



University Image, Culture, Perceived Teaching Quality and Recommendation as Predictors that Contribute to International Students' Choice for Place of Study: Focus Universities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has created countless opportunities and challenges for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions. The internationalisation of higher education is one of the foremost encounters faced by universities in an era of globalization. As a result, the increasing number of international student's studying abroad at non-Western and non-native English speaking settings have changed the scene at higher education institutions particularly in the Asian region. To further understand this, this article offers insight to the important role of destination as a choice for international graduate students who are currently enrolled at a Malaysian University. Therefore, this current study aims to understand the factors which are most crucial in influencing an international student's decision on their study destination in the Asian region or particularly in Malaysia. The qualitative research method was employed in this study in order to understand the phenomena in multiple realities. Semi-structured, face-to-face, and in depth interviews were conducted with 64 international students who are enrolled in postgraduate studies at focus universities, in different courses and programmes. Cluster and purposive sampling methods were employed for sample selection and the content analysis technique was utilized to analyse the data. Findings from the semi-structured interviews significantly reveal that the pull factors influencing international students' university choices were: university image, culture, perceived teaching quality and recommendations. Understanding the significance of such criteria in a students' destination choice has important implications to the Malaysian government in developing a strategy to enhance the quality of education in order to remain competitive in the global market for international education.

Keywords:

University image, perceived teaching quality, culture, international student, higher education

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the overall context of studying abroad has changed significantly due to globalization. These changes can be seen as opportunities for the Malaysian higher education industry to become one of the newer players. Therefore, the Malaysian government has developed the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) strategy (2015-2025) which attempts to transform Malaysia's higher education system in the face of this new challenge. Based on the latest report from Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia is now the 9th largest recruiter of international students globally and one of the top 10 destinations for international students (MEB2015). According to the same report from Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education, the largest number of international students enrolled come from countries in Asia and Africa (MEB2015).

The current data shows there were approximately 132,710 foreign student enrolled in Malaysia universities in 2016 [19]. The higher education industry represents huge and continuous growth all around the globe. Studying abroad has also become popular among adults around the world [19]. On the average, student mobility across countries have a 5.6% enrolment of undergraduates, and over 25% of enrolment are doctorate [20].

For a host country like a Malaysia, international students are an important source of income and have a disproportionate impact on economic growth. Besides, international students also contribute to the local economy [20]. Jusoh, [12] reported that the annual income from the higher education sector is estimated to contribute RM 5.9 billion a year to the Malaysian economy. The Ministry of Higher Education estimated this figure to increase to RM 15.6 billion by 2020 with up to 200,000 international students [4,12]. In the last two decades, the increasing number of international students enrolled is largely due to the depreciating ringgit, causing students in China to pick Malaysia as their study destination within the region [4]. In addition to that, the quality of higher education in Malaysia is recognized by QS World University Rankings [12].

Currently Malaysia has 20 public universities consisting of three categories, with 10 focus universities, 6 research universities and 4 comprehensive universities. Consistent with their status, the focus universities deliberate on the specific grounds related to the establishment (Management, Technology, and Islamic studies), while a comprehensive university offers a variety of courses and fields of study. MoHE (2017) stated that research and focus universities have to fulfill the requirement of a ratio of 50% postgraduate and 50% undergraduate students; while comprehensive universities should have 70% undergraduates and 30% postgraduates. This strategy aims to enable Malaysia to become an education hub in the Asian region by 2020 with 200,000 international students enrolled at Malaysian Universities. The growing number of international students enrolled does not guarantee Malaysia's position as a host country if it remains complacent for a long period of time. The increased competition from other education hubs will require Malaysia to improve its higher education strategy in order to be competitive within the Asian region. Being a new comer in this industry, Malaysia only captures 2 percent of the world market [33]. Traditionally, the market for foreign students in the higher education sector is dominated by the US, UK, Europe, and Australia [34]. However, Malaysia has the advantage of being an Islamic country, and when paired with a low cost of education, it can be effective in attracting international students, thus possibly making it the educational hub in the region [35].

