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## **Cultural factors behind the growth of e-learning in Malaysia: Academic Guanxi**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to discover and examine ways in which cultural factors shape the adoption and use of information technology for online teaching. This research focuses on influential early adopters in the tertiary education sector in Malaysia who have become change-agents by inspiring small networks of their peers. The study examines the concept of guanxi to understand the operation of trust and inspiration in networking and teamwork in the Asian academic environment. Findings from this research will enable individuals and institutions to better understand ways in which to optimise the online teaching and learning experience for staff.*

### **Keywords**

Cultural factors, e-learning, education, *guanxi*, online learning and teaching, social network

### **INTRODUCTION**

The influence of human factors in general, and cultural factors in particular, in online teaching and learning, have received little attention in the literature. However, the adoption of online technologies to support education has become more predominant as tertiary institutions want to increase the reach of their courses, breaking geographical barriers. Whilst breaking down the geographical boundaries, these technologies are changing classrooms from the traditional face-to-face environment to a faceless online environment, where instructor and student interact via text (Bower, 2001). The adoption of these online technologies affects both students and instructors.

Online learning can be defined as the delivery of teaching programs using different information and communication technologies (Chadha and Kumail, 2002). The online learning environment takes form of a virtual environment in which teaching and learning takes place and is comprised of the various delivery and communication modes and interfaces (including chatroom and other discussion modes, email, voice and video communication) through which students interact with each other, their lecturers and tutors and with the learning material itself (which includes content presented in the form of text, still images, moving images, and sound). Obviously, many aspects of the online learning environment differ markedly from those experienced in traditional face-to-face teaching and learning but even in this traditional, physical environment extensive use is increasingly being made of large screen data-projection for text and images and here the difference with the online environment is not so great as might be imagined. Moreover, all learning environments revolve in large measure around the reading of texts. In the online environment students can generally choose whether to read text directly from a computer screen, which has certain advantages (scrolling, scanning, digitally searching) as well as several well-recognized disadvantages due to the physical qualities of the viewing screens (in terms of resolution, contrast and ease of manipulation). These latter limitations are steadily being addressed but in the

mean-time it should be remembered that online learners generally have the option of printing and reading from hard-copies of their texts as well, of course, as using books and other conventional text formats rather than attending face to face classrooms and interacting with the teacher and other learner. Therefore, the introduction of online learning environments transforms the education practice by the teachers as well as the students.

Some studies have investigated cultural factors in student interaction for online class discussion (Djojoputro et al., 2005; Campbell 2004), and found different cultural backgrounds and prior learning experiences shapes the way students learn. However, little literature was found exploring how cultural factors shape the attitudes and behaviour of educators in this online environment. The objective of this research is to explore cultural factors shaping the attitudes and behaviours of educators involved in pioneering online teaching learning. This paper explores cultural issues associated with the online learning environment as experienced by educators. Specifically, the research focuses on influential early adopters who have become change-agents by inspiring small networks of their peers. It is intended that the findings from this research will allow individuals and institutions to better understand ways in which to optimise the teaching and learning experience by recognising and responding to the needs and preferences of individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds so as to better motivate them by building trust and facilitating inspiration. The following section will discuss the current literature on culture, gender and online education. This will be followed by two vignettes exploring the adoption and creation of social networks increasing the user buy-in and adoption of online education. A discussion will be provided highlighting implications for practice.

## **CURRENT LITERATURE**

Many universities were quick to adopt the web for basic promotional marketing and public relations purposes and for the sharing of useful information when the first user friendly web browsers appeared in the early 1990s. According to McPhail (McPhail, 2002), by 1990 the Internet was used substantially by people who had significant computer programming experience and with the creation of the World Wide Web, the mouse, icons, browsers, and search engines that were user friendly, Internet use expanded globally and rapidly. From the outset there were high expectations expressed by some academic teachers and university managers that the web would revolutionise teaching through online delivery of course materials and interaction between students and staff. Online distance learning students perceived there was a lack of feedback or contact with their teachers because there is not a daily face-to-face contact with teachers, which on-campus students regularly receive. It is believed that this missing link must be restored and may include institutional efforts and institutional policies must to be put in place.

