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## Intercultural mentoring among university students: The importance of meaningful communication

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### ABSTRACT

In many universities, peer mentoring is a popular practice aiming to ease cultural transition for newcomers. Despite the ubiquity of such practice, the factors involved in short-term mentoring programmes and how they relate to mentoring outcomes remain under-researched in Malaysia. This collective case study aims to address this gap by exploring the factors shaping participants' intercultural mentoring practice in a one-month programme. Interviews were conducted with ten participants comprising equal numbers of Korean mentees and local mentors, backed up by observations. Subsequently, five factors were identified: interest in cultural exchange, building rapport, obstacles to meeting, group conformity, and language accessibility, together highlighting the key role of meaningful intercultural communication in achieving the mentoring objectives. Through the lens of activity theory (Engeström, 2001, 2015), this study helps to shed light on the dynamics of successful mentoring practice shaped by undercurrents from the institution, the local context, cultural variation, and personal characteristics of the participants.

### Introduction

Over the years, the number of international students residing outside their own country has grown rapidly (Macaro, 2015), as universities in different countries globally strive to recruit them, due to political, academic, and socio-economic factors (Tsegay et al., 2018). The list of countries that have entered the competition includes Malaysia (Khodabandelou et al., 2015), a popular study destination for Asian and Middle Eastern students due to various reasons, including lower costs and shared cultural values (Singh et al., 2014). As a country well known for its diversified cultures, Malaysia's higher education system provides opportunities for international students to gain a global perspective on interacting, working, and living with local students from three ethnicities (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) while simultaneously pursuing an international qualification (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2022).

The government in Malaysia has made a massive investment in the growth and development of its higher education system, with over 20% of its expenditure devoted to education across all levels (Wan et al., 2016). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, applications from international students to study in Malaysia have recorded an increasing pattern, and as of October 2021, it was reported that the country received 33,000 new applications from international students (Karim, 2021). Indeed, the goal of transforming Malaysia into a global education hub was reflected in the government's aspiration to reach 250,000 international students by 2025 (Lam, 2021). To

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meet the government's expectations, Malaysian higher education must increase their standing in international rankings by improving the learning experience of international students and providing adequate support to them. These students face particular challenges when studying overseas, including language barriers (Meng et al., 2018), feelings of isolation (Wang & Hannes, 2014), homesickness, and depression (Saravanan et al., 2019). All these issues could increase their difficulties in adapting to the host country, which in turn may lead to negative consequences (Shafaei et al., 2016).

Some academic departments may implement international peer mentoring programmes with the aim of promoting cross-cultural communication. During the programme, international students are assigned local mentors who communicate with them through social activities and informal meetings. This helps the visitors to improve their ability to adapt to cultural differences (Anderson et al., 2006), and stay connected to campus life (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). To ensure effective peer mentoring, it is critical for institutions to have a clear idea of what the local mentors and international mentees hope to gain from such practice and the constraints they face in developing relationships. The students' voices and perceptions need to be examined so that relevant practitioners and policy makers can create opportunities and conducive platforms for both parties to successfully interact with each other. Thus, this paper examines the intercultural mentoring experiences of students in a one-month peer mentoring programme in which mentors were Malaysian undergraduates and mentees were visiting Korean students. The aim was to better understand the factors involved, how they affected students' mentoring experience, and the ways in which students' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours were shaped by their culture (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; McKay, 2002). Relatively few studies have examined this issue in Malaysia, particularly in short-term international mentoring programmes.

Malaysia is home to 170,000 international students from 162 countries, according to Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) CEO Mohd Radzlan Jalaludin (Study International, 2022). These international students typically engage in some cultural exchange with local students. However the dynamics of intercultural learning between the local and international students involve various factors, uncertainties, and challenges, which are mostly under-researched even within the broader multicultural South-East Asian education context. This has increased the significance of our work here that discusses intercultural learning experiences among students from diverse backgrounds, combining the participants' first-person point of view and the researchers' observation findings. We believe the insights obtained are a step towards understanding the development of intercultural mentoring relationships as well as having relevance to the design of other short-term intercultural mentoring programmes and facilitating their implementation.

### The mentoring process in context

Put simply, mentoring refers to an interpersonal relationship which involves a more experienced mentor intentionally supporting, counselling, and guiding a less experienced mentee or protégé (Johnson, 2016). At the heart of this relationship is the connection between the mentor and protégé, which is more than a simple exchange of information. In an ideal relationship, the mentor 'is driven by a healthy desire to aid the protégé in realizing his or her goals' (Harris, 2016, p. 42), while the mentees gain valuable experience and insight from their mentors (Kalbfleisch, 2002). This is of great importance for newcomers who require more culturally sensitive mentors to offer them assistance in a foreign country.

While definitions of mentoring vary according to context, there is consistent agreement that the broad aim is to bring mentees 'into new forms of participation in the meaningful activities of a cultural community' (Bearman et al., 2007, p.377). Reflecting such new forms of participation is the notion of growth areas (Nora & Crisp, 2007), which goes beyond a single focus on academic outcomes. Ward et al. (2012) identified six growth areas in undergraduate mentoring: academic skills and knowledge, career decision-making, connectedness to others, maturity, physical well-being, and aspiration. While some of these may not occur in short-term programmes, additional growth areas may occur when mentors and mentees bring different cultural practices to the relationship.

