

Perceptions of University Students on Social Interactions between Local and International Students on Campus: A Case Study of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction between local and international students is essential for fostering cross-cultural understanding, reducing stereotypes, and enhancing academic and personal development in diverse university environments. This study examines university students' perceptions of social interactions between local and international students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), where local students constitute approximately 70% and international students from over 100 countries make up 30%. Using a qualitative research design with semi-structured in-depth interviews, data were collected from 12 students (6 local and 6 international) at the Gombak campus. The findings reveal generally positive perceptions of the potential benefits of social interaction, yet actual engagement remains limited. Major barriers identified include language differences, cultural disparities, pre-existing social networks, lack of interaction activities, and insufficient support systems, which are exacerbated by the shift to hybrid and online learning post-COVID-19. Students expressed the need for structured support mechanisms such as buddy programs, intercultural workshops, inclusive campus events, and language support services. The study proposes a framework of effective strategies grounded in Social Constructivism Theory to enhance meaningful interactions. These insights offer practical recommendations for IIUM and similar Malaysian universities to promote integration, intercultural competence, and a more inclusive campus environment.

Keywords: Social interaction, local students, international students, intercultural communication, barriers to integration, Malaysia, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study:

Higher education institutions worldwide, including the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), host increasingly diverse student populations. IIUM comprises about 70% local (Malaysian) students and 30% international students from over 100 countries. Social interaction between these groups plays a vital role in promoting cross-cultural understanding, cultural exchange, global networks, language skills, personal growth, and reduced stereotypes.

Effective social interactions enhance intercultural competency, communication skills, and inclusive learning environments. As universities continue to internationalise, understanding students' perceptions of these interactions becomes crucial for building supportive campus communities. This study investigates how students at IIUM perceive social interactions between local and international students, identifies key barriers, and explores necessary support mechanisms. Social interactions refer to the ways individuals or groups engage with one another through verbal and non-verbal communication, shared activities, and mutual influence.

Problem Statement

Despite the recognised benefits, social engagement between local and international students at IIUM remains limited. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to hybrid/online learning further reduced interactions (Azmat & Ahmad, 2022), affecting both social well-being and learning effectiveness. Common barriers include language difficulties, cultural differences, pre-existing social networks (cliques), discrimination, lack of confidence, and inadequate university support systems. These restrictions lead to missed opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, increased stress, anxiety, loneliness, and homesickness, particularly among international students. Existing literature highlights the need for targeted interventions, yet context-specific data from IIUM is limited. Previous research has emphasised the significance and benefits of meaningful social connections in fostering cultural awareness and enhancing the overall university experience (Smith, Johnson, & Lee, 2020; Brown & Wilson, 2018). Language difficulties, cultural disparities, and pre-existing social networks have all been found to be significant impediments to social engagement in several studies (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017; Thompson, Hernandez, & Chen, 2019). Furthermore, an inadequate infrastructure of support systems aggravates the issue. Universities must offer tools, initiatives, and programs that help domestic and international students integrate socially (Kim & Jones, 2021). Previous studies (Kim & Jones, 2021; Thompson, Hernandez, & Chen, 2019) have highlighted the importance of interventions like buddy programs, intercultural workshops, and inclusive campus events in fostering meaningful connections and bridging the gap between students.

Factors that have been mentioned to limit social interaction include: lack of interaction activities, cultural differences, discrimination, and lack of confidence, among others (Ilias, Baidi, Ghani & Razali, 2020).

Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of social interactions between local and international students on campus and propose a framework of effective strategies to enhance integration at IIUM.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the perceptions of interactions between local and international students on campus.
2. To identify the major barriers affecting these interactions.
3. To investigate the most appropriate support mechanisms required to facilitate better interaction.

