

Ethnic Interactions among Students at the University of Malaya*

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Abstract: Our 2008 survey of undergraduate students at the University of Malaya found that most tend to interact with course mates and friends from their own ethnic group. Students from multi-ethnic neighbourhoods and those who do not have language barriers are more likely to communicate and study with course mates from another group, especially when they are taking the same courses. Those who perceive other ethnic groups favourably are also more likely to interact with them academically and socially. Consistent with the socialisation theory, the level of inter-ethnic interaction among undergraduates is higher than that of secondary school students. There seems to be some improvement in inter-ethnic interaction among UM students since 2002. Students' perception of ethnic relations has also become more positive and almost all of them are in agreement that ethnic relations are very important for national development. Nevertheless, there are some 'exclusionists' among students, who would not accept the 'out-group' as neighbour or colleague. Hence, more efforts are needed to achieve the goal of the Prime Minister to unite all Malaysians under the *IMalaysia* framework.

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JEL classification: D71, I23, J19, Z19

1. Introduction

Malaysia has a multi-ethnic population with a diversified collection of vibrant cultures. Understanding and managing the diversity of the population is very important in nation building. In 2000, the population of Malaysia comprised 50.2 per cent Malays, 11.0 percent other *Bumiputera* (consisting the many indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak and a small group in Peninsular Malaysia), 24.5 per cent Chinese, 7.2 per cent Indians, 1.2 percent Others and 6.0 per cent non citizens (Department of Statistics, 2001). Each ethnic group has its own cultural practices and customs. All Malays and most of the other *Bumiputera* are Muslims. The majority of the Chinese are Buddhists or Taoists, and the Indians are mostly Hindus. There is also quite a sizeable number of Christians among the Chinese and Indians. Bahasa Malaysia is the official language and English is widely used in daily life. The Chinese and Indians also communicate in their mother tongue. Most Chinese and Indians send their children to vernacular primary schools, and subsequently to the national secondary schools. Ethnic segregation is discernible in terms of occupation, place of residence, eating place, friends, social life and political affiliation. However, there has been a reduction in occupational segregation between the Malays and non Malays resulting from changes in the employment structure over the years (Harban and Aziz 2004). Malaysia's fractionalisation

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index at 0.694 is lower than a number of countries such as India and, and it is about the same as that of Canada (Yeoh 2001).

Racial harmony and political stability in Malaysia have attracted foreign investments, and contributed towards the rapid economic progress. As envisaged in Malaysia's Vision 2020, the plural society is a source of strength for moving Malaysia toward a developed country within the next ten years. The ethnic factor has always featured prominently in public policies and socio-economic development agenda. The affirmative action measures of the Government beginning with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP 1971-1990) were aimed at eradicating poverty regardless of race, and eliminating the identification of race with location and economic activities. National unity has always been a primary goal of the NEP, the National Development Policy (1991-2000) as well as the National Vision Policy (2001-2010). The government has always placed great emphasis on forging racial harmony and national unity. The National Unity Department was established in 1971 and most of the time it was placed under the Prime Minister's Department, except for the few years when it came under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. Courses on ethnic relations are being taught at the universities to provide a better understanding of the importance of ethnic relations in the country. The National Service programme is being implemented with the aim of fostering closer friendship among young people of different ethnic groups. However, the impact of these programmes in forging racial harmony has yet to be evaluated.

Malaysia prides itself as a being a model of peaceful multi-culturalism. Racial harmony has prevailed despite differences in religion and social life. However, in the more recent period, there has been growing concerns over ethnic polarisation and these are often reported in the media. Heated debates on ethnically sensitive issues and extremist remarks by certain politicians had caused a major setback to the ruling party, itself an ethnically-based coalition; in the 2008 General Election, the party lost five states and also its two-thirds majority in Parliament to a coalition of opposition parties for the first time in 40 years. Upon taking over the helm as the country's sixth Prime Minister in March 2009, Najib Abdul Razak has called on all Malaysians not only to tolerate but to accept one another and unite under the *1Malaysia* concept in an effort to create a more liberalised economic environment and attract foreign investments (*The Sunday Star* 2009a).

Sanders (2002) defines ethnicity as a social construct involving insiders and outsiders mutually acknowledging group differences in cultural beliefs and practices. He argues that ethnic boundaries are patterns of social interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, inter-group members' self-identification and outsiders' confirmation of group distinctions. According to the Inter-group Contact Theory, lack of interaction could lead to prejudice and tensions between the different groups for not knowing about each other, and interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between minority and majority group members (Miell and Dallos 1996).

According to the socialisation theory, the education system is the main social institution that transmits values, norms and modes of behaviour to students. Do undergraduates have a higher degree of ethnic tolerance and lower degree of ethnic prejudice compared to the general population? A study by Hello *et al.* (2004) found that educational attainment is the most important determinant of ethnic distance in the Netherlands, even after controlling for various parental socialisation paths. Their study also shows that the higher young adults'

educational attainment, the less they intend to avoid social contact with ethnic minorities. Quoting a number of studies, Coenders and Scheepers (2003) concluded that one of the most consistent findings in social research on ethnic attitudes is the negative association between educational attainment and ethnic prejudice. However, their findings show that the hypotheses derived from the socialisation theory were only partly supported as the difference in ethnic exclusionistic attitudes between higher- and lower-educated people is stronger in established democracies.

A number of studies have dealt with the ethnic relations in Malaysia. In his paper on the cultural and economic dimensions of ethnic relations in Peninsular Malaysia, Lee (2000) observed that ethnic relations depend on whether the majority of the ethnic members, particularly the ethnic elites, are pursuing separatist or amalgamative strategies and goals. Lee's observations are congruent with the view that the ethnic paradigm has dominated political science analysis of societal conflict in West Malaysia; and that ethnic identity and ethnic-based conflict in West Malaysia are intricately linked to politics (Singh 2001).

