

# Malaysia's Niche in International Higher Education: Targeting Muslim-majority, Commonwealth, and Less-developed Countries

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## Abstract

*In 2010, more than 87,000 international students were studying in Malaysia. The Malaysian government wants to increase the number of international students to more than 200,000 by 2020. The case of Malaysia as an emerging player in international education is particularly interesting as it is not only one of the first former colonies of a European country to achieve such high international attractiveness, but also one of the first Muslim-majority countries to become a hub of international education. This article analyses both the supply and demand side of this remarkable trend. The historical and political circumstances for the institutional buildup of Malaysian higher education are discussed, followed by an analysis of the religious, linguistic, and developmental background of the international students coming to Malaysia. Lastly, factors affecting other prominent destinations of international student migration, such as the implications of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are taken into account.*

**KEYWORDS:** Malaysia, student mobility, Africa, Islam, madhhab, innovation gap, Commonwealth

## INTRODUCTION

IN THE COLONIAL ERA, much of international student mobility was determined by the power relations between the colonial centres and their peripheries. All of the main destinations for international students were located in countries with a European, Christian-majority population. This led to a structural imbalance in the production of knowledge about the non-European and non-Christian majority of the global population. Discourses on Orientalism, both in European and non-European languages, can be seen therefore as part of the decolonization process.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Most English-language scholars of Orientalism refer to Edward Said's English-language book *Orientalism* (1978) as the starting point of the related discourse. However, it is little known that several

More than 60 years after the end of World War II, global power relations have changed considerably, including in higher education (Chen and Barnett 2000; Mazzarol and Soutar 2012). Several countries outside the established European-North American-Australian cultural contexts have become major players in international higher education, including Singapore, Japan, Korea, China, and Malaysia. Among the formerly colonised countries, the performance of Malaysia is particularly interesting since it is the first Muslim-majority country to attract increasingly large numbers of international students, against competition with the other destinations (Abd. Aziz and Abdullah 2013). The number of international students in Malaysia increased from 30,397 in 2003 to 86,923 in 2010, while the Malaysian government is aiming for 200,000 international students by the year 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The key question of this article is who exactly are these numerous students who have already enrolled in Malaysia? Do they share a specific demographic profile, which then could be related to Malaysia's particular niche in global higher education? Is there a direct connection to one or more of Malaysia's unique historical trajectories, e.g. as a multi-ethnic, Muslim-majority, Commonwealth country with a particular emphasis on education since the 1970s? And does the specific composition of the international student population in Malaysia provide an unprecedented ground for new kind of encounters, e.g. of international Muslim students of various backgrounds and orientations?

Initial evidence from a recently published article with interview excerpts of Chinese students in Malaysia (Wong and Ooi 2013: 66) suggests that Malaysia's distinct image as a modern, pluralist Muslim-majority country with its "mix of the secular and the religious" is an important factor for Muslim students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in their choice of Malaysia as their destination country. In their non-representative study of 888 Chinese students in Malaysia, Wong and Ooi (2013: 65) found "disproportionate numbers of Chinese Muslims", namely 14.3 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

years prior to that, namely in 1971, the Indonesian scholar Ismail Yakub had already published an Indonesian-language contribution on *Orientalisme*, referring among others to Arabic-language sources printed in Lebanon in the 1950s. It seems thus that the critical discourse on European ways of framing 'the East' pre-dates Said's nevertheless highly relevant publication by several decades.

<sup>2</sup>In its related Powerpoint presentation from 2011, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education indicates that the targeted 200,000 international students will spend RM 6 billion, based on the assumption that an average international student is spending RM 30,000 per year. Available at: <http://jpt.moh.gov.my/menupemasaran.php> (accessed on 31 July 2015).

<sup>3</sup>The study was carried out in 2011 and concentrated on 888 students from the People's Republic of China who were "enrolled in, or had graduated from, public universities (7), private university colleges (8), and religion-based (4) tertiary institutions" (Wong and Ooi 2013: 59). It is unclear whether the inclusion of students from these not specified "religion-based institutions" influenced the outcome of the study with its strong accentuation of the "Islam factor". The quoted number of 14.3 per cent Muslim students in 2011 is equal to 127 in absolute terms, which is relatively few

Since the “Islam factor”, as Wong and Ooi (2013: 65) call it, appears to be rather relevant for the case of Chinese students in Malaysia, the question arises whether there is a general pattern that Malaysia is particularly attractive for internationally mobile Muslim students, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 when more established Anglophone destinations introduced restrictive visa policies (Sirat 2008). In this article I depart from the implicit basis for Wong and Ooi’s quoted perception of those “disproportionate numbers”, namely the statistical account of the religious composition of China. Rather, my approach consists of looking not only at one country (China), but at all countries of origin of the international student population in Malaysia. By dis-aggregating the related numbers per country, and then re-aggregating them according to general demographic categories, this article will produce a statistical model of the overall composition of the international student population in Malaysia. This model then can serve as a hypothesis for future analysis, including more systematic inquiries into “disproportionate” empirical evidence of particular student numbers.

## **INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND**

The rise of Malaysia as an important destination for international students was inconceivable at the time Malaya obtained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957. The first decade of the newly independent country was marked by drastic territorial changes, especially the formation of Malaysia in 1963, through the joining of Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah, and Singapore, followed in 1965 by Singapore’s departure as an independent country. Until 1969, the only university of the young nation was the University of Malaya (Universiti Malaya), established in 1949 (Khoo 2005: 44) by Ordinances of both the Federation of Malaya (27 April) and the Colony of Singapore (31 March).<sup>4</sup> In 1969, Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang was established (Ujang 2011: 47), followed in 1970 by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Ujang 2011: 54).<sup>5</sup>

The first great transformation of Malaysia’s education system, including higher education, began after the riots of 1969 between ethnic Chinese and

compared to the recorded 10,214 Chinese students in Malaysia in 2010 (the last year of detailed statistics on countries of origin published by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education ).

<sup>4</sup>The official Foundation Day of the University of Malaya is 8 October 1949 (Khoo 2005: 47). The Singapore government suggested in 1954 that the University of Malaya should have two campuses, one in Singapore and one in Kuala Lumpur (Khoo 2005: 63). Initially, teaching took only place at the campus in Singapore, while from 1958 onwards, more and more buildings of the new premises in Kuala Lumpur were being used. In 1959, new legislation came into effect that created two autonomous divisions of the University of Malaya, one in Malaya, one in Singapore (Khoo 2005: 83), until the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur became fully independent in 1962 (Khoo 2005: 89). The Singapore branch became the National University of Singapore (NUS) after Singapore’s independence in 1965.

<sup>5</sup>See Ujang (2011) for an overview of the historical developments of other universities in Malaysia.

ethnic Malays. In response to that national catastrophe, the government of Malaysia embarked on a long-term policy to address the issue of poverty, which was particularly widespread among the ethnic Malays, through a range of measures. Probably the deepest impact for the eventual position of Malaysia as a future hub for international education has been the strong emphasis placed on education in the policies of most Malaysian governments since the 1970s. Numerous new universities were established throughout the country. Eventually, every state in the country had at least one federally funded university, while private universities have been allowed to operate since the 1980s. At the same time, the government has provided ample scholarship opportunities for young graduate students to study abroad, most notably in the United Kingdom, Australia, America, New Zealand, and Japan.

In the late 1990s, the second great transformation of Malaysia's system of higher education was triggered by the financial implications of the "Asian Crisis" (Healey 2008: 346). As an emergency measure, the government put a temporary hold on the expensive scholarship programme for Malaysian students abroad. In its wake, a substitution policy was implemented in which local universities were given the task to provide education to Malaysian graduate students instead of sending them abroad. Concurrently, a balancing strategy was started with the purpose to attract increasing numbers of international, tuition-paying students to Malaysia (Tham 2013). The Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) was given the task to promote Malaysia as an attractive destination for international students, including in trade fairs and the like (Abd. Aziz and Abdullah 2014: 16). The income generated from this strategy of internationalising higher education was to be used to balance, at least in part, the expenses for educating Malaysian students abroad.

These reforms of Malaysia's higher education system were already in place when certain restrictions after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, began affecting the flow of Muslim students to a number of Western destinations, including most notably to America (Sirat 2008). Suddenly, Muslim-majority Malaysia, which offered various education programs in English, became a viable alternative for internationally mobile Muslim students.

The latest important factor affecting the system of higher education in Malaysia is the effect of global university ranking which have been published annually since 2003, notably the Times Higher Education Ranking (THE Ranking)<sup>6</sup> and the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU Ranking)<sup>7</sup>. In these rankings, Malaysian universities have not always been listed to the satisfaction of the Malaysian public and politicians, which has led to increasing pressure on the government to bring at least some Malaysian universities into the world's recognised top 100

<sup>6</sup><https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings> (accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>7</sup><http://www.shanghairanking.com/de/> (accessed 31 July 2015).

universities.<sup>8</sup> The designation by the Malaysian government in 2006 of four ‘research universities’ and the subsequent selection of one of these, namely Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), as the country’s APEX university in 2008, mark important milestones in the country’s effort to improve international recognition of Malaysia’s higher education system (Abd. Aziz and Abdullah 2014: 108).<sup>9</sup>

In this context, it is important to analyse the current composition of international students in Malaysia according to their most common denominators since this will allow a clearer picture of Malaysia’s current market share in global higher education. Since the demographics of the international student population in Malaysia are so far mostly unknown beyond the sheer statistics of countries of origin, a closer analysis is required to uncover possible correlations between the composition of the international student body in Malaysia, their origins, religion, and the historical contexts of their home countries. Only then can the social implications of these changing trends be addressed.