Research Questions

1. How do students at IIUM perceive social interactions between local and international students?
2. What are the major barriers affecting social interaction between local and international students at IIUM?
3. What kind of support is required to facilitate social interaction between local and international students at IIUM?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the body of knowledge on intercultural relations in higher education, particularly in multicultural contexts like Malaysia. Findings will assist IIUM and other institutions in designing effective policies, programs, and support systems. It also advances theoretical understanding through the lens of Social Constructivism Theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Interaction

Social interaction involves dynamic exchanges of ideas, cultures, and experiences between individuals from diverse backgrounds. It enhances socio-emotional development, motivation, communication skills, and cultural adaptation. Topping (2023) states that social interaction is fundamental in shaping cultural forms, influencing

individuals as well as collective experiences. In higher education, it is particularly important for international students' adjustment and overall campus inclusivity.

In the context of international and local students, social interaction involves the dynamic exchange of ideas, cultures, and experiences between students from different backgrounds and geographical locations (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2021; Irwin, 2020). Irwin (2020) recognises the multicultural society in Asia and how it contributes to intercultural communication among people of different backgrounds. The perception of having social interaction skills is attributed to a person's cultural sensitivity, collaboration, socio-cultural adjustment, and communication (Leal Fiho et al., 2021).

Barriers to Social Interaction

Key barriers include language limitations, cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, discrimination, pre-existing social networks, and a lack of inclusive activities. Post-COVID shifts to online learning have intensified these challenges. International students often face greater difficulties in social integration, leading to isolation and stress. These barriers may include language differences, cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, and preconceived notions that create communication challenges and limit the exchange of ideas (Deepa et al., 2023). Furthermore, factors such as social isolation, discrimination, or a lack of cultural awareness may contribute to the creation of barriers, hindering the integration and interaction between local and international students. Irby, Wynn and Strong (2012) stated that overcoming social interaction barriers is crucial for nurturing a more inclusive and supportive environment, encouraging cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing the overall educational experience for all students involved.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

Effective strategies encompass orientation programs, buddy/mentorship systems, intercultural workshops, inclusive campus events, language support, and policy changes promoting diversity. The primary solution to overcome challenges faced in social interaction is effective intercultural communication among students (Holiday, Hyde & Kullman, 2021). Inclusive programming and cultural competence training have shown positive results in fostering engagement. Several studies articulate the ideas that enhance and support social interaction among students, and these strategies include: orientation programs, student support services offering comprehensive advisory and counselling, institutions to have inclusive policies, organise social events with diversity as a key point, mentorship programs, as well as cultural awareness programs (Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; Hurst, Wallace & Nixon, 2013). Smith, Johnson, and Lee (2020) in their study recommended creating an inclusive and supportive environment that encourages positive social interaction between local and international students with programs that enhance collaborative learning, information accessibility, workshops, and language support services.

Impact of Good Social Interaction

Positive interactions improve academic performance, confidence, cultural understanding, and well-being while reducing loneliness and enhancing global citizenship. The importance of social interaction is further described by a study by Ilham (2023), which states that good social interaction provides a better understanding among students and also strengthens the student-parent relationship due to frequent occurrences in interactions. The impacts of social isolation give an opportunity for individuals to be actively engaged in activities that benefit their academic and social skills development (Barber, 2022; Wu, Liu, Hagan & Mobbs, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Social Constructivism Theory by Lev Vygotsky. The theory emphasises that knowledge and understanding are constructed through social interactions within cultural and environmental contexts (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Umar, Atan, & Majid, 2023). Concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development highlight the value of collaboration and guidance in learning and adaptation highly relevant to intercultural exchanges between local and international students. Umar, Atan, and Majid (2023) state that

