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Influential drivers for postgraduate students in Malaysia's Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Malaysia has witnessed an influx of international students in the local higher education institutions with the aggressive support from the Malaysian government to build Malaysia as the educational hub within the region. Besides the country level policy, the aim of this study is to understand the influential drivers that influence international students to choose Malaysia and the university as their study destination. This study is based on a qualitative approach using face-to-face interviews with fifteen international students currently studying in Malaysian universities. The findings reveals that the drivers of student choice are cost of education, significant others and location and information sources in marketing communication (online prospectus/brochure, university website and online application websites).

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INTRODUCTION

Countries such as the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Canada, France and Australia has traditionally been strong in attracting international students from all over the world to pursue their undergraduate and post graduate studies in their respective colleges and universities. Their motivations are mainly to increase the international student population within their campuses, having various cultures and backgrounds to enrich the academic atmosphere within the classrooms and ultimately provide another source of income for the college and university. In the context of Malaysia, which traditionally sends their local students abroad has seen an upcoming trend that international students are coming to Malaysia to pursue their tertiary studies. In recent years, Malaysia's government is aggressively pushing Malaysia's higher education as a regional educational hub and due to their persevering efforts, Malaysia was ranked as 11th largest exporter of higher education among international students (Global Education Digest UNESCO, 2008).

In the year 2008, a total number of 50,679 international students enrolled in private institutions and further increased to 58,294 international students in 2009. The year 2010 has seen a growth as much as 8% (MOHE, 2010). This further proves Malaysia's higher education is increasingly gaining acceptance worldwide.

With the Higher Education Ministry objective in enrolling 150,000 international students by 2015 (Bernama, 2010) integrated together with the PHEIs benefits and the overall positive impact on Malaysia's economy, further investigation to how international students go through their choice process of selecting which college or university would be invaluable.

There has been research conducted in regards to the demographics and the numbers of international students, but there is little research done that focus on the influential drivers of international students to pursue post graduate studies in Malaysia. The private institutions can further enhance and improve their strategies on enrolling international students if they have a better understanding on the university selection process used by these students.

Theoretical Framework:

Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) is the focal point of this study. It isolates and contains the college choice process within a manageable three-stage framework (predisposition, search, and choice). Predisposition stage is the student's decision to go to college as a goal in life. It is strongly influenced by the student's ability of continuing their studies at higher education as well as the background and encouragement from the student's

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family. Search stage is the process of learning about specific institutions and their characteristics. Lastly, choice stage is when applications are completed and the student chooses a particular institution. This study specifically investigates the international student's choice stage in choosing a university in private institutions.

Empirical Studies Review:

Cost of Education:

Cost of education has been the most studied factor in influencing student's choice of a particular university. Cost of education can only be the tuition fees or it can also refer as the tuition fees along with the cost of living and lower travel costs in a foreign country. When studying in any Malaysia higher education institutions, international students are not allowed to work full-time and therefore they need to consider on their living expenses during their time of study. Many studies have stated that cost of education is important (Baharun, Awang and Padlee, 2011; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; and Joseph and Joseph, 1998).

Students in general highly consider the cost of education before deciding on the university that they want to study in. This applies in different countries, namely New Zealand (Joseph and Joseph, 1998), Indonesia (Joseph and Joseph, 2000), Australia (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) and Malaysia (Baharun *et al.*, 2011; and Wagner and Fard, 2009).

Despite the belief that international students are wealthy, research has shown that cost of education is an important factor in choosing their place of study. Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009) examined the 6 factors of international students on choosing Malaysia's public universities as their study destination and their finding shows that one of the main reasons is due to the competitive overall costs of studying in Malaysia.

Significant Others:

There are certain groups of individuals or an individual that may influence prospective student's choice process. Significant others are defined as friends, parents, counselors, other students, teachers, university admission officers (Baharun *et al.*, 2011). Many studies found that one or more of these significant others are important influential factors in students' choice of university (Kusumawati, Yanamandram, V. and Perera, 2010; Baharun *et al.*, 2011; Hassan and Sheriff, 2006; Baharun, 2004; and Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). However, there is little known on the effects of significant others on the choices of international postgraduate students. In terms of international students, it is necessary to consider the potential role of relatives and education agents as well.

Location:

The geographical location of the private institution within the country or its proximity to home and environment of the host country has been found to be an influential factor among postgraduates (Pooch and Love, 2001) and local and international students in Australia (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Many students seriously consider universities that are relatively close to their homes (Jackson, 1982). Pooch and Love (2001) study on doctoral students identified location as most important factor and Beneke and Human (2010) has classified location as second most important factor for students in deciding the university they want to continue their studies.

Marketing Communication:

Kotler and Fox (1985) defined education marketing as "The analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organizational objectives". Malaysian government together with PHEIs has aggressively pushed in promoting local private higher education in the overseas market with the assumption that international students will be well informed consumers in choosing Malaysian and the right PHEI in accordance to their programmes of interest. Marketing communication can be viewed broadly or specific; it may involve in expensive print (brochure, prospectus, advertisement in foreign newspapers and magazines locally and abroad) (Moogan, 2011), technology (Internet, CD-ROM and university website)(Moogan, 2011; Fernandez, 2010) or through efficient communication between prospective student and PHEI (education fairs and email communication)(Gomes and Murphy, 2003).