Buell (2004) devised four models for mentoring in the field of communication: the Cloning Model, the Nurturing Model, the Friendship Model, and the Apprentice Model. In the Cloning Model, mentors aim to control mentees to create a duplicate copy of themselves. The mentee 'is encouraged to comply with the mentor and duplicate his or her values' (p. 64). In contrast, the mentor in the Nurturing Model serves as a parent figure who 'creates a safe, open environment in which a mentee can both learn and try things for him- or herself' (p. 65). In the Friendship Model, the mentor and protégé are not involved in a hierarchical relationship, but are viewed as friends. Finally, the Apprentice Model involves the mentor providing training and education to the mentee. A hybrid version of the Nurturing and Friendship model fits the context of this paper, where the host university sets guidelines for the local mentors and Korean mentees to function as 'buddies' who learn from each other through daily communication. While the mentors are expected to guide the mentees to quickly adapt to university life in a foreign country, it is also anticipated that they learn the cultural values and norms of their mentees.

### The need for international peer-mentoring programmes

International peer-mentoring programmes have been implemented in many universities around the globe with the goal of assisting newcomers who are 'motivated to seek a sense of belonging in the possibly unfamiliar host country' (Caligiuri et al., 2020, p. 4). These students face barriers in achieving a sense of belonging due to cultural differences, different social norms, and possible language barriers (Rivas et al., 2019, as cited in Caligiuri et al., 2020). To meet the needs of these learners, one way is through third party intervention, which could be part of a structured or informal mentoring programme (Kalbfleisch, 2002; Martin & Sifers, 2012; Li et al., 2018). This could be beneficial to international students as Furnham and Bochner (1982) explained: 'If sojourners are carefully introduced into a new society by close, sympathetic host-culture friends, the evidence indicates that they may encounter fewer problems than if they are left to fend for themselves' (p. 171).

### Variables that influence the mentoring relationship

Effective mentoring relationships could be affected by the characteristics or traits of mentors as perceived by their mentees. Efforts need to be made continuously by the mentors to establish a strong ground in the mentoring relationship (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Ensher & Murphy, 2011; Mansson & Myers, 2012). In a qualitative study by Colvin and Ashman (2010), for instance, mentees' perception of a mentor's role included being a 'trusted friend', primarily in helping mentees to feel comfortable on campus thereby contributing to mentees' sense of belonging. Elsewhere, mentees reported desirable mentor traits such as being accessible and approachable, demonstrating humility and care for others, and showing willingness to listen and make changes to adapt to mentees' needs (Li et al., 2018). This aligns with the Friendship model proposed by Buell (2004). In this model, a mentor who is appreciated is 'someone who [can] be trusted, who listens, and who is encouraging' (p. 68). Thus, a reciprocal relationship of respect between mentors and mentees is highly valued.

While the primary goal of all mentoring is to address the needs of the mentee, peer mentoring among university students also anticipates benefits for the mentor (Malin & Hackmann, 2016; Schmidt & Faber, 2016), contributing to the intercultural learning experience (Bretag & van der Veen, 2015), and building a reciprocal mentor–mentee relationship (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). This is in line with an earlier study by Kalbfleisch and Davies (1993), which suggested that the mentor is not solely accountable for the relationship, in other words it is not a one-sided relationship. Protégés could offer support to their mentors as the relationship develops. Rather than being a passive receiver, they can also take proactive steps in 'achieving trust and respect by sharing information, resources, and expectations and by being professional, enthusiastic, and supportive with collaborative problem solving' (Hudson, 2016, p. 20). This contrasts with the traditional mentoring relationship, in which a power imbalance occurs between the mentor and the protégé as both struggle with uneven experiences (Mullen, 2009).

In recent years, power relations have been reconceptualised in a reciprocal model of mentoring relationships (Jones & Brown, 2011; Cowin et al., 2012). The mentor and the protégé share power in their relationship through collaboration, discussion, and mutual decision making. Communication becomes a deciding factor in developing a strong mentoring relationship, and a study by Eller et al. (2014) showed that a mentor's ability to 'communicate well' was the characteristic most highly ranked by both mentors and mentees. This reflects an earlier study by Mee-Lee and Bush (2003), who argued that communication is a deciding factor in developing an effective mentoring relationship, and that a mentor should possess the ability to communicate effectively with others, listen well, and comprehend others' viewpoints. On the other hand, a protégé needs to be open to listening (Phillips & Adams, 2018). Together, mentor and mentee cultivate a supportive relationship. Kalbfleisch (2002) thus concluded that 'communication is central to the initiation, maintenance, and rapport of mentoring relationships' (p. 63) which in turn could contribute to effective mentorship.