Keegan stated that “the link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be ‘integrated’” (Keegan, 1986, p.120). Students who do not receive sufficient interaction will eventually drop out from the institutional system (Sheets, 1992). After an initial burst of activity during which universities established websites to publicise their programs and to act as virtual brochures and handbooks to get their niche in the market, by the end of the decade development had slowed. Although by this stage, universities across the world had begun to explore online teaching. One of the overriding motivations is to attract more students. There was very little concern in engaging the teachers and discussing with them regarding their perspectives and motivating them.

Universities adopted various technologies such as WebCT, FirstClass and Blackboard. These technologies varied but shared similarities with their focus being on the learner’s perspective, that is, providing competitive advantages, expanding student base and international market place. Online teaching and learning literature focused on the identification of advantages and disadvantages from learner’s perspective which includes the convenience in terms of time and place, self directedness, controlling learning pace. Some researchers (Djojoputro et.al, 2005; Campbell, et al, 2004) explored cultural factors which influence the learner’s learning style but not from the teachers’ perspective. Although there are some teachers willing to learn new technologies, many are reluctant and resist changing their teaching practices. One reason educators may resist is due to their cultural background, influences and ideologies (Hyland, 2003). Some feel fear and anxiety of lack of technical experience and confidence. There are some who feel fear of losing their jobs (Bates, 2000) suggested that fears relating to professional job security were significantly high amongst teaching academics for fear and concerns by the introduction of online teaching and learning. There is very little mention about cultural factors in going online. As a result, there is a perceived lack of understanding from the educators’ experiences and perspective in terms of these cultural factors.

### **Cultural dimensions**

Hofstede (1991) has provided an in-depth discussion on culture and the various dimensions of culture, which have been widely accepted and used in a variety of disciplines (Corbitt et al., 2004). One of the virtues of

Hofstede's writing is its lucidity and concrete expression, particular in the area of culture. Hofstede's view (1991, p. 5) of culture is that it is "learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes. The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." Through this, Hofstede (1991, p.10) argues that culturally, everyone belongs simultaneously to several different kinds of groups and is variously influenced by different layers of mental programming within themselves:

*a national level according to one's country ( or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime); a regional and/or ethnic and / or religious group(s); a gender level, according to whether a person was born as a girl or as a boy; a generation level, which separates grandparents from parents from children; a social class level, associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation or profession; for those who are employed, an organisational or corporate level according to the way employees have been socialised by their work.*

Hofstede (1991) identified five independent dimensions of national culture, each rooted in a basic problem with which all societies have to cope, but on which their answers vary. He describes the dimensions as follows:

- **Power distance**, which is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality.
- **Uncertainty avoidance**, which is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future.
- **Individualism versus collectivism**, which is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups.
- **Masculinity versus femininity**, which is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women.
- **Long-term versus short-term orientation**, which is related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present.

Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner have conducted research that parallels that of Hofstede (2001) in several important respects. They discuss about not so much stereotypes as the need to understand individuals. They too draw their study sample from a business environment and arrive at a series of oppositional dimensions of culture, settling on six axial pairs (2003, p.8):

- **Universalism versus Particularism** - Universalism is focus more on rules than relationships. Whereas, particularism focus is more on relationships than on rules.
- **Individualism versus Communitarianism** - Individualism is about the rights of the individual and frequent use of "I" form. Communitarians sees group-focus and frequent use of "We" form and achieve in groups and assume joint responsibility.
- **Specificity versus Diffusion** - Specificity is direct and to the point, and purposeful in relating. Whereas, diffusion is indirect and seemingly "aimless" forms of relating.
- **Achievement versus Ascription** - Achievement use of titles only when relevant to the competence brings to task and respect for superior. Ascription extensive use of titles especially when status in the organisation and respect of superior in hierarchy is seen as a measure of commitment to the organisation.
- **Inner direction versus Outer direction** - Inner direction is about thinking and personal judgment, that is, 'in our heads'. It assumes that thinking is the most powerful tool and that considered ideas and intuitive approaches are the best way. Outer direction is seeking data in the outer world. It assumes that we live in the 'real world' and that is where we should look for our information and decisions.
- **Sequential time versus Synchronous time** - Sequential time sees events as separate items in time ie. one after another. It finds order in a series array of actions that happen one after the other. Synchronous time sees events in parallel, synchronised together. It finds order in coordination of multiple efforts.