The affirmative action policies of the Government have been implemented to bridge the ethnic gaps in education, employment and economic status and these have differential effects on the different ethnic groups. However, as noted by Cheong *et al.* (2009) in an article in this same volume, the implementation of the NEP with its main focus on the reduction of poverty and restructuring of society has had the effect of contributing to the very problems that its strategies aimed to solve, that is, national unity. Under the government's affirmative action policies, Malays and other indigenous groups are given preferential treatment in education in terms of scholarship and places in public universities. Young Malaysians have also grown up in a society with dichotomous access (*Bumiputera* versus non *Bumiputera*) to finance, scholarships, licenses, housing and ownership of equity (Shyamala *et al.* 2009). Some commentators are of the view that the quota system for places in the public universities and scholarships implemented to bridge the gaps between the different races is unjust with allegations of racial profiling, and this has led to the feeling of alienation among students and their parents (e.g., *The Sunday Star* 2009b).

Despite the importance of national unity, a national survey on this topic based on scientific sampling has yet to be undertaken. Findings from some case studies are summarised below.

In 2002, a survey on ethnic interaction among undergraduates of the University of Malaya (UM) was conducted under the auspices of the Centre for Economic Development and Ethnic Relations (CEDER). The pertinent findings from that survey will be compared with findings of this survey in this report. A 2006 study on the perception and expectation on ethnic relations conducted by the Merdeka Centre, an opinion research firm, found that about 80 per cent of the respondents felt that ethnic relations is good, 54 per cent that ethnic solidarity is sincere, 64 per cent that Malaysians are getting closer, and 43 per cent that ethnic relations will improve while 15 per cent thought that it will worsen. Almost all respondents were of the view that it is important to improve inter-ethnic interaction. In all these aspects, the Malays were most likely to provide favourable responses, and the Chinese the least likely (Merdeka Centre 2006). Based on findings from a survey conducted in 15 secondary schools in Kedah and Penang, Najeemah (2006) shows that ethnocentrism is evident among secondary school students. She concluded that in areas in which there is similarity between groups, there will be compatibility, whereas in areas in which norms or

rules differ, the tendency is towards cross-ethnic conflict. In a study on inter-ethnic interaction in secondary schools, Kuppusamy *et al.* (2009) also found that ethnocentrism is common in secondary schools. Students tend to clique with their own ethnic group in study, sports and social activities. The survey also found that it is more common for the minority groups to interact with the ethnic majority rather than the other way round.

2. Objectives of Study

Universities are a microcosm of larger society. The day-to-day living of undergraduates such as food habits, clothing, religious practices, and the way they spend their leisure time and social interaction very much reflects the society at large. Sharom (1980) argued that the overriding goal of the universities is to assist in the promotion of national integration and unity, to be achieved through their teaching as well as non curricular programmes, and through the use of the national language – Bahasa Malaysia – as the principal medium of instruction.

This study was conducted in 2008 as a follow-up to an earlier survey conducted in 2002 (Jahara *et al.* 2004) to gauge the current state of ethnic interactions among university students, and to examine the changes that have taken place since 2002. It is hoped that findings from this study will contribute toward a better understanding of ethnic relations on campus and in the country so that appropriate actions and programmes can be implemented to foster ethnic relations for national development. Specifically, the survey was undertaken to:

- (i) examine social and academic interaction among university students and factors that facilitate or hinder inter-ethnic interaction;
- (ii) know more about the perception of UM students on national integration;
- (iii) contribute towards efforts in promoting harmony, *esprit de corps*, friendship and cooperation among students of different ethnic and social groups; and
- (iv) provide some insights on ethnic relations among university students, for formulation of policies to promote ethnic relations.

3. Methodology

As a follow-up to a similar survey conducted in 2002 (Jahara *et al.* 2004), this study used the same questionnaire used in 2002 to collect comparable data for an examination of changes that took place over the six-year period. The self-administered questionnaire was used to solicit frank responses to some of the more sensitive topics and were distributed to respondents in various places on campus, such as computer laboratories, hostels, canteens and faculty concourses.

Close-ended questions were used to facilitate data collection and processing, and to achieve a high response rate. However, close-ended questions provide limited response choices and surface level data. Many attitudinal questions were in the form of a rating scale. For ease of analysis, some of the categories were collapsed to form dichotomous variables. For instance, ‘very often’ was combined with ‘often’ as opposed to the alternative category ‘seldom’ or ‘never’. Logistic regressions were run on the reconstructed dichotomous dependent variables to study the factors affecting ethnic interaction within the multivariate

context. The distributions of the main independent variables are summarised in Appendix 1 while the major findings are discussed under the next two headings.

4. Social and Academic Interaction

Many university students are living away from home for the first time in their lives for three to four years and in some disciplines up to five years. At the university, students find their new circle of friends from different backgrounds and places, but they are mostly course mates or fellow collegians. Some become close friends while others remain ordinary friends or acquaintances.

Inter-ethnic interaction among students is conditioned upon the opportunity to mix. Students from the more mono-ethnic faculties have fewer opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction. For instance, the proportion of Malay students who had more than 10 Chinese friends in the campus varied from 26.0 per cent among those who came from faculties where Chinese made up less than one-quarter to 62 per cent in faculties where half of the students were Chinese. The proportion of Chinese students having more than 10 Malay friends ranged from 38 per cent among those from faculties where Malays made up less than a quarter of the total to 100 per cent among those from faculties where Malays formed the majority. The same pattern was observed for Indian and Other *Bumiputera* students. For all ethnic groups, a higher proportion of those from the more mono-ethnic faculties did not have any friends from another ethnic group, compared to the more multi-ethnic faculties (table not shown).

Table 1 shows that minority groups were more likely to interact with the majority groups than the other way round. For instance, half of the Chinese and Indian students had more than 10 Malay friends in the campus; but among Malay students, only about a third had more than 10 Chinese friends and one-fifth had more than 10 Indian friends. It is also found that the Malays and Chinese were more likely to have a higher level of interaction between them than with the minority Indians and Other *Bumiputera*. Interaction with the minority groups was limited by the lack of opportunity because none were enrolled in many of the courses.