Time and commitment are other important variables in the mentoring process, as discussed by Kalbfleisch (2002), who stated that mentors would be reluctant to see the end of the mentoring relationship if they had invested a considerable amount in the relationship. Similarly, Phillips & Adams (2019) claimed that in the mentoring practice, commitment is required from both mentors and mentees, and mentoring must be desired by both parties. The bond between the mentor and mentee is strengthened if both parties are willing to invest time and resources in maintaining their relationship, which includes making attempts to initiate connection with each other. It is common that in mentoring relationships, participants 'will have ups and downs, differing desires and goals, and that the power differential in their relationship will affect the communication in the mentoring relationships' (Kalbfleisch, 2002, p. 67). If the pairs spend significant time in their mentoring relationship to share their goals and learn from each other as 'friends' or 'buddies', it is likely that they would be able to maintain a healthy relationship and gain benefits from the mentoring practice. In short, to achieve the desired outcome of the mentoring programme, the participants must be committed to invest time in the communication process.

The outcomes of formal mentoring are usually measurable because the process is recorded to align with mentoring policies. Hence, numerous studies have focused on the relationship between the mentor, the mentee and formal mentoring outcomes. For instance, the effectiveness of the mentor is studied based on the mentor's characteristics and responsibilities (Kahle-Piasecki, 2011; Smith, 2015). Intercultural mentoring is also often studied in the context of formal mentoring, and within a structured mentoring programme (Woods et al., 2013; Prieto-Flores et al. 2016; Vickers et al., 2017). The duration of the mentoring programme in this study is one month, relatively shorter than many mentoring programmes in the literature. Despite the time constraint, traditional ways of mentoring still apply, such as building rapport between mentors and mentees through multiple communication channels, and utilising various opportunities to build mentor-mentee relationships. The factors involved in how intercultural mentoring practice is carried out within this type of informal context and limitations of time, remain under-researched in the current mentoring literature and become a focus of this paper.

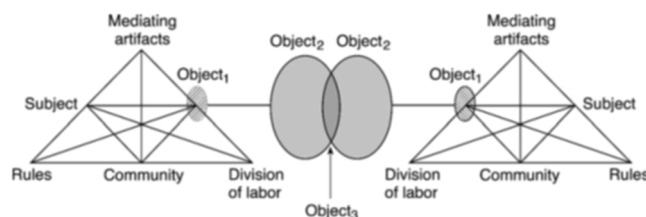


Fig. 1. Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for the third generation of activity theory (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

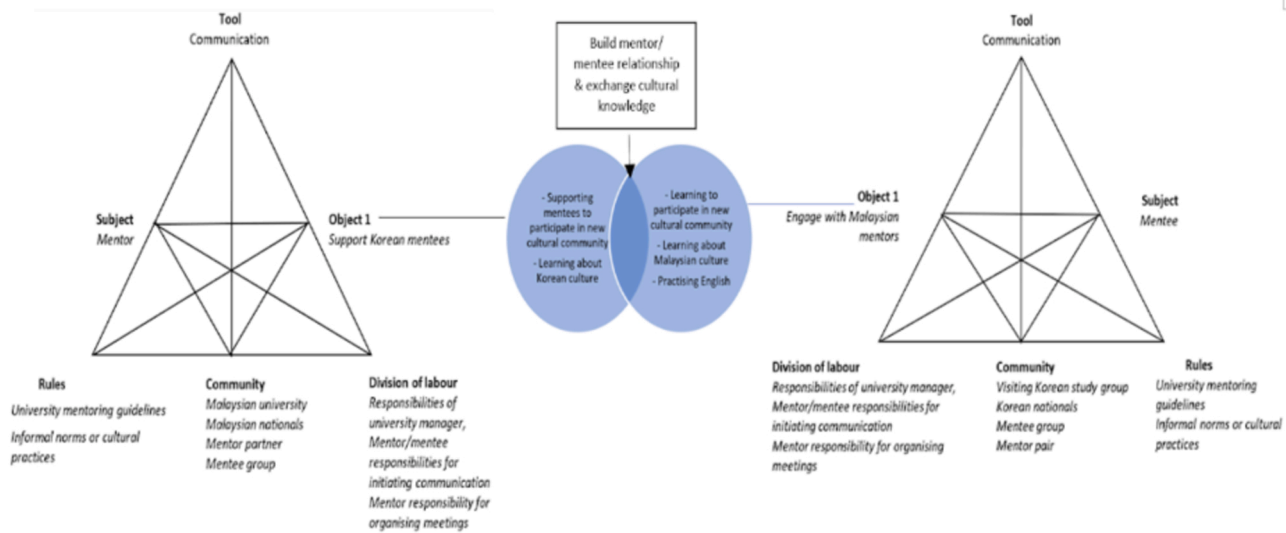


Fig. 2. Components in the *Korean Buddy* mentoring system.

### Theoretical framework

This study uses Activity Theory (AT) as a qualitative methodology with descriptive case study methods (Engeström, 2015; Russell & Schneiderheinze, 2005), aiming to develop a contextual understanding of participants' mentoring experience. Third generation activity theory (Engeström, 2001) was adopted, as shown in Fig. 1, with the unit of analysis as joint activity (Engeström, 2015), which accurately reflects mentoring activity.

This joint activity unit of analysis is applied in Fig. 2 based on the Malaysian university mentoring context alluded to above and described more fully in the Method section below. On the left there is an activity system with a mentor subject, which is in interaction with another activity system having a mentee subject. Each system has objects specific to the subject (Object 2 being more complex than Object 1), as well as a jointly constructed object (Object 3). Each system also has its own community characteristics, which in turn can be expected to shape the subjects' perceptions of what on the surface are identical tools, rules, and division of labour.