## GENERAL TRENDS

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has been publishing various statistics on the international student population in the country, including detailed accounts of student numbers per country of origin from 2003 through 2010<sup>10</sup>. Accordingly, the total number of international students increased from 30,397 (2003) to 86,923 (2010), while the total number of countries of origin rose during the same period from 134 to 161 (Table 1).

The detailed analysis of the entire sample reveals that Malaysia has been attracting increasing numbers of students particularly from countries with a smaller population than Malaysia’s, which is estimated to reach 30.5 million by July 2015 (CIA World Fact Book 2015). Examples include Bahrain, Kuwait, Fiji, Tajikistan, the Comoros, etc. (Table 2)<sup>11</sup>; countries where local Higher Education

<sup>8</sup>For a critical Malaysian perspective at the existing university rankings see Koo Yew Lie *et al.* (2011).

<sup>9</sup>Similarly, by the same year, China intends to host 500,00 international students and South Korea 200,000, while Singapore aims for 150,000 by 2015 (Ilieva *et al.* 2013: 301). See also Kell and Vogl (2012) for the general trends in higher education in the countries of the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>10</sup>2010 is the last year with publicly available data for the student population from every country in the list. The Ministry of Education has been publishing shortlists for the 20 most important countries of origin for 2011 and 2012 for the sector of public HEIs (MOHE 2012: 69). For 2013 and 2014, no such numbers are available (MOHE 2014).

<sup>11</sup>Certain methodological problems with the data provided by the MOHE exist. For instance, some listed territories are not internationally recognised as independent countries, such as Palestine, England, Chechnya, or even, in 2007, “Utopia” (sic!). Possible statistical overlapping, e.g. between “England” and “United Kingdom” or “Cote d’Ivoire” and “Ivory Coast” could not be corrected for due to a lack of access to the primary data. For the British Indian Ocean Territory, where the original population of the, c. 1200 agricultural workers, were relocated in the 1960s to Mauritius and the Seychelles, it is probable that the numbers provided by the MOHE refer to members of the relocated population and their self-chosen “country of origin”.

**Table 1.** Growth in international student numbers in Malaysia, 2003–2010. (Source: Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, various statistics, own calculations).

YEAR	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Enrolled international students in Malaysia, public and private HEI combined	30,397	31,674	40,525	44,390	47,928	69,164	80,750	86,923
Number of countries of origin as indicated by the Ministry of Education	134	138	140	139	135	150	162	161

Institutions are not as numerous or as well-developed as in Malaysia. Hence, an initial conclusion could be that the Malaysian education system has a special attractiveness for the internationally mobile students of smaller countries due to the comparatively differentiated choices between the home countries and Malaysia.

In 2010, the top 17 countries of origin with more than 1000 students in Malaysia accounted for 67,093 out of 86,923 students (Table 3), which is approximately 77.2 per cent of the total. Most students studied at private Higher Education Institutions. The “business of higher education in Malaysia” (Chai 2007), following the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act of 1996<sup>12</sup>, was thus the main driver of the expansion of the international student population in the country in the 2000s. This seems to be in contrast to the situation in Singapore, where the government has been to a greater extent the driving force behind the internationalisation of the student population (Ho 2014).

The countries (and territories) listed by the Ministry can be rearranged according to world regions. As Table 4<sup>13</sup> shows, the most important world regions with more than 1000 students each are: West Asia (24,793 students), Africa (21,784), Southeast Asia (14,663), East Asia (12,296), South Asia (7850), and Central Asia (1782). Together, these non-European and non-American

<sup>12</sup><http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.12/Act.555-PrivateHigherEducationalInstitutionsAct1996.pdf> (accessed on 18 August 2015). There is some confusion about this act in secondary sources. Chai (2007: 114) abbreviates the title of that act as “Private Higher Education Act 1996”, while Healey (2008: 340) refers to it as “the 1998 Education Act”.

<sup>13</sup>England is listed by the MOHE as a separate country aside from the United Kingdom. Also, the MOHE lists Serbia and Montenegro and Yugoslavia as separate countries for 2010, although legally they did no longer exist at that time.

**Table 2.** ‘Small’ countries of origin with high increase in student numbers in Malaysia, 2003–2010. (Source: Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, various statistics, own calculations. The threshold was a multiplying ratio of 10).

Country	Population (2015)	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010 <sup>1</sup>	Multiplying ratio, 2003–2010
Bahrain	1.3	1	1	8	28	57	130	215	193	193
Kuwait	2.8	1	3	3	4	8	22	174	160	160
Kazakhstan	18.2	10	7	12	40	172	542	1217	1258	125.8
British Indian Ocean Territory	0.01	0	0	0	0	0	1	77	121	121
Niger	18	2	2	2	1	2	1	192	204	102
United Arab Emirates	5.8	0	0	0	0	0	84	68	72	72
Zambia	15.1	4	2	5	12	10	53	93	112	28
Kosovo	1.9	0	5	8	26	26	23	26	27	27
Uruguay	3.3	0	0	0	0	3	2	2	25	25
Fiji	0.9	0	1	2	3	5	28	31	25	25
Zimbabwe	14.2	29	46	71	116	230	507	583	659	22.7
Qatar	2.2	1	6	13	14	30	23	12	22	22
Mauritania	3.6	4	5	10	10	10	59	30	78	19.5
Chad	11.6	8	19	28	39	48	100	135	136	17
Saudi Arabia	27.8	136	241	329	525	1048	2752	2331	2252	16.6
Tajikistan	8.2	3	3	3	5	10	12	54	47	15.7
Mali	17	3	5	7	6	15	28	67	46	15.3
Cameroon	23.7	9	15	16	24	67	155	141	132	14.7
Swaziland	1.4	1	2	0	1	6	11	10	14	14
Palestine	n.a.	52	108	177	191	217	396	589	679	13.1
Kyrgyzstan	5.7	7	10	12	10	23	54	93	88	12.6
Botswana	2.1	160	160	206	517	1490	2350	1939	1911	11.9
Rwanda	12.7	2	3	3	1	4	2	26	23	11.5
Namibia	2.2	0	1	8	7	10	5	10	11	11
Comoros	0.8	19	18	39	38	34	44	46	202	10.6
Venezuela	29.3	0	0	1	1	4	2	9	10	10
Cote d'Ivoire	23.3	0	0	1	2	0	7	23	10	10

**Table 3.** Most important countries of origin of international students in Malaysia, 2010. (Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2011), own calculations. The threshold for this table was 1000 students).

COUNTRY	Public HEI	Private HEI	KTAR	Total
Iran	4814	7009		11,823
China	2168	8046		10,214
Indonesia	3769	6119	1	9889
Yemen	1809	4057		5866
Nigeria	737	5080		5817
Libya	1125	2805		3930
Sudan	596	2241		2837
Saudi Arabia	668	1584		2252
Bangladesh	538	1503		2041
Botswana	2	1909		1911
Iraq	1255	580		1835
Pakistan	297	1492		1789
Thailand	786	939		1725
Korea, Republic of	28	1426		1454
Maldives	195	1154		1349
Kazakhstan	29	1229		1258
Sri Lanka	79	1024		1103
TOTAL 17 TOP COUNTRIES	18,895	48,197		67,093
TOTAL ALL COUNTRIES	24,214	62,705	4	86,923

students account for 83,168 students or 95.7 per cent of Malaysia's international student population. This demonstrates that Malaysia is not only a main destination for its immediate neighbours in Southeast Asia. Rather, the implication for Malaysia's role within the ASEAN region is its increasingly global position in higher education, reaching beyond a merely national or regional horizon. In this regard, Malaysia can be better compared to Singapore than to most other countries in Southeast Asia.

In fact, Malaysia has become a major player far beyond its regional cultural sphere, including for students from Africa and the Central Asian successor countries of the Soviet Union. Particularly striking is the high number of students from Iran and the Arabic countries, which historically have been considered the cultural and intellectual centres of the Muslim world. Now, it seems that Malaysia has gained a central role in higher education for these countries, re-centring to a certain degree the historical distribution of roles in the Muslim world.

In terms of theoretical perspective, the question is whether the unprecedented encounter of so many international students of various national, regional, and also religious backgrounds in Malaysia is leading to new trans-national, trans-regional, or even trans-religious phenomena, including new discourses on Islam. For that purpose, I conduct a number of dis-aggregation and re-aggregation



**Table 4.** Regional origin of international students in Malaysia, 2010. (Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2011), own calculations).