While the above cultural factors have been found as important in understanding people's attitudes and competency in general business practice (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2003), what is much less well understood is the ways in which cultural background shapes their attitudes and competency with respect to adopting and using technologies for online teaching.

Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner argues that communitarians sees group-focus and assume joint responsibility. From the study by Djojoputro et al. (2005), students seem to seek friends and relationships before they feel comfortable with each other. The research found that students were not only feel at ease with the names provided online but they would feel much more comfortable when they first met face-to-face. According to Hofstede (2001), students from the power distance and collectivism culture tend to feel and find comfort in a communal and dependency environment.

Hofstede (2001) argues that in the high power distance culture, students tend to have a dependant style of learning. The finding above supports this argument indicating that this dependency still can be seen among these students. Even though there is an indication that the power distance is reduced in online learning environment, the students still expect that the knowledge comes from the lecturer rather than building the knowledge themselves through discussion and interaction.

Essentially, the findings Djojoputro et al. (2005) indicate that the interviewed students from a collectivist and high power distance culture want to be guided by the lecture in the online learning environment. These students relied heavily on the lecturer's information and answers whilst studying that subject during the semester.

Utilising Hofstede's (2005) work, there is a distinction between members of an individualist society and members of a collectivist method in the way they operate. Members of the individualist typically focus to look after their own or his immediate family (Hofstede, 2005, p76). However, in a collectivist society, members typically work in a communal sense, through networks and associations. In the Chinese culture, this is typically referred to as *guanxi*. This concept draws together considerations of social linkages, group behaviour and social capital.

The concept of *guanxi* has been rediscovered by a number of writers in recent years. Davies (1995), for example, defines *guanxi* as "the social interactions within the network place and its members". Similarly, Corbitt and Thanasankit (2001) begin with the observation that *guanxi* are "cultivated through a person's network of connections". In their study the researchers have begun to explore the role that *guanxi* dynamics play in individual motivation and change management behaviour amongst academic faculty members involved in the pioneering of online learning information technology.

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*Guanxi* is a specifically Chinese term for networking. It is used to describe high-trust, long-term relationships that allow individuals to assist one another in a synergistic fashion. The pattern of *guanxi* is, however, endemic to academic environments around the world. Guru-disciple; supervisor-postgraduate student; mentor-mentored: this is the warp and weft of academic life. When inspirational, visionary early adopters mentor groups and networks of willing learners profound change is possible. Productive *guanxi* can form spontaneously but there is much that management can do to facilitate, encourage and empower them. Though little researched, it is clear that cultural factors must influence the development of trust. Cultural factors clearly shape the ways that enthusiasm is inspired and that guidance is given and received.

Academic *guanxi* are found all around the world but their characteristics, development and dynamics are very much culturally influenced. *Guanxi* networks entail reciprocity, obligation, and indebtedness among actors, as well as the aesthetic protocol that comes with cultivating these relationships (China Business Review, 2004). *Guanxi* means connection/s.

This study employs the concept of *guanxi* (particularistic ties built on individual trust) to understand the operation of trust and inspiration in networking and teamwork in an Asian academic context (Corbitt and Thanasankit 2001). Particular attention will be given to examining differences between academic teachers based on gender, cultural orientation (shaped by ethnicity and educational background), and social milieu (determined by education, profession, environment, and related personal preferences including cultural affinity).