We see Fig. 2 as a starting point to explore participants' mentoring practice within its social context, including problems in achieving intended outcomes. As explained by Scanlon & Issroff (2005), activities are integrated units which are mediated by other activities. Therefore, contradictions are bound to exist when external factors cause imbalances between them, which manifest themselves as problems.

Engeström (2007) conceptualisation of the mycorrhizae-like formation of activity systems is also of particular interest in this study as it reflects the reciprocal nature of the mentoring relationship. Mycorrhizae, or 'fungal roots', comprise both the specialised roots grown by a plant and the fungi which inhabit them, working in a symbiotic partnership across a range of interacting activity systems. To work toward their overlapping objects, the mentor and mentee activity systems engage in two-way communication and knowledge exchange, in other words, the embedded 'fungal roots'. Integral to the development of such fungal roots is building collaboration in knot-like ways 'without rigid predetermined rules or a fixed central authority' (Engeström, 2007, p. 44), referred to as 'knotworking'.

### Method

This research follows a collective case study design, studying five sets of mentors and mentees to explore the factors that affected their mentoring practice in a short-term intercultural peer mentoring programme.

### Research context and participants

Since mentoring is practiced in different ways in different contexts (Arnold, 2006), it is important to identify the features framing this study. The mentoring context is a one-month English Summer Programme (ESP) held for visiting Korean students at an international university in Malaysia. Similar Intensive English courses are very common in the education system in Malaysia with the aim to build international students' language proficiency. This particular ESP is usually held twice a year, during winter and summer.

The ESP provides Intensive English classes in the mornings and a range of afternoon activities such as Malay language classes and Cultural Sessions. Linked to this programme is the 'Korean Buddy Programme' set up by the university with volunteer local student mentors. The aim is to help the visitors quickly adapt to student life in Malaysia and to be successful in the ESP. At the same time, mentors can learn more about Korean culture from their mentees. The guidelines provided to mentors highlight the importance of good communication, being a positive role model, being motivated and empathetic, and building rapport.

The mentoring practice occurred in groups – two mentors connecting with four or five Korean students. At the start of the ESP, mentors and mentees were brought together, assigned into groups, and given time for self-introductions. The mentors were subsequently expected to set up communication pathways and arrange weekly meetings for social interactions. Students were expected to use their own money for social outings, while the university organised a 'buddy party' at the end of the ESP.

Ten research participants were recruited through a convenience sampling technique to represent five mentoring groups. The mentor pairs were represented by five female undergraduates, all being Chinese Malaysian, and the mentee groups were represented by five male Korean students. While the researchers were aware of the skewed gender population in this representation, it was a naturally occurring one. Malaysian mentors were mostly signed up by female undergraduate students while the volunteer mentees just happened to be male. Nonetheless, based on the obtained data, the undistributed gender representation in the study did not seem to be an issue in the intercultural mentoring among the Malaysian mentors and Korean mentees. Having said that, future research studies probing into the gender factors in the intercultural mentoring programme are nonetheless warranted.

At the time of joining the one-month ESP, all the Korean students were pre-intermediate users of English, based on the English placement test provided by the university. These students sought opportunities to study abroad every year, and in most cases, they went abroad during vacation months (Nam, 2018). The Malaysian mentors, on the other hand, could speak fluent English, were familiar with the ways the university operated, and understood how to fulfil local assessment requirements. Their mentoring role was intended to be primarily for the social well-being of the mentees and for assistance with study or social concerns. The power differential was thus minimal, being a factor of greater locally relevant knowledge with no additional element of greater status.

### Positionality

Of the three researchers and authors of this paper, two were English lecturers in the one-month English Summer Programme (ESP). As academics directly involved in the ESP, these two prepared and delivered English lessons as well as set and administered formative and summative assessments to the Korean university students in hope of improving their English proficiency over the month. They also prepared and conducted afternoon activities designed to promote cultural exchange between Malaysian and Korean students.

The research team explored the dynamics of mentoring practice to further understand what both Malaysian university student mentors and Korean university student mentees gained outside the class and how the mentoring practice benefitted or impeded English language learning. We also examined the effectiveness of this mentoring programme to provide suggestions based on the needs of both the Malaysian and the Korean university students in terms of the mentoring practice. The English lecturers approached the Malaysian mentors and Korean mentees to explain the purpose of this study for participant recruitment. Consents were gained from the participants and participation was voluntary.

### Data generation and analysis

Grounded Theory qualitative research design (Creswell, 2014) was adopted in which the identification and explanation of themes are grounded in the data obtained from participants. The data were collected in three phases, pre-ESP, during-ESP and post-ESP, using observation checklists and audio-recorded interviews, with the intention of triangulating the researchers' observations and the responses produced by the participants. The observation checklist (see Appendix A) was designed to observe some of the ways the mentoring relationship was enacted, including the interaction between mentors and mentees, the ways they behaved in relation to each other, and if there were barriers between them. The checklist was used during the two whole-group gatherings (one at the start of the ESP and one at the end of the programme) to observe, describe, and note down reflections on how the Malaysian mentors and Korean mentees behaved towards each other. The checklist was used in preference to audio- or video- recording to ensure a genuine account of behaviour when participants interacted with one another.

