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How do we know what is academic success for international students?

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In this paper, we explore the perceptions of academic success by postgraduate international students in one of the research universities in Malaysia. Based on the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff members, the study finds that a clear understanding of academic success leads to the development of the insights and capabilities required for the success. Academic success has generally been perceived through measurable indicators such as grades and time taken to complete a degree. However, the research participants’ perceptions of academic success went beyond the measurable indicators to include the development of soft skills such as networking, communication, teamwork, presentation, and writing, research skills, improvement of academic knowledge, contributions to home country or society, and exploration of international life. These positive international educational experiences do influence the development of the attributes and capabilities required of higher education graduates to excel in a globalized world.

Keywords: academic success; postgraduate international students; Malaysia

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of postgraduate international students, academics, and professional staff members in a research university in Malaysia regarding the phenomenon of academic success. While a number of researchers have boldly stated that academic success is associated with quantifiable indicators, this paper provides dynamic findings that show the limitations of such pronouncements; in particular, it demonstrates that non-quantifiable indicators such as attributes and capabilities gained throughout the higher-education experience can lead to academic success in a highly interconnected society. This paper attempts to produce insights into the question, “What attributes and capabilities do higher education graduates require to excel in a globalized world?” under the theme of “Preparing graduates for a globalized world”.

To provide necessary understanding on the attributes and capabilities required of higher education graduates to excel in a globalized world, the first section of this article provides an
overview of the globalisation and internationalisation of higher education. It then provides a broad overview of academic success as a phenomenon. Next, it presents a brief discussion of the research approach that underpins the findings in this article. Finally, it outlines the key findings, highlighting how postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff members experience academic success in this research university.

**Review of the literature**

**Globalisation and internationalisation of higher education**

Over the recent decades, the term ‘globalization’ has been a fashionable theoretical term, and has been used increasingly since the 20th century (Beerkens, 2003; Enders, 2004), including in the education sector. Consequently, the “globalization of higher education” has become an established feature of higher education systems worldwide. According to Marginson and van der Wende (2007), globalisation includes “the processes of world-wide engagement and convergence associated with the growing role of global systems that criss-cross many national borders” (p. 11). Additionally, Deem (2001) asserts that globalisation is related to the “global spread of business and services as well as key economic, social and cultural practices to a world market through multinational companies and the internet” (p. 7). Knight (2006), a leading researcher in the internationalisation field, describes globalisation as the flow of people, ideas, values, culture, technology, knowledge, and economy across nations in responding to more world-wide interconnectedness and interdependence. Knight (2008) applies her basic conception of to the education sector, describing internationalisation as “academic mobility for students and teachers, international linkages, partnerships and projects, new international academic programs and research initiatives” (p. 22). Education is also globalized or internationalised through the “delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchise using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques” and through the “inclusion of an international, intercultural and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching-learning process” (Knight, 2008, p. 22).

For the purpose of this research, “internationalisation” refers to student mobility, which has become a striking feature of the globalisation of higher education (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). Global statistics indicate that the number of higher education students enrolled as international students almost doubled from just over 2 million in 2000 to more than 4.1 million in 2010 (OECD, 2012). In 2009, over 80,000 international students migrated to Malaysia to pursue higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010), and the number has grown since. International students in Malaysia are mainly from Iran, Indonesia, China, Nigeria, and Yemen (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia, and New Zealand have traditionally attracted international students from the Asian continent (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). But recent geopolitical and financial uncertainties have resulted in a decline in incoming international students to these traditional destinations, allowing the emergence of new players in Asia such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia (Altbach & Postiglione, 2006; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

**Academic success phenomenon**

Academic success is an outcome that every student would want to achieve in their academic endeavor. In the main, research attempting to measure academic success has tended to rely on students’ cognitive development using simplistic numerical measurements such as Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), Grade Point Average (GPA), and/or time taken to
complete a course or degree (Graham, 1987; Killen, 1994; Sansgiry, Bhosle & Sail, 2006; Woodrow, 2006). The reliance on these simplistic indicators appears to be such an accepted orthodoxy that exploration of other indicators of academic success have rarely been offered. For example, bold statements by Graham (1987), Killen (1994), and Sansgiry et al. (2006) reiterate that many studies from around the world have asserted that grades as a universally accepted measurement of academic success. Indeed, there are many research papers in which the authors assume that the concept of academic success is so well understood by their readers that it requires no explanation at all.