## METHODOLOGY

This study takes the form of an ethnographic study of the adoption and use of online teaching using a couple of Malaysian tertiary institution academics involved in leading or contributing to small teams and networks pioneering online teaching. This paper draws heavily on vignettes of two academics interviewed by the researcher but the selection and interpretation of this material is influenced significantly by interviews with dozens of other academics, most of which, for the sake of clarity, are not directly referred to here. An ethnographic research method (Hammersley, 1995) was chosen for this study because it is the approach most suitable to research seeking a deeper understanding of social behaviour and subtle human factors through interacting with and 'living' in the communities of online educators. By employing an inductive data analysis

approach, ethnography allows a rich theory to emerge from a thick description of the human interactions and cultural context under study. In this study ethnographic data was collected via participants' interactions and regular dialogue, including *semi-structured interviews*, *observation* and *documentation* (Fetterman, 1998). Participants were chosen from a selected sample of tertiary academics in Malaysia, with as broadly varying cultural backgrounds as possible, and specifically from amongst academics involved in teams and networks pioneering the development of online learning.

The researcher worked in this environment whilst technologies supporting online delivery of university subjects were being established. The main participation of the researcher was to share experiences in helping academics both in Western and Asian universities with the use of online technology and learning management systems. As such, a range of academics participated in observations and interviews. However, this paper focuses on two representatives from a Malaysian Higher Education Institution. Although not typical of Malaysian academics in general, Arial and Norial are broadly the online learning pioneers in Malaysia. The study was structured to maximise the aspects of longitudinal study by observing the same individuals over a period of two to three years. Contact with these academics commenced in early 2005. Notes were taken during observations of their online teaching activities and interviews were digitally recorded. Each interview was then transcribed in full or in part, for later analysis.

The data gathered was largely qualitative in nature, consisting of interview transcripts, information and notes taken from observations and related supporting documentation. As noted above, an ethnographic approach using an inductive data analysis method, specifically the meaning condensation method (Kvale, 1996), was employed. This entailed organising, arranging and chronologically ordering the data, condensing large data texts and describing their meaning in the form of shorter statements, then analysing them and searching for recurring themes or patterns that represent the participants' perspective. Based on the findings of this research, the researcher was able to put forth a set of relational assertions about the cultural impact of using online technology for teaching using the language and terminology of the participants. Some of the key findings are discussed below in this paper.

## **THE PUSH TO GO "ONLINE"**

The Economist Intelligence Unit (Economist Intelligence Unit in cooperation with IBM Corporation, 2003) state that as far as Malaysia's e-readiness is concerned, Malaysia appears well-positioned internationally. In their survey in 2003 on the e-readiness of 195 countries, Malaysia was ranked 32 for the year 2002 and 33 for the year 2003; and amongst the various countries in the Asia-Pacific area, Malaysia was ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in 2002 and in 2003 in the same survey. In a report (Dutta & Jain, 2002) that investigated e-networks in 82 countries, Malaysia was ranked 29<sup>th</sup> for the readiness in terms of the environment and usage of e-networks in the country. A recent study by Kaur and Abas (2004) quite a number of issues that are bear upon the success of e-learning initiatives at Malaysia's best known centre for e-learning, Open University Malaysia. They mention that there are many educators and students who were surveyed who are quite ready to take up e-learning initiatives at their institution but there are many others who clearly need more time to be influenced in the uptake of e-learning. In their paper, they stated that institutional policy makers and advisors have to play a key role in initiating and influencing the e-learning initiatives.

Despite years of significant hype about 'going online', e-learning in South East Asia not nearly as widely used as might be expected. Malaysia may have its Cyberjaya hitech city in the form of Putrajaya, the new satellite sister city to the capital Kuala Lumpur, but there are still very few extensive internet-centered programs around especially in the teaching and learning area.

## **Mentors, pioneers, social network and bamboo networking**

Arial was interviewed and observed in Malaysia where she works at one of the newer public universities, Oriial University (*not its real name*) in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital. She mentored and "championed" several junior colleagues. She talked about how she became deeply involved in online learning. The fact that we were from the same social environment or milieu was a significant factor in enabling us to rapidly progress to an intimate and frank exchange of experiences and observations.