Vygotsky's theory helps in understanding communities in which local and international students live, and it also facilitates social interaction. Furthermore, Vygotsky developed the concept of the Proximal Development Zone, which underscores the difference between what individuals can achieve and what they can do without help. Emphasises the use of language in social adaptation and coordination, which results in better social interactions between people of different backgrounds. The social constructivism theory assumes that people's knowledge and understanding of reality are constructed through the interaction between them and society members around them. Not only is the social constructivism theory applicable in education and learning environments, but it also helps in improving motivation among students (Zajda, 2023). In university settings with various student populations (local and international students), social interaction becomes a vehicle for learning forums, cultural exchange, broadening perspectives, and promoting understanding. Furthermore, in learning and education settings for students, the necessity to create ideas from real-life experiences is applicable based on the social constructivist theory. Zajda (2023) adds that social constructivism facilitates connectivism and learning for students as well as improves their performance. The core concepts of the theory elaborate on the socialisation, identities and interests of people.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore in-depth perceptions and experiences. 3.2 Population and Sampling: The target population included undergraduate and postgraduate students at IIUM's Gombak campus. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 6 local and 6 international students (third/final year, with international participants from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East) who volunteered. Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2020) explain that the qualitative method enables the production of descriptive data and provides an in-depth explanation of the subject matter under study.

Population and Sample Size

The population of the current study are students at IIUM, including undergraduate and graduate students, both local and international, at the Gombak campus. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is a public university in Malaysia consisting of about 26, 000 students with the majority undergraduates and about 6000 are postgraduates from over 100 countries (IIUM, 2025).

Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews (30–40 minutes each) were conducted using 14 open-ended questions covering perceptions, experiences, barriers, support needs, and suggestions. Interviews were held in English for one month, with interview questions constructed and prepared in an orderly manner, structured to ensure the objectives of the study are met. A purposive sampling approach was used based on the considerations for this study. Deliberate/purposive sampling offers flexibility, targeted respondent selection, and suitability for in-depth qualitative technique (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Both local and international students were requested to volunteer to take part in the study, and those who accepted to take part in the interview were thoroughly briefed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study interviewed 12 students at IIUM Gombak campus (6 local Malaysian students and 6 international students) using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Through thematic analysis, three major themes emerged that directly answered the research questions.

Theme 1: Students' Perceptions of Social Interaction Between Local and International Students

Participants generally held positive perceptions regarding the potential value of social interaction, but most admitted that actual interaction remains limited.

Selected Quotes:

"Interacting with international students is very enriching. I learn about different cultures, food, and perspectives. Honestly, it makes campus life more interesting." (L3, Local, Year 4)

"I believe mixing with local students would help me understand Malaysian culture better and improve my English. But in reality, we mostly stay in our own groups." (I2, International – Nigeria, Year 3)

"Social interaction is important for building friendships and networks, but I think both sides are shy. Locals have their own circles, and internationals also prefer people from their own countries." (L5, Local, Year 4)

Most participants perceived social interaction as beneficial for cultural exchange, language improvement, and personal development, yet described the current level of interaction as superficial or occasional (mainly in class or during university events).

Theme 2: Major Barriers Affecting Social Interaction

Five major barriers were consistently reported: language differences, cultural differences and misunderstandings, pre-existing social networks (cliques), lack of structured interaction opportunities, impact of COVID-19 / hybrid learning

Supporting Quotes:

"Sometimes I want to talk to international students, but their English is very fast, or they use slang. It makes me nervous to join their conversation." (L1, Local, Year 3)

"Language is a big issue. Even when we speak English, the accent and vocabulary differences make communication difficult." (I4, International – Yemen, Postgraduate)

"Cultural differences in humour, food preferences, and even how we greet each other create invisible walls. What is normal for me might be strange for them." (I5, International – Maldives, Year 4)

"Local students already have their high school friends and group WhatsApp chats. It's hard to enter those circles." (I1, International – Uganda, Year 3)

"After COVID, everything became online or hybrid. We lost the natural chances to meet and interact on campus." (L6, Local, Year 4)

These findings support previous studies (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017; Hashim, 2012) that identified language, culture, and social segregation as primary obstacles.

Theme 3: Support Mechanisms Required to Facilitate Interaction

Participants strongly emphasised the need for structured and sustained university support. The most recommended strategies were: buddy/mentorship programs, regular intercultural events and workshops, mixed-group academic and non-academic activities, and language support initiatives.

