The importance of place for international students’ choice of university: a Malaysian case-study

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In this paper we explore the importance of place for international postgraduate students currently enrolled in a Malaysian university. Using place as the analytic focus, the findings from the semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with thirty-three postgraduate international students indicate that place had a significant role in the choice of destination of the students. Amongst the factors that contributed to the students’ decisions to enrol in a Malaysian university was the sense of Malaysia as a safe environment, shared cultural values with the students’ own background, the financial benefits derived from low tuition fees and low cost of living, proximity to the students’ home country as well as access to culturally important items such as halal and other dietary requirements. From this brief case-study, we glean insights into the significance of national attributes in the decisions made by international postgraduate students in their choice of university to study. This insight has important implications for the Malaysian government’s strategy of competing in the global market for international students.

Keywords: decision-making, postgraduate students, international students, Malaysia

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of “place” in the experience of international students currently studying in a leading research university in Malaysia. Unlike the criteria developed by “local” students when considering where to attend university that includes institutional factors such as reputation, the perceived quality of courses and so on (Soutar & Turner, 2002), in this study it is clear that it is the perceived national attributes that have a primacy over individual institutional qualities. To provide the necessary policy context for our concern about international study destination, we offer in the first section of this paper an overview of the strategy of internationalisation in Malaysia, with a particular focus on the importance of international students to that strategy. The next section offers a brief discussion of the research approach that underpins the findings in this paper. We then offer a broad overview drawn from the literature that examines the “push-pull” factors that contribute to international students’ decision-making about choice of university. We next provide some
findings that highlight the international students’ experience of place in their reasons for choosing Malaysia as their destination for international education. The paper concludes with implications for Malaysia’s national strategy that arise from the findings of this study.

**Background**

Over recent decades, the internationalisation phenomenon has become an established feature of global higher education. Although just one of the many activities that constitute internationalisation (Knight, 2008), student mobility is now an accepted feature of the landscape of higher education. According to the most recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) figures, the number of tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship almost doubled from just over 2 million in 2000 to more than 4.1 million in 2010 (OECD, 2012). International students’ social, intellectual and economic contribution to local tertiary systems can be significant – for instance, in Australia they represent over one fifth of all enrolments in higher education institutions (OECD, 2012). Comprising on average 8% of enrolments within the university sector in OECD countries, international students are one of the most important stakeholder groups in the global higher education system (OECD, 2012). The students’ reasons for selecting particular institutions in particular countries are therefore of great importance to those nations competing for international student enrolments.

Traditionally, the flow of international students has been from the Asian continent to countries belonging to the OECD with the main destinations including United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia and New Zealand (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Recent geo-political and financial events have however contributed to a decline in enrolments in these traditional destinations allowing the emergence of new players within Asia itself such as China, Singapore and Malaysia now attracting significant numbers of students from the Middle East and Africa (Altbach & Postiglione, 2006; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Despite the extensive literature on the internationalisation of higher education very little is known about the experiences of international students enrolled in universities in the Asian region in general or in Malaysia in particular (see Aphijanyatham, 2010; Yousoff, 2012). In an effort to redress this knowledge shortfall this paper explores the experiences of international postgraduate students in Malaysia. In this paper international students are defined as “students who have chosen to travel to Malaysia for tertiary education and have not attended secondary or preparatory education in Malaysia” (Devi & Nair, 2008, p. 180).

**The strategy of internationalisation in Malaysia**

Malaysia is currently experiencing what has been referred to as the fourth phase of higher education or the phase of higher education for global competition (Singh, Schapper & Mayson, 2010). Internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia is now “seen as a means for improving and empowering higher education in the country so that these institutions can become comparable to the best in the world” (Tham & Kam, 2008, p. 353). The pursuit of a leading position in the global education market is clear in the national government’s objectives and rationale for internationalisation (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Malaysia aims
to be recognised as an excellent international hub of higher education by the year 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007; Tham & Kam, 2008).

In its efforts to implement the internationalisation policy, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) of 2007 spells out clear internationalisation aims that include attracting international students, the employment of international academicians with the purpose of promoting research collaboration and to encourage credit transfer programmes (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). In this context, the attraction of international students to Malaysian universities is seen as “a critical marker of a higher education institution’s prestige” (Lee, 2010, p. 66).