Although Arial had undertaken both undergraduate and doctoral studies at a local Malaysian university she had experienced some brief but significant periods of work in American universities. The most recent of these occurred in 2001, when she went to an American university to do her sabbatical. Whilst there, she met with a number of key people whom she describes as having changed her life. In particular, she met with a very motivated and enthusiastic professor who is now her key mentor and champion in online learning and teaching. She said that she learnt so much during her brief time there that the sabbatical visit represents a turning point for her professionally. Essentially, she developed a social network outside her Malaysia culture.

Arial would describe herself as a collectivist in that she holds to collectivist values whereas her American mentor might be labeled an individualist. They both get along very well despite apparently occupying two opposite poles of the same dimension (Hofstede, 2003, p. 82). Hofstede (2003) typology would suggest that there is a wide gap between these two cultural orientations (individualistic vs. collectivism). Other researchers (Myers & Tan, 2002; Corbitt, et al. 2004) have suggested that Hofstede's fixation of national culture does not map onto the real world situation as he seems to believe it does. In this case for example that categorizing American as individualist and Asian as collectivistic, does not really help us understand the dynamic of the relationship between Arial and her mentor. There are possibly two elements here. Firstly, they both have learnt to adjust to and respect each others' values, cultures and personalities. Secondly, it seems likely that these two individuals are never quite the polar opposites that Hofstede theory would suggest they are. In any case, they have certainly learned to transcend the bounds of national cultural orientation.

Arial joined her current university in February 2002. She joined the current university because her ex-boss left the previous university to set up the current university and needed her support and expertise, including the specialist knowledge that she had recently acquired in America. She describes herself as being excited and full of new ideas after returning from America and being very keen to help and implement a new learning management system at Arial University. It was, she says, not so much about monetary gain but about her passion and interest in transferring her knowledge, skills and expertise that she had gained during her sabbatical overseas. Nevertheless, she felt that her online teaching and learning expertise was limited and so she continues to keep in touch and build her network with her mentor that she first developed in the States.

She continues to find encouragement from her American mentor to push ahead and promote her passion for online education. Nevertheless, Arial felt very much alone in carrying on this work. Through hard work she slowly built up a small network of supporters locally and overseas who shared her passion for online teaching and learning. Arial's story suggests that elemental principles behind the concept of *guanxi* transcend the boundaries of Asian culture. American culture is said to be individualistic and to sharply contrast with the collectivistic culture that Arial identifies with (Hofstede, 2001). Yet clearly Arial's case is one in which professional or academic *guanxi* extend beyond national culture. She builds more on networking and that networking is not just within the collectivist people but because they share the online passion. In other words, through these interactions, Arial has developed a professional (academic) *guanxi* (network) outside her local institution. Arial's expertise in online teaching was not well utilised within her institution. They have similar culture but not the same passion for their professional work, significantly lacking the passion for online teaching and learning. This goes to explain that *guanxi* goes beyond national culture. Professional (academic) *guanxi* may extend beyond the realm of collectivism vs. individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Myers & Tan (2002) also argued that we should move beyond the concept of "national culture" to one that recognizes the dynamic nature of culture.

### **A new bamboo clump getting established**

In many ways the metaphor of bamboo shooting illustrates well the *guanxi* social capital dynamics involved in cases like Arial's case. Bamboo is a very 'social plant' in that every new outcrop is linked to some earlier clump of growth. This remains the case even when there does not appear to be any direct connection between two clumps as bamboo is capable of sending out runners over long distances underground forming hidden networks of connected growth. Arial builds her academic *guanxi* based on both her personal and social connections (networks), her *guanxi* (based on culture) and her professional *guanxi*.