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach using face-to-face interviews as the primary data gathering technique. The interview research was done over a two-month period in 2013. The respondents were identified through the assistance of the selected university's international student association. 15 international students (9 males and 6 females) from undergraduate and postgraduate level were randomly chosen from different private higher education were interviewed for this study. All universities are strategically located within Klang Valley in Malaysia.

A structured interview format was developed to have a general guideline of ensuring the consistency of information being asked from one interviewee to another, yet at the same time it is open-ended that provides the interviewees the freedom to answer in accordance to their perspective on what is deemed important for them. The open-ended responses were documented in English. It was initially expected that a large number of international students (approximately 40 expected interviews) would be willing to participate in this study. However, despite numerous attempts through telephone calls and emails, only fifteen interviews were conducted. This obstacle may be due to the timing of the interview being conducted (at the end of the year, November-December 2013) that most universities have their year-end semester breaks and majority of the students have returned home to their respective countries.

The respondents were initially asked demographic question which includes personal questions about their age, marital status and current academic level. Most of the respondents were between 18 years – 35 years of age. Majority of the respondents are single. 60% are currently pursuing their undergraduate degree.

The respondents' response was interpreted from the interview data and sorted into specific categories. The data processing involved clustering or coding the respondents' comments into broad themes that were common among the respondents (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The research question which gives guidance for this study as below:-

RQ1: What factors influence international students to choose Malaysia?

RQ2: What factors makes a difference in choosing one university to the other?

Findings:

Respondents were asked to reflect on the initial reasons of choosing Malaysia as their place to study in comparison to other neighbouring countries. Majority of the respondents (11 students) agreed that the cost of education was one of the main reasons of coming to Malaysia and continue their studies there, as supported by different researches done by Baharun *et al.* (2011) and Joseph and Joseph (1998). Students can obtain an international degree from a foreign branch campus located in Malaysia with a fraction of the cost in comparison to study at the main campus in Australia and the UK. They also have the choice of a twinning programme (e.g. 3+0 programme) that can be completed locally in Malaysia. The foreign exchange rate was also highlighted that it is an important element that was considered by their parents when choosing their studies destination because it not only affects the payment of the tuition fees but also their living expenses, as one respondent explained:

“Whenever the currency rate increases or decreases, it affects my living expenditure; one month I can spend more on food [eating out], then the other month I need to buy more tin food. It is frustrating sometimes.”

Interestingly, 4 out of 6 female respondents were highly influenced by the recommendations of their parents and relatives of continuing their studies in Malaysia. Their relatives who have both visited and stayed in Malaysia gave positive feedback that gave some sort of trust to their parents of allowing them to go overseas. 3 of the female respondents' relatives were staying in Kuala Lumpur which means that they are not alone in a foreign country during their studies duration. As for the male respondents, 7 of them stated that their friends as well as their cousins influenced them to consider studying in Malaysia due to the freedom that they have in Malaysia. The remainder 4 respondents were encouraged by education agents to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate degree in Malaysia.

The geographic location of Malaysia was also heavily considered due to the geographical proximity to their home countries. Majority of the respondents who are both single and married expressed the importance of being near home. Majority of the respondents who are single prefer to be near home because of the cheaper air travel between Malaysia and their home country. Besides that, their parents usually fly to Malaysia once a year and prefer to have shorter flight hours. The respondents who are married would like to travel more than once a year to their home countries to visit their elderly parents.

In this study, the respondents were asked what makes the university that they have chosen different in comparison to other universities in Malaysia. The respondents explained that the university's online prospectus and specific course's brochures which are readily available online 24 hours a day makes a difference from one institution to another. Twelve respondents downloaded the online documents and went through it together with their parents/family to have a better overview of not only the university, but the course that they want to pursue. This greatly gave an added advantage to the university without having their prospective international students to wait for the delayed response through email due to different time zones.

Another factor was the Internet that the respondents used to visit the university's websites and read information related to the university in the form of blogs, forum and Facebook pages. The respondents believed that the more information the university website has, the more credible the university is. The high reliance of university websites as a source of information has been found in both local and overseas universities (Moogan, 2011; Fernandez, 2010). The layout of the university website is also important, as agreed by a female respondent:

“I was surfing on most of the university websites, and when I saw a website that looks simple and no updates were done on it, I immediately closed it and looked at the other university's website. A university

website should always be nice to look at and always filled with the latest events that is happening within the campus.”

Besides that, the respondents applied to the universities that have an easy application process; ten of the respondents applied through the university online application website and uploaded all of their academic certificates and transcripts virtually. They were immediately given a confirmation that their application is received by the university and they will be informed on their application status within a week's time. This greatly reduces the time and effort of having to courier the application form and academic transcripts without knowing whether the university has received the documents.

Conclusion:

This study highlight that there is a growing number of international students who are pursuing their studies in Malaysia's higher education but there is a lack of research done on exploring the drivers of student choice for higher education. The findings provide some insights on the influential drivers as well as the advantages of their universities in comparison to other institutions. The private institutions can apply some of the advantages such as the implementation of online application website and adding more online materials for the benefit of prospective international students. Understanding the drivers of international student choice can further assist private institutions to improve and enhance their strategies on enrolling international students.

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