

Obstacles to Learning in Students from Twinning Programs in Malaysia

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Abstract: It has been well documented that the approaches to learning are important constructs in trying to describe differences in students' experiences of tertiary education, and in trying to understand variations in the quality of their learning outcomes. However, what has been lacking up to now is research into how approaches to learning operate in the context of a Malaysian twinning program. First, a twinning program environment is a unique and complex setting, as students are required to function within a context which advocates ideals of their partner program in Western universities, but the students remain within the boundaries and limitations of their Malaysian educational institution. Second, academics in twinning programs are faced with real challenges in providing learning environments that can foster deep approaches to learning that satisfy both the aims of the exporter and also that of the Malaysian education system. Third, there is a possibility that students operating from a twinning mode and coming from diverse cultural, social, and educational environments may exhibit different learning approaches to those espoused in Western contexts.

This article reports on a study of second and third year undergraduate students in twinning programs in Malaysia. The article begins with the premise that giving students a 'voice' is necessary and leads to a better understanding of their needs, thus to better cooperation between lecturers and students. The findings provide descriptions of the obstacles and specific ways that hinder deep learning, including a special mention of the manifestation of the phenomenon known as *kiasu* (a word which originated in Singapore and reflects a trait in which students strive to win or make an effort to reduce the risk of failure). The article also discusses different possibilities for developing deep learning and understanding. Recommendations are made for teaching and learning practices.

Keywords: Approaches to Learning, Twinning programs and Modes, *Kiasu*, Cultural Diversity, Learning Cultures

Introduction

The enactment of the 1996 Private Higher Education Act in Malaysia saw a rapid expansion of Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEI), and an increase in students enrolled in PHEIs. The Act was endorsed because the Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Higher Education) wanted to democratise education and provide opportunities for more students to achieve a degree, but at the same time provide meaningful learning in PHEIs (Salleh, 2003). Many of the PHEIs have established linkages called 'Twinning Degree Programmes' with curricula imported from overseas Western universities, of which Australia and the United Kingdom are well represented. Typical twinning arrangements are '1+2' (one year in local PHEI and two years in the overseas partner university), '2+1' or '2+2' year arrangements. '3+0' is fairly recent, and is one in which students are allowed to complete the foreign degree entirely at the local PHEI.

As an educator who works in a PHEI environment, I realised that there was little literature in the area of PHEI students undertaking overseas Western curricula in Malaysia. I was thus motivated by a deep concern at this lack of attention given to the whole process of PHEI students' learning particularly because of the unprecedented growth in student numbers at PHEI since 1995 that gave rise to the call for 'quality' and for Malaysia to be a 'centre of educational excellence' (Department of Private Education, 2003; Rao, 1997). Furthermore,

the democratisation of education has led to greater and wider participation of students coming from different societal groups (including mature-aged students) with a range of abilities, needs and motivations. Yet there have been few attempts to seek the opinions and views that reflect the status of PHEI students, as participants in new roles as consumers, customers, and contributors to their own learning processes and to the improvement of PHEIs as a whole. Roger (1969, p.104), claimed that “a way must be found to develop a climate in the system in which the focus is not upon teaching...” and that we as educators must “develop a creative individual who is open to all his experience, aware of it, and accepting of it ...”. Marjoribanks (1991, p. 3) concisely added that “if teachers are to be successful in stimulating students’ learning then they need to understand the formidable intricacies of their undertaking”. However, it is not possible for PHEI to “develop a climate in the system ...” that is optimal to learning or for teachers “to understand the formidable intricacies of their undertaking” unless we constantly re-evaluate and involve the students by garnering their opinion and obtaining feedback about their learning difficulties and learning environment through a qualitative analysis of investigations undertaken.

Acknowledging the importance of giving student a ‘voice’ means acknowledging their active role in the learning process. We need to seek a better understanding of students’ own qualitatively distinct experiences of learning as they perform various tasks, attempt to understand the significance of their learning materials and ultimately to change their conceptions of their subject material. I consider that a greater understanding and clarity of the complexities of our students’ learning is to enable them to participate, learn, and develop to their fullest potential within improved learning environments.