Interviews are a data-collection method traditionally used in qualitative research and the naturalistic paradigm (Côté & Turgeon, 2005; Halcomb & Davidson, 2006), and were used to explore the participants' behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions pertaining to the mentoring programme. The interviews were semi-structured and the pre-determined questions (as shown in Appendix B) were designed to draw out associated factors, while follow-up questions made it possible to probe deeper into the participants' responses (Lingard & Kennedy, 2010). The interview questions were tested with two experienced colleagues to explore the language and the clarity of the questions prior to the actual interview (McGrath et al., 2019). The participants were individually interviewed by a researcher for about 30 min each: the mentees after their final ESP classes, the Malaysian mentors at the end of the programme. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by assistant researchers. The transcribed data were coded for patterns and themes using inductive coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Thomas, 2006) and inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researchers read and interpreted the transcribed data and cross-checked the observation notes to code data into categories and develop themes based on the frequency of themes emerged. The themes identified included participants' interest in cultural exchange, language accessibility, group conformity, opportunities to meet, and mentor-mentee relationship. The data collected in the observation checklists were tabulated to indicate patterns, which were then compared against themes from the interview data. We then cross checked the data against the interactive activity system shown in Fig. 2 to identify contradictions, development of mycorrhizae formations, and instances of knotworking.

### Results and discussion: factors affecting participants' mentoring practice

The data revealed five key factors affecting participants' mentoring practice, namely: interest in cultural exchange, building rapport, obstacles to meeting, group conformity, and language accessibility.

#### Interest in cultural exchange

Participants' interest in cultural exchange was a factor in their willingness to volunteer for the mentoring programme as well as in their subsequent engagement with it. Both mentors and mentees referred to this, often in terms of making friends. M1 commented:

It's fun to make a friend with Koreans [...] I don't have the opportunity [to travel to Korea], that's why I joined this one so it is, like – rather than go their country and learn about them, why not I join this when they come to my country so that we can exchange the info like here. (Mentor, M1)

Similarly, M2 was driven by the goal of meeting new friends and learning more about Korean culture due to her interests in K-pop and K-drama, reflecting the newly emergent 'Korean wave' which is increasingly gaining popularity in Asian countries (Hong & Kim, 2013). M4 also stated that 'it's quite interesting to see why people from different cultures are actually acting differently.' She added:

So my thinking is it will be fun to have some friends there from other cultures, so understand each other and quite curious on how they look like. Is there any differences between our cultures like that? (Mentor, M4)

These quotes affirm the notion that ‘people tend to invest in goals that they value more’ (Petrides and Frederickson, 2011, p. 99), given that the mentors were willing to invest their time and energy in the buddy programme driven by the goals they value – meeting new friends and understanding more about Korean culture. This also resonates with the views of Ariffin et al. (2018), who maintained that ‘Malaysians are more open to other cultures and capable to accept different perspectives’ due to the country’s diversified cultures and multiple races.

Some of the mentees expressed similar beliefs about interacting with foreigners to gain experience. S2 commented that ‘it’s [a] very exciting experience’ to talk with foreigners and he wanted to ‘feel [the] local atmosphere’. He thought getting to know his buddy ‘very quickly’ would be the best way for him to adapt to a new country. S2’s view accords with a previous study indicating that mentoring from a ‘buddy’ or a ‘cultural insider’ is essential for a successful intercultural learning experience (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017). Additionally, outings organised by the mentors were clearly successful in providing opportunities for cultural exchange. For example, when M2 invited her Korean mentees to her house for a Chinese New Year dinner, she found that Korean respect for elders was such a strong cultural priority that the mentees would not disregard it despite encouragement.

[A]fter our food is ready then we will ask the Korean to just sit down and eat first, don’t have to wait for us. So then they keep insisting that no, we have to wait for the eldest person to eat first, which was my grandmother [...] (Mentor, M2)

Reporting this incident, M2 said, ‘we get to learn about their culture, how they do things, that’s different from what we’re doing in Malaysia.’ The opportunity for mentors to make such intercultural observations strengthens the mycorrhizae-like fungal roots of the mentoring activity system, deepening the level of knowledge exchange and communication.

### *Building rapport in the mentor-mentee relationship*

Linked to participants’ underlying interest in cultural exchange, a good mentor-mentee rapport evidently played a pivotal role in the success of participants’ mentoring practice. One mentee (S2) explained, ‘Because she’s very friendly, and if I go to another place, she recommends attractions and food.’ From a study perspective, another mentee (S1) reported: ‘She gives me whatever I want and finds me for the group project. I have to present YouTube, Malaysian YouTube, each of us, but I don’t know Malaysian...Malay language, she translates for me.’

In general, the mentor was perceived by the mentees as a cultural ambassador, introducing Malaysian culture and traditions, and modelling cultural behaviours. This finding supports our argument that a combination of Buell’s (2004) Nurturing and Friendship models is likely to lead to positive interaction between the mentor and mentee, and eventually a reciprocal mentor-mentee relationship.