World Region	Countries (numbers of students in Malaysia 2010)	Total
West Asia	Iran (11,823), Yemen (5866), Saudi Arabia (2252), Iraq (1835), Jordan (769), Palestinian Territory (679), Oman (379), Syria (311), Turkey (235), Bahrain (193), Afghanistan (160), Kuwait (160), United Arab Emirates (72), Lebanon (25), Qatar (22), Azerbaijan (11), Chechnya (1)	24,793
Africa	Nigeria (5817), Libya (3930), Sudan (2837), Botswana (1911), Somalia (1478), Tanzania (830), Kenya (687), Zimbabwe (659), Uganda (420), Egypt (403), Mauritius (300), Algeria (238), Morocco (222), Niger (204), Comoros (202), Guinea (184), Djibouti (152), Chad (136), Cameroon (132), Eritrea (116), Zambia (112), Ethiopia (100), South Africa (87), Ghana (85), Mauritania (78), Malawi (54), Mali (46), Liberia (37), Gambia (36), Sierra Leone (36), Tunisia (31), Mozambique (29), Seychelles (26), Equatorial Guinea (23), Rwanda (23), Senegal (17), Lesotho (15), Swaziland (14), Burkina Faso (12), Namibia (11), Burundi (10), Cote d'Ivoire (10), D.R. Congo (9), Madagascar (8), Benin (5), Central African Republic (5), Gabon (3), Zaire (2), Angola (1), Togo (1)	21,784
Southeast Asia	Indonesia (9889), Thailand (1725), Singapore (899), Vietnam (642), Myanmar (464), Philippines (401), Brunei Darussalam (328), Cambodia (283), Laos (25), Timor Leste (7)	14,663
East Asia	China (10,214), South Korea (1454), Mongolia (245), Taiwan (180), Japan (177), Hong Kong (26)	12,296
South Asia	Bangladesh (2041), Pakistan (1789), Maldives (1349), India (1338), Sri Lanka (1103), British Indian Ocean Territory (121), Nepal (100), Bhutan (9)	7850
Central Asia	Kazakhstan (1258), Uzbekistan (306), Kyrgyzstan (88), Turkmenistan (83), Tajikistan (47)	1782

*Continued*

Table 4. *Continued*

World Region	Countries (numbers of students in Malaysia 2010)	Total
Europe	United Kingdom (141), Russia (101), Bosnia and Herzegovina (72), Germany (72), France (67), Norway (56), England (38), Denmark (36), Kosovo (27), Albania (25), Finland (18), Italy (13), Netherlands (13), Sweden (13), Belarus (11), Ukraine (10), Austria (9), Switzerland (7), Ireland (6), Belgium (5), Lithuania (5), Poland (5), Romania (5), Croatia (4), Serbia and Montenegro (5), Yugoslavia (5), Czech Republic (4), Malta (4), Portugal (4), Estonia (3), Hungary (3), Iceland (3), Macedonia (3), Slovakia (3), Georgia (2), Cyprus (1), Greece (1), Moldova (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (1)	803
South and Central America	Brazil (190), Uruguay (25), Colombia (12), Venezuela (10), Chile (6), Mexico (5), Argentina (2), Peru (2), Belize (1), Costa Rica (1), Guyana (1)	255
North America	United States of America (158), Canada (66)	224
Oceania	Australia (78), Fiji (25), Papua New Guinea (7), New Zealand (5)	115
Caribbean	Trinidad and Tobago (5), Antigua and Barbuda (2), Dominican Republic (2), Jamaica (2), Bahamas (1), Haiti (1), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1)	14
Not Stated		2344
Total		86,923

calculations for the overall religious composition of the international student population in Malaysia; specifying it further, not only will the Sunni/Shi'ite distinction in international student numbers be examined, but also according to the respective *madhhab* (schools of Islamic law, commonly spelled *mazhab* in Malaysia). This allows us to investigate whether the international Muslim students coming to Malaysia are from the same sub-group of Sunni Islam as most Malaysian Muslims, namely the Shafi'i *madhhab*.

## RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION

In order to analyse the international student population in Malaysia further, I employed a method that I have developed elsewhere (Graf 2011). The main idea is to dis-aggregate the total number of students per country of origin by the demographic composition of that country, and to re-aggregate the statistical sub-totals of the individual countries to a general aggregate. For the general information on the religious composition of the countries represented among the international students in Malaysia, I use the percentage information provided for every country by the CIA World Fact Book as a standard source, assuming that this institution has a strong interest in having the most up-to-date data available<sup>14</sup>.

### The International Muslim Student Population in Malaysia

Table 5 demonstrates that statistically, 61.7 per cent of the international student population in Malaysia in 2010 was Muslim. The first question then is what the rough proportion of Shia and Sunni students was among this group. Table 6 is calculated based upon estimates published by the Pew Research Center (2009) on the Shia population of the world's countries.

In Table 6, I depart from those countries of origin with more than 100 Muslim students in Malaysia. These countries comprise 52,393 out of 53,624.5 (or about 97.7 per cent of the total foreign Muslim student population). Apparently, the most prominent countries of origin for the Shia students in Malaysia are Iran (with 10,717.5 students), Yemen (2,199.8), and Iraq (1,245.9). There are also Shia students from Saudi Arabia (281.5), Pakistan (215.6), and Bahrain (109.7), to name just those countries with more than 100 estimated Shia students. Of those countries listed in Table 6, the total estimated number of Shia students in Malaysia is 15,058.3 (or 28.1 per cent of the foreign Muslim students). This percentage is considerably higher than the approximate global Muslim population that is Shia, which is 10-13 per cent (Pew Research Center 2009: 39). For Malaysia, which officially only recognises the Sunni version of Islam, this high influx of

<sup>14</sup>Chechnya is not listed separately in the CIA World Fact Book. For the purposes of this study, it is supposed that the one Chechen student studying in Malaysia in 2010 was Muslim. The religious composition of British Indian Ocean Territory is not disclosed in the CIA World Fact Book. No numerical breakdown of the religious composition of Kosovo available.

**Table 5.** Religious composition of the international student population in Malaysia, 2010.

Rank	Religion	Country of origin (with statistical number of speakers among foreign students in Malaysia)	Total	%
1	Islam	Iran (11,586.5), Indonesia (8514.4), Yemen (5866), Libya (3812.1), Nigeria (2908.5), Sudan (2837), Saudi Arabia (2252), Bangladesh (1826.7), Iraq (1779.9), Pakistan (1724.6), Somalia (1478), Maldives (1349), Kazakhstan (883.1), Jordan (722.9), Palestinian Territory (658.6), Tanzania (415), Oman (379), Egypt (362.7), Syria (279.9), Uzbekistan (269.3), Algeria (235.6), Turkey (234.5), Brunei (219.8), Morocco (219.8), Comoros (198), India (179.3), Niger (163.2), Afghanistan (158.4), Bahrain (156.7), Guinea (156.4), China (153.2), Djibouti (142.9), Kuwait (136), Singapore (134), Sri Lanka (83.8), Thailand (79.4), Mauritania (78), Chad (72.2), Kenya (76.3), Turkmenistan(73.9), United Arab Emirates (69.1), Kyrgyzstan (66), Uganda (50.8), Mauritius (49.8), Mali (43.6), Eritrea (42.3), Tajikistan (42.3), Ethiopia (33.9), Gambia (32.4), Tunisia (30.4), Bosnia and Herzegovina (28.8), Cameroon (26.4), Sierra Leone (21.6), Philippines (20), Myanmar (18.6), Albania (17.5), Qatar (17), Senegal (16), Ghana (15), Lebanon (14.9), Djibouti (14.9), Russia (12.6), Azerbaijan (10.3), Mongolia (9.8), Burkina Faso (7.3), Malawi (7.0), Zimbabwe (6.6), Cambodia (5.9), Mozambique (5.2), France (5), Liberia (4.5), Nepal (4.2), Cote d'Ivoire (3.9), United Kingdom (3.8), Germany (2.7), Fiji (1.6), Swaziland (1.4), Australia (1.3), South Africa (1.3), Benin (1.2), Canada (1.3), Zambia (1.1), Rwanda (1.1), England (1), Norway (1), Macedonia (1), Unites States of America (0.9), D.R. Congo (0.9), Netherlands (0.8), Central African Republic (0.8), Denmark (0.7), Madagascar (0.6), Vietnam (0.6), Austria (0.4), Trinidad and Tobago (0.3), Seychelles (0.3), Switzerland (0.3), Burundi (0.3), Serbia and Montenegro (0.2), Yugoslavia (0.2), Togo (0.2), Georgia (0.2), Zaire (0.2), Cyprus (0.2), Guyana (0.1), Timor Leste (0.1), Croatia (0.1)	53,624.5	61.7