Background Literature

Concerns about the quality of student learning in tertiary education are not new. In recent years, there have been significant efforts by researchers and educators addressing this issue and the expanding field of student learning research has produced many suggestions of what we should be doing to encourage quality learning. In this broad discourse about quality and material on the ways that students learn, the student approaches to learning (SAL) have emerged, and have led to a distinction between ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ approaches to and outcomes of learning.

The surface approach to learning is seen as an approach driven by extrinsic motivation, and extrinsic to the real purpose of the task (Biggs, 2001). The intention is to meet requirements with as little effort and time as possible. One of the methods is to memorise material. Rote learning does not automatically mean that a student is adopting a surface approach, because rote learning can be acceptable when verbatim recall is needed. It becomes a surface approach if the student rote learns answers to previous examination questions. According to Ramsden (1992, p.45), surface approaches “are uniformly disastrous for learning ... they may permit students to imitate authentic learning and to bamboozle their teachers into thinking that they have learned ... the snag is that you may survive the exam but you will almost certainly forget everything you memorized for it after a few days”. An outcome of surface learning is that the underlying meaning tends to become lost or fails to be integrated into the learner’s knowledge base. There is no analysis of the learned material. Biggs (1987, 2001) has suggested that students who continue to use a surface approach, not only have poor performance outcomes, but they tend to terminate their higher education after a first degree.

On the other hand, the deep approach is based on an intention to engage in the task meaningfully (Biggs, 2001). There is an attempt to understand what is learned and to relate it

to both their previous knowledge and previous experience. The aim of deep learning is to engage in a task with learning processes that are appropriate to completing it satisfactorily (Biggs, 2001). Martön and Säljö (1984, p. 46) stated “We are not arguing that the deep/holistic approach is always “best”: only that it is the best, indeed the only, way to understand learning materials’. Resultant outcomes are high quality learning, including the development of analytic skills (Biggs, 2001; Gordon, Simpson, & Debus, 2001). Therefore, in this framework, it is reasonable to expect that PHEI students doing overseas curricula in Malaysia adopt deep approaches to learning so that they may achieve the outcome that is part of deep learning for understanding. Ramsden (1992, p.61) stated:

Deep approaches are connected with qualitatively superior outcomes which we associate with understanding a subject: the making of an argument, the novel application of a concept, an elegant solution to a design problem, an interplay between basic science knowledge and professional application, mastery of relevant detail, relating evidence correctly to conclusions.

However, previous studies in the educational arena have demonstrated that students’ learning environment can have some interesting effects on approaches to learning. The approach that students adopt, whether it is a deep or surface approach in their daily academic learning can be somewhat helped or hindered by their learning environment. Students’ perceptions of the learning environment such as teaching quality and teaching practices can influence students’ approaches to learning and their learning outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Prosser, Trigwell, Hazel & Gallagher, 1994; Ramsden, 1992). According to Trigwell and Prosser (1996), approaches to teaching play a key role in the quality of students’ approaches to learning. The authors found that student-focused approaches to teaching are associated with deep approaches to learning while an information transmission mode and teacher-centred approaches are associated with surface approaches to learning.

Curiously and surprisingly, very few studies have looked at the approaches to learning and learning environments from students studying in twinning programmes in Malaysia. The PHEI learning environment is a unique and a complex setting, as students are required to function within a context which advocates ideals of their partner overseas universities, but remain within the boundaries and constraints of a local private institution. Students in PHEIs are sometimes required to make an adjustment between being taught by local and overseas deliverers. Therefore, as in any learning environment, many aspects of the PHEI environment may affect the approaches and quality of students’ learning. Theoretically, students at PHEIs have the same experiences with regards to the instructional, learning, and teaching processes as their counterparts overseas. But is this necessarily so? This article provides an insight into the ‘real-world’ issues as experienced by PHEI students undergoing twinning programmes and asks what we can do for our students so that they achieve desirable learning outcomes. In addition, the article also contributes to the twinning programme literature by exploring the problems that PHEI students experience in completing their degree from learning institutions that may employ different approaches to learning.

