

Internationalization of Higher Education: Key Factors Attracting International Students to Study in Private Higher Education Institution in Malaysia

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Abstract

Increased student mobility in the era of globalization has enabled Malaysia to benefit from the entrance of international students into its institutes of higher learning. Recognizing the appeal of affordable education benchmarked against international standards, one of the strategic thrust areas for Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is internationalization of its tertiary learning institutions. Malaysia consists of a high number of higher education institutions (HEIs) especially the private ones. Private higher education institutions have contributed towards a significant number of international students enrolling for tertiary education in Malaysia. This presents an opportunity for data gathering and analysis related to the students' reasons to study in Malaysia. This study intends to investigate the key factors attracting international students to enrol into private higher institution programs in Malaysia using the "internationalization framework", derived from literature review. A questionnaire involving more than 300 respondents was distributed to investigate twelve domains, namely: tuition fee; the location of accommodation; cost of living; transportation; dual degree programmes; teaching facilities; English as a medium of instruction; recognized programs; qualified and experienced lecturers; communication and culture diversity. Based on the scope of study, i.e. Malaysia, three private higher institutions located in Kuala Lumpur have been selected as a source for data due to their high percentage of international student population. All of these constructs will be tested in order to identify the level of significance. Findings of this preliminary investigation will enable the institutions to learn the factors attracting international students to join them and to recognize the barriers in meeting students' expectations. Results obtained may also provide an indirect benefit of identifying a positioning strategy for the institutions as well as for Malaysia, at large.

Keywords: Internationalization, private higher education institution, attracting factor, international students.

Introduction

The stiff competition between public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia requires these institutions to become more internationalized. Internationalization is a complex phenomenon in the field of higher education in Malaysia. Towards Vision 2020, internationalization is seen as an inevitable force to help and accelerate the country to achieve this vision (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Knight (2004) defines internationalization as “integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. Internationalization is not a new term. It is frequently used to discuss the international dimension of higher education. Therefore it is important for the higher institutions to have the ability to attract students, either local or foreign, to pursue study in their institutions. Factors such as tuition fees, accommodation, cost of living, programs offered, cultural diversity, communication, teaching facilities, qualified academicians and others are crucial aspects considered by students in selecting the places for their tertiary education. Students were cost-conscious in which they preferred to register in HEIs offering quality courses at low cost (Ancheh et. al, 2007; Fernandez, 2010; Sia 2010). Cost of education such as tuition fee is one of the influential factors that determine their decision in choosing Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) (Padlee et. al, 2010). Dahari and Abduh (2011) claimed that based on previous research; there was a negative relationship between demands for education with the price of attendance.

Other than that, students seriously consider universities that are relatively close to their places or homes as it will help them to reduce their expenses (Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi, 2014). Location is categorized as the second most crucial factor for students in making decision to choose the university they want as mentioned by Pooock and Love (2001); Beneke and Human (2010). Among final year students, the geographical location of the institution that is near or close to home and environment of the host country has been one of the influential factors because it is one of the ways to reduce cost of living (Migin et al., 2014). Referring to International Student Service web portal (2012), the affordable cost of tertiary quality education has been one of the main reasons for the international students to choose Malaysia as a destination to pursue their study. In addition, the cost of living in Malaysia is relatively low compared to Europe, the U.K, the U.S and Australia (Arguijo, Bahumik and Hansen, 2014), thus low cost of living would be one of the factors influencing international students’ decision to pursue study in Malaysia. Easy access of the transportation could be another factor that influences international students in making their decision. Local transportation system like public transport and air travel could be the pulling factor in students’ decision to have more affordable, convenient and easy access transportation around the cities and back to home country (Shan, Taqriz and Suat, 2013). Programs offered by the universities such dual degree program could affect students’ decision in selecting universities. Based on the report issued by Institute of International Education (2014), the increasing number of dual degree programs offered by higher institutions represents 15.1% of the factors driving the increase in the enrolment of international students.

The availability of teaching facilities could be another pull factor that can influence students’ choices. Ivy (2008) states that there is a variety of tangible aspects evaluated in services offered by the university ranging from the lecture’s facilities and the appearance of the buildings. Convenient and well-equipped libraries for research, computer labs and designs of lecture halls are important for providing an environment in which students can learn comfortably and successfully (Migin et.al, 2014). Besides, the use of English as a language or medium of instruction also contributed to the popularity of Malaysia as a choice of destination among international students (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Other than that, the offer of recognized programs was another undeniable factor affecting the institution’s reputation; and reputation has been one of the main factors for students to make the decision in selecting the university to pursue their study (Beneke & Human, 2010). In addition, the quality of academic staff is also a crucial element that helps a higher education institution develop a good image of the institution. A qualified competent and experienced lecturer will help the universities to increase their reputation, as emphasized by Koe and Saring (2012): good reputation of universities has a tremendous effect in influencing students’ choice of university.

Studying in an international university will help students to gain knowledge of international affairs and be sensitive with cultural differences. According to Lembert and Usher (2013), up to 90% of university students noticed that being able to work in an unfamiliar culture would be a good experience and an invaluable lesson to be optimized for job-seeking upon graduation. International students in Malaysia have different range of English language competency. Some students may find adjustment to hearing and speaking English relatively swift and simple but some of them find the transition much more difficult. However, this should not be used as an excuse for them to avoid communicating in English since the higher educational institutions and private language centres have been providing the opportunity for international students to improve their English proficiency. ELS Language Centre and British Council, for instance, have been offering courses and programs in order to help them improve their communication in English (Shan et. al, 2013).