2	Christianity	Nigeria (2326.8), Botswana (1368.3), Indonesia (1058.1), Kenya (566.8), South Korea (459.5), Philippines (370.9), China (357.5), Uganda (352.4), Kazakhstan (329.6), Tanzania (207.5), Brazil (169.1), Zimbabwe (164.8), Singapore (131.3), Unites States of America (124), United Kingdom (101), Mauritius (96.6), Zambia (84), Eritrea (72.5), South Africa (69.2), Sri Lanka (68.4), Ethiopia (62.8), Ghana (60.5), France (58.6), Iraq (55.0), Cameroon (52.8), Norway (50.5), Australia (49.8), Germany (49), Chad (48), Canada (46.4), Vietnam (46.2), Jordan (46.1), Malawi (44.7), Egypt (40.4), Denmark (35.3), Bosnia and Herzegovina (33.1), Brunei (32.8), Liberia (31.7), Syria (31.1), India (30.8), Uzbekistan (27.6), England (27.2), Seychelles (24.6), Equatorial Guinea (23), Rwanda (21.5), Palestinian Territory (20.4), Russia (19.9), Myanmar (18.6), Kyrgyzstan (17.6), Bahrain (17.4), Mozambique (16.3), Fiji (16.1), Finland (15.3), Guinea (14.7), Uruguay (14.6), Thailand (12.1), Lesotho (12), Sweden (11.3), Colombia (10.8), Italy (10.4), Venezuela (9.8), Lebanon (9.7), Ukraine (9.6), Namibia (9.4), Djibouti (9.1), Belarus (8.8), Burundi (8.5), Taiwan (8.1), Turkmenistan (7.5), Albania (7.5), Mongolia (7.4), Austria (7), Timor Leste (6.9), Papua New Guinea (6.7), Netherlands (6.5), D.R. Congo (6.3), Switzerland (5.6), Ireland (5.5), Chile (5.2), Romania (5), Serbia and Montenegro (4.6), Poland (4.6), Yugoslavia (4.6), Mexico (4.5), Lithuania (4.3), Comoros (4), Malta (3.9), Belgium (3.8), Croatia (3.7), Sierra Leone (3.6), Portugal (3.5), Japan (3.5), Madagascar (3.3), Cote d'Ivoire (3.3), Trinidad and Tobago (2.9), Gambia (2.9), Burkina Faso (2.8), Swaziland (2.8), New Zealand (2.6), Iceland (2.6), Hong Kong (2.6), Central African Republic (2.5), Slovakia (2.5), Morocco (2.2), Benin (2.1), Hungary (2.1), Macedonia (2), Gabon (2), Qatar (1.9), Argentina (1.9), Peru (1.9), Dominican Republic (1.9), Georgia (1.8), Antigua and Barbuda (1.8), Zaire (1.4), Jamaica (1.3), Mali (1.1), Senegal (1), Greece (1), Chechnya (1), Moldova (1), Bahamas (1), Haiti (1), Spain (0.9), Costa Rica (0.9), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (0.9), Cyprus (0.8), Estonia (0.8), Belize (0.7), Guyana (0.6), Slovenia (0.6), Azerbaijan (0.5), Angola (0.5), Laos (0.4), Czech Republic (0.4), Tunisia (0.3), Togo (0.3)	9806	11.3
3	Buddhism	Thailand (1631.9), Sri Lanka (762.2), Myanmar (413), Singapore (382.1), South Korea (351.9), Cambodia (272.8), Taiwan (167.4), Japan (126.4), Mongolia (122.5), Vietnam (59.7), Brunei (42.6), Laos (16.8), Nepal (10.7), Bhutan (6.8), Australia (1.6), Kazakhstan (1.3), Unites States of America (1.1), New Zealand (0.1)	4370,9	5.0
4	Hinduism	India (1077.1), Bangladesh (196), Indonesia (178), Mauritius (144), Nepal (80.6), Sri Lanka (78.3), Singapore (36), Mauritius (9.3), Fiji (7), Bhutan (2.2), United Kingdom (1.4), Trinidad and Tobago (1.1), Seychelles (0.5), England (0.4), Guyana (0.3), New Zealand (0.1)	1803	2.1

*Continued*

Table 5. Continued

Rank	Religion	Country of origin (with statistical number of speakers among foreign students in Malaysia)	Total	%
5	Other	China (9703.3), Not stated country (2344), South Korea (642.7), Nigeria (581.7), Botswana (542.7), Vietnam (535.4), Zimbabwe (487.6), Indonesia (336.2), Iran (236.5), Singapore (215.8), Tanzania (207.5), British Indian Ocean Territory <sup>2</sup> (121), Libya (117.9), Sri Lanka (110.3), Mongolia (105.4), Russia (68.3), Pakistan (64.4), Cameroon (52.8), India (50.8), Japan (47.1), Kazakhstan (44.0), Kenya (43.9), Niger (40.8), United Kingdom (34.8), Brunei (32.8), Unites States of America (32.1), Kosovo <sup>3</sup> (27), Zambia (26.9), Australia (25.3), Kuwait (24), Hong Kong (23.4), Brazil (20.9), Germany (20.4), Bahrain (18.9), Bangladesh (18.4), Canada (18.3), Uganda (16.8), South Africa (16.5), Chad (15.8), Myanmar (13.9), Guinea (12.9), Sierra Leone (10.8), Uruguay (10.4), Philippines (10), Swaziland (9.8), Ghana (9.5), England (9.4), Uzbekistan (9.2), Laos (7.9), Mozambique (7.5), Netherlands (5.7), Tajikistan (4.7), Taiwan (4.5), Norway (4.5), Nepal (4.5), Kyrgyzstan (4.4), Madagascar (4.2), Cambodia (4.2), Czech Republic (3.6), Ethiopia (3.3), France (3.3), Qatar (3.1), Lesotho (3), Cote d'Ivoire (2.9), Finland (2.7), Italy (2.6), Algeria (2.4), Malawi (2.3), Belarus (2.2), New Zealand (2.2), Burkina Faso (2.0), Peru (9.1), United Arab Emirates (2.9), D.R. Congo (1.8), Central African Republic (1.8), Thailand (1.7), Namibia (1.7), Sweden (1.7), Turkmenistan (1.7), Afghanistan (1.6), Austria (1.6), Benin (1.6), Mali (1.3), Burundi (1.2), Belgium (1.2), Colombia (1.2), Eritrea (1.2), Switzerland (1.1), Gabon (1), Liberia (0.8), Hungary (0.8), Chile (0.8), Gambia (0.7), Trinidad and Tobago (0.7), Jamaica (0.7), Lithuania (0.6), Seychelles (0.5), Portugal (0.5), Mexico (0.5), Slovakia (0.5), Turkey (0.5), Angola (0.5), Togo (0.5), Rwanda (0.4), Ukraine (0.4), Ireland (0.4), Iceland (0.4), Slovenia (0.4), Poland (0.4), Zaire (0.4), Fiji (0.3), Papua New Guinea (0.3), Belize (0.3), Tunisia (0.3), Lebanon (0.3), Croatia (0.2), Venezuela (0.2), Antigua and Barbuda (0.2), Estonia (0.2), Azerbaijan (0.2), Serbia and Montenegro (0.1), Yugoslavia (0.1), Malta (0.1), Argentina (0.1), Dominican Republic (0.1), Spain (0.1), Costa Rica (0.1), Peru (0.1), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (0.1)	17,318.5	19.9
Grand Total			86,922.9	100

**Table 6.** Shia students in Malaysia, 2010. (Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2011), Pew Research Center (2009), own calculations. When the Shia population is less than one per cent, a numerical value of zero is used).

COUNTRY	Estimated number of Muslim students in Malaysia	Shea in % of the country's Muslim population (averaged)	Estimated number of Shia students in Malaysia
Iran	11,586.50	92.5	10,717.50
Yemen	5866	37.5	2199.8
Iraq	1779.9	70	1245.9
Saudi Arabia	2252	12.5	281.5
Pakistan	1724.6	12.5	215.6
Bahrain	156.7	70	109.7
Nigeria	2908.5	2.5	95.3
Syria	279.9	17.5	49
Turkey	234.5	12.5	29.3
Oman	379	7.5	28.4
India	179.3	12.5	22.4
Tanzania	415	5	20.8
Kuwait	136	22.5	20.6
Afghanistan	158.4	12.5	19.8
Uzbekistan	269.3	1	2.7
Indonesia	8514.4	0	0
Libya	3812.1	0	0
Sudan	2837	0	0
Bangladesh	1826.7	0	0
Somalia	1478	0	0
Maldives	1349	0	0
Kazakhstan	883.1	0	0
Jordan	722.9	0	0
Palestinian Territory	658.6	0	0
Egypt	362.7	0	0
Algeria	235.6	0	0
Brunei	219.8	0	0
Morocco	219.8	0	0
Comoros	198	0	0
Niger	163.2	0	0
Guinea	156.4	0	0
China	153.2	0	0
Djibouti	142.9	0	0
Singapore	134	0	0
TOTAL FROM COUNTRIES WITH MORE THAN 100 ESTIMATED MUSLIM STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA	52,393		15,058.3 (= 28.7% of the countries with more than 100 Muslim students in Malaysia)

Shiites might constitute an interesting phenomenon in terms of theological discussions and practices, and possibly also a source of misunderstanding or conflict.