Method

In order to penetrate the ‘real-world’ issues of PHEI students from twinning programmes, a phenomenographic approach was used to obtain detailed and rich qualitative data. According to phenomenography, it is important to look at students’ learning experiences that happen in their natural situation, and in-depth interviews provide one of the best means of finding out about students’ experiences.

The Participants

The study population consisted of second and third year undergraduate students undertaking the 3+0 twinning programmes from either Australian or British universities. These students were taking degrees in business and business-related subjects, computer science, or engineering. It was considered important that students who participated in the study were mature enough to make valid and careful judgements about their learning and studying at PHEI to ensure careful responses to the interviews. Furthermore, it was necessary that students were established in their place of learning and had formed certain learning habits. These were the reasons second and third year students were chosen. A total of 52 students were interviewed. There were 25 males and 27 females of which seven were Malays, 33 Chinese, 10 Indians and three indigenous races (Iban and Kadazan).

Interview Questions and Protocols

Generally, students were asked questions that dealt with an exploration of the approaches they used in learning as well as feelings and perceptions of their learning environment. The teaching strategies and practices used by their lecturers, influential person/s who facilitated their learning or helped to optimise their learning outcomes, and their overall satisfaction with the course and institution were the issues investigated. In addition, students were provided with the opportunity to suggest elements they would like to see improved to maximise their learning. An informal conversation was held with students on an individual basis and conducted away from the students' institutions. Students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

At the start of every interview, I briefly explained the purposes of my study and discussed ethical issues such as anonymity and stressed the interviewees' right to withdraw from the interview at any point if they so wished, and then obtained permission to tape record the interviews. At certain points in the interview, following students' responses, when necessary, I followed up with questions to ensure a better understanding of what was said, or to encourage students to reflect on certain terms they had used. Students were given the opportunity to ask me questions at the end of each interview, as I felt this was only fair given the sacrifice of their time and effort. On average each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. The interview process took three months to complete.

I undertook verbatim transcription, usually fairly soon after the interview had taken place. I began to glean information through each set of responses and used a method of 'free' and 'open' coding to assess an idea of common themes that emerged which pertained to students' approaches to learning and their perceptions of their learning environments. After the initial transcription, a more careful analysis was conducted where each response was again re-evaluated and compared using an "iterative reading and re-reading of transcripts to establish similarities and differences in the responses made" (Entwistle & Martön, 1994, p.166). At all times, the themes and categories from the interview data were integrated with relevant literature pertaining to 'learning approaches' and 'learning environments' (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Prosser, Trigwell, Hazel & Gallagher, 1994; Ramsden, 1992). Overall, the analysis permitted useful interpretations of aspects of student learning in the twinning program environment.

To provide realistic insights, data from the interviews were not edited, but rather presented in verbatim form. However, interviews that were spoken in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) or the Chinese Hokkien dialect (Fujian province in China) were translated as

closely as possible so that the original meanings were not lost. As much as possible, students' responses were presented as they were spoken, to reflect a realistic picture of students' approaches to learning and their perceptions of the learning environment. Explanations of local colloquialisms used are in parentheses.

Results and Findings: Obstacles to deep learning

Although the aims of twinning programs advocate that students acquire deeper levels of understanding of their course and that their learning environments promote deep approaches to learning, the findings of this study indicate that students encountered a number of obstacles that can defeat these aims if they are not addressed.

Unimaginative teaching

Unimaginative teaching and superficial skimming of the learning materials by academics compounded students' use of shallow memorisation of information.