Numerous studies have reported that GPA is an important criterion commonly used by institutional administrators to evaluate students’ academic achievement of students (Graham, 1987; Killen, 1994; Sansgiry et al., 2006). GPA, which originated in America, has been characterised as “studying the students’ performance for that particular semester” (Ali, Jusoff, Ali, Mokhtar & Salamat, 2009, p. 82); generally, a GPA of 3.0 or higher is considered to be good academic achievement for any graduate program (Sansgiry et al., 2006). Other studies, meanwhile, have expanded the list of academic success indicators to include performance in a specific subject (Graham, 1987; Sansgiry et al., 2006), degree completion (Andrade, 2006), and average time taken to complete a course (Berg & Hofman, 2005). Similarly, in Malaysia, universities tend to use a numerical system, the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), to measure student’s academic success (e.g. Agus & Makhbul, 2002; Ervina & Othman, 2005; Norwani, 2005). Ali et al. (2009) write, “CGPA shows the overall students’ academic performance where it considers the average of all examinations’ grade for all semesters during the tenure in university” (p. 82). The CGPA is obtained by “dividing the cumulative grade points (determined by multiplying the grade values of subjects taken with the number of hours in the semester) with the cumulative attempted hours (credit hours in which the students obtained a grade)” (Alfan & Othman, 2005, p. 341). In short, academic success is defined in terms of measurable and quantifiable performance, and grades are still the universally accepted variables for evaluating performance in academic settings (Sansgiry et al., 2006).

However, the numerical system of cognitive evaluation has been criticised as an insufficient descriptor of students’ academic success. For example, Heil and Aleamoni (1974, as cited in Graham, 1987) argued that the GPA is not a good indicator of academic achievement, as its calculation does not include the number of courses taken by students in a semester. This system puts international students at a disadvantage, as, due to their often low level of English proficiency, international students may only be able to cope with only two courses in a semester, which GPA calculations do not reflect (Graham, 1987). Postgraduate studies show a relatively spread of grades, which that indicates significant correlations are less likely to be found (Graham, 1987; Xu, 1991), and therefore that a numerical GPA does not reveal truly graduate students’ academic success.

Astin (1993) has similarly argued that grades are hardly accurate in determining students’ academic success. He puts forward that the holistic intellectual development of a student in terms of in-classroom learning, out-of-classroom experiences (extracurricular activities), and personal development is what generally reflects a student’s performance relative to other students. Lee (2010) complements this by stating that the measurement of “graduation percentages fails to capture the difficult experiences and unusual resolve of those individuals who persist in their studies” (p. 68). However, there is a widespread lack of appreciation for attributes and capabilities beyond the numerical grade, as demonstrated by Malaysian employers who short-list graduates for interviews based on their CGPA performance. Hashim (2009) points out that many “well-established companies in Malaysia limit their recruitment
only to students who achieve 3.00 CGPA and above” (p. 1), even though some graduates who might not have academically excelled actually possess the work-related attributes and skills that are important in good employees. In short, the grading systems used to determine students’ academic success both fail to fully capture their learning experiences and impede their employment opportunities.

The preceding discussion underlines the predisposition to equate academic success with numerical measurements that are cognitive, technical, and individual. It also establishes a context within which to explore qualitative indicators of academic excellence that identify unquantifiable attributes and capabilities leading to academic success. The research findings in this paper, therefore, present a dynamic and unique perspective of academic success.

The research approach

This article draws on material from a current PhD study on academic success and postgraduate international students in Malaysia. The study was designed as a qualitative study to explore the meaning of academic success as perceived by postgraduate international students in one public research university in Malaysia. Fifty-five semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted in English for between 30 and 60 minutes from November 2011 to February 2012. Thirty-three postgraduate international students enrolled in the university were interviewed, representing Iran, Yemen, India, Iraq, Indonesia, and China. Most of the international students were PhD students (23 students), with only 10 pursuing their master’s degrees. The majority of the postgraduate international students in this research university are enrolled in courses offered by the faculties of Pharmacy (five students) and Education (five students), Communication (four students), Architecture (three students), and Humanities (three students). In addition, interview sessions were conducted with 12 professional staff of the Postgraduate Students Office, language support services, library, housing administration, and the faculty providing assistance to postgraduate international students. Further, 10 academics from various faculties including language, social sciences, education, management, and architecture also participated. The research participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure that variety of participants were reflected among their groups.