It can also be assumed that among the more than 50,000 international Muslim students in Malaysia, as well as with the local Muslim population, there are ongoing discussions about the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*).<sup>15</sup> In insular Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, the Shafi'i school of Islamic law is the most widespread, while students from the Arabic peninsula, Central and South Asia or African countries generally bring other versions of Islam with them to Malaysia. Historically, these *madhhab* were highly relevant as authoritative schools of Islamic law, and at the same time the adherence to the same *madhhab* had implications on the social level. Communities which adhered to the same school of law had a shared basis of trust and mutual understanding, which was important for trade and other economic and social activities. As followers of the various *madhhab* are now encountering each other in greater numbers in Malaysia, the theological implications will certainly be interesting. A question could be whether the intensive social interactions between followers of different *madhhab* (inter-*madhhab* interactions), as they currently take place in Malaysian universities, will lead to theological innovations, including in a trans-religious or at least a trans-*madhhab* sense.

To investigate this further, in the following I not only to follow the differentiation between Sunni and Shia as suggested by the Pew Research Center in its research design, but to try to generate an impression of the composition of the international Muslim student community in Malaysia by *madhhab*. For the purposes of this study, the publication on *Islamic Family Law in a Changing World* by An-Na'im (2002) as well as the related website<sup>16</sup> are employed as main sources for the distribution of the various *madhhab* in the countries of origin of the students.

In Table 7, I conduct a statistical disaggregation of the general student numbers by the percentage of the *madhhab* in each country of origin. This approach allows further differentiating of not only the composition of the 'Sunni' group, but also that of the 'Shia' population, which is only represented in the Pew Research Center report (2009) as a homogeneous group. The purpose of the detailed analysis here is to generate a basis for an overall picture and general trends, which are presented in Table 8.

It is of course understood that Tables 7 and 8 overstate the majority and understate the minority *madhhab* of the individual countries, as often only approximate data are available on the 'main' *madhhab*. Nevertheless, these two tables provide the following insights:

<sup>15</sup>Pouwers (2014) gives a useful overview of the scholarly discussions about the *madhhab*, focusing mainly on the early period.

<sup>16</sup><http://aannaim.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal> (accessed on 9 Sept. 2014).



**Table 7.** Muslim students in Malaysia by country and schools of *fiqh* (*madhhab*), 2010. (Source: various, see table footnotes; author's calculations).

Country	Schools of fiqh <sup>a</sup>	Shia – in % of the country's Muslim population (averaged) <sup>b</sup>	Estimated number of Muslim students in Malaysia, 2010	Sunni – Hanafi students in Malaysia	Sunni – Maliki students in Malaysia	Sunni – Shafi'i students in Malaysia	Sunni - Hanbali	Shia – Ja'fari students in Malaysia	Shia – Zaydi students in Malaysia	Shia – other schools students in Malaysia	Ibadi students in Malaysia
Iran	Ja'fari majority (92.5%), Hanafi minority (7.5%)	92.5	11,586.5	869	0	0	0	10,717.5	0	0	0
Indonesia	Shafi'i majority; Ahmadi minorities	0	8514.4	0	0	8514.4	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen	Shafi'i (62.5%) and Zaydi (37.5%)	37.5	5866	0	0	3666.3	0	0	2199.8	0	0
Libya	Maliki majority	0	3812.1	0	3812.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nigeria	Maliki majority (97.5%) <sup>c</sup>	2.5	2908.5	0	2835.8	0	0	95.3	0	0	0
Sudan	Hanafi dominant, previously Maliki	0	2837	2837	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	Hanbali majority (87.5%), Ja'fari minority (12.5%)	12.5	2252	0	0	0	1970.5	281.5	0	0	0
Bangladesh	Hanafi majority	0	1826.7	1826.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iraq	Ja'fari (70%), Hanafi (30%)	70	1779.9	534.0	0	0	0	1245.9	0	0	0
Pakistan	Hanafi majority (87.5%), sizeable Ja'fari (12.5%) and Isma'ili minorities; Ahmadi's legal status is unclear <sup>d</sup>	12.5	1724.6	1509.0	0	0	0	215.6	0	0	0

Continued

Table 7. *Continued*

Country	Schools of fiqh <sup>a</sup>	Shia – in % of the country's Muslim population (averaged) <sup>b</sup>	Estimated number of Muslim students in Malaysia, 2010	Sunni – Hanafi students in Malaysia	Sunni – Maliki students in Malaysia	Sunni – Shafi'i students in Malaysia	Sunni - Hanbali	Shia – Ja'fari students in Malaysia	Shia – Zaydi students in Malaysia	Shia – other schools students in Malaysia	Ibadi students in Malaysia
Somalia	Shafi'i majority	0	1478	0	0	1478	0	0	0	0	0
Maldives	Shafi'i majority, Ja'fari minority <sup>c</sup>	0	1349	0	0	1349	0	0	0	0	0
Kazakhstan	Hanafi majority <sup>f</sup>	0	883.1	883.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jordan	Hanafi	0	722.9	722.9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Palestinian Territory	Hanafi majority	0	658.6	658.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tanzania	Shafi'i majority (95%), with significant Hanafi, Ja'fari (5%) and Isma'ili communities and small Ibadi, Maliki, Hanbali and Ahmadi communities <sup>g</sup>	5	415	0	0	394.3	0	20.8	0	0	0
Oman	Ibadi majority (assumed 82.5%) and Sunni and Shi'a (7.5%) minorities	7.5	379	0	0	0	0	28.4	0	0	312.7
Egypt	Hanafi majority	0	362.7	362.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Syria	Hanafi majority (estimate 82.5%; Ja'fari (17.5%), Isma'ili and Alawi minorities)	17.5	279.9	230.9	0	0	0	49.0	0	0	0
Uzbekistan	Hanafi (99%) <sup>h</sup>	1	269.3	266.6	0	0	0	2.7	0	0	0
Algeria	Maliki majority, Ibadi minority	0	235.6	0	235.6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Turkey	Hanafi majority (82.5%) <sup>i</sup> , Imami minority	12.5	234.5	234.5	0	0	0	0	0	29.3	0
Brunei	Shafi'i majority	0	219.8	0	0	219.8	0	0	0	0	0
Morocco	Maliki majority	0	219.8	0	219.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
Comoros	Shafi'i <sup>j</sup>	0	198	0	0	198	0	0	0	0	0
India	Hanafi majority (82.5%) <sup>k</sup> , sizeable Shafi'i, Ja'fari (12.5%) and Isma'ili minorities	12.5	179.3	147.9	0	0	0	22.4	0	0	0
Niger	Maliki <sup>l</sup>	0	163.2	0	163.2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Afghanistan	Hanafi (estimated 87.5%) <sup>m</sup>	12.5	158.4	137.1	0	0	0	19.8	0	0	0
Bahrain	Ja'fari majority (70%), Shafi'i (15%) and Maliki minorities (15%) <sup>n</sup>	70	156.7	0	23.5	23.5	0	109.7	0	0	0
Guinea	Maliki <sup>o</sup>	0	156.4	0	156.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
China	Hanafi <sup>p</sup>	0	153.2	153.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Djibouti	Shafi'i <sup>q</sup>	0	142.9	0	0	142.9	0	0	0	0	0
Kuwait	Maliki (87.5%) (following the school of the ruling al-Sabah family); also significant Ja'fari Shi'a population	22.5	136	0	119	0	0	20.6	0	0	0

Continued

Table 7. Continued

Country	Schools of fiqh <sup>a</sup>	Shia – in % of the country’s Muslim population (averaged) <sup>b</sup>	Estimated number of Muslim students in Malaysia, 2010	Sunni – Hanafi students in Malaysia	Sunni –Maliki students in Malaysia	Sunni – Shafi’i students in Malaysia	Sunni - Hanbali	Shia – Ja’fari students in Malaysia	Shia – Zaydi students in Malaysia	Shia – other schools in Malaysia	Ibadi students in Malaysia
Singapore	Shafi’i majority	0	134	0	0	134	0	0	0	0	0
Grand Totals			52393	11373.2	7565.4	16120.2	1970.5	12829.2	2199.8	29.3	312.7

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise stated: <http://aannaim.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/> (accessed on 3 Sept. 2010); Pew Research Center (2009) for estimates of numerical proportion of Shia of the country’s Muslim population.

<sup>b</sup>According to Pew Research Center (2009). If the Shia population is less than 1%, in this table I use a numerical value of 0.

<sup>c</sup>As there are no clear numbers on the Shafi’i minority in Nigeria, I operate in this table with the assumption that 100% of the non-Shia Muslims in Nigeria follow the Maliki school.

<sup>d</sup>No clear statistics on the distribution of *madhhab* in Pakistan are available; hence I depart from the Pew Research Center’s (2009) number for Shia in Pakistan in order to calculate the number for the majority.

<sup>e</sup>The Pew Research Center (2009) does not give a number for the Ja’fari minority in the Maldives.

<sup>f</sup>(Yemelianova 2009: 12).

<sup>g</sup>As there is no exact statistical evidence available about the numerical distributions of the various schools of *fiqh* in Tanzania, I assume in this article that the non-Shia Muslims adhere to the dominant school, which is in this case Shafi’i.

<sup>h</sup>(Rasanayagam 2010: 125).