[Translated from the Hokkien dialect]

I remember this lecturer, she gives us the notes, then she will use the projector on the board and she will read the notes word for word ... If she can explain what the notes mean would be better, just read, you know, everyone of us can read right? She requires the answer to be exactly what she gives us from her notes, if we use another words, like use our own words to explain, it is not acceptable. (Female, Chinese, Computer Science)

Similarly:

There are times when although the subject is interesting, the lecturer made me de-motivated or dislike the subject. I feel sad about it. (Male, Malay, Computer Science)

When asked to give examples of what was meant when a lecturer 'de-motivated', the response was the inability of the lecturer to respond to questions related to the subject and this shattered the confidence the student had in the lecturer.

It is bad when the lecturer purposefully forget what we ask because he don't know how to answer, with this kind of lecturer, we will not get the latest knowledge. (Male, Malay, Computer Science)

The following passages from two students were fairly typical of the other students interviewed when discussing the ways lecturers were responsible for their use of memorisation, partly because of the lecturers' inability to explain clearly and the large amount of unrelated notes given.

Take for an example a lecturer who says this 'this won't come out for exams, no need to worry', they straight away tell me that he don't know the subject himself, that is why those statements were made. So how does he expect us to be good in the subject? When we ask a question, he will link it to something totally irrelevant and don't know how to explain, and talk nonsense even to the point of talking about toilets. He is good at talking, but we never get an answer, I will listen for an hour only. I have

no problem with pretending to listen, ears open but brain somewhere else.
(Male, Chinese, Engineering)

He is like using his own materials, the materials are a little related to the subject but not totally. I will get piles and piles of notes, and when exams come, there is no time to study, what else to do – so take a few pages of notes that are important and memorise. (Male, Indian, Business)

Another problem found was not only lecturers' inability to explain things but to relate it to the real working environment.

The lecturer is too serious, no humour, they could ask us for opinions and give real live examples, rather than they just yak, yak, yak, yak. (Male, Chinese, Business)

The lecturer's ability to perform well was not necessarily seen as effective teaching and students were able to discern between lecturers who advanced their learning with those who had 'entertained' them.

... students liked her because she is very pretty, she walks up and down, makes jokes, talks well, but she cannot teach. She delivers from books. During tutorials, she will read out the answers without the explanations.
(Male, Chinese, Business)

Lack of useful and timely feedback

Giving quality feedback on students' work was perceived to be important, but as the comments show, it appeared to be lacking. Several students expressed frustration at being left in the dark about their effort, and felt it was 'time-wasting' to do a piece of work and not know if it was right or wrong or even meaningful. They commented on the importance of timely feedback so that they would not make the same mistakes.

He does not give any feedback. He will keep asking for opinions, but in the end, what is the correct one, all students want to know right? (Female, Chinese, Computer Science)

I think when we finish the assignments and we pass up, after they [..referring to lecturers..] have checked, they should give it back to us and give us comments on where we go wrong, and how we can improve ourselves. (Female, Chinese, Computer Science)

The following comments reflected the frustration students felt when feedback was not forthcoming from their lecturers.

I am not asking for too much, but if like the lecturer can tell me why I did something wrong and give me feedback, I would probably work harder.
(Male, Chinese, Business)

I would prefer feedback to be given so that I am able to get some idea of where and why I went wrong. But sometimes there are no feedbacks at all, maybe because the lecturer lack the experience to even know what to say

and comment, maybe also the lecturer dare not give feedback in case we students question back. (Male, Chinese, Engineering)

We do not get feedback at all, we only know our marks, we do not get things like how to improve. ... Sometimes we feel like it is time wasting to do assignments. (Male, Chinese, Computer Science)

Unfair treatment

Several students were vehement about issues of teacher bias and favouritism. Students do not appreciate being picked on by their lecturers, or they felt that at the level of higher education they should be equally respected.