Place of residence did not reveal sharp variations in the number of friends from other ethnic groups. For instance, the proportion of Malay students from multi-ethnic backgrounds with more than 10 Chinese friends was only slightly higher than those from mono-ethnic backgrounds (38 per cent compared to 32 per cent). Chinese students from a mono-ethnic background were slightly more likely to have more than 10 Malay friends compared to those from a mono-ethnic background (50 per cent compared to 49 per cent, table not shown).

There appears to be some improvement in inter-ethnic mixing since 2002. The proportion of Malay students having more than five Chinese friends on campus had increased from 54 to 58 per cent and the proportion of Chinese students having more than five Malay friends had increased from 61 to 70 per cent.

Compared to students in secondary schools, university students were found to have more friends from other ethnic groups. For instance, data from the survey by Kuppusamy *et al.* (2009) showed that among secondary school students in Selangor, only 17 per cent of Malay students had more than 10 Chinese friends, and 38 per cent of Chinese students had

Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondents by number of friends from each of the ethnic groups at University of Malaya

Ethnicity of friend/ number	Ethnicity of respondents			
	Malays	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Malay friend				
None	0.3	-	3.0	0.8
1-5	2.0	10.1	27.0	21.4
6-10	2.8	11.6	21.0	22.5
>10	94.9	78.3	49.0	55.3
Other <i>Bumiputera</i> friends				
None	15.2	4.7	22.4	9.9
1-5	44.4	17.8	51.8	49.2
6-10	19.4	19.4	12.2	20.2
>10	21.0	58.1	13.6	20.6
Chinese friends				
None	4.4	3.9	0.5	0.8
1-5	37.2	31.0	2.2	24.4
6-10	23.1	17.8	5.4	23.3
>10	35.2	47.3	91.9	51.5
Indian friends				
None	10.2	11.7	11.0	1.5
1-5	49.7	33.6	54.0	6.5
6-10	20.4	21.1	18.7	10.3
>10	19.7	33.6	16.3	81.7

more than 10 Malay friends in schools, but the corresponding percentages are much higher in the university, at 35 per cent and 49 per cent respectively.

Inter-personal communication is crucial for forging closer relations and understanding among people from different backgrounds. In the survey, students were more likely to communicate with persons from the same ethnic groups than those from other ethnic groups. With the exception of Other *Bumiputera*, more than 90 per cent of students from all ethnic groups reported that they often communicate with friends from the same ethnic group. However, students were much less likely to communicate with friends from other ethnic groups, as shown in Table 2. Data show that about 42 per cent of the Malays and Chinese communicated often with each other, and much less frequently with the Indians and other *Bumiputera*.

While Bahasa Malaysia has been widely used as the medium of instruction in the school system, language still poses a barrier to inter-ethnic interaction and communication. Table 3 shows that Malay students were more likely than those from other ethnic groups to view language as an obstacle to inter-ethnic interaction. Generally, male students were more

Table 2: Percentage who communicated frequently with friends of different ethnic groups

Ethnicity of friends	Ethnicity of respondents			
	Malays	Other Bumiputera	Chinese	Indians
Malays	95.3	86.8	41.8	63.7
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	36.7	74.4	21.0	38.5
Chinese	41.8	53.5	93.6	63.0
Indians	28.4	40.3	24.0	91.6

Table 3: Percentage of respondents who viewed language as an obstacle to inter-ethnic interaction by ethnic group and gender

Ethnic group	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Malays	33.9	21.7	26.2
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	17.5	16.7	17.1
Chinese	24.5	18.4	20.4
Indians	11.0	10.5	10.7
Total	29.2	19.8	23.1

likely than female students to encounter language barriers in their interaction with students from other ethnic groups.

Students who had language barriers were less likely to communicate with others. For instance, among the Malay students, the percentage who often communicated with Chinese students varied from 35 per cent for those with language barriers to 44 per cent for those with no language barriers. Among Chinese students, the proportion who often communicated with Malay students differed by as much as 15 percentage points (30 per cent versus 45 per cent).

Logistic regressions show that ethnic distribution of the faculty and language barrier are the two most important factors affecting inter-ethnic communication. For instance, Malay students from faculties where Chinese students made up at least 50 per cent of the student population were almost two and a half times more likely to communicate with Chinese students as compared to those from faculties where Chinese made up less than one quarter. Malay students with no language barrier were about one and a half times more likely than those with a language barrier to communicate with Chinese friends on campus. Chinese students with no language barrier were almost twice as likely as those with a language barrier to communicate with Malay friends, and those from faculties where Malays

Table 4: Logistic regression explaining frequency of communication between Malay and Chinese students (odds ratio)

	Malay students communicating frequently with Chinese friends	Chinese students communicating frequently with Malay friends
N	2461	1355
Chinese/Malay proportion in the faculty		
50% or more	2.3932**	1.6341*
25 - 49.9%	1.5436**	1.3909
No language barrier	1.3996**	1.9195**
Staying in hostel	1.1451	1.2942*
Male	0.8300*	1.1661
Urban	1.1694	0.9561
Multi-ethnic neighbour	1.2448*	1.2310
Constant	0.2936**	0.2188

**, * Significant at 1% and 5% respectively

constituted at least half were 1.6 times more likely than those from faculties where Malays constituted less than one-quarter to communicate with Malay friends (Table 4).

Malay males were 17 per cent less likely than the females to communicate with Chinese friends, and those from multi-ethnic backgrounds were 1.2 times more likely than those from a mono-ethnic background to communicate with Chinese friends. However, among the Chinese, gender, urban-rural residence and type of neighbourhood did not provide significant difference in their communication with the Malays.

University students experience different interactions with course mates and friends, ranging from studying to social activities. These interactions may range from superficial encounters to long standing relationships and partnerships. Studies show that interaction starts with things that people have in common and is constrained by various factors (SHM 2007).

