings also answered RQ3 that seek to find out to what extent local students are willing to be involved with international students in the future. Figure 4 shows a high percentage of 69% of respondents are somewhat interested and very interested to

establish a friendship with their foreign counterparts. About 28.24% showed neutrality in this matter compared to only 2.3% of the “not interested” group.

**Figure 4: Local Students’ Interest in Establishing Friendship**



The willingness to establish a friendship with international students also goes a long way whereby the respondents expressed interest in universities’ programmes and events that provide the opportunity for local students to meet international students. Findings presented in Figure 5 answers RQ3 that there is a need for universities to organize events or programmes that would allow both local and international students to interact. The findings show that about 67.9% (37.7% ‘somewhat should’ and 30.2% ‘Definitely should’) are positive and interested to see their universities organize program or events of such nature. About 29.7% remained neutral while only less than 2.3% were not in agreement that their universities should organize events to close the gap between the local and international students’ differences.

This willingness to interact with international students via events organized by the university were expressed by all the FGD participants. For example, they said:

S2: So, I think I like big events where we can see both local and international students where it would be like entrepreneurship day where they are selling their products and services in the foyer... so that was the biggest impact on the activities on campus... in terms getting to know both the local and international students. It’s good!

S4: Ok... I think the first program that facilitates international and local students will be the induction program, where you know you can join and become facilitators. That was my first ever experience interacting with the international students...I think I like joining events like that. It’s interesting.

S10: I like going to events that give me a chance to meet international students...if my university organizes such an event, I would love to join.

Such positive involvement in universities events has allowed the local students and international students to build networks among them and these findings are in line with the suggestions by Munusamy and Hashim (2019 and Knigh (2016) that such avenues will enhance knowledge transfer and exposure to intercultural elements which will benefit both the local and international students.

**Figure 5: Role of University**

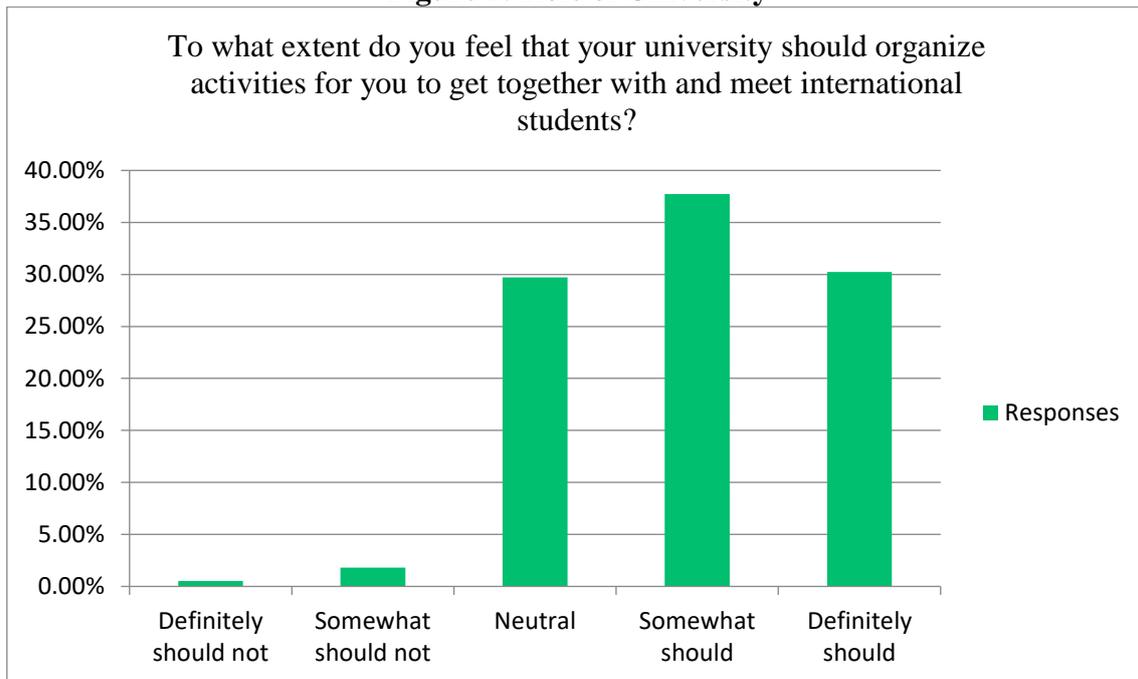
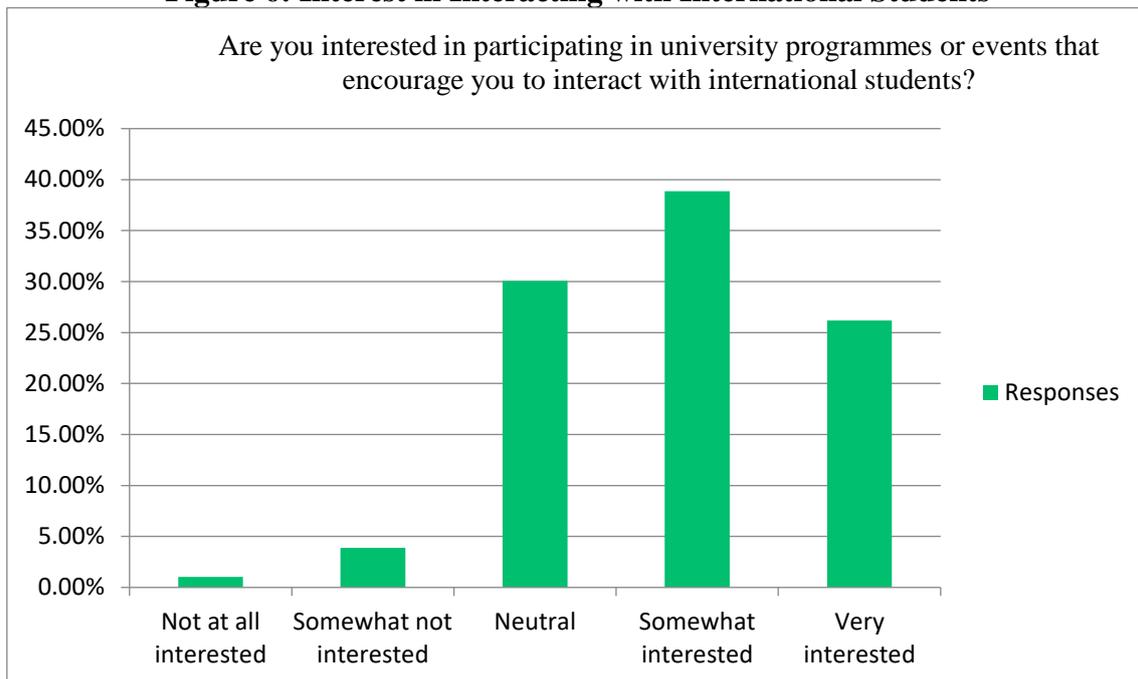