Stop picking on us, be fair. They always, purposely ask some of us to answer questions, especially if it is a tough question, then if we cannot answer then they will say – ‘ah see never go for classes’ they embarrass us students. Maybe they think we can be afraid of them, but it gives the opposite reaction. (Female, Chinese, Business)

When the same student was asked to elaborate on what she meant by ‘opposite reaction’, she explained:

If they [..the lecturers..] cannot respect us, why should I? They think we are afraid they will fail us and must ‘bordek’ [..colloquial for ‘be extra nice to’..] them?

Lowering or having marks made lower was noted by several students who felt lecturers were being biased and personal about situations. This view was expressed as:

Some bad lecturer, they cannot take students’ attitude, they easily snap and then become sarcastic, maybe they think we are still in secondary school ... We just laugh and we do not feel hurt at all ... Sometimes our marks are always lower than the others ... a bit biased. (Female, Indian, Business)

Another time, the lecturer doesn’t want to entertain us, even though he knows we did quite well. ... I don’t know why, but our group always get lower marks. (Male, Chinese, Engineering)

They [.. referring to the lecturer ..] penalize those weaker students and those students who don’t go for classes that kind of things, some lecturers are like that, they just discriminate. (Female, Chinese, Business)

Apparently, such situations served to de-motivate:

No motivation in it, need to pass the degree, I just want to finish it. If it [..referring to the subject..] was not compulsory, I would not bother to take it. (Female, Indian, Business)

Other students, on the other hand, who had better rapport with their lecturers, were viewed as being especially favoured, and were given more help.

Lecturer must not take sides to certain students or pay more attention to one group of students. ... I think the group approached the lecturer so many times, they build this relationship. ... Those who don't ask much, or are quiet, are neglected. (Male, Chinese, Engineering)

Lecturers will notice the active or outstanding student in class, they will think this student is a good student, smart or intelligent. ... Lecturers will notice the students who approach them more, close to them. ... She/he will remember you more. So when you asked, you will get more than other students, it is not fair to the other students. ... Normally, the lecturers will only look at students who are performing well, they do not really bother about the rest. Maybe they [..referring to students..] have problems why they do not do well, maybe they have problems with English, shy, or do not understand what you are teaching? (Male, Chinese, Business)

A few students felt neglected by their lecturers because they were more in control and more independent in their own learning. Students commented that their lecturers were aware that they would be immersed in more independent work when they transferred to overseas Western universities, and felt grateful that their lecturers were trying to expose them to the different kinds of learning cultures they might find overseas. Students found that their lecturers did not work as hard at explaining things and expected them to undertake research to find the answers to questions. Most students realised that they should be less dependent on their lecturers or tutors and to take control of the organisation of their own learning. However, a few felt that their lecturers were not doing it effectively, and tended to ignore those who adapted well to independent work over those who found it difficult. The reverse result may occur, where students might revert to old approaches because it was perceived that lecturers tended to neglect students once they were able to be more self-reliant in their work.

Miss [..name..] do encourage us to do independent work, she says that it is better we get used to doing it now because when we go overseas next year, lecturers there will not provide notes or hold our hands, but she is not doing it effectively though. Some of my friends and myself, we enjoy having the freedom to see how we can complete our work, and also how we can sometimes talk to her about what we want to do in our assignments. ... She encourage us telling us we need to do this [..referring to being independent..] but at the same time, she overly attend to student and give free marks to those who complain about independent work. ... She pays attention to students who cannot do their work themselves and ignore those who are into independent work. Implementation is not effective. (Female, Indian, Business)

When asked how such situations would make them feel:

If we have lecturers like this, then we will not have the motivation to really study as we know she/he will not be asking us anything and we have 'let us not do it' attitude. (Female, Indian, Business)

Negative students' attitude and a general disappointment appeared to be prevalent when students encountered differential treatments from their lecturers. It appeared also to influence how they viewed their learning, which was reflected in passive and submissive behaviours.