<sup>i</sup>For further details see Hekimoglu (2010: 6). There is also a Shafi’i minority in Turkey, however, exact statistics about the number of its followers are not available.

<sup>j</sup>Cf. Pearson (2000: 48).

<sup>k</sup>As there are no precise statistics available regarding the percentages of the Sunni *madhhab* in India, this number is calculated via the Pew Research Center’s (2009) number of Shia followers in India.

<sup>l</sup>Cf. Hunwick (2004).

<sup>m</sup>Cf. Malikiyar (1997).

<sup>n</sup>The Pew Research Center (2009) gives a number of 70% Shia for Bahrain; the remaining 30% are divided evenly for the purpose of this table.

<sup>o</sup>Cf. Hunwick (2004).

<sup>p</sup>Cf. Israeli (2002).

<sup>q</sup>Cf. Abu Umar Faruq Ahmad (2010).

**Table 8.** General composition of the international Muslim student community in Malaysia by *madhhab* and world region, 2010. (Source: Table 7, own calculations)

School of <i>fiqh</i> / <i>madhhab</i>	Main world region	Main countries of origin (more than 100 students)	Estimated total number	Percentage of the total international Muslim student population in Malaysia
Sunni – Shafi'i	Around the Indian Ocean	Indonesia (8514.4), Yemen (3666.3), Somalia (1478), Maldives (1349), Tanzania (394.3), Brunei (219.8), Comoros (198), Djibouti (142.9), Singapore (134), Bahrain (23.5)	16,120.2	30.8
Sunni – Hanafi	Countries of the former Ottoman Empire, Turkic communities in West/Central Asia (Silk Road), Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighbours	Sudan (2837), Bangladesh (1826.7), Pakistan (1509.0), Kazakhstan (883.1), Iran (869), Jordan (722.9), Palestinian Territory (658.6), Iraq (534.0), Egypt (362.7), Uzbekistan (266.6), Turkey (234.5), Syria (230.9), China (153.2), India (147.9), Afghanistan (137.1)	11,373.2	21.7
Sunni - Maliki	North-West Africa around the Sahara, smaller Gulf countries	Libya (3812.1), Nigeria (2835.8), Algeria (235.6), Morocco (219.8), Niger (163.2), Guinea (156.4), Kuwait (119), Bahrain (23.5)	7565.4	14.4
Sunni - Hanbali	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia (1970.5)	1970.5	3.8
<b>TOTAL SUNNI</b>			<b>37,029.3</b>	<b>70.7</b>

*Continued*

Table 8. *Continued*

School of <i>fiqh</i> / <i>madhhab</i>	Main world region	Main countries of origin (more than 100 students)	Estimated total number	Percentage of the total international Muslim student population in Malaysia
Shia – Ja'fari	Iran and neighbours	Iran (10,717.5), Iraq (1,245.9), Saudi Arabia (281.5), Pakistan (215.6), Bahrain (109.7), Nigeria (95.3), Syria (49.0), Oman (28.4), India (22.4), Tanzania (20.8), Kuwait (20.6), Afghanistan (19.8), Uzbekistan (2.7)	12,829.2	24.5
Shia – Zaydi	Yemen	Yemen (2199.8)	2199.8	4.2
Shia – other	Turkey	Turkey (29.3)	29.3	0.1
TOTAL SHIA			15,058.3	28.8
Ibadi	Oman	Oman (312.7)	312.7	0.6

1. The Shafi'i Indian Ocean connection: Malaysia as a Shafi'i-majority country seems to be the major education hub for the Shafi'i communities around the Indian Ocean. This ranges from Somalia, Tanzania, Djibouti, and Yemen, and the Muslim-majority islands of the Comoros and the Maldives in the Western Indian Ocean, to Southeast Asia, with Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore as the major countries of origin. Students from this Shafi'i Indian Ocean area account for more than 30 per cent of the international Muslim student population in Malaysia. This new central role of Malaysia builds on traditional trading connections and networks that far predate the colonial era. The old Indian Ocean 'Shafi'i sphere' is apparently resurfacing in the currents of international student mobility, and it is likely that its influence on followers of the other *madhhab* among the international students in Malaysia is one side-effect of Malaysia's new role as hub for internationally mobile Muslim students. Further research should inquire as to whether this new relevance can be seen as a 'Shafi'isation' process of Islamic discourses among the international Muslim students in Malaysia, or whether mainstream Shafi'i discourses in Malaysia are being influenced by elements of other *madhhab*.

2. Over-representation of Shia Muslims: The percentage of international Shia students in Malaysia is much higher than the global average. Worldwide, about 10-13 per cent of all Muslims are Shia; in the Malaysian sample of 2010 the percentage among international Muslim students is 28.8 per cent. The provenance of these students is mostly Iran, which could be explained as a side-effect of Western sanctions barring Iranian students from studying in more established education hubs. However, as also Yemen and Iraq are strongly represented in the sample of 2010, there might be additional factors of attraction, e.g. the old networks around the Indian Ocean (cf. above), or Malaysia's highly innovative economy and education system (cf. below).

3. Malaysia as new education hub for the former Ottoman Empire and West Asia (Hanafi madhhab): For historical reasons, the Hanafi *madhhab* is mainly followed in the countries that once belonged to the core lands of the Ottoman Empire (from Egypt to Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey), as well as among the Turkic communities of the Silk Road in West and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and China), plus Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Students of this Hanafi *madhhab* constitute about 20.8 per cent of international Muslim students in the sample of 2010. This signifies an unprecedented centrality of Malaysia as an education centre for these countries and communities. As evidence from Wong and Ooi (2013) suggests, there are a number of former "Chinese Muslim" students from China who have permanently settled in Malaysia. This could mean that a Hanafi *madhhab* in Malaysia is being established or, building on previous historical migrations, increasing. As Hanafi Muslims from China encounter in Malaysia Hanafi Muslims from Palestine, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the question is whether, within that particular Hanafi *madhhab*, theological innovation is taking place, in terms of discourses and other practices.

4. Malaysia as new education hub for North-West African countries (Maliki *madhhab*). Statistically, about 14.4 per cent of the international Muslim students in Malaysia belong to the Maliki *madhhab*. My approach, based on *madhhab* rather than on linguistic or ethnic criteria, also brings into question the frequent conceptual usage of the Sahara as separating borderland between ‘North Africa’ and ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’. Rather, in this view, the Sahara with its pathways and travel routes can be seen as a connecting region between two parts of the same religious community that follows the same school of religious law. Hence, further empirical research could include a more in-depth look at the linkages and connections between students from Libya, Morocco, Algeria on the one side and Nigeria, Niger, and Guinea on the other, particularly in the Malaysian context.

5. Isolated position of students from Saudi Arabia (Hanbali *madhhab*): Different from all other *madhhab* groups of international Muslim students in Malaysia are the students from Saudi Arabia, as they are the only significantly numerous adherents of the Hanbali *madhhab* in the sample. Empirical research on this group could therefore concentrate on whether this religiously isolated role is also mirrored in the social relations of the Saudi Arabian students in Malaysia.

### The Christian Sub-sample

As [Table 5](#) shows, an estimated 11 per cent of the international students in Malaysia in 2010 are Christians. According to the statistical analysis of the data, the foreign Christian students in Malaysia are almost exclusively from non-Western countries, with a strong cohort from African countries. The countries with more than 100 international Christian students in Malaysia listed in [Table 9](#) constitute together 8091.2 students, which represents 83.5 per cent of the entire Christian sub-sample.

[Tables 9](#) and [10](#) give an impression of the composition of the international Christian student population in Malaysia in the sample of 2010. There seems to be an overrepresentation of Protestants (66.8%) in relation to Catholics (28.7%) if compared with the global ratio (Catholics: 50.1%, Protestant: 36.7%, Orthodox: 11.9%, Other Christian: 1.3%) (Pew Research Center 2011). The reason might be that Malaysia is particularly popular as an education destination among citizens of Commonwealth countries, particularly in Africa, where Protestantism is more widespread than Catholicism. It appears that Malaysia does not attract sizeable numbers of Christian students from the Americas, Europe, or Australia. This absence might be partly due to the higher development status of these world regions in comparison to the Commonwealth countries of Africa. In addition, it can be assumed that there is a language barrier for students from Catholic-majority Francophone or Lusophone Africa, as well as from Latin America, as these countries are nearly absent in the sub-sample above (which only considers countries with more than 100 Christian students in 2010). The result is a special composition of the international Christian student population in Malaysia



