

**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA**

**INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE:  
EXPLORING SUPERVISION  
EXPERIENCES OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AND  
ACADEMIC SUPERVISORS IN  
MALAYSIA**

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## ABSTRACT

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in academic supervision, particularly within internationalised higher education. In Malaysia, where international postgraduate enrolment continues to grow in line with national goals outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015–2025), supervision often occurs within complex intercultural interfaces. However, empirical research remains limited on how ICC is understood and enacted by both International Postgraduate Students (IPS) and Local Academic Supervisors (LAS). This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences and interpretations of ICC in supervision across selected public and private universities in Malaysia. Guided by Dalib's (2017) adapted Intercultural Competence Model and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the study employed a qualitative interpretivist design. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 IPS and 15 LAS across selected public and private institutions in Klang Valley, Malaysia. A hybrid thematic analysis using NVivo 14 revealed two overarching themes in informants' understanding of ICC: Attitude and Mutual Understanding. Findings suggest that IPS develop a more intentional and experiential understanding of ICC, while LAS show more implicit and variable interpretations shaped by discipline, background, and prior exposure. The study contributes a relational, context-sensitive account of ICC and calls for stronger institutional support for reciprocal engagement.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

The globalisation of higher education has accelerated international students' mobility, leading to a significant increase in the number of postgraduate students pursuing advanced degrees outside their home countries (Fidler et al., 2025 ; Singh & Jack, 2021). In response to this trend, many nations have sought to position themselves as attractive academic destinations by offering high-quality education and culturally diverse environments. Malaysia is among the countries that have actively promoted itself as a global education hub. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have seen a steady rise in the enrollment of international students, drawn by promises of academic excellence, cultural richness, and a relatively affordable cost of living.

While Malaysia's multicultural setting offers potential for rich intercultural engagement, it also presents communication challenges that are often underestimated. International students entering Malaysian universities must adapt to the new academic system and learn to navigate complex intercultural dynamics (Yassin et al., 2020). Scholars have long emphasised that language proficiency, while essential, is not sufficient for successful communication across cultures (Byram, 2021 ; Deardoff, 2009 ; Bennet, 2013). Communicative competence also requires the ability to interpret and respond to social and cultural norms embedded in language use (Corbett, 2022 ; Dalib et al., 2019 ; Feng et al., 2009 ; Kramsh, 2013 ; Shaules, 2016). This is particularly true in academic supervision, where misalignments in expectations can lead to breakdowns in trust and understanding. In the intercultural supervision context, success hinges on the development of effective and appropriate intercultural communication skills (Zheng et al., 2019). Nowhere is this more critical than in the postgraduate supervision relationship, which represents one of the most influential academic encounters for international students. In such a relationship, the quality of communication between the student and supervisor plays a vital role in shaping academic progress, emotional well-being, and overall educational experience (Zheng et al., 2019 ; Sidhu et al., 2013 ; Manathunga, 2017).