Once a lecturer was very angry with a guy who did not do her tutorial questions and then she walked out of the class and ignored those who have done the tutorial questions, and he [..the student..] was nearly barred from the exams until he appealed. Because of this I do not dare do anything, ask her or contradict her, just do what she wants. (Female, Chinese, Computer Science)

I don't want to make him [..referring to her lecturer..] angry, he may mark us down. I feel sometimes he will disadvantage us, make our marks lower. (Female, Chinese, Computer Science)

Negative aspects of group discussion

Although deeper understanding can be forged through group work, conflicts within the group may prevent deeper learning and broadening of knowledge. Such conflicts may also encourage passiveness and obstruct positive sharing and communication. For instance, students complained about members of the group who dominated and tried to control the working of the whole group thus preventing the remaining students from engaging in productive discussions.

To me, I find it is not useful because it is a waste of time. ... I don't like group work so much, sometimes there is one person who takes over everything. ... The others let him take over, maybe because they are lazy themselves, but there is no team work if one always want to take over everything. I don't get any benefit from this. (Female, Chinese, Business)

... who thinks he or she is right, and if the member write something, they will change, sampai [..colloquial meaning 'to the point of'..] we get fed-up and let them do what they like. We just follow-'lah' [..colloquial Malay expression..], no point to argue, we always must follow what they want to say. Sometimes I think they also do not give us everything they know. (Female, Chinese, Business)

In addition, there were feelings of dissatisfaction within group members if their peers did not put in the same amount of work as they did or who were perceived to be selfish.

... we will have problem with group members, that is one thing you cannot avoid, I have faced it a couple of times. Like when they cannot finish their part, they will give every possible reason they can give. I just bear with them. Last semester I was so pissed off with my group member that I cried over it because the situation was so tense. (Male, Chinese, Business)

...what they do is to take their sweet time to research for extra materials and in the end, there is no time to compile, towards the end it is last minute work. (Male, Chinese, Business)

... it can be hard as I am kind of serious and they are like more to fun and entertainment, where to go. ... When I get too serious and that we start earlier, they get angry. Sometimes it is hard to tell them what to do. Or sometimes they ask me to do, then when I finished they do not go through, just type it out. This is my dissatisfaction. (Male, Chinese Business)

... but some of the disadvantage I experience are members who are selfish in that they find the information and keep it themselves. (Female, Chinese, Business)

Manifestations of Kiasu (pronounced as 'kia-sue')

The findings of the qualitative analysis also allowed the exploration of other characteristics within students' learning environments which might contribute to their intended approaches to learning. Particularly revealing were several comments by Malaysian students about the existence of *kiasu*-ism within their learning environments. The word *kiasu* originated in Singapore to reflect a trait that captures a particular aspect of Singaporean society. Literally translated from the Hokkien dialect, it means 'fear of losing out' or 'afraid to lose'. The emphasis is not so much on fear of losing, but means that there is a striving to win or making an effort to reduce the risk of failure (Doran & Jose, 1999).

Possibly, students adopting a surface approach were motivated by the pressures felt by being *kiasu*, where the desire was simply to complete the course or a fear of failing and 'loss of face'. In addition, the intention to fulfil the course requirement by memorising the material likely to appear in examinations appeared to be influenced by the *kiasu*-ism perceived by students to exist in their schools years. Manifestations of those aspects of *kiasu*-ism were expressed by the following students:

I observe that the Chinese schools are more *kiasu*. ... Want to be top school in [..state of Malaysia mentioned..] The teachers concentrate a lot on best classes, extra tuition in weekends. I think only the Chinese school teachers work on weekends, the students are really forced to do well, so they [..the school..] can get many A's and be top school. ... So their habits are the same now. (Male, Chinese, Computer Science)

We were told to write the same lines again and again so we can remember, and then to mug [.. colloquial for 'learn and remember very hard' ..] the PMR [..Form 3 National examination..] exercise books because they say a lot of the exam questions will be from there. (Male, Chinese, Business)