Figure 6 shows more than 50% of the respondents are interested to participate in university events or programmes that would encourage them to interact with international students. Such initiatives by the universities which actively involved the local students will lead to the establishment of a conducive environment that support more meaningful interactions among local and international students (Munusamy & Hashim, 2019). The findings show 38.9% in the “somewhat interested” category and 26.2% in the “very interested” category. About 30% in recorded in the neutral category compared to only 4.9% who are not interested to participate.

**Figure 6: Interest in Interacting with International Students**

The FGD participants favoured university organizing events or programmes that encourage them to interact with international students. They said:

S1: I think if possible, universities should organize events, you know, do such effort because, you know, I personally have been part of NGOs, you know, to unite nations and I interacted with many international people. So personally, I feel that what we can learn as Malaysian is that we don't just stay in our own comfort zone. We get to learn about other people as well. You know, too many beautiful cultures outside. And I think we should be open minded and universities must promote that openness.

S8: Personally, I think yes... my university should be conducting such event, but I personally think they are doing it already because, you know, for the Student Representative Council nominees, we are not only emphasizing on the local students, but also, we are looking the space for the international students to be a part of the mission.

S9: I think my university should do more activities or programmes to facilitate interaction from both parties because like in some programmes, they don't have much international students. So, the international students tend to stay in their own group. They tend to find their own people, you know, because sometimes they're too shy to approach local and the same goes with the locals, they don't approach international students. So, one of the ways for us to break that barrier is by doing activities. So, yeah, I think definitely should.

S12: Not many programmes have been done by my university. But there were a few. I like that...it gives local and international students a chance to meet! Maybe more activities need to be organized!

## Conclusion

To sum up, the findings from both the survey and FGD illuminate the overall perception of local students towards their international peers. The local students do not mind and are somewhat comfortable interacting with international students. They described their overall experience with international students are fair and good. The majority of the students reported that the intercultural experiences with international students are important to their personal development. The majority of the students surveyed have one or more international friends on campus. This indicates the overwhelming positivity in the way local students embrace the presence of international peers on campus. However, it is important to note that the local students do face challenges when working in group activities or assignments with international students due to differences in English language abilities and attitudes towards the quality of work and time management. The majority of the local students expressed interest and willingness to establish friendship with their foreign counterparts and participated in university events or programmes that would give them the opportunities to interact with international students.

It is recommended that both public and private universities focus on organizing activities, events and programmes that would provide a platform for all local and international students to interact and get to know one another better. This platform will foster better ties and understanding of the different cultures that exist on campus. This will eventually garner interest and support from local students to reap the benefits of internationalisation through comraderies formed on campus.

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