Students share a common goal in academic pursuit. Therefore, it is imperative that they study together and learn from one another. Moreover, assignments and project papers that make up a substantial portion of the course evaluation are often done in groups. For some courses, the lecturers would decide on the group members. However, given a choice, most students would form groups with members from their own ethnic group. The survey shows that the majority of students study with course mates from their own ethnic group. Except for the Other *Bumiputera* students, students are less likely to study with course mates from other ethnic groups, partly because of the different types of courses taken. Nevertheless, about half of the students reported that they do study together with course mates from other ethnic groups, with the proportion being higher among the minority groups.

Ideally, clubs/societies and sports in the university, where the members with a common set of goals and interests work alongside each other, should provide venues for inter-ethnic interaction. Within the university, there are many academic clubs and societies, covering

wide ranging disciplines and activities such as language, religion, sports and alumni. However, many of these clubs/societies and sports are ethnocentric and therefore do not serve to dispel ethnic stereotyping. As expected, students were much more likely to participate in societies and sports with members from their own ethnic group rather than those from other ethnic groups. Informal interaction such as visiting and going for a stroll was less frequent among students from different ethnic groups (Table 5). Differences in religion, cultural practices, language, food and courses taken were some of the main reasons for the lack of inter-ethnic interaction.

Table 5: Per cent who interact with students from different ethnic groups at least once a week in various activities

Interact with friends from other ethnic groups in various activities	Ethnic group of respondent			
	Malay	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Study with				
Malays	92.1	83.0	50.4	52.7
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	39.2	72.1	33.0	38.9
Chinese	46.1	59.7	82.3	54.4
Indians	38.1	49.6	39.4	84.3
Take part with members of other ethnic groups in society and club activities				
Malays	77.0	73.4	35.7	52.3
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	38.4	65.1	26.5	40.2
Chinese	44.0	48.9	68.6	52.3
Indians	38.1	45.7	27.7	68.3
Play games/sport with				
Malays	89.2	81.4	28.5	41.2
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	34.4	74.2	21.9	30.7
Chinese	34.7	50.4	82.8	40.8
Indians	28.6	42.6	22.1	70.2
Visit				
Malays	87.0	73.6	21.5	42.4
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	30.9	70.5	17.3	30.9
Chinese	29.4	38.8	70.1	41.2
Indian	24.8	31.8	16.8	72.1
Go for a stroll with				
Malays	85.9	70.5	17.5	30.5
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	26.0	65.1	15.9	21.1
Chinese	24.9	37.2	70.4	30.9
Indians	20.7	28.7	14.5	67.9

Table 6: Percentage of students from the various ethnic groups studying with course mates from other ethnic groups at least once a week, according to selected variables

		Malay	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Gender	Male	61.5**	93.0	58.7**	68.1
	Female	50.2**	83.3	51.2**	60.2
Place of origin	Urban	57.9**	88.1	54.6	64.1
	Rural	49.9**	87.1	52.2	59.4
Neighbourhood	Multi-ethnic	59.1**	88.0	55.6*	62.3
	Mono-ethnic	49.2**	87.0	49.8*	60.7
Place of stay	Hostel	53.1*	88.2	55.3	60.4
	Off campus	57.8*	86.1	51.0	69.3
Language barrier	No	54.8	86.9	54.3	62.4
	Yes	53.2	90.9	51.1	67.9
Play games with others	No	30.0**	50.0**	37.9**	38.3**
	Yes	83.7**	93.7**	86.8**	86.6**
Joining clubs	No	32.3**	70.6**	39.0**	46.0**
	Yes	76.9**	93.7**	77.0**	75.5**

** , * Significant at 1% and 5% respectively

Compared with the 2002 survey, there seems to be a rather marked improvement in inter-ethnic interaction over the six-year period. For instance, the proportion of Malay students studying with Chinese course mates has increased from 33.3 per cent in the 2002 survey to 46.1 per cent in the current survey, and the proportion of Chinese students studying with Malay course mates has increased even more significantly from 30.1 to 50.4 per cent.

The likelihood of studying and interacting with those from other ethnic groups varied according to a number of background variables, as shown in Tables 6 – 8. For all sub-groups, almost 90.0 per cent of Other *Bumiputera* reported that they studied and played with course mates and friends from other ethnic groups, and about three-quarters had participated in activities in clubs and societies with members from other ethnic groups at least once a week.

For all ethnic groups, male students were more likely than female students to study, play games and take part in club/society activities with course mates and friends from other ethnic groups. For both sexes, besides the Other *Bumiputera*, the Indians were relatively more likely to study, play games and take part in societies with course mates and friends from other ethnic groups, and the Chinese the least likely (Tables 6 – 8).

Malay students from the urban areas were more likely to interact with other ethnic groups, in terms of studying, playing games and participation in clubs and activities. The differential could be due to lack of interaction with other ethnic groups among rural Malay students before coming to the university. For all other ethnic groups, urban-rural origin did not produce any differential in inter-ethnic interaction (Tables 6 – 8).

Table 7: Percentage of students from the various ethnic groups playing games with friends from other ethnic groups at least once a week, according to selected variables

		Malay	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Gender	Male	59.3**	93.0*	41.5**	67.0**
	Female	37.1**	80.6*	29.7**	42.7**
Place of origin	Urban	48.3**	83.1	34.6	52.5
	Rural	41.5**	88.6	31.9	46.9
Type of neighbourhood	Multi-ethnic	48.4**	85.5	35.3*	51.3
	Mono-ethnic	42.0**	87	29.9*	50.0
Current place of stay	Hostel	46.2	83.9	37.0**	50.8
	Off campus	43.2	91.7	28.2**	52.0
Language barrier	No	44.4	86.9	34.9*	49.6
	Yes	47.9	81.8	28.3*	64.3

** , * Significant at 1% and 5% respectively

Table 8: Percentage of students from the various ethnic groups taking part in club/society activities with friends from other ethnic groups at least once a week, according to selected variables

		Malays	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Gender	Male	59.3**	70.2	47.6**	67.0*
	Female	43.8**	76.4	34.1**	52.6*
Place of origin	Urban	53.9**	72.9	39.4	57.1
	Rural	44.0**	74.3	37.2	59.4
Neighbourhood	Multi-ethnic	54.2**	74.7	40.1	58.1
	Mono-ethnic	44.4**	71.7	35.3	53.6
Place of stay	Hostel	51.6**	71.0	45.8**	62.6*
	Off campus	44.4**	80.6	27.3**	45.3*
Language barrier	No	48.8	74.8	39.3	56.8
	Yes	51.5	68.2	35.5	64.3

** , * Significant at 1% and 5% respectively

Among Malay and Chinese students, those from multi-ethnic places were more likely to study and play games with course mates from other ethnic groups compared to those who come from mono-ethnic places. This shows that past experience in mixing with people from other ethnic groups is likely to have a positive effect on inter-ethnic relations on campus.