**Table 9.** International Christian students in Malaysia, 2010. (Source: Pew Research Center (2011), own calculations)

Country	Denominations (in percentage of Christians)	Commonwealth country?	Students in Malaysia (more than 100)	Catholics	Protestants	Orthodox	Others
Nigeria	Catholic (24.9), Protestant (74.1), Other (0.9)	Commonwealth	2326.8	579.4	1724.2	0	20.9
Botswana	Catholic (8.4), Protestant (91.0), Other (0.6)	Commonwealth	1368.3	114.9	1245.2	0	8.2
Indonesia	Catholic (34.2), Protestant (65.5), Other (0.3)		1058.1	361.9	693.1	0	3.2
Kenya	Catholic (26.1), Protestant (70.4), Orthodox (1.9), Other (1.6)	Commonwealth	566.8	147.9	399.0	10.8	9.1
South Korea	Catholic (37.4), Protestant (60.7), Other (1.9)		459.5	171.9	278.9	0	8.7
Philippines	Catholic (87.5), Protestant (11.6), Other (0.9)		370.9	324.5	43	0	3.3
China	Catholic (13.4), Protestant (86.5)		357.5	47.9	309.2	0	0
Uganda	Catholic (48.7), Protestant (51.2)	Commonwealth	352.4	171.6	180.4	0	0
Kazakhstan	Catholic (9.1), Protestant (7.5), Orthodox (81.7), Other (1.7)		329.6	30	24.7	269.3	5.6
Tanzania	Catholic (53.3), Protestant (45.8), Other (0.9)	Commonwealth	207.5	110.6	95	0	1.9
Brazil	Catholic (76), Protestant (23), Other (0.9)		169.1	128.5	38.9	0	1.5
Zimbabwe	Catholic (13.2), Protestant (85.5), Orthodox (0.6), Other (0.7)	Commonwealth	164.8	21.8	140.9	1.0	1.2
Singapore	Catholic (39.2), Protestant (59.3), Orthodox (0.6), Other (0.9)	Commonwealth	131.3	51.5	77.9	0.8	1.2

*Continued*

Table 9. *Continued*

Country	Denominations (in percentage of Christians)	Commonwealth country?	Students in Malaysia (more than 100)	Catholics	Protestants	Orthodox	Others
United States of America	Catholic (30.2), Protestant (64.8), Orthodox (0.8), Other (4.3)		124	37.4	80.3	1.0	5.3
United Kingdom	Catholic (22.3), Protestant (75.1), Orthodox (1.2), Other (1.4)	Commonwealth	101	22.5	75.9	1.2	1.4
ALL COUNTRIES			8091.2	2322.3	5406.6	284.1	71.5

**Table 10.** International Christian students in Malaysia by world region, 2010. (Source: Own calculations)

Denomination	Main world region	Main countries of origin (more than 100 students)	Commonwealth countries (more than 100 students)	Number of students from Commonwealth countries (more than 100 students)	Total number (more than 100 students)	Percentage of the total international Christian student population in Malaysia
Protestant	Africa, Asia	Nigeria (1724.2), Botswana (1245.2), Indonesia (693.1), Kenya (399.0), China (309.2), South Korea (278.9), Uganda (180.4), Zimbabwe (140.9)	Nigeria (1724.2), Botswana (1245.2), Kenya (399.0), (278.9), Uganda (180.4), Zimbabwe (140.9)	3938.5	5406.6	66.8
Catholic	Africa, Asia	Nigeria (579.4), Indonesia (361.9), Philippines (324.5), South Korea (171.9), Uganda (171.6), Kenya (147.9), Brazil (128.5), Botswana (114.9), Tanzania (110.6)	Nigeria (579.4), Uganda (171.6), Kenya (147.9), Botswana (114.9), Tanzania (110.6)	1220.2	2322.3	28.7
Orthodox	Former Soviet Union	Kazakhstan (269.3)		13.8	284.1	3.5
Other Christian				43.9	71.5	0.9
ALL					8084.5	99.9

comprised mainly of Anglophone Protestants from Africa. In terms of theological frameworks and discourses, for instance on gender roles, sexuality etc., this would suggest a number of distinct positions among the international Christian students in Malaysia, that are popular in Protestant-majority African countries, but not in, for instance, the United Kingdom, North America or Australia. An interesting question for future research therefore is how these international Christian students engage in or have conflict with the Protestant theological discourses in Malaysia.

### **The Buddhist and Hindu Sub-samples**

The estimate for the Buddhist sub-sample represented in [Table 5](#) suffers in particular from a methodological problem in that the number of Buddhists from Thailand is most likely an overestimate since the calculation of this number is based solely on the general distribution of religions in Thailand. However, my field work in Malaysia suggests that the majority of students from Thailand who choose to study in Malaysia mainly derive from Muslim and/or Malay communities in Southern Thailand, with few of their Buddhist compatriots from Central and Northern Thailand. The same assumption may be applied to the statistical ‘Hindu’ students from India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Mauritius since all of these countries have sizeable Muslim communities for whom studying in Muslim-majority Malaysia might be particularly attractive. However, even if the estimated numbers for these countries might be distorted, this nevertheless leaves us with a viable number for the other Asian countries of origin. Apparently, among the international students in Malaysia there are relevant sub-groups of Buddhist and Hindu students originating from various countries. In other words, Malaysia not only has become a meeting place for internationally mobile Muslim and Christian students, but also for those of the Buddhist and Hindu faiths. Hence, future research could address the Buddhist and Hindu discourses taking place among the new plural student communities of these faiths in Malaysia.

### **Linguistic Composition**

In order to further analyse the international student population in Malaysia in terms of its linguistic composition, I employ a similar method as applied to its religious makeup above. [Table 11](#) demonstrates that, statistically, Arabic is the most widely spoken language among the international students in Malaysia. Almost 19,000 students from 24 countries are native speakers of Arabic. In fact, anecdotal evidence from several departments of Malaysian universities, especially Islamic Studies, suggests that increasingly, Malaysian lecturers are supervising their Arabic students in Arabic, and that Arabic is being admitted as an official language for Master and PhD theses at Malaysian universities.<sup>17</sup> This influences

<sup>17</sup>Information gathered during field work at Universiti Malaya in March 2013. The linguistic competence of Malaysian lecturers in Arabic often seems to have been acquired during their own studies in Arabic countries.

**Table 11.** Major languages of international students in Malaysia (2010). Note: The CIA World Fact Book gives no indication of the use of Kazakh or other Turkic languages in Kazakhstan. (Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2009), CIA World Fact Book 2014, own calculations).

Rank	Language	Country of origin (with statistical number of speakers among foreign students in Malaysia)	Total
1	Arabic	24 countries: Yemen (5866), Libya (3930), Saudi Arabia (2252), Sudan (1418.5), Iraq (1413), Jordan (769), Palestinian Territory (679), Egypt (403), Oman (379), Syria 311), Algeria (238), Iran (236.5), Morocco (222), Bahrain (193), Kuwait (160), Comoros (101), Mauritania (78), Djibouti (76), United Arab Emirates (72), Chad (68), Eritrea (58), Tunisia (31), Lebanon (23.8), Qatar (22)	18,999.8
2	English	40 countries: Nigeria (5817), Botswana (1911), Sudan (1418.5), Maldives (674.5), Zimbabwe (659), Uganda (420), Tanzania (415), Kenya (343.5), Singapore (206.8), Philippines (200.5), United Kingdom (141), U.S.A. (129.7), British Indian Ocean Territory (121), Zambia (112), South Africa (87), Ghana (85), Australia (78), Cameroon (66), Eritrea (58), Canada (38.8), England (38), Liberia (37), Gambia (36), Sierra Leone (36), Seychelles (26), Fiji (12.5), Namibia (11), Rwanda (7.7), Lesotho (7.5), Swaziland (7), Ireland (6), New Zealand (5), Trinidad and Tobago (5), Papua New Guinea (2.3), Antigua and Barbuda (2), Jamaica (2), Iceland (1.5), Bahamas (1), Guyana (1), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1)	13,232.3
3	Chinese languages	China (10,214), Singapore (528.7), Taiwan (180), Hong Kong (23.6)	10,946.3
4	Indonesian languages	Indonesia	9889
5	Persian	Iran (6266.2), Afghanistan (Dari) (80)	6346.2
6	Turkic languages (Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Tatar, Turkish, Turkmen, Uzbek etc.)	Iran (2128.1), Uzbekistan (258.6), Turkey (235), Turkmenistan (73), Afghanistan (17.6), Mongolia (12.2), Azerbaijan (11)	2512.5
7	Bengali	Bangladesh (2041), India (108.4)	2149.4
8	Thai	Thailand	1725
9	Sinhala	Sri Lanka (816.2), Maldives (674.5)	1490.7
10	Somali	Somalia	1478

*Continued*

Table 11. *Continued*

Rank	Language	Country of origin (with statistical number of speakers among foreign students in Malaysia)	Total
11	Russian	Kazakhstan (1195.1), Russia (101), Uzbekistan (16.8), Kyrgyzstan (11), Turkmenistan (10), Belarus (7), Ukraine (2), Estonia (1),	1344.9
12	Punjabi	Pakistan (1037.6), India (37.5)	1075.1

both the position of English and Malay as academic languages in Malaysia, as well as the international position of Arabic.

English seems to be only a second language among the international students in Malaysia. Statistically, only approximately 13,000 out of the roughly 87,000 foreign students speak English as their mother tongue. Most of these native speakers of English originate from African countries, which could constitute an interesting phenomenon for further research on the linguistic contact between Malaysian and African versions of English.