A thematic analysis approach was used on interview transcripts and relevant documents from the university and the Malaysian government to identify the inherent themes from the data. The subsequent coding process involved the assignment of keywords, grouping of codes, highlighting quotes that supported the codes, and establishing themes from the codes (Ezzy, 2002). The response validation approach entailed emailing the interview transcripts to all research participants to ensure that the transcribed texts corresponded with their respective perspectives and experiences (Bryman, 2012).

The understanding of academic success in Malaysia: Attributes and capabilities

Respondents cited their motivations for academic success as including the development of research and soft skills such as networking, communication, teamwork, presentation, and writing, the exploration of international life and the contribution to their home country and society. In addition, postgraduate international students highlighted that they equate academic success with the development of academic knowledge. These motivations for academic success have implications for the attributes and capabilities required for higher education.
graduates to be successful in a globalized world, in terms of participation in the workforce or to further their education level. Postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff members highlighted that measurable indicators include grades, timely completion of studies, awards for outstanding achievements, and the ability to secure employment opportunities.

This study compiles the different perspectives of postgraduate international students, academics, and professional staff on the meaning of academic success. The academic staff offered that many students consider the completion of their degree within the allotted program structure and time frame to be academic success. Securing good career opportunities was also identified as an indicator of academic success, which is consistent with the findings of Sam et al. (2013) that academic success has been equated by many to well-paying careers. In addition, achievement of academic awards offered by the university such as the Dean’s List Award, research patents and scholarships for outstanding academic performance were also considered as academic success. These incentives, as Tinto (2005) writes, are likely to encourage students to strive for academic success of students, as institutions show their support, commitment to, and recognition of achievements.

These non-quantifiable indicators or qualities of academic success suggest that particular attributes and capabilities are required to achieve success and excellence, especially in a globalized world. Postgraduate international students stated that personal characteristics such as patience, discipline, hard work, self-motivation, passion, and independence are crucial in moving towards academic success. Although there is a conception that international students lack one or more of these characteristics and thus underperform as compared to local students, this has been shown to be a misconception (Kingston & Forland, 2008). Due to their relocation and the challenge of new environments, international students are often determined, hardworking, independent, and highly motivated to achieve their academic goals (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

The acquisition of soft skills in higher education has been cited as instrumental in academic success; this supports the standpoint of Malaysia’s Ministry of Higher Education (2007) that a graduate has to be developed holistically. Some soft skills that academic staff determined in this study as necessary include networking, communication, teamwork, presentation, and writing. These critical skills are considered to be essential employability skills for postgraduate international students to secure a good career upon graduation. Montgomery and McDowell (2009) acknowledged that the social-learning experiences of international students could be an aspect of “global citizenship” as they develop soft skills important for life and work in a global community.

Postgraduate international students and professional and academic staff members explicitly stated that it is important to learn and conduct quality research so that their work is publishable in peer-reviewed journals. Subsequently, academic success to international students in this research study also means to attend, and present their research work at, international conferences. Similarly, Kamler (2008) notes that publication is an important activity for academics as well as research students to disseminate findings and to produce knowledge in their specific fields. Academic staff members also believed that critical and independent thinking are important to formulate ideas, and to read and evaluate information, all important skills for postgraduate students. This finding is in agreement with Holmes’s (2004) study, in which postgraduate international students in New Zealand noted that the ways in which reading complements ideas through reading critically, evaluating information,
prioritising what to read, and managing time effectively lead them to become critical and independent thinkers. The development of research skills is emphasised in the particular research university in this study because research work generated by postgraduate international students supports the aspiration of Malaysia becoming a global-education hub by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). As a result, the implication of developing research capabilities is not solely to enhance students’ own career development in academia, but also to support the efforts of countries that are positioning themselves as education hubs. According to Knight (2012), education hubs represent the third generation of cross-border activities emerging onto the higher education landscape of our more globalized world. The term education hub is being used by “countries, zones, and cities who are trying to position themselves as centres for student recruitment, education and training and in some cases research and innovation” (Knight, 2012, p. 30). For instance, Malaysia is referred to as a student hub because it focuses on the recruitment of foreign-education providers and international students for training and education purposes (Knight, 2012).