Social media turned out to be a powerful tool in building rapport, especially in light of the obstacles to face-to-face meeting discussed in the next section. The Koreans introduced the mentors to ‘KaKao Talk’, a Korean free mobile instant messaging application, and this was often the main form of interaction between mentees and mentors over the month of the programme:

We did, like, exchange, like Messenger (KaKao Talk) and Instagram. And I take the initiative to reply his story and his comment. I think through that we can maintain the friendship. Even though you are already go back, the programme already ended, but we still keep in touch and no awkwardness between us. (Mentor, M1)

The rapport that M1 and S1 achieved through their use of social media was evidently based on both of them taking some initiative in communicating at the start, and then continuing the conversation. In other words, it required both parties to make efforts, as found in previous studies (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Ensher & Murphy, 2011; Mansson & Myers, 2012), to respond to challenges such as shyness and being responsive to initiatives for meeting up.

Shyness created a particular problem for M5 and she and her partner were unable to set up any face-to-face meetings with their group:

I think the problem is because I’m shy. I couldn’t make friend when I’m shy, like it’s hard for me to communicate with them when I’m shy. I will be panic, like ‘What should I ask them? What should I talk about?’ [...] In texting, should be okay. But [...] I am not sure what can I ask while face-to-face. (Mentor, M5)

From this account, M5’s shyness clearly had consequences for building rapport, creating a contradiction between the subjects and objects in the activity system. M1, on the other hand, was able to manage her shyness and make the necessary effort to build the mentoring relationship. We see this in her report of a conversation held between herself, her Malaysian buddy partner and one of their Korean mentees:

[...] my partner said she’s actually quite shy and not comfortable, then my [Korean] buddy said ‘M1 also quite shy but she takes the initiative, she’s still going out with us and play with us.’ So even you are shy, just step out from your comfort zone and be friend with others. (Mentor, M1)

This suggests the embedding of mycorrhizae-like roots of connection through intentional knot-working on the mentor's part, with its worth fully recognized by the Korean buddy.

While Engeström (2007) asserts that knotworking in activity systems depends on a mycorrhizae-like formation, it is clear that establishing this formation requires effort, as indicated in previous studies (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Ensher & Murphy, 2011; Mansson & Myers, 2012). When the mentor and mentee communicated effectively, it provided stability to the mentoring practice and relationship. However, when mentor-mentee communication was dysfunctional, it played the part of 'rotten fungal roots' (Engeström, 2007) and served as a contradiction in terms of achieving the mentoring objective. In the mentoring relationship between M1 and S1, the mycorrhizae-like formation appears to grow healthily, facilitated by social media, and with no need for a top-down, one-way communication channel provided by the higher education management authority. In the case of M5, despite the use of social media, relationship building did not progress to face-to-face connection, while M3 encountered mentee unresponsiveness when trying to initiate meetings as well as associated issues with group conformity. Thus, mentor-mentee communication can be seen as a double-edged sword in terms of developing strong fungal roots of communication and achieving the mentoring goals.

#### *Obstacles to meeting: time, cost and commitment*

The most important obstacles to meeting face-to-face were time, cost, and difficulties in obtaining commitment across members of the mentee group. These obstacles to meeting can be seen as contradictions weakening the links between subjects, tools, and objects, and thus undermining the development of a strong mycorrhizae-like formation to hold the mentoring process together.

While mentors and mentees all wished to meet frequently, mentors' class timetables clashed with the mentees' limited free time after their morning English classes and afternoon activities as shown below:

We try to meet once a week, but we meet just one time because the different schedule (Mentee, S4).

We connect Kakao Talk... They are very busy. So, we delayed meeting days. So, I don't meet my buddies. (Mentee, S5)

Moreover, mentees reduced the initiation of meetings to save on cost, as they found they often had to 'spend a lot' for meals when meeting up with their mentors.

Time matching, it's hard to find time...And if we want meet many times, it will cost a lot because lunch or dinner, it will cost (Mentee, S2).

Usually, I would have dinner with them because they also have classes and I have classes so it's usually dinner. We don't do a lot of activities for this time round compared to my previous programs, because they are really packed this time (Mentor, M2).

Thus, time and cost both presented obstacles to meeting and consequently to the achievement of successful mentoring objectives. An additional obstacle was difficulty in obtaining commitment from all members of a mentoring group as M3 indicates below:

It was hard to get to reach out to five of them... he's a straightforward person. If he's busy, he will just say 'oh I am busy, I've something on with my friends. We can meet up another day'. Others... they don't reply or they reply late. (Mentor, M3)

Such findings resonate with earlier studies that time, cost, and commitment would affect the process of mentoring (Kalbfleisch, 2002; Phillips & Adams, 2018). In contrast to M1 and S1, whose effective communication provided stability to their rapport building and mentoring practice, M3 encountered a contradiction in the form of mentee unresponsiveness. Managing this contradiction and addressing time factors in setting up meetings was significantly shaped by group conformity among M3's Korean mentees.