The current place of stay provided an erratic pattern of inter-ethnic interaction. For the Malays, those living outside campus were more likely to study with course mates from other ethnic groups, as compared to those who stay on campus, but no significant differences were observed for other ethnic groups (Table 6).

Chinese students living on campus were more likely than those staying outside campus to play games with friends from other ethnic groups, but there was no significant difference among those of the other three ethnic groups. With the exception of the Other *Bumiputera*, students staying on campus were more likely to take part in multi-ethnic club/society activities (Tables 7 – 8).

Tables 6 – 8 show that for all ethnic groups, the language barrier did not prevent students from interacting with one another in their studies and social activities. However, Chinese students who regarded language as a barrier in communicating with others were less likely to play games with those from other ethnic groups compared to those who did not have such a problem.

Playing games and participation in club/society activities are important determinants of academic interaction. For all ethnic groups, those who played games and took part in society activities with friends from other ethnic groups were also much more likely to study with them (Table 6).

Academic interaction across ethnic groups depended on the courses taken. In faculties where the courses were taken mainly by students from one ethnic group, it is irrelevant to examine inter-ethnic interaction in studying. Academic interaction across ethnic groups varies by faculties and ethnic groups. Table 9 shows that about two-thirds of Malay students from the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, the Faculty of Economics and Administration, and the Faculty of Law reported that they study with course mates from other ethnic groups, partly because of the presence of a large number of non Malay course mates. Elsewhere, the non Malays were much more likely to study with the Malays rather than the other way round, and this can be attributed to the larger number of Malay course mates in all the other faculties.

The Other *Bumiputera* and Indians were much more likely to study with course mates from other ethnic groups, simply because there were few from their own ethnic group doing the same course. More than 85 per cent of Other *Bumiputera* students from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science reported that they studied with course mates from other ethnic groups at least once a week. About two-thirds of Indian students from the Faculty of Economics and Administration and the Faculty of Science reported the same. However, a little less than half of Indian students from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences studied with course mates from other ethnic groups. This may be due to the different courses taken by different ethnic groups within the faculty.

Logistic regressions show that ethnic composition of the faculty is by far the most important factor in explaining inter-ethnic academic interaction for the Malays and Chinese, and probably for the other ethnic groups as well. For both Malays and Chinese, those from faculties where the opposite ethnic group made up at least 50 per cent were about 1.6 times more likely to study with course mates from another ethnic group, as compared to those that come from faculties where the opposite ethnic group made up less than one quarter (Table 10).

Male students were about 1.3 to 1.5 times more likely than female students to study with course mates from another ethnic group at least once a week. Students who did not have language problems in interacting with others were only slightly more likely than those who have language problems to study with course mates from other ethnic groups. Urban-rural origin and current place of stay did not show significant differentiation in the likelihood

Table 9: Per cent of students studying with course mates from other ethnic groups, by faculty and ethnicity of respondents

Faculty	Malay		Chinese	
	%	n	%	n
Arts and Social Sciences	54.6	317	61.1	72
Built Environment	56.3	103	76.3	38
Business and Accountancy	45.5	176	43.7	167
Computer Science and IT	67.7	65	53.3	30
Economics & Administration	65.1	218	45.1	164
Education	63.2	95	74.0	73
Engineering	49.0	100	45.6	171
Language and Linguistics	42.1	38	50.0	58
Law	64.0	25	35.8	53
Medicine	56.5	147	62.1	95
Science	55.4	785	57.8	327

Note: Tabulations for Other Bumiputera and Indian students are not shown in the table because of the small number of cases in most faculties.

Table 10: Logistic regressions explaining the likelihood of Malay and Chinese students studying with course mates from other ethnic groups at least once a week

	Malays	Chinese
No language problem	1.1127	1.1371
Hostel	0.8723	1.1601
Male	1.5857**	1.3418*
Urban	1.1555	1.1082
Multi-ethnic neighbour	1.3939**	1.2418
Malay/Chinese proportion in the faculty		
50 % or more	1.6247**	1.5759*
25 - 49.9 %	1.2410*	1.4625
Constant	0.6405	0.4900

Note: Due to the relatively small sample size, logistic regression was not run for the Other Bumiputera and Indians.

** , * Significant at 1% and 5% respectively

to study with course mates from other ethnic groups. However, among the Malays, those from multi-ethnic neighbourhood were 1.4 times as likely as those from a mono-ethnic background to interact with other ethnic groups academically (Table 10).

5. Attitudes and Perceptions

How one perceives a situation determines a particular reaction and each reaction creates a different outcome. In this regard, inter-ethnic interactions are very much influenced by

Table 11: Percentage distribution of respondents by their perception on the willingness of course mates from different ethnic groups to help them in study, by ethnicity of respondents