Another understanding of academic success mentioned by all three stakeholder groups is to contribute to postgraduate international students’ home country or community through invention or innovation. For example, academic and professional staff have suggested that postgraduate international students can contribute to the economic and social development of their country through application of knowledge and research findings acquired in the university. Postgraduate international students can also assist their country and society through their teaching role, as they are eager to impart valuable knowledge to their future students. Similarly, in Harman’s (2003) research study, postgraduate international students were keen to return home, as they had permanent jobs such as teaching positions in public universities or civil-service positions in government departments or research institutes. Interestingly, the international students in Harman’s (2003) study also perceived it possible to have careers in Australia or other developed countries or to work for international agencies such as the World Bank.

One of the postgraduate international students mentioned that as a Tourism Planner he can help poor rural communities by organising them as tourist destinations. Another postgraduate international student suggested that as a researcher he can produce significant findings to help people and also animals. These are some noble thoughts by postgraduate international students to help their country and society at large. In particular, this understanding of academic success is in accordance with the aim of higher education in Malaysia, which is to “produce graduates who are knowledgeable and competent in their fields, as well as to be able to put into practice knowledge gained” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, p. 12) to uplift the well-being of the society, the nation, and the global community. As a result, as Scheyvens et al. (2003) acknowledge, postgraduate international students’ intelligence, adaptability, and resilience should not be underestimated, because these strong characteristics are likely to support and contribute to the development of their own countries upon the completion of their studies.

Lastly, academic success as expressed by postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff involves students’ willingness to immerse themselves in the Malaysian local culture. Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) suggest that there is no doubt that international students enrich their learning process through sharing cultural norms and life experience with other international or local students. Interestingly, Adrian-Taylor, Noels, and Tischler (2007) highlighted that when an international student has a positive educational experience abroad, both the international student and the host-country nationals benefit from the resulting
enriched learning and social development. Learning to speak Malay is important (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Ishak, 2010) as it helps international students to better understand and interact with local people and to better understand the local culture. Further, competency in a local language helps international students to start social communication and to discuss with lecturers/supervisors as they settle down in the new place (Mahmud et al., 2010).

Further, professional staff members have pointed out that exploring international life occurs through respecting the local culture. Malaysians hold strong Eastern values and beliefs based on a multi-racial and religious background; international students are expected to respect these values and beliefs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). This understanding of academic success appears in *Internationalisation Policy 2011*, a document concerning higher education in Malaysia; one of the policy’s goals is to increase integration between local and international students through university social and cultural programs, provide language support programs such as Bahasa Malaysia for foreign students, and encourage international students to participate in local homestay programs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Further, Leask (2009) puts forward that on-campus cultural diversity strategically assists students to develop meaningful intercultural awareness, skills, and knowledge so that they can become responsible global citizens and effective workers in the globalized world (Jon, 2013).

**Conclusion**

International students highly value their academic performance and are very sensitive to the issues surrounding their academic success (Chen, 1999), as to a large degree it determines their ability to successfully complete their higher-education studies (Fraser & Killen, 2003). Successful completion of studies means they are likely to enjoy higher incomes and gain valuable work experiences in several countries before returning home (Knight, 2012). With this as a background, understanding academic success is essential to understanding the attributes and capabilities required to excel in this globalized world. Measurable indicators of academic success have usually been quantitative, and include grades, timely completion of studies, awards and recognitions, and high-paying jobs. Underpinning these measurable indicators, characteristics of successful international students such as determination, diligence, discipline, self-motivation, and independence as learners are important to excel in this globalized world due to the global competitiveness to secure employment. Academic success can also be indicated by non-measurable indicators such the development of soft skills and research skills. These skills are important for graduate students as they make them more employable, and enhance countries’ higher-educational hubs. Further, what they learn in their postgraduate studies is essential to excel in the globalized world because this capability enhances new ways of studying, and of learning and applying knowledge. This understanding of academic success is linked to the contributions they can make to their home countries.

Postgraduate international students and academic and professional staff members put forward that one contributes to one’s home country through application of knowledge and research findings. This insight demonstrates the capabilities of enhancing social learning in this competitive global world. Lastly, assimilation to the local culture by exploring international life in Malaysia is an important experience because it enhances students’ intercultural awareness, which in turn helps them develop into respectful global citizens and effective employees in this globalized world.
The positive experiences of an international higher education journey do influence the development of attributes and capabilities of graduates that they require to be successful in a globalized world and a competitive workplace.

References


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