Another interesting observation that becomes apparent through this method of statistical analysis is that a sizeable community of more than 2,500 speakers of Turkic languages from Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, etc. is studying in Malaysia. More research is necessary to assess the extent of communication between these students. It is imaginable that some of them are discovering commonalities among each other, and that discourses on Turkic cultural identity are enabled through the newly emerging role of Malaysia as a hub for international education. This is of course also the case for students from the other linguistic groups.

### Innovation Gap

Summing up the discussion so far, Malaysia is particularly attractive for Muslim students, Iranian, Arab and African students, as well as Anglophone students from the Commonwealth. The question is what other characteristics might these students share. In this regard it is perhaps useful to consider Malaysia's relatively high position in the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). For many years, Malaysia has been the only Southeast Asian country ranked as a "High Human Development" country, with a HDI of 62 out of the 140 of the world's nations included in the report (as of 2014).<sup>18</sup> HDI rankings are based on a number of parameters and criteria, including health, education, income, inequality, poverty, etc. Therefore, Malaysia's high position reflects generally good living conditions in the country. This might be interesting for a number of internationally mobile students,

<sup>18</sup>In Southeast Asia, Singapore is currently ranked top (ranked ninth worldwide), followed by Brunei Darussalam (30), Malaysia (62), and Thailand (89) (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/THA> (accessed on 17 February 2015)).

**Table 12.** GII scores of countries of origin of international students in Malaysia.

Country	Students in Malaysia (more than 100)	GII Score	Weighted GII Score
Sudan	2837	12.7	36,029.90
Yemen	5866	19.5	114,387
Myanmar	464	19.6	9094.4
Guinea	184	20.2	3716.8
Nepal	100	23.8	2380
Pakistan	1789	24	42936
Algeria	238	24.2	5759.6
Niger	204	24.3	4957.2
Zimbabwe	659	24.3	16,013.70
Bangladesh	2041	24.4	49,800.40
Uzbekistan	306	25.2	7711.2
Ethiopia	100	25.4	2540
Tanzania	830	25.6	21248
Zambia	112	25.8	2889.6
Iran	11823	26.1	308,580.30
Cambodia	283	27.5	7782.5
Cameroon	132	27.5	3630
Nigeria	5817	27.8	171,712.60
Sri Lanka	1103	29.0	31987
Philippines	401	29.9	11,989.90
Egypt	403	30	12,090
Botswana	1911	30.9	59,049.90
Uganda	420	31.1	13,062
Brunei Darussalam	328	31.7	10,397.60
Indonesia	9889	31.8	314,470.20
Kenya	687	31.9	21,915.30
Morocco	222	32.3	7170.6
Kazakhstan	1258	32.8	41,262.40
India	1338	33.7	45,090.60
Oman	379	33.9	12,848.10
Vietnam	642	34.9	22,405.80
Kuwait	160	35.3	5648
Jordan	769	36.2	27,837.80
Bahrain	193	36.3	7005.9
Brazil	190	36.3	6897
Mongolia	245	37.5	9187.5
Turkey	235	38.2	8977
Russia	101	39.1	3949.1
Thailand	1725	39.3	67,792.50
Mauritius	300	40.9	12,270
Saudi Arabia	2252	41.6	93,683.20
China	10214	46.6	475,972.40
Japan	177	52.4	9274.8
Korea, Republic of	1454	55.3	80,406.20

*Continued*

Table 12. *Continued*

Country	Students in Malaysia (more than 100)	GII Score	Weighted GII Score
Singapore	899	59.2	53,220.80
United States of America	158	60.1	9495.8
United Kingdom	141	62.4	8798.4
TOTAL	71979		2,295,325

especially for those from countries with much lower development status. However, since the internationally mobile group consists in this case of students seeking a good place for higher education, the HDI rankings might be not the most useful tool in assessing Malaysia's attractiveness. Rather, in the following analysis I employ the Global Innovation Index (GII), jointly published by Cornell University, the European Institute for Business Administration (INSEAD), and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). The GII is designed to identify the relative innovation scores of the included countries. Like the HDI of UNDP, the GII rankings are based on a number of relevant criteria.<sup>19</sup>

In order to find out the average GII score of the countries represented among the foreign students in Malaysia, the following formula was applied: 'GII score of country of origin' multiplied by 'number of students from that country' to obtain 'the total GII score per country'. These 'total GII scores per country' are added up to form the 'grand total GII score' (2,295,325), which I then divide by the grand total of student numbers (71,979). The result is an average GII score of 31.9. For comparison: Malaysia's own GII score is 45.6. This suggests that the average incoming student originates from a country ranked 13.7 points lower. For illustration, examples of countries with such a GII score of *c.*31.9 are Uganda, Bhutan, Indonesia, and Kenya. For students from countries such as these, the difference in innovation status between their home country and Malaysia seems to be motivation enough to decide to study in Malaysia and not in their home country.

Furthermore, the average GII score of the countries of origin of the inbound students seems to be in reality much lower than the mentioned 31.9, since the GII index does not cover the countries listed in Table 13. Together, these are the countries of origin of 12,993 students, which is equivalent to 14.9 per cent of the total foreign student population in Malaysia. Among them are a number of failing or failed states such as Afghanistan, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, or Syria. For students from these countries, Malaysia with its functioning public service and good public universities apparently serves as a substitute for failing institutions at home.

<sup>19</sup><http://www.globalinnovationindex.org/content/page/data-analysis> (accessed on 5 Sept. 2014).



**Table 13.** Countries of origin of international students in Malaysia not included in the GII. (Source: UNDP 2014, GII 2014, own calculations). Note: The UNDP Report 2014 is based on data prior to the heavy civil wars in Libya and Syria.

Country	Number of students in Malaysia (more than 100)	GII Score	HDI rank	HDI group
Afghanistan	160	n.a.	169	Low human development
British Indian Ocean Territory	121	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Chad	136	n.a.	184	Low human development
Comoros	202	n.a.	159	Low human development
Djibouti	152	n.a.	170	Low human development
Eritrea	116	n.a.	182	Low human development
Iraq	1835	n.a.	120	Medium human development
Libya	3930	n.a.	55	High human development
Maldives	1349	n.a.	103	Medium human development
Not Stated	2344	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Palestinian Territory	679	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Somalia	1478	n.a.	n.a.	Low human development
Syria	311	n.a.	118	Medium human development
Taiwan	180	n.a.	n.a.	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12993</b>			

### CONCLUSION: MALAYSIA'S NICHE

This paper has analysed in depth the demographic composition of the international students in Malaysia. Departing from the numbers of students by country of origin in 2010, as published by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, the first question was that of the regional composition of that group. The first finding is that in 2010, most international students in Malaysia did not come from the neighbouring countries, but from West Asia and Africa. Malaysia is hence not merely a regional, but a global player in international student mobility; a proposition supported by the calculation of the linguistic composition of the student population. The largest groups were Arabic speakers from 24 countries

and native speakers of English from 40 countries, mostly from Africa, followed by Chinese, Indonesian, Persian, and Turkic speakers. As a Commonwealth country with a prominent role of English in higher education, particularly in the sciences, Malaysia seemingly has an advantage in attracting a larger cohort of English-speaking international students.

In terms of the religious composition, it is estimated that about 61.7 per cent of the international students in the sample were Muslim. Among them, the Shia sub-group constituted about 28.7 per cent, which is far greater than the portion of the Shia population among the global Muslim community. Apparently, Malaysia is particularly attractive for Shia students not only from Iran, but also from Yemen, Iraq, and other countries. Among the Sunni students, a detailed analysis according to school of Islamic law (*madhhab*) revealed that all four major Sunni *madhhab* are represented in great numbers. As these *madhhab* were historically very important for the constitution of spaces of trade and communication, it is thus found that Malaysia has successfully tapped into (1) the Indian Ocean sphere of the Shafi'i school of law, (2) the Hanafi school, which was relevant in the former Ottoman Empire and the Silk Road, (3) the Maliki school of the countries north and south the Sahara with its interconnected trading networks, and (4) the Hanbali school from Saudi Arabia. One can therefore assume that interesting discussions on theology and Islamic law are currently taking place among the international Muslim students in Malaysia. As no other Muslim-majority country has developed such attractiveness for international students, Malaysia performs therefore a pioneering role in these discourses of a globalising Muslim community and its various *madhhab*.

The analysis of the Christian sub-sample shows that Protestant students are by far the most represented among the international Christian students in Malaysia. The reason is the high number of students from Commonwealth countries, mostly from Africa, where apparently British versions of Protestantism were more widespread than Catholicism. It can be assumed that there are various social, cultural, and religious encounters and discussions between Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, as well as Christians from all over Asia and beyond happening in Malaysia.

A last factor considered in this study is the development status and the innovation status (Global Innovation Index score) of the respective countries of origin of the students in Malaysia. It was found that the average international student in Malaysia comes from countries with much lower innovation status than Malaysia. Since more than 10,000 international students in the sample originated from failing or failed states not included in the GII study, the difference is even more pronounced. As a highly developed, Muslim-majority country with English as medium of instruction for its international students, Malaysia seems to have found a niche in the horizons of mobile international students. For Muslim, English or Arabic-speaking students from much less developed countries, particularly in western Asia and Africa, Malaysia is certainly proving to be a very attractive destination.

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