#### *Group conformity*

During the mentee interview, S3 clearly indicated the powerful influence of peers and group conformity when making choices to meet the mentors, as the quote below illustrates:

So, if 5 persons Korean or 4 people try to avoid meeting, and I...I can't say, 'Let's...let's play.' I can't say, I can't say. So [...] They won't play with buddy or other...other group people [...] they just [want] us [to be] their friend. (Mentee, S3)

#### **Similarly, M3 said**

They [Koreans] are more group, group type, so like let's say I have four Korean buddies, so if one of them not here, they will insist, say: 'let's wait, let's wait'. (Mentor, M3)

These quotes endorse the activity theory view that human actions or behaviours are mediated or influenced by the rules of practice in a community (Issroff & Scanlon, 2002). In this context, the Korean students' unwillingness to mingle with people outside their circle is mediated by the unwritten rule of their Korean community to follow the voice of the majority. This is evident in the phrase 'I can't say [...] let's play [mingle with local buddies]'. Interestingly, the phrase 'I can't say' was repeated three times, implying a personal struggle to conform to peer norms. Masland and Lease (2013, p. 663) proposed that 'behaviours performed by a majority of one's peer group are generally viewed as appropriate behaviours, as they are indicative of consensus among a group of individuals.' Following the majority voice was socially appropriate for this mentee, reducing the risk of group disapproval and strengthening the ties within the group. Nevertheless, such group conformity did function as a contradiction in regard to establishing mentoring interaction and achieving the objectives of the mentoring programme.

Although some of the mentees expressed positive views on making foreign friends, they showed a preference to mingle with their Korean circle even when Malaysian students were present, as in the farewell session where the Korean students were seen to sit with other Koreans and to be unresponsive to local students' attempts to initiate conversation. This prioritisation of the cultural rules of the peer group thus set up another contradiction within the joint activity system, again suggesting a lack of commitment to the objects and preventing their full achievement. It also goes against Anderson et al.'s (2006) study revealing that even in a short-term programme, students were able to improve their ability to adapt to cultural differences. One reason could be due to the influence of social context in shaping the identity, behaviour, and attitude of cultural groups. To illustrate, a person's behaviour will be shaped by the practices and norms of a particular cultural group that he or she belongs to (Liu et al., 2020). Hence, the Korean students may choose to conform to their group norm to mingle with their own group, which in turn hinders the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Another reason could be the limited time spent with the mentors, as opposed to the large amount of the time living, travelling, and studying with their own Korean group, making them comfortable mingling with their own circle. This study, thus, indicates the important role of social and cultural context in affecting the mentoring relationship, as well as the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

#### *Language accessibility in mentor-mentee communication*

Language plays an important role in mentoring communication with another, acting as a gatekeeper to block or support learners' access to the process of learning (Norton, 2000). In this study, language differences sometimes interfered with the communication process between the mentor and mentees, owing to the mentees' low proficiency in English. For example, M2 commented, 'they [Koreans] are not fluent in English [...] and I don't really know much Korean so I can't converse with them that much [...]' Similarly, M5 added:

Sometimes, it's about the...the language because they are still not familiar with English yet, so, they can't really explain. Sometimes, when they want to explain, they cannot use English to explain well. (Mentor, M5)

Linguistic proficiency is recognised as a common problem faced by international students (Meng et al., 2018). However, the communication barrier could be avoided when both mentors and mentees could share the same language. S1 stated that he liked his buddy, explaining:

Because she's fluent in Korean, she can talk ...when I don't know the English vocabulary, she told me that's not [correct...] And if I...I want to express my...my opinion or I don't know the word, then, she told me in Korean. (Mentee, S1)

Similarly, both M4 and M5 agreed that the communication barrier could be overcome with the help of a buddy who could converse in Korean. For example, M5 said, 'one of my buddy, she understand the Korean, so she can help us to translate.' Some mentors also employed strategies such as using Google translation or adjusting their speech pace to the mentees. S3 commented, 'I can't understand English very well, so she [buddy] speaks slowly and little bit, little bit, little bit.'

Similar to the study by Li et al. (2018), the findings show that the mentor's adaptive personality helped to improve the mentoring relationship. Also, the findings highlight the significant role of language in maintaining the mentoring relationship. Without a shared language, ineffective communication may pose a potential threat to the relationship, functioning as a contradiction in the joint activity system, and making knotworking unachievable.

#### **Conclusion**

Through third generation activity theory (Engeström, 2001), this study has uncovered both successes and failures in terms of achieving the mentoring objectives of the one-month Malaysian university 'Korean Buddy Programme'. While evaluation was not the purpose of this study, it can be said that the most salient contradictions to goal achievement were poor communication – whether due to insufficient shared language, shyness, insufficient commitment, or group conformity – and failure to establish weekly face-to-face meetings, mainly due to schedule clashes, cost, and communication difficulties related to group size. Of the growth areas identified by

Ward et al. (2012) it is connectedness to others which stands out in this study. Linked to this, we see intercultural competence as an additional growth area, stemming directly from an interest in cultural exchange and a willingness to put effort into rapport building. Growth in participants' intercultural competence corresponds with meaningful intercultural mentor-mentee interaction, which itself mimics the mycorrhizae-like aspect of Engeström (2007) activity system, relying on intercultural understanding and exchange as a strong, bounded, and institutionalised base for the mentor-mentee relationship.