	Ethnic group of respondents			
	Malays	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian
Willingness to help	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Are Malay course mates willing to help				
Not willing at all	0.4	2.3	2.4	2.4
A little bit willing	1.9	3.1	10.9	10.2
Average	9.9	21.1	34.7	33.7
Willing	26.7	28.1	29.2	26.3
Very willing	61.0	45.3	22.8	27.5
Are other <i>Bumiputera</i> course mates willing to help				
Not willing at all	6.6	3.2	5.7	8.0
A little bit willing	19.4	4.8	15.1	13.6
Average	28.3	20.0	38.5	31.9
Willing	25.9	31.2	22.6	25.8
Very willing	19.9	40.8	18.0	20.7
Are Chinese course mates willing to help				
Not willing at all	5.3	6.1	0.5	4.7
A little bit willing	17.6	13.2	2.1	14.2
Average	30.4	34.2	16.5	28.5
Willing	28.6	22.8	34.6	29.2
Very willing	18.2	23.7	46.2	23.3
Are Indian course mates willing to help				
Not willing at all	8.2	10.1	4.7	1.2
A little bit willing	22.0	22.9	14.9	2.7
Average	31.4	31.2	37.6	15.1
Willing	23.4	19.3	25.2	30.1
Very willing	15.0	16.5	17.7	51.0

attitudes and perceptions towards members of other ethnic groups. As shown above, the probability of students studying with course mates from another ethnic group is strongly positively correlated with the perception of the opposite ethnic group being helpful. Most students were of the view that members from their own ethnic group were willing to help out in their studies. Table 11 shows that about half of the Malay, Chinese and Indian students viewed course mates from the opposite ethnic group as being willing to help out in their

studies. Other *Bumiputera* students were more likely than all other ethnic groups to perceive that course mates from the other ethnic groups are willing to help out in their studies.

The perception of the willingness of course mates from other ethnic groups to help out in study has become more positive since 2002. In the current survey, about 47 per cent of Malay students reported that Chinese course mates were willing to help, up from about 36 per cent in 2000; conversely, a little more than half of the Chinese students in both surveys reported that their Malay course mates were willing to help. The proportion of Indian students who reported that their Chinese course mates were willing to help them in their study has also increased appreciably from about 40 to 52.5 per cent, while the proportion of Malay course mates who were willing to help them in their studies remained unchanged at about 54 per cent

The perception as to whether course mates from other ethnic groups were willing to help out in study did not vary much by gender, place of origin and current place of stay. However, language barrier influenced such a perception. For all ethnic groups, students who had a language barrier in communicating with others were much less likely to perceive their course mates from other ethnic groups as willing to help out in their study (table not shown).

Academic interaction across ethnic groups was influenced to a large extent by students' perception of the other ethnic groups, such as their willingness to help out. Figures 1 and 2 show such a perception was very important in determining academic interaction. For both Malay and Chinese students, those who perceived that the opposite ethnic group is very willing to help out in course work are at least twice as likely as those who perceive otherwise to study together. However, it must be mentioned that this perception may also be conditioned by the experience of studying together. Those who have studied together were much more likely to have a positive perception of course mates from the other ethnic groups.

As argued by Jahara *et al.* (2004), social distance can often be self-fulfilling, as it is natural one will avoid interacting with members from a group that is not acceptable for certain social relations. They argued that the unfavourable stereotypes one holds towards the 'out-groups' are highly unlikely to be broken down, and this does not augur well for fostering racial harmony.

A modified Bogardus social distance scale was used to measure the social distance separating ethnic or other groups from each other by assessing the willingness of the respondents to accept members from other ethnic groups as their own spouse, spouse of a relative, boy friend or girl friend, neighbour and colleague. Responses to this set of questions were generally consistent with the hypothesis a person who refuses association with the socially distant items will refuse the socially closer items (Newman 2000). It is postulated that if one can accept someone from another ethnic group as husband or wife, it is highly probable one can also accept him or her as spouse of a relative, neighbour or colleague. On the other hand, if one can accept the 'out-group' as neighbour or colleague, it does not follow that one would accept them for marriage. In Malaysia, inter-marriage is rare. An estimate by Tey (2007) based on the 2000 population census shows that intermarriages made up only 2 per cent of all marriages among the three main ethnic groups – the Malays, Chinese and Indians – and of those who inter-married, a sizeable proportion were married to

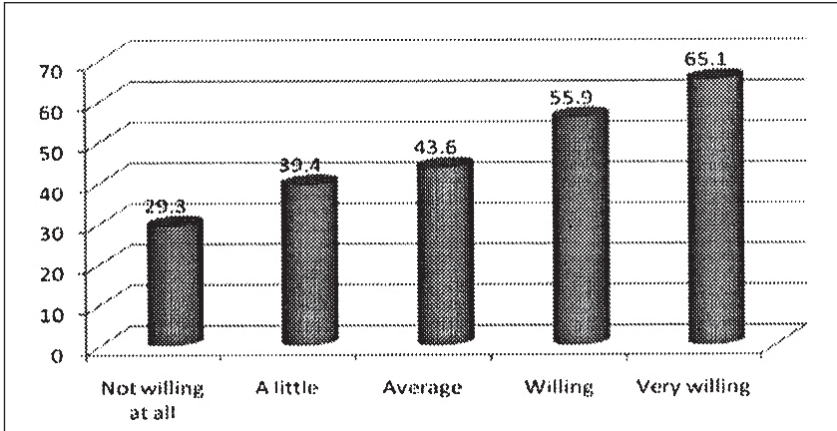


Figure 1: Per cent of Malay students studying with Chinese course mates at least once a week by their perception of Chinese students' willingness to help

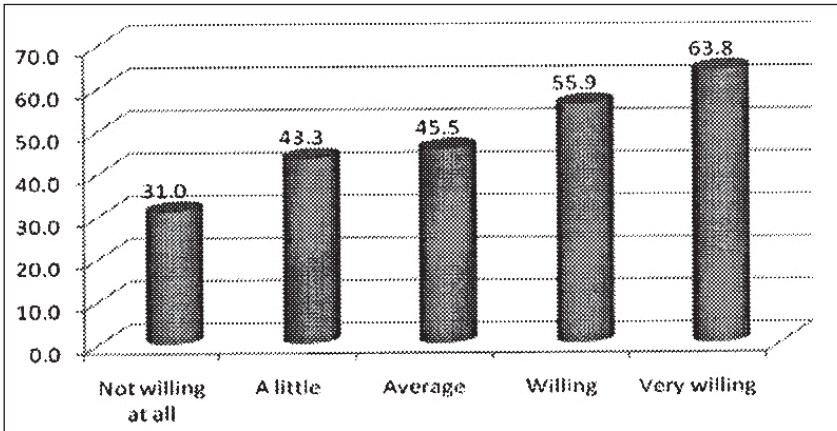


Figure 2: Per cent of Chinese students studying with Malay course mates at least once a week by their perception of Malay students' willingness to help

non Malaysians. However, about one in ten Other *Bumiputera* had married someone from another ethnic group.