Arial recounts how it took her a long time, and much discouragement, pain and sorrow before she saw in fruit of her labour. She had very few supporters from her institution that shared her vision. She had to increase her normal work load to continue her passion for online teaching and learning. Her time developing online innovation projects was not fully rewarded by her management team. She also experienced a lack of technical support from her institution during the initial stage. So to overcome the issues, she turned to support and networks from her mentors from overseas. Slowly, she began building a network of academics within the institution and outside her institution who were also interested in online teaching and learning. She initiated forum groups to share ideas about the new technology that she had been using. Over the years, she was in constant contact with her American mentor and together they worked hard to research and publish in the area.

After several years of work she was finally rewarded with new clusters of colleagues and new clumps grow. Although its passage underground long remained invisible finally the bamboo sent up new shoots and surfaced with fresh growth. Arial builds on her cross cultural professional (academic) *guanxi* to build her group of support for online teaching innovations.

Today Arial closely mentors several younger colleagues, for example Haranah, who is very grateful for her support and encouragement. She encourages Haranah, in regular exchanges online. She helps her in projects and

encourages her in her interests. Their relationship is based on deep trust between herself and a small network of mutual encouragement.

Haranah initially started off not knowing much about online teaching and learning. Arial trained her, encouraged her and invited her to join her in related research and writing projects. Then they both came up with new road bricks. Haranah reports being very struck by the fact that Arial was always willing to freely share her thoughts and ideas with her without holding back. In local parlance Haranah describes Arial as not being a “*kiasu* type”, adding that she is “very generous”. The Hokkien Chinese word *kiasu* has entered broad usage in Malaysia and Singapore, even amongst those not from a Hokkien or other Chinese ethnic background because of the way it precisely evokes the notion of someone who is simultaneously insecure and competitive and constantly afraid of ‘losing out’.

Arial’s experience has convinced both of them that well-defined outcomes and remunerations, prospects for further career advancements and other tangible benefits – cash or in-kind are significant factors in encouraging the adoption of online teaching and learning in most Malaysian institutions.

The current statistics regarding teaching at Arial University point to wide spread adoption of online teaching and learning principles. Nearly 80% of their courses are delivered online. All new staff are required to attend online workshops, seminars and tutorials. The situation when Arial first started that very few courses were offered online and she met with considerable resistance amongst her colleagues regarding moving to online teaching. It would appear that to a considerable degree the transformation of the institution in respect to online teaching and learning is contributable to the catalytic influence of early pioneers such as Arial.

She noticed that people are changing their behaviour to suit cultural situations in a variety of ways:

- *Use of language. Generally people are more adaptive to the language. For example, if I noticed that my student from Sabah is more comfortable using a certain tone, then I will try to adapt to his tone.*
- *I also try to impress my tone of language upon the students so that they ‘improve’ their communication styles.*
- *Responding to one another: Here cultural sensitiveness is important. More in terms of mannerisms rather than content. For example in some cultures, a ‘sort-of-permission’ is sought in responding. So if we are not sensitive to this, it might lead to negative or no communication. Offending another is very visible in the online forums. This factor may need higher levels of discovery and eventually training.”*
- *... but only if the person have had previous interactions of the culture, via intensive reading, watching movies, interaction etc. Other wise it is rather difficult. This is due to the fact that we do not have the authentic mental schemata to formulate more probing questions to ask for clarifications.*

Hofstede’s (2001) power distance is another cultural dimension refers to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality among members within a society, which can develop into inequalities in power and wealth. In high power distance environment, teachers and educators are treated with great respect and honour and have lots of influence and power in the classroom (Hofstede, 2001).

### **Woman pioneer and E-Community**

The second case study exemplar that we will examine here concerns Norial (not her real name). Norial is a professor from a public university in Malaysia. Ethnically she identifies with the Malay community in Malaysia. She did her Masters and undergraduate studies in universities in Midwest America in the 1980s. Soon after she returned to Malaysia after completing her Masters degree she continued her postgraduate studies by commencing a PhD program at her own institution working with a local mentor. Unfortunately, her local mentor did not share the same experience or skills in online teaching and learning applications as did Norial. Nevertheless, Norial remained motivated to use her computer to prepare lecture notes, and produce a “story board” for her classes.