To realize such an aspiration, understanding the factors by which international students select their destination for further studies and their basic needs will be crucial. This can also bring about new capabilities and the capacity to further improve the effectiveness of the higher education system in this region as well as upsurge the enrollment of international students. Mazzarol and Soutar, [14] and Migin *et al.*, [15] highlighted several pull factors that can influence and affect the relative

attractiveness of a student to a host country. These include, among other factors, the image and reputation of the university as well as the host country's profile, the cost of education, as well as a safe environment. However, cultural issues were not discussed in the list of factors that can influence the student's selection of a study destination [1,28]. While previous study lack of investigated an array of difficulties in a cultural adjustment Hawes and Thomas [10] and Wells [29], consequent development of literature in this field in the past decades highlight the need for another view integrating recent research. In addition to that, negative stereotypes are often used to describe international students who are perceived to be lacking in English language ability and familiarity with the Malaysian academic system. What's more, moving to a foreign country to study brings with it numerous potential challenges and international students may experience acculturation stress [11,13,26] and have problems adjusting. Therefore, in an effort to fill close the gap, this current study explores the reality of these factors that international students might have to consider when making a decision to pursue post-graduate studies in Malaysian higher education institutions. Despite wide literature on the internationalisation of higher education institutions, very few know about the reality of international students' criteria in making a decision to enroll in universities in the region of Asian or particularly in Malaysia, with regard to perceived teaching quality, culture, university image and recommendation.

From various communication and information gathered about Malaysian universities, we can conclude that information would have been disseminated through word of mouth (recommendations from friends and family that have previously experienced studying in Malaysia [5]. However, the literature also shows that limited study had been carried out about recommendation as an aspect for international students to consider when making a decision to study in Malaysia [16,18,28]. There is a lack of research on how international students make decisions for a study destination especially for factors such as perceived university image, perceived teaching quality, perceived culture and recommendation factors. This study also aims to understand the phenomena of change in the landscape of studying in non-western countries given the difference socially and in culture and language. Besides, this study therefore also attempts to fill this gap and offer some contextual qualitative data to enhance the understanding of factors that play a part in an international student's decision making that enable them to plan and enroll in a Malaysia Higher Education Institution.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Review of the Past Study

Investigation into the factors encouraging students' select to study in a higher education institution is crucial for a several number of reasons. Initially it offers the institution an understanding of the reason why students select a particular university over another. Secondly, it is most important that the information gained should be used by a university to assist in the enhancement of their marketing strategy. Other than that, the understanding gained from this exercise about student choices and expectation of an institution can help to further comprehend the student preferences and what strategies can be applied to improve student experience at the institution.

The literature by Ahmad and Buchanan [1] and Mazzarol and Soutar [14] has determined the motivation of students going to study abroad and the reasons which students deliberate while making that decision. These current studies acknowledge that students' decision-making process of going abroad involve interplay of push and pull factors. Nonetheless, the push-pull model by Mazzarol and Soutar [14] and Wadhwa [28] is the most significant and possibly the most prominent approach to the body of analysis in study abroad literature. This model has become basic theory in

this area. The push factor is described as interest in overseas education where the home environment is also considered unsatisfactory [14]. While pull factors include things a student may consider to be attractive in a host country (destination country) [2,3,14]. A study on the factors influencing a student's choice to study in a higher education institution has explained that the utmost essential factors are pull factors such as the characteristics related to a university's image and reputation, these include university ranking, the quality of the institution, the quality of the academic program and infrastructure [25]. The studies undertaken include both a student and parents' perception and indicate that the quality of the academic program, campus safety, campus facilities, and academic reputation as uppermost criteria used by students and parents to select universities [17,24]. Chapman [36] advocates three predictors influencing students' choice. They include information gained from friends, parents and high school staff. Second, the institutional characteristics such as fee and place are key criteria that are taken into consideration by students when selecting a place to study [31,32]. Finally, the Institution's effort to communicate their attributes to the students is crucial. In addition, Gong and Huybers [37] in a study with 17 Chinese students enrolled at two Australian Universities, found factors as university ranking and destination safety is crucial in influencing students' decision.