Table 12 shows that the majority of respondents could accept someone from their own ethnic groups to be their own spouse, spouse of a family member, boy friend or girl friend, neighbour and colleague. Around two-thirds to 90 per cent of the respondents were willing to accept members from another ethnic group as neighbour or colleague. However, a smaller proportion could accept members of other ethnic groups as their own spouse, spouse of a family member or even as boy friend or girl friend. There are many reasons for not wanting to marry someone from another ethnic group, and these include peer pressure, cultural and dietary differences and the requirement for religious conversion. The fact that a sizeable

Table 12: Percentage of respondents who can accept people from own or other ethnic groups as partners in various family and social relations, by ethnic group

Family and social relation	Malays	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indians
As spouse				
Malays	97.4	51.2	6.7	10.8
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	24.3	76.0	12.3	10.8
Chinese	29.1	43.4	97.8	30.4
Indians	12.3	14.7	9.0	90.4
As spouse of a family member				
Malays	92.2	53.5	14.7	13.8
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	34.6	81.4	21.9	17.7
Chinese	37.6	48.1	97.0	40.8
Indians	20.5	27.9	18.4	89.2
As boy friend or girl friend				
Malays	93.0	59.4	10.9	20.8
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	29.1	71.1	16.7	16.9
Chinese	34.6	46.1	96.5	38.8
Indians	15.2	23.4	13.2	89.2
As neighbour				
Malays	90.2	85.9	72.2	78.5
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	73.5	89.1	69.8	75.4
Chinese	75.0	80.5	94.3	85.0
Indians	67.1	75.8	66.3	88.1
As colleague				
Malays	91.8	89.1	74.6	80.0
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	77.6	89.1	73.0	77.7
Chinese	78.9	79.1	96.0	85.5
Indians	72.1	78.3	72.9	89.2

proportion of the respondents (up to one-third) were not willing to accept members of certain ethnic groups as neighbour or colleague is a matter of concern for policy makers.

Among the ethnic groups, the Other *Bumiputera* were much more willing than the rest to accept someone from another ethnic group as their own spouse or spouse of a relative, and other social relations. Among the three main ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia, the Malays appeared to be relatively more “open” than the Chinese and Indians to inter-ethnic marriage. The Malays and Indians were also more likely to accept the Chinese rather than any other ethnic groups as a marriage partner. It appears that the Chinese were least willing to accept inter-ethnic marriage.

In general, inter-marriage was more acceptable among males rather than females, and it was also more acceptable among those who came from urban areas and multi-ethnic

neighbourhood. However, Malay males were much less likely than their female counterparts to accept members from other ethnic groups as neighbours or colleagues. As expected, those who came from multi-ethnic neighbourhoods were much more willing to accept others as neighbours or colleagues (table not shown).

Overall, close to half of the respondents opined that ethnic relations on campus were good or excellent, while only less than 2 per cent were of the view that ethnic relations on campus were poor. Students' assessment of ethnic relations for the country as a whole corresponded closely with their view on ethnic relations in the campus. University students were generally positive with regard to the improved ethnic relations in the country. Table 13 shows that almost 40 per cent were of the view that ethnic relations had improved over the last five years, as against 14 per cent who were of the view that it had worsened. Looking ten years into the future, 46 per cent held the view that ethnic relations would improve while 18 per cent held the opposite view.

Compared to the findings in the 2002 survey, perceived ethnic relations on campus had improved somewhat. In the earlier survey, only 31.4 per cent of the respondents were of the view that ethnic relations on campus were good or excellent, and this had increased to about 50 per cent in the present survey. However, students' perception of ethnic relations for the country as a whole appeared to have turned slightly more negative, as a lower proportion were of the view that ethnic relations in the country were good or excellent (43.5 per cent as against 48.5 per cent).

The perception of ethnic relations varied rather widely across ethnic groups. Malay students were more likely to have a positive evaluation of ethnic relations and the Chinese least likely to do so. It is also worth noting that about 5 per cent of Indian students held the view that ethnic relations on campus were poor. Chinese and Indian students are also much more likely than Malay and other *Bumiputera* students to report that ethnic relations had worsened and were expecting a deterioration in the future. In contrast, about half of the Malay and other *Bumiputera* students held the view that ethnic relations would improve in the future (Table 13).

Compared to the 2002 survey, the Malays and Other *Bumiputera* students had become more positive in their perception of ethnic relations on campus and in the country. In this survey, 58 per cent of the Malay respondents and 54.2 per cent of Other *Bumiputera* respondents were of the view that ethnic relations on campus were good or excellent compared to 33.8 per cent each in the 2002 survey. On the other hand, the proportion of Chinese and Indian students who were of the view that ethnic relations had worsened during the last five years had increased from 9.2 per cent and 16.1 per cent to 18 per cent and 26.1 per cent respectively, and more than 20 per cent were of the view that it would be worse in the future. It is likely that their views on ethnic relations had been influenced by the spate of heated debates in the media by politicians to champion the rights and privileges of their own ethnic communities.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Studies have shown that the higher the educational attainment, the less widespread chauvinistic feelings. In other words, higher education is associated with increasing tolerance toward ethnic out-groups and decreasing feelings of in-group superiority, but the educational

Table 13: Percentage distribution of respondents by perceived ethnic relations and ethnicity