Selected Quotes:

"A buddy system where a local student is paired with an international student from the beginning would help a lot. Not just for one week, but for the whole semester." (I3, International – Indonesia, Year 3)

“The university should organise more events like cultural nights, sports competitions, and group projects that mix locals and internationals.” (L2, Local, Year 4)

“Free English conversation clubs or language exchange programs would reduce the language barrier.” (I6, International – Pakistan, Postgraduate)

“Workshops on cultural awareness for both sides are necessary. We need to learn how to understand each other better.” (L4, Local, Year 3)

As shown in Table 1, three major themes emerged from the data analysis.

Table 1: Summary of Emergent Themes and Sub-themes

No.	Main theme	Sub-themes	Key Findings
1	Students’ perceptions of social interaction	• Value and benefits • Actual level of interaction	Participants acknowledged the importance of social interaction for cultural exchange, personal growth, and academic development. However, interactions remain largely superficial and limited to classroom settings.
2	Major barriers to social interaction	• Language differences • Cultural differences & misunderstandings • Pre-existing Social Networks (Cliques) • Lack of structured opportunities • Post-COVID-19 effects	Language barriers and accents, cultural norms, strong local friendship circles, insufficient mixed activities, and the lingering impact of hybrid learning were identified as the primary obstacles.
3	Support mechanisms required	• Buddy/mentorship programs • Intercultural events & workshops • Mixed academic & social activities • Language support initiatives • Institutional policy support	Strong preference for structured, sustained programs including paired buddy systems, regular cultural exchange events, collaborative activities, and university-driven inclusive policies.

The findings revealed three major themes. Students generally acknowledged the value of social interactions between local and international students for fostering cultural exchange, improving intercultural competence, and supporting personal growth. However, they reported that actual day-to-day engagement remains limited and largely superficial. The study identified several dominant barriers, including language differences, cultural norms and misunderstandings, pre-existing social networks (cliques), lack of organised mixed activities, and the lingering effects of hybrid learning post-COVID-19. To address these challenges, participants expressed a strong demand for structured support mechanisms such as buddy/mentorship programs, frequent intercultural events and workshops on cultural competence, enhanced language support services, and university policies that actively promote integration between local and international students.

These findings align with prior studies (e.g., Garcia & Nguyen, 2017; Kim & Jones, 2021) and reinforce Social Constructivism by highlighting how structured social platforms can bridge knowledge and relational gaps.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social interaction between local and international students at IIUM holds immense potential but is hindered by multiple barriers. This study underscores the need for intentional interventions to translate positive perceptions into meaningful engagement. The study concludes that students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) hold positive perceptions of social interaction between local and international students, recognising its

value in promoting cultural exchange, intercultural competence, and personal development. However, actual day-to-day engagement remains limited and superficial. Major barriers such as language differences, cultural misunderstandings, pre-existing social cliques, lack of organised mixed activities, and the lingering effects of hybrid learning post-COVID-19 continue to hinder meaningful integration. These findings highlight a significant gap between the perceived benefits and the current reality of intercultural engagement on campus, underscoring the need for deliberate institutional intervention.

To address these challenges, several key recommendations are proposed. The university should establish a structured buddy/mentorship program that pairs local and international students, organise frequent intercultural events and workshops on cultural competence, and strengthen language support services. Additionally, IIUM needs to develop inclusive policies that encourage mixed-group academic and social activities while creating dedicated spaces for cross-cultural interaction. Such measures would help bridge existing divides and foster a more inclusive campus environment. This study proposes a comprehensive IIUM Intercultural Engagement Framework built on four pillars: structured pairing, sustained programming, targeted support services, and strong institutional commitment. Grounded in Social Constructivism Theory, the framework aims to transform superficial contact into meaningful, long-term relationships. Implementing these recommendations will not only enhance students' university experience but also contribute to the development of globally competent graduates. Future research should adopt larger samples and longitudinal designs to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions.

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