Looking more specifically at the range of factors affecting participants' mentoring experience, we see beyond contradictions and growth areas to note the broader picture. Five key factors were identified: interest in cultural exchange, building rapport, obstacles to meeting, group conformity, and language accessibility. Each factor involved communication, and each was shaped to some degree by intercultural connotations, given that the relationship between local mentors and Korean mentees was mediated by the norms and conventions practiced in each cultural community.

All five factors indicate the importance of initiative, whether on the part of the mentor or the mentee, although the distribution of labour lay primarily with mentors. Where initiative was lacking, whether due to shyness, group conformity to social rules, pressures such as time and cost, or personal difficulties, the university mentoring guidelines were not being fully implemented. On the other hand, where initiative occurred, meaningful communication also occurred, and the intended outcomes were more likely to be achieved. For example, the group initiative to use social media to communicate paid off powerfully in terms of relationship building. This further confirms communication as the core tool mediating the mutual relationships among mentees, mentors and the objects of the activity. On the one hand, communication was negatively affected by obstacles to meetings, issues with language accessibility, and some aspects of group conformity. On the other hand, it was positively enhanced through personal initiative, interest in cultural exchange, effort in rapport building, and strategies for dealing with language accessibility.

Meaningful communication between mentors and mentees reflects the mycorrhizae-like aspect of an activity system, which depends for its effectiveness on a stable, bounded, and institutionalised base (Engeström, 2007). The university's informal guidelines for mentoring provided the framework for such a base, but the students greatly enhanced its stability by turning to social media platforms. For some participants, this enabled a knotworking approach to developing initial relationships and setting up meetings. Working toward a similar target, most of the mentors and mentees were able to engage in two-way communication and knowledge exchange, thus developing embedded 'fungal roots' within the joint activity system. Meaningful interaction between the mentor and mentee – which occurred in various ways including assignment guidance, mobile text messages and verbal chats, as well as face-to-face social meetings – led to a good rapport in the mentoring relationship.

An obvious limitation of this study is the small sample size, which means that the findings obtained are not necessarily generalisable to other situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Also, the mentor sample is represented by five female dyads, since mostly females signed up for the mentoring programme, while the volunteer sample representing the Korean mentee groups happened to comprise only males. Gender distribution is certainly worthy of further research, as it would be interesting to investigate the motives of local and international students signing up for short-term intercultural mentoring programmes within the context of gender differences. Also worth examining would be the impact of gender differences that could lead to possible challenges faced by students during their intercultural communication.

Our interview findings indicated that after the final gathering organised by the university, the mentors and mentees separated and did not seem to maintain communication. The observation data also showed that during that final gathering, many mentors and mentors sat with their peers from their home country instead of mingling with new friends. Hence, we suggest that future research should address this lack of ongoing connection through a longitudinal study that explores the use of virtual communication means and strategies for maintaining the interaction between the mentors and mentees after their physical separation. Intervention research could also be considered to reduce the social distance between the participants during the organised gathering, such as coaching the participants in physical communication techniques, and getting them involved in some interactive activities through the event.

To conclude, based on the study, we suggest several implications for supporting short-term mentoring practices in higher education institutions. First, mentors and mentees should be guided to actively collaborate, take initiative, and put in effort to build their relationship through meaningful communication. Second, interaction between the mentor and mentee should be facilitated by the university through supportive schedules, partnerships of manageable size, and access to multiple communication modes such as social media, mobile texting, and email. Finally, both mentors and mentees should have an inherent interest in cultural exchange, be flexible, and be open-minded to leave their comfort zones to mingle with people outside their circle. In doing so, they are better able to develop sensitivity towards the cultural practices of others to engage in meaningful communication.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

## Observation Checklist

Study Name : Intercultural mentoring among university students: The importance of meaningful communication

Principal Investigator : \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers : \_\_\_\_\_

Date & Time : \_\_\_\_\_

Event : \_\_\_\_\_

Location : \_\_\_\_\_

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Criteria</b>      <b>Observed (/) /</b> <b>Not Observed (x)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Field Notes</b></p>
<p>Interaction between participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The ways they behave      (    )</li> <li>- How they interact with each other (    )</li> <li>- Motivation                      (    )</li> <li>- Barriers                              (    )</li> </ul>	
<p>Participants learn through mentoring practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do they learn?      (    )</li> <li>- Motivation                      (    )</li> <li>- Barriers                              (    )</li> </ul>	
<p>Mentoring policy is enacted</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the content explained to the participants? (    )</li> <li>- How is it implemented      (    )</li> <li>- Motivation                      (    )</li> <li>- Barriers                              (    )</li> </ul>	

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

1. Do you know how the buddy system works? If yes, explain how it works. If no, why not?
2. What motivates you to sign up for the buddy programme? (For the mentors only)
3. How often do you meet your buddy?
4. Do you like your buddy? If yes, why? If no, why not?
5. Do you trust your buddy? If yes, why? If no, why not?
6. Do you have the same values as your buddy? If yes, why? If no, why not?
7. Do you respect your buddy? If yes, why? If no, why not?
8. What do you learn from your buddy?
9. Are you committed to maintaining the friendship with your buddy?
10. Do you like the buddy system? If yes, why? If no, why not?
11. Do you face any problems with your buddy? If yes, what are the problems? If no, why not?
12. In your opinion, how can the university improve the buddy programme? (For the mentors only)

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