Previous findings were also revealed in a study undertaken in Australia with business and commerce, engineering, health and sciences, and graphic and interior design students. The study undertaken by Shah *et al.*, [38] suggested that other than student perception; that admission and prospect, learning environment, quality of teacher, course design, and graduate success were also key factors in students' decision making. In addition to that, a study undertaken by Singh [13, 25] in the Malaysian context also suggested that socio-economic factors, learning environment, shared cultural value, low education fees and a low cost of living, are the top factors influencing international student choice.

Due to the fact that international students come from different cultures, level of westernization, and communication infrastructure that vary according to their home country, this may lead to various factors that can influence their decision making [9,11]. Therefore, this current study attempts to fill the gap by investigating new key factors that influence international students from different cultural background in choosing a place to study in public universities, particularly in Malaysia.

There are limited studies on the predictors influencing student choice in public higher education institutions in Malaysia. Most of the research to date is based on private higher education institutions in Australia, USA and the UK, also which utilize the quantitative method. However, very little studies using the qualitative method have been conducted in the Malaysian public higher education context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

To achieve the research objectives and to answer the research questions, this study employed a qualitative case study approach. According to Yin [39,40] an in depth case study should understand the phenomena at a specific event. Yin, also acknowledges that case studies let the researcher to discover individuals or organizations simply through complex interferences, supported with deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena. According to Eisenhardt [7], Ford *et al.*, [8], Stake [27] exploring factors of an international student's choices in study destination should be because they capture the dynamic of the study phenomena and provide multidimensional view of the situation in a specific context [6,30] Moreover, case study approaches are also suitable to examine how international student choices are different depending on setting and context. The current study intends to obtain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the factors affecting

international students' decision for choosing a Malaysian university as their destination for postgraduate studies.

3.2 Sampling

Respondents of this case study are international postgraduate students from a selected focus university. The decision for selecting research respondents from this university is based on the categories of public universities in Malaysia in a report by the Ministry of Higher Education. The report states that the percentage of postgraduate students from focus Universities are relatively high at approximately 20.55 percent compared to other categories such as the research universities and comprehensive universities. The participants for this research were selected based on cluster and purposive sampling design at the graduate schools of selected focus universities. This current study employs cluster sampling to identify a group of students according to country of origin and purposive sampling that involves selecting a sample that yields the most inclusive understanding in the form of gaining rich information on the topic and then encompassing those essentials that contain the most representative qualities of the population [21,22,23]. Therefore the researcher assumed that the largest pool of potential participants for this research would be at focus universities. The purposive sampling method was utilized to gain data from respondents in a focus group. The total sample size was 64 students (12 from Pakistan, 18 from Nigeria, 10 from Bangladesh, 6 from Algeria, 7 from Iraq, 4 from Indonesia, 7 from Thailand). The doctoral students comprise of 46 students (71.8%) whereas the Masters students make up the remaining 18 (28.1%), ranging in ages 35 to over 40.

3.3 Data Collection

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews at the postgraduate school at selected Malaysian public focus universities. The interviews that were conducted between March and December 2015 and again in March 2016, had Indonesia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Algeria, Thailand, Iraq and Pakistan representing the majority of international students enrolled in their postgraduate studies at this particular focus university. The researcher purposely chose participants who were willing to be involved in this case study. The respondents must also have certain characteristics that achieve the research objective as well as answer the research question. The participants were selected based only on country and not region so any bias could, as much as possible, be avoided.

3.4 Data Analysis

In order to achieve a systematic technique of analysis, the coding of the data is done by utilised thematic analysis. The data was managed effectively. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytics method that is used for recognizing, analyzing and reporting the patterns (themes) within data. Braun and Clarke [41] stated that the analytics is organized to describe the data set in detail and is interpreted in a variety of aspects on the research topic. Evidence from the various sources is then grouped into code and coded into bigger themes. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke [42] acknowledged that the themes that capture the relevant data from interview transcripts have to answer the research questions and represent the patterned responses within the data set that was created. The themes/categories of the variables in this study are the factors that influence students to choose Malaysia, and specifically the university to enroll in for postgraduate studies. In order to maintain the true value and validity of the students' comments, the extracts are quoted verbatim, without any editing.