Today Norial is one of key pioneers and “early adopters” in her institution. She initiated and established an e-community forum with other institution within the country and in neighbouring countries. Several years ago she started using a learning management system to put up her lecture materials and set up discussion boards for her students and other colleague to use in their classes. She experienced difficult times working with colleagues who did not want to participate in online teaching and learning. After many years of persevering in using online in her teaching Norial’s faculty now has been able to put more than 188 courses are online.

Norial explained that colleagues who are more than 45 years of age are not accustomed to participating in online teaching situations. Their online experience is confined to using email for communication but even that is not employed extensively. They would still prefer to meet students or staff via face-to-face meetings and classes. Staff between 35 and 45 years of age, however, in Norial’s experience, tend to be much more willing to

experiment and use the online environment in their teaching. Norial is convinced that this group of staff are more receptive in the uptake of new technology. As a result she makes time to train them and provides assistance through a series of workshops, forum discussion groups and newsletters designed to encourage staff. She shared that in the first couple of years, she felt very alone and frustrated being the only one in her institution pioneering this work. Her superior was also not very encouraging of her online teaching and learning interests. Nevertheless her doctoral supervisor was much more supportive and encouraged her to share notes with other PhD students who shared her interests. This encouraged and motivated each other to carry on the “good work”, which was important due to the many years they felt themselves to be isolated in their interests.

In 1999, Norial set up an “E-Community” environment where she hoped that a group of early adopters could come together to share ideas, frustrations and a place where they can “*mamak*” (encourage) each other. She provided endless rounds of online training and support material for staff. In a collectivist communal culture, the time of being together is emotionally sufficient even there is silence. Norial stated that “*..even we come together and nobody talks... it is oklah.. we enjoyed seeing each other and be together in the same place. We feel the sense of belonging and know there is a place to meet face-to-face. After a little we’ll start chatting.*”

In 2002, a new E-learning system was developed in-house for second year lecturers to post their reading materials, lecture notes, tutorial tasks, send emails to staff and students. Approximately 105 students and 3 staff were involved in this project. She developed group project work and for student to submit assessment online and the staff to mark the assessment online. Through this system, Norial set up a facility for announcements and lecture notes uploading, and helped to put materials online after training the tutors in how they could get access to the online materials.

In 2004, Norial set up a committee for approximately two thousand lecturers to sit for a level of competency test using online teaching and learning techniques. She gave them extensive support and trained them in how to use the system before the assessment.

Whilst she was studying for her Masters degree in America, she met a cyber expert who became her mentor and champion. Norial explains that in Muslim society there is a concept of “*Sillaturrahim*” which parallels the concept of *guanxi* exchanges in Chinese society which means networking or maintaining relationship - the sharing of themselves firstly to family, secondly to neighbours and lastly others. *Silaturrahim* is an Arabic word meaning bonding or close ties (<http://www.chinamuslim.per.sg/origin/origin.htm>). She diligently worked on this “*Sillaturrahim*” relationship with her mentor professor benefited from a lot of assistance and support in online teaching and learning. This culminated in him visiting her university as a visiting professor for a period of six months.

Norial worked hard to pioneer the adoption and development of online teaching and learning techniques and technologies at her own university. She is one of the key early adopters in using online technology in her institution. She also shared, in our conversations, that academics are sometimes very “individualistic” when it comes to sharing knowledge and ideas. She believes that if you share no matter whether you gain now or later, spiritual rewards will ensure. She explains that there is “*whole spectrum of opportunities to gain knowledge only if we are willing to begin sharing and help others*”.