Because maybe first of all, it is the *kiasu* attitude, some students take it they need to pass the paper, so they memorise to pass. ... Surely we become *kiasu*, the parents give gifts to the teachers so that the children will get good marks from the teachers, so they don't get pushed down to back classes [..classes with poor performers..]. Parents don't want to 'pai-say mah' [..colloquial for 'don't want to be embarrassed'..], even the teachers expect this, I think. (Female, Chinese, Business)

Yet, paradoxically, deeper understanding might develop following the manifestations of *kiasu*-ism as the following transcript indicated:

I am *kiasu* - I need to learn as much as I can that can help me, but I don't like to study something I cannot understand. I try to listen well in lectures, take notes, underline important points. ... I challenge myself, I don't mind if someone is better. I try even harder to be better. ... It is up to us to do well, if I find I cannot understand what they [..referring to his lecturer..] are talking

about, I will read more, ask more questions in tutorials, or discuss with others. Anyway, bad or good, I think that they are older and more experienced in many things, still have philosophy in life they can share with us, to develop us. (Male, Chinese, Computer Science)

Discussion: Implications for Teaching Practice

Interviews in the study showed that students relied on surface approaches to learning in response to their lecturers' activities, behaviour, and conduct. The use of irrelevant handouts and materials were mentioned as contributing to students' confusion. The description of using a surface approach as a manifestation of lecturers' actions, well intentioned or otherwise, could arise from such circumstances and as a result, students who were deep approach learners could be forced to employ surface methods such as rote learning for the replication of notes. The interview analyses appeared to support an investigation by Kember and Wong (2000) who found that an over dependence and an excessive use of handouts and materials could downplay the importance of enthusiastic scholarship for students to be actively engaged in their learning, thus creating an environment of passive perception of their learning and an acceptance of rote-learning approaches. Moreover, the interview analyses showed that the perceived behaviours of lecturers such as being prejudiced, threatening and intimidating, being unenthusiastic and un-imaginative in their teaching, and having negative attitudes towards students and teaching did not provide positive emotional and motivational conditions necessary for deep learning. Instead, such discouraging factors were found to be instrumental in students developing passive and submissive attitudes and adopting surface learning. Students expressed the importance of timely and useful feedback as part of good teaching. Feedback was perceived as essential in helping them develop their ideas and a lack of it was perceived to hinder their learning and was a discouraging factor.

The students commented that those students who seemed to be more articulate or who seemed to be more intelligent were able to capture and monopolise the lecturer's attention. Moreover, those students who had a better grasp of doing work independently had reduced time available to them from their lecturers. In addition, problems related to group discussions can be detrimental to deeper learning. First, members who were more dominant tended to control the activities of the group. On the other hand, students reported that there were instances where all members of the group did not put in an equal amount of work or were selfish in sharing information. Both problems may prevent constructive contributions and may prevent sharing of learning and skills. The interview data also revealed the existence of *kiasu*-ism within students' learning environments. Students indicated that they were adopting surface approaches because of pressures felt by being *kiasu*, where the desire was to complete the course or a fear of losing out.

Implications for Teaching Practice in Twinning Programmes

The results of this study suggest that students are able to discern between teaching practices that are obstacles to their use of higher level learning approaches. Higher level learning approaches are reflected in students being better at using analytical skills, to think critically, share and apply ideas, and to cultivate a positive philosophy and interpretation of their life and the world. Students were critical of teaching practices which were not constructive, non-committal, apathetic, showed favouritism, and did not cater for the needs of different students. The findings suggest that appropriate teaching practices, supportive teacher attitudes, and the provision of positive learning environments are important factors in student learning. Therefore, based on these findings, the following recommendations to improve teaching practices are tendered:

Understand the importance of creating and encouraging cooperation and sharing among students. Academics could make learning more involving by introducing strategies such as brain storming, group discussion, and other team-related activities. Through the processes of communicating, sharing, and cooperating, younger students may benefit from more experienced older students. Also, weaker learners or those who may have English language difficulties may understand better what they have learned. In addition, the shared aims within group activities may provide a positive environment to encourage self-efficacy and support among the sexes and different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, academics must be conscious that doing group work and any work that involves group effort can be time consuming and is likely to be meaningless if it is not planned and structured carefully with appropriate aims and objectives of what is to be achieved. Therefore, lecturers must organise any group related activities carefully to harness the strength of such activities and make them an effective learning tool.

Understand the importance of guiding students towards adopting deep approaches to learning. Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) students who come from more traditional school systems need to have academics guide them in organising information or to be analytical in problem solving in their reading and studying. For example, lectures could initially be sequenced and structured to explain important concepts and theories, followed by explanations that can show the relationship of what they are learning to real life situations. By showing students the reality of what they are learning, students may be able to reflect on the importance of what they are learning, thus stimulating their interest. In addition, students can explore new concepts and ideas learnt through group work discussion, through solving problems from authentic case studies and projects, and through appropriately planned practical laboratory sessions. Academics should be aware that test questions and problem solving activities should be made more challenging so that they require students to adopt deep approaches, thus helping them discard their habit of shallow memorising or a dependence on finding answers to past examination questions. Academics should also be aware that Malaysian students are reluctant to express their opinions openly or contradict their lecturers because of the respect they have for their elders. This does not necessarily mean that students are passive and lack the ability to think critically; rather academics could assist them by providing opportunities for them to argue or agree on issues and problems without fear or favour.

Understand the importance of creating and encouraging an impartial learning environment. Academics should be aware of the needs and differences of the diverse student groups in their classes. Efforts should be made to discard teaching environments that are threatening and prejudiced and adopt those that are satisfying, rewarding, and non-discriminatory. Such efforts should include regarding students' views and opinions, giving students a chance to express themselves in their own way, avoiding preferential allocation of marks in tests or assignments, and by not spending excessive time with particular students or groups. Those academics who still hold obsolete racial assumptions in their teaching practices, should be made aware that such attitudes have no place today in progressive higher educational institutions. Perceptions of inequality from lecturers because of race differences may perpetuate bias and raise hostilities among students of different ethnic groups.

Provide Professional Development. Gow, Kember, and Sivan (1992) indicated that many higher education lecturers are unaware that their teaching practices produce effects quite different to those they intend. Horsburgh (1999) has noted that staff training programmes

have been shown to make an impact on how teachers view their teaching and their students' learning. Some form of professional development programmes could be initiated as a way to improve academics' teaching performance and for them to become aware of some of the potentially negative aspects of their teaching approaches.

Professional development programs could take the form of:

- Academic staff training. Academics who are considered to be poor performers including those who have no formal training in teaching could be offered opportunities for staff training as a way to enhance their effectiveness and improve their contribution towards their teaching performance.
- International, research and industrial experiences. Adequate funding and time-out allowances could be arranged between twinning partners and partner universities to:
 - i. provide twinning program lecturers with overseas teaching appointments/attachments with the partner universities;
 - ii. provide opportunities for lecturers of both institutions to initiate collaborative research, development projects, and developing concepts and ideas about teaching;
 - iii. establish partnerships with the private business and industry sector to elicit input from them regarding industrial needs and to be receptive to the current needs of businesses and industries

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper are from the 'voice' of students studying in twinning programs. The findings provided by this study can help twinning program providers and their overseas partners to make improvements where needed so that future twinning program students will find studying a rewarding experience and a study option worthy of consideration. It is important to note that obstacles to deep learning described here need to be addressed not only for the sake of current students, but also in the interest of a quality learning environment to facilitate deep level approaches to learning. In addition, the study also uncovered the existence of *kiasu*-ism among PHEI twinning program students that is often associated with Singaporeans. A more detailed definition and practical operationalisation of this personality trait and its relationships to the processes of learning as it pertains to Malaysian students could be important in enhancing teaching and learning.

It is hoped that the findings will stimulate further development and improvements designed to enhance PHEI students' learning from the twinning programs and the successful attainment from both their academic and life-long potential.

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