4. Qualitative Stage Findings

This study utilizes the thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is outlined with six phases to guide the researcher in conducting the data analysis [42]. The advantages of the thematic analysis are its flexibility to code the database and the theme, it is also a relatively quick method to learn, with the accessibility to research even with little or no experience in qualitative research. By using this analysis, the researcher can highlight similarities and differences across the data set. However, this data analysis technique also has its weaknesses. Coffey and Atkinson [43] acknowledges that the weakness of this technique is the problem of losing the context of what the participant has said because the researcher plucks chunks of text losing the context within which they appear. However, in this current research, the researcher tries to reduce the loss of context from respondents by immediately recording the transcripts.

4.1 Factors that Contribute to Foreign Students Studying in Malaysian Focus Universities

International students from the African countries posited two focal reasons for their decision to travel to Malaysia to pursue their higher degree. The university environment as well as the experience and knowledge of supervisors facilitate course completion. Students from Indonesia consistently agree that it is this sense of similarity between their culture and Malaysia's culture as Malay nations, as well as the ease to access halal food. Finally, recommendations from friends and relatives motivate them to choose Malaysia as a destination to further their education. The analysis illustrates that there are a few factors influencing international students' decision to choose Malaysia as their study destination, such as (i.e, university image, perceived teaching quality, culture and recommendation).

Theme 1- University Image

The most significant findings related to this study is that foreign students indicate that the rank and image of the university is an essential criterion which influences their decision making.

Taking admission in UUM was the biggest turning point in my education experience. I am here because of this university getting accreditation, for example AMBA and currently waiting result for AACSB. From my knowledge the statistics show that most of postgraduate student complete their study on time. I think the supervisor very knowledgeable and efficient (Interviewee 4).

A university's robust research background plus a competitive and current postgraduate program also promotes the particular university to become a pioneer in offering niche academic programs in management.

I make the decision to choose UUM as my post graduate study because this university focus on management "Eminent University". My Phd specialized in management. I believed that this is the right choices. I am also here because of the quality of programs offered and the reputation of this university. Despite I have been facing difficulty being away and feeling lonely from my family and food, I really happy with teaching quality and learning experience here (Interviewee 43).

The data analysis reveals that two of the foreign graduate students are satisfied with the excellent resources and facilities provided by the university.

I never imagine that the excellent facilities like sport center, library and accommodation are good before I came here. First information I got, UUM located in rural areas "look like countries" site. So what did you aspect of that? After I came here totally has changed my perception (Interviewee 7).

..... The university library is very huge and comfortable. Also, this library has a lot of material like reference book, journal/ article and easier to access. The library systems well organize. Moreover, the library staff also very helpful and supportive and especially to international student like us to find the material (Interviewee 19).

The data reveals that having a university with a physically attractive campus and is also environmentally friendly, is a strong factor in influencing the decision making process of students when deciding on which university to continue their graduate studies.

..... I think UUM has physical attractive campus, such as the beautiful lakes, the green environment, in the forest, very cool and this university has mini zoo. It's very suitable for leisure activity like jogging, walking and golfing. I can walk around the campus at free time to release my tension. This campus also is a very strategic location which is located in the rural areas, very quiet and peaceful (Interviewee 29).

Theme 2- Perceived teaching quality

This study also indicates that the quality of education is the strongest factor in influencing a student's choice for a higher education institution and destination to further their post-graduate studies.

.....I'm very interested to further my study here (UUM) because of the quality of programmes offered and also the experience of the supervisor in guiding me to complete my PhD. My supervisor is very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about what they are teaching (Interviewee 17).

According to one of the respondents, the quality of the research done in certain areas is described as quite impressive and excellent.

I think I choose to further my PhD here because I believe that UUM currently focusing on publishing in higher impact journal. From my study it's shown that the university professor also expert in certain areas of subject matter that good for novice researcher likes me. I think that the quality of the research particular in certain areas quite impressive and excellent (Interviewee 34).

In addition to that, the study also reveals that international certification also plays an important role, encouraging students to make the decision to study abroad.

Another thing, study abroad can get better quality of education and also world recognition. Moreover, by getting an international certificate and an experience on study abroad, easier to me on getting the job after graduate (Interviewee 33).