After many years of pioneering and networking, Norial and her colleagues have finally established a national e-learning forum committee that comprises of key representatives from most national Malaysian universities and the Malaysian Department of Education. She believes through hard work and perseverance, she has accomplished her dream of having this forum group set up in Malaysia. This group meets monthly. They organized bi-annual conferences where they invite key e-learning academics from national and international universities to participate and share their experiences in new technology-enabled teaching practices. She and her colleagues compile all the papers for publications. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner’s (2003) synchronous time sees events in parallel, synchronized together; and it finds order in coordination of multiple efforts. Norial structure her work synchronically. She usually does several tasks such as building networks among her peers, colleagues, management, mentors and students; establish e-learning forum groups; online discussion forums; conducts workshops, synchronously. She feels that time commitments are desirable rather than real absolute; and she is flexible with her plans. She finds that her multi-tasking in coordinating multiple efforts at the same has fruited. Similar to Arial’s experience, Norial was also rewarded with a new growth of a big “clump” of “national e-learning forum group”. Norial continues to build on this “*Sillaturrahim*” relationship which parallels her cross cultural professional (academic) *guanxi* to build her e-learning community.

## CONCLUSION

In the above vignettes, mentor-networks played a significant role in the development of the pioneers of online teaching and learning in Malaysia. Virtually all of those interviewed for this study reported that they have found it rather difficult to find a support base in their first years of pioneering online developments. So what they have

tended to do is to fall back on their peer networks linked to the institutions at which they studied. It is often the case that there are prominent individuals championing e-learning in the institutions where they teach. They form small groups for information sharing and networking. They tend to look to their management for tacit 'permission' rather than direct encouragement. Consequently the active promotion of e-learning in Malaysia can be described as being 'middle-down' rather than 'top-down' in nature. That is to say, it is mid-level academics that inspire those below them to join in the development of e-learning programs. They are strongly internally driven and motivated. In time, their activity should produce new generations of locally developed e-learning experts but this has yet to take place in a substantial fashion.

It appears from the observations and interviews from the two women academics in this study, their role is an important one in the pioneering development of e-learning in Malaysia. These women pioneers are very enthusiastic in their adoption of new technology to a degree that belies the conventional wisdom that it is men who are much more inclined to explore new technology. But it seems that in fact it is women who are more open to experimentation and more willing to learn new things. They form their own support networks and work hard to make things work. They are very willing to share ideas and pass them on.

In many cases the men and women at the forefront of e-learning developments in Malaysia can be said to be 'culturally plural', either in their background and domestic environment or in their orientation and outlook. These are people who negotiate cultural and communal boundaries with ease and grace. Individuals who are strongly mono-cultural in their outlook, are generally much less willing to experiment with e-learning and are often described by their peers as being overly driven by '*kiasu*' attitudes and the desire to save face when it comes to both innovation and peer networking.

In this study, it shows that both men and women '*academic guanxi*', or peer networks or similar exchanges that might be described by other terms such as '*Sillaturrahim*', play a key role in the adoption of online technologies. Key early adopters become change-agents by inspiring small network of their peers and via their *guanxi*. It is also discovered that motivation is not simply an individual matter but is also about groups and peer networks or communities of exchange and encouragement. *Guanxi* is about personal connection, friendship or networking (Corbitt and Thanasankit, 2001; Chen and Chen 2004). It has been identified as a necessary condition to do B2B successfully in Asia. In the development of e-learning in Malaysia there is very little activity which is not linked to small clusters of developers who are tied into wider networks through personal contacts.

Like clumping bamboo, whilst the local clusters tend to be easily seen the longer-range 'subterranean' personal connections are generally not nearly so immediately obvious. These connections are often the product of previous mentorship relationships, including the relationships between influential academics and their former postgraduate students. These relationships tend to work like bamboo runners: they run off in multiple directions below ground and unseen and then throw up new clumps which grow up and then send out fresh runners of their own.

This study leads to an important implication. Top-down policies and technology implementations are required, but still insufficient to successfully adopt online teaching and learning strategies. A proactive approach to supporting professional *guanxi* amongst academics is strongly required. Pioneers (i.e. champions are to be identified and promoted). Support schemes need to be established to allow middle-down team building, and sharing and exchanging of new teaching experience and practice. More importantly, a collegial culture of trust and strong social relationships amongst academics need to be built up and nurtured. Sadly, this is rather challenging for the academic community as many universities tend to adopt an economics-driven view toward online teaching and learning (Corbitt et.al, 2006)!

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