A research done by Yeoman (2010) about tourist's motives found out that the main motives for students to study abroad are to gain new knowledge, explore new culture and meeting new people, all of which could contribute towards an interesting experience for students who get the chance to pursue study aboard (Shan et.al, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to conduct analysis in identifying the factors that may influence and attract students to enroll in private Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Malaysia. A questionnaire is developed for this quantitative research as a tool to collect the data about the underlying constructs proposed for this study. These constructs comprise the investigation of factors that attract international students to continue their tertiary study in Malaysia. The scale that has been used to identify the factors that determine international students to continue study in Malaysia consists of tuition fees (Ancheh et. al, 2007; Fernandez, 2010; Sia 2010; Koe & Saring, 2012; Padlee et. al, 2010; Dahari & Abduh, 2011), the location of accommodation (Migin et. al, 2014; Beneke & Human, 2010; Poock and Love, 2001), cost of living (Arguijo, Bahumik and Hansen, 2014), transportation (Shan et.al, 2013), dual degree programs (Institute of International Education, 2014), teaching facilities (Ivy, 2008; Migin et.al, 2014), English as medium of instruction (Verbik, Lasanowski & Hobsons, 2007), program recognize (Beneke & Human, 2010), quality and experience lecturers (Koe & Saring, 2012), communication (Shan et.al, 2013) and culture diversity (Yeoman, 2010; Shan et.al, 2013).

The focus group of the sample selected for this research comprises of some international students from different private institutions located in Kuala Lumpur. Students of different nationalities are categorized based on the rank of population given by the particular institutions involved in this study. The list given consists of nationalities of Iran, Yemen, Indonesia, China, Kazakhstan, Tanzania and Maldives. The students are selected from different academic levels which are Diploma, Foundation, Degree and Masters, enrolling in Pre University and Diploma programs, Business and Management, Computing and Technology, Engineering and Postgraduates studies. From the total of 800 questionnaires distributed to all students, 349 (43.6%) were answered and returned by the international students.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. At first, SPSS was used to analyze initial data and provide descriptive analyses about the study's sample such as means, standard deviation and frequencies. Then SPSS was also used to analyze reliability and correlation to determine significant relationship between student's nationality and factors that has been investigated in this study. Lastly, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) has been conducted to identify the mean differences between factors that could influence international student's choice in selecting Malaysia as a destination for higher education with students' nationality.

Data Analysis and Results

Basically this study involves 349 participants which are students from private higher institutions in Malaysia. Out of the total population, 230 (65.9%) were male while 119 (34.1%) were female. The study also involved diversity of nationality among students in order to identify factors that may attract them to pursue study in Malaysia and their perception towards internationalization. With regard to the distribution by nationality, this research intends to select top 6 nationalities involved during the fieldwork. From the statistics, Iran and Tanzania were the highest nationalities with the total number of 72 (20.6%), followed by Yemen 63 (18.1%), Maldives 58 (16.6%), Indonesia 43 (8.4%) and the rest came from Kazakhstan with 41 (11.7%). From the data collected, majority of participants were Business and Management students with 150 (43.0%), 114 (32.7%) were Computing and Technology, 36 (10.3%) were Pre U and Diploma, 29 (8.3%) were Engineering students and there was a small number of students from post graduate study with 25 (4.9%). Referring to level of education, most of the respondents were degree students with 268 (76.8%) followed by diploma 41 (11.7%), and there was an equal number of students for foundation and pursuing Masters with 20 (5.7%) for each level of education. All the data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

| Characteristics | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male 230 (65.9%) | Female 119 (34.1%) | |
| Level of Education | | |
| Foundation 20 (5.7%) | Diploma 41 (11.7%) | Degree 268 (76.8%) |
| Master 20 (5.7%) | | |
| Nationality | | |
| Iran 72 (20.6%) | Yemen 63 (18.1) | Indonesia 43 (12.3%) |
| Tanzania 72 (20.6%) | Maldives 58 (16.6%) | Kazakhstan 41 (11.7%) |
| Program | | |
| Pre University 36 (10.3%) | Business and Management 150 (43.0%) | Computing and Technology 114 (32.7%) |
| Engineering 29 (8.3%) | Postgraduate (Masters) 20 (5.7%) | |

Reliability analysis has been conducted to test the reliability of the data that has been asked for this study. Table 2 below shows the result for reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 2: Reliability test result

| Item | Cronbach's Alpha | No of Items |
|---|------------------|-------------|
| Influence Factors to Pursue study in Malaysia | 0.734 | 12 |

According to Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha value is 0.734 and this is considered as strong because it exceeds 0.6, the minimum value for the statement to be reliable (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). Therefore all the questions that have been asked under these variables reliably measure the factors that could influence international students to pursue their study in Malaysia.

In this study, 12 items have been introduced in the questionnaire and all these 12 items are classified into a number of factors. Likert Scale was used to measure the level of agreement among students of Private Higher Institution in Malaysia regarding the area of Internationalization. The scale of 1 (least correct) to 5 (most correct) is used for students to state their perceptions with regards to different factors of internationalization in Malaysian Private Higher Institutions. The correlation analysis was conducted between nationalities and all the items are asked in the questionnaire in order to identify if there was any significant relationship between students' nationality and factors of internationalization and also to distinguish the factors that could influence international students in selecting Malaysia as a place for tertiary education. The result of correlation analysis is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis between Students' Nationality and Influence Factors to Pursue Study in Malaysia

| Nationality | Variables | Result |
|-------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Iran | Program is recognized | $r = .141, p = 0.008 < 0.01$ |
| | Quality and experienced lecturer | $r = .151, p = 0.005 < 0.01$ |
| Yemen | Graduate from international university | $r = .154, p = 0.004 < 0.01$ |
| | Dual degree programs | $r = .147, p = 0.006 < 0.01$ |
| | Cost of living | $r = .215, p = 0.000 < 0.01$