Theme 3-Culture

Another crucial factor that appeals to foreign graduate students is related to culture. It is seen as something that is interesting to learn and experience while they study abroad. Students who study abroad experience different cultures and can also interact with a myriad of people from multi ethnic and multi religious backgrounds. Malaysia as a country is ethnically and religiously diverse, and this is good exposure for international students and will add value to their lives through international experience and a better understanding of cultures and traditions that are different to their own. One of the highest number of survey responses indicate that Malaysia as a country has many places of interest along with social events and leisure activities that are readily available.

.....Malaysia as a Muslim country. Because of the similarity of Islamic culture trigger me to further my post-graduate study at this country. I 'm as a Muslim people's..... feel free to perform my duty as a Muslim, no prejudice by local authorities. If we in Western countries at certain part we can't perform as a Muslim because not allowed by local authorities....they assume Muslim people as terrorist (Interviewee 2).

.....I want to study and experience living in Malaysia. Even though I came from Indonesia, I believe that has a dissimilar culture between Malaysia and Indonesia. I take this opportunity to

experience international culture. I believe that Malaysia offers diversity of cultural valued. (Interviewee41).

In conclusion, culture and similarities in religion and belief of international students and the host country, are factors that influence the decision making process especially when the graduate student has the intention and willingness to learn new cultures.

Theme 4- Recommendation

The data also reveals that recommendation through word-of mouth is a strong influence in the decision making process of the international student in deciding which university they would like to further their graduate studies.

.....I'm studied here because of my friend was recommended, last two years back during semester break. She went back for the data collection in my country. She told me that Malaysia is a nice place for study. She also satisfied with university facilities. Now she already graduated. My supervisor is her supervisor too (Interviewee 34).

In conclusion, factors such as image of the university, perceived quality and recommendation from friends are strong factors that influence foreign students in their decision to choose Malaysia as their study destination and UUM as the higher education institution for their post-graduate studies.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings illustrate that the factors identified by the international students are consistent with the limited literature published on Malaysia higher education to date [44]. The factors stated by students from Thailand and Indonesia in choosing Malaysia as a study destination are as follow: 1) sharing similar culture especially for Thai students and 2) the travelling distance from their home country. Whereas, the reasons put forward by students from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Middle East who are studying in Malaysia are: being an Islamic country and sharing the same religious belief makes it easier for them as Muslims. While specifically for Indonesia, sharing the same culture and language proves to be a compelling reason. Environment and geographical factors also contribute to decision making. Proximity to home country and the short travelling distance are key factors affecting higher education choice for some international students. Furthermore, a conducive environment at the university and attractive facilities affect the choice of destination for further studies [45]. The increasing number of students studying abroad all over the world will increase the intercultural understanding. Different culture and language are main factors which significantly influence students to learn something new which can give them extra credit, compared to studying in their home country.

Other significant factors were quality of education, university reputation, university image and recommendation from their friends and family. Another interesting finding from this current study is that many students' feet at ease studying in Malaysia, a country that is an exciting place to live, which is at peace and is a safe environment. Moreover, if the university is physically attractive and has conducive campus facilities, this adds to the international students comfort and enjoyment. This study has also highlighted the importance of teaching quality and teaching staff that are qualified and knowledgeable in research and publication. For example, where the university professor is producing quality research, particularly in certain areas are seen as quite impressive and excellent. In the context of sources of information, the study also reveals that the role and recommendation by others that through word-of mouth can influence a student's decision making process in the choice of country and Higher Education Institution. The findings are aligned with previous studies which illustrate that students are more likely to attend a particular Higher Education Institution in a country

of their choice if their senior, previous classmate or family members have attended or are currently attending that particular university. Therefore, studying the factors affecting international students' choices provides a basis for higher education institutions in Malaysia to understand their customers and build marketing plans and strategies to attract students from all over the world.

By understanding these crucial factors that influence international student choice, Malaysia higher education institutions will be more prepared to face the challenges along the way to becoming an education hub in this region. This current study advocates that university image; perceived teaching quality, culture, and recommendation from friends and family are seen as important factors and appear to be primary criteria that are considered when making a decision in selecting a destination for their place of study. Future research on the students' experiences of their education in Malaysia could offer insight into the students' satisfaction and loyalty for the further improvement of the Malaysian university.

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