Perceived Ethnic Relations	Malays	Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian	Total
On campus					
Excellent	13.9	14.7	4.3	10.7	10.6
Good	44.1	39.5	28.9	37.9	38.6
Neutral	36.7	39.5	55.5	34.9	42.7
Not bad	4.3	4.7	9.5	11.1	6.5
Poor	1.0	1.6	1.8	5.4	1.6
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
In the country					
Excellent	15.6	15.5	4.0	11.5	11.6
Good	49.9	41.9	28.9	35.2	41.9
Neutral	31.3	38.8	56.2	42.5	40.3
Not bad	2.6	2.3	9.2	7.3	4.9
Poor	0.7	1.6	1.8	3.4	1.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Last five years					
Better	48.0	44.2	25.1	32.6	39.6
Remains	41.3	41.9	56.9	41.4	46.3
Worse	10.6	14.0	18.0	26.1	14.1
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Next ten years					
Better	53.6	49.6	32.7	42.9	46.0
Remains	30.6	34.1	46.0	31.0	35.8
Worse	15.8	16.3	21.3	26.1	18.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

effect on inter-ethnic attitudes and tolerance varies across contexts (Coenders and Scheepers 2003; Hello *et al.* 2004; Jackman and Muha 1984).

This survey shows that even among undergraduates, there is strong evidence of ethnocentrism, as students from each ethnic group tend to form cliques with course mates and friends from their own ethnic groups rather than those from other ethnic groups in study, games and sports and social activities. They also tend to have more favourable attitudes toward the ethnic in-group and unfavourable attitudes toward out-groups. Lee (2000) argued that as members of distinct and self-conscious cultural communities, the different ethnic groups naturally were inclined to identify with and treasure their respective languages, cultures and religions, and thus actively strive to preserve and propagate them. Hence, it is expected that students choose to socialise and associate with members from their own ethnic group, who share a common language, culture and religion, and the same courses taken. However, it is worth noting that there seems to be some improvement in ethnic relations on campus between 2002 and 2008.

This survey found that many factors contribute to ethnocentrism on campus. First, the different type of courses taken by students from different ethnic groups, even within the

same faculty does not provide the opportunity for them to interact academically. Second, most students are preoccupied with study and do not find time to socialise or to play games. The different ethnic groups on campus tend to play different games, and this is reflective of Malaysian society. As such, the opportunity to interact among students from different ethnic groups in games and sports is rather minimal. Third, many students are apathetic toward club and society activities. Moreover, most of these societies are mono-ethnic or are dominated by one ethnic group, probably due to indifference or the small number of an ethnic minority on campus. Fourth, cultural and religious differences are one of the main deterrents of inter-ethnic mixing. Because of eating habits, it is rare to see students from different ethnic groups eating together. Fifth, ethnic stereotyping and peer pressure could also contribute to the lack of acceptance and interaction among students from different ethnic groups. Finally, the political and social environment could also give rise to suspicion and feelings of alienation that prevent closer ties and *camaraderie* among undergraduates.

A number of measures can be taken by the university management and lecturers to forge closer inter-ethnic relations and interaction among students. The practice of the university to assign seniors to serve as guides and buddies to freshmen provides an excellent opportunity to bring together old and new students from different ethnic backgrounds to break the 'ice'. Programmes can be implemented to encourage them to interact in study, games and social and community activities.

The allocation of accommodation in hostels can be arranged to maximise inter-ethnic interaction among students. Concerted efforts should be made to encourage students to use the common study room and participate in social activities and sports. Members of various university sub-committees should be reflective of the ethnic composition. In the 2002 survey, it was found that religion was the main hindrance for room-sharing among students from different ethnic groups. However, the hostel management can still facilitate inter-ethnic mixing by assigning students from different ethnic groups to the same floor.

There are many clubs and societies on campus but few students are active participants in these clubs and societies, as many are preoccupied with studying and doing well in examinations. To encourage active participation among students, appropriate incentives should be offered for those who are actively involved, especially in activities that promote inter-ethnic relations. There is also a need to encourage more exchange programmes among these clubs and societies to scale up inter-ethnic interaction and to bring about acceptance of the out-groups.

Left to their choice, most students would form working groups with those from their own ethnic group. Lecturers can play a very important role in facilitating and forging closer interaction between students from different ethnic groups, by assigning them to the working groups, with appropriate guidance. They must also ensure close and equal participation of all to prevent ill feelings arising from non contribution of some group members.

The ethnic factor should be considered in sending students for industrial training. It will help to foster inter-ethnic interaction by sending students from different ethnic groups to the same organisation, so that they appreciate and learn how to work along with different people in the workplace.

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Appendix 1: Sample distribution by key independent variables

		Number	Percent	Faculty	Number	Percent
Ethnic group	Malays	2461	57.9	Academy for Islamic Studies	157	3.7
	Other Bumiputera	129	3.0	Academy for Malay Studies	170	4.0
	Chinese	1355	31.9	Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences	481	11.3
	Indian	262	6.2	Faculty of Built Environment	146	3.4
	Others	43	1.0	Faculty of Buisness and Accountancy	370	8.7
	Total	4250	100.0	Faculty of Computer Science and IT	101	2.4
Gender	Male	1518	35.7	Faculty of Dentistry	21	0.5
	Female	2732	64.3	Faculty of Economics and Administration	420	9.9
	Total	4250	100.0	Faculty of Education	201	4.7
Year of study	1	1193	28.1	Faculty of Engineering	288	6.8
	2	1554	36.6	Faculty of Language and Linguistic	110	2.6
	3	1151	27.1	Faculty of Law	92	2.2
	4	352	8.3	Faculty of Medicine	277	6.5
	Total	4250	100.0	Faculty of Sciences	1219	28.7
Place of origin	Urban	2489	58.6	Sport Centre	93	2.2
	Rural	1761	41.4	Centre for Cultural Studies	62	1.5
	Total	4250	100.0	Centre for Foundation Studies	40	0.9
Neighbourhood	Multi-ethnic	2545	59.9			
	Mono-ethnic	1701	40.0	Total	4248	100.0
	Total	4246	99.9	Missing value	2	0.0
	Missing value	4	0.1			
Place of stay	Hostel	2873	67.6			
	Outside campus	1372	32.3			
	Total	4245	99.9			
	Missing value	5	0.1			