According to the website of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2013a), there are currently twenty public universities in Malaysia – five of which are designated research universities, four comprehensive universities and eleven focused universities. Consistent with their designation, the research universities focus on research, the focused universities concentrate on specific fields related to its establishment [e.g., technology, Muslim studies and location (Sarawak and Sabah)], while the comprehensive universities offer a variety of courses and fields of study. The former and latter universities aim for a ratio of 50% postgraduate and undergraduate students; the comprehensive universities aim for 70% undergraduate and 30% postgraduate students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013a).

With its intention to become one of the leading players in the global international student market and a higher education hub in the region, one of the aims of the Malaysian government was to attract 100,000 international students by 2010 (Marimuthu, 2008; Sato, 2005). This target figure was later revised to 80,000 international students (Richards, 2012). The international student population in Malaysia grew substantially from 32 students in 1970 (Hanapi, Zahiruddin & Mohd Shah, 2003) to 47,849 students in 2007 (Wan, Kaur, & Jantan, 2008), the year in which the National Higher Education Strategic Plan was announced. By 2010 there were over 24,200 international students enrolled in public higher learning institutions and about 62,700 studying at private higher learning institutions. These figures combined total close to 87000 international students coming from 167 countries around the world (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). The home countries of the majority of these students are located in the Middle East such as Iran and Yemen, and Asian nations such as Indonesia and China, and Nigeria (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011).

With the government’s strategy as a background, the purpose of this paper is to explore why international students have selected a Malaysian university to conduct their postgraduate studies, with a particular emphasis on the role that place played in that decision.

The research approach

This paper draws on material from a current PhD study on academic success and postgraduate international students in Malaysia. Designed as a qualitative study to explore the meaning of academic success within one research public university in Malaysia, fifty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted; 33 of which were with postgraduate international students enrolled in the university. The research participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the ethnicity, study discipline, progress of study, and gender diversity of the international student cohort enrolled in this university was reflected amongst their group. Using textual analysis, the interview transcripts and Malaysian government and
institutional documents were read and re-read to identify the themes that emerged from the data. The theme relevant to this paper was the frequent reference to reasons why Malaysia was selected by the research participants as the destination country to undertake postgraduate study.

**The research context**

The study of postgraduate international students is relevant to this research because of the Malaysian government’s policy on the development of “Research Universities”; the university where the research reported in this paper has been conducted is one of Malaysia’s five research universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013). Within this policy, designed to offer additional research support to the designated universities is the requirement for each research university to ensure at least 10 per cent international postgraduates in their student enrolments (Ministry of Education, 2004). This is in contrast to the cap of 5 per cent placed by the Malaysian government on the total enrolment of international students in undergraduate programmes; with no cap imposed on postgraduate students (Sirat, 2009). It is clear then for the Malaysian government that the experiences of postgraduate students are of particular importance because of the role they are afforded within the nation’s strategy of reaching the ranks of the world’s top universities.

**Factors that influence students to travel abroad for their education**

It is no surprise that students develop criteria to assist their decision-making about their choice of institution. Most research however in this field tends to concentrate on decision-making of local students in the developed world (Maringe & Carter, 2007). An example of one such study of Australian school-leavers, found the criteria may include the preference for a particular course of study, institutional reputation, the perceived quality of teaching and potential career prospects (see Soutar & Turner, 2002). In the Soutar and Turner (2002) study it appears the choice is made from an analysis of the institutions; for international students the decision-making is far more complex as it involves not just institutional considerations but the perceived qualities of particular nations and cities (see Cubillo, Sánchez & Cervino, 2007).

When reviewing the literature on this issue it is clear there are various reasons why international students choose to pursue their studies overseas (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Described as “push pull” factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82), many of those reasons clearly identify the role of place in these decisions. It should be noted however that the following discussion is based on research predominantly based on students from the Asian continent [the Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) study was conducted with students from Taiwan, China, India and Indonesia] who choose to study in Western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and/or the United States of America (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Singh, Jack & Schapper, 2012).

Generally, push factors refer to the characteristics of the home environment that are considered by students as unsatisfactory (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These may include adverse social or political conditions (Maringe & Carter, 2007), inability of local educational institutions to provide suitable programmes, place and resources to accommodate all students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Altbach, 2004; Steele, 2008; Safaieh & Singh, 2006), fewer
world class institutions, doctoral and postdoctoral programmes (Altbach, 2004), lack of availability of specialisation (Altbach, 2004; Safahieh & Singh, 2006), limited access to funding and poor career prospects (Altbach, 2004). From this list of reasons why students may find the home offerings to be inadequate, place is important – for it is their estimation of their nation’s current circumstances that contribute to their reasons to look elsewhere for their further education (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

On the other hand, pull factors include what intending students may consider to be attractive features of a destination country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), such as good academic reputation (Altbach, 2004; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Madgett & Bélanger, 2008; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2006), personal safety (Shanka et al., 2006), availability of scholarships (Steele, 2008), lower cost/fees and cost of living (Abubakar, Shanka, & Muukac, 2010; Madgett & Bélanger, 2008; Shanka et al., 2006), the prestige of a foreign degree (Movondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004), quality academic and non-academic services and facilities (Abubakar et al., 2010), existing social links (Madgett & Bélanger, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), opportunity to live in a diverse culture and provide a global view of the world (Movondo et al., 2004; Steele, 2008), more opportunities for employment (Safahieh & Singh, 2006). Again, within this list of factors that pull students to study overseas, it is the perceived offerings of a particular country, its resources, its reputation, its facilities and so on that attract students to enrol in their universities.

In the next section of the paper we will examine why the international students in our study selected Malaysia as their place of study. We need to reiterate at this point that this work is drawn from a broader project on perceptions of academic success and questions were not specifically asked about the push or pull reasons for students’ choice of university. Nonetheless, what is clear from their responses is that for most of the students, their decision to study in Malaysia was primarily based on the attraction of the country. Unlike the suggestion made by Maringe and Carter (2007) that the perceived inadequacies of one’s own home country have greater strength as push factors than the attractions of the pull factors, the students’ responses in this study tended to focus on the positive features of Malaysia. These findings suggest that for this sample of students primacy is accorded to pull factors in the decision-making process. When analysing the data it became clear that the national background of the research participants was important in their responses. It was therefore decided to group the responses according to their home geographic region – thus students’ responses are represented from the Middle East, from Asia and then the rest of the world.

Factors that contributed to international students studying in Malaysia

The international students from the Middle East tended to specify three main reasons for their decision to travel to Malaysia to seek international education. Although some of the students made mention of attributes of the particular university such as its ranking in Malaysia, the state of the art facilities and the course structure that facilitated early course completion, due to the word limit constraints of this paper we focus our intention on the role of Malaysia the place alone. For these students, the sense of Malaysia as a safe and peaceful place to study was important. Consistent with this was the sense of similarity between the students’ culture and Malaysia as a Muslim nation, with ready access to halal food a point noted by interview respondents. Finally for these students, it was the perceived reasonableness of the tuition fees...
and the low cost of living within Malaysia that they found attractive. Examples of some of the students’ statements are included below:

[Malaysia] is a safe place, I couldn’t go back to my country as the situation is not safe (Iraq international student)

Didn’t have problem with Islamic halal food (Iraq international student)

Because it was cheap for us to come here, more than Europe and America, it is difficult to go to that country because first of all it was really expensive for us (Iran international student)

The main reason was the reasonable tuition fees…..similar society as the Muslim society (Yemen international student)

These reasons identified by the international students are consistent with the limited Malaysian literature that has been published to date on this topic. For example, the events surrounding September 11, 2001 in the USA created a new trend of international student mobility especially for students from Islamic nations (Sirat, 2008; Yusoff, 2012). Facing the imposition of severe visa restrictions into the USA, many Muslim students now venture into Asian countries such as Malaysia. According to Sirat (2008), students from Middle Eastern countries choose Malaysia as their place of study due to security reasons as well as the provision of quality education. Further, Malaysia also offers a stable political and economic environment to enhance international student mobility (Aphijanyatham, 2010). In addition, international students choose Malaysia as their tertiary education destination due to low living costs (Safahieh & Singh, 2006).

For the students from Asia, there are many perceived qualities of Malaysia itself that contributed to their decision to study there. Included in the factors are the close proximity of the university and/or the country to their home; the sense of sharing the same culture and language as well as reasonableness of the fees and low cost of living. Their responses are captured as follows:

Malaysia is very near to China so if I want to come back is very convenient (China international student)

Same culture, we are Asian people….even though we are different religion but same thinking about how to think of something I think the same, can understand, can cooperate and do something very well….and near my country also so I can go back to my country (Cambodia international student)

I found that the tuition fees…it was less… (Sri Lanka international student)

Because it’s close from Medan around 40 minutes by aeroplane…..the tuition fee low compare to Indonesia, you know I pay tuition fee one semester only around RM 875 but in Indonesia 5 times more (Indonesia international student)

Again, the reasons identified by the international students are explained and supported by the limited literature on this topic. For instance, international students coming from neighbouring Asian countries such as China, Singapore and Indonesia choose Malaysia as their destination
to study due to strong historical links between Malaysia and other Asian countries, the sharing of common language such as Malay and Chinese languages and having similar education systems which follow the British system, as well as the proximity of Malaysia to their home countries and affordable living costs (Sirat, 2008).

Finally, other reasons provided by the international students identify the importance of a positive national reputation as well as highlighting the significance of friends’ experiences when making decisions about choice of study destination. For instance,

...my friends studying in Malaysia so they are telling me much about Malaysia, Malaysia is civilised, they are advanced.....because of the level of development of Malaysia, level of research because I am really interested in their research and my field of study is research so I like that, people here are highly advanced in research...Malaysia is a good area for research (Nigeria international student).

In summary, students who participated in this research study have offered clear indication of the importance of national reputation (see Cubillo et al., 2006) as well as the perceived national characteristics of Malaysia in their choice of study destination.

**Conclusion**

This paper has focussed on the importance of place in international students’ decisions to study in Malaysia. As a result, this paper has identified several reasons underpinning the experiences of postgraduate international students in Malaysia with regards to their reasons of choosing Malaysia to seek international education. The factors stated by the Middle Eastern students in choosing Malaysia as their study destination are firstly it is a safe and peaceful place, secondly, sharing of same religion (i.e. Islam) and thirdly, the cost of living and the tuition fees is reasonably low. On the other hand, reasons put forward by the Asian students who are studying in Malaysia are firstly, the close proximity to their home countries, secondly, sharing the same culture and language as well as reasonableness of the fees and low cost of living. Other significant reasons were the quality of education and recommendations by friends.

What is of interest with these findings is the stated wish of many of the students to find a study destination that is culturally familiar, that is considered to be safe and with relatively low risk. These expressed preferences for a study destination that offers the reassurance of sameness and familiarity are in contrast to other studies that highlight the opportunities for students’ personal growth and development of intercultural awareness when exposed to cultural diversity and difference when studying overseas (Williams, 2005). When considered however in light of other research that suggests international students may experience adjustment problems due to cultural differences with the host country (see Yusoff, 2012), the cultural diversity within Malaysia that includes ethnic Malay, Chinese and Indian communities as well as the dominance of Islam as the state religion, clearly makes Malaysia an attractive destination for many communities of internationally mobile students (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

These findings have significant implications for a national strategy to increase the number of international students enrolled in Malaysian universities. Consistent with a review of previous
research on this topic (see Cubillo et al., 2006), students from this study appeared to be attracted to the attributes of the country first, and the particular characteristics of the institution second. The Malaysian government has conducted extensive promotional and marketing strategies of Malaysian higher education in targeted cities such as Dubai, Beijing, Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007; Sugimura, 2009). We also note the promotional materials available on the website of the Ministry of Higher Education (2013b).

Based on our findings from this small sample we would strongly recommend promotional materials continue to emphasise the perceived attributes of Malaysia such as its safe and secure environment, perceived cultural compatibility, an acceptance and capacity to provide for the diverse needs of students from many nations and cultures, its proximity to countries within the region, the shared history with Asian neighbours, the maintenance of the British tradition of education, the low cost of living and low fees within the higher education system. While the quality, status and ranking of individual institutions are also judged to be very important criteria for selection by potential international students, it appears the primacy of the decision making for the students who participated in this study was the country in which the institutions are located. Future research on the students’ lived experiences of their education in Malaysia could offer important insight into that dynamic between nation and institution in light of students’ satisfactions, disappointments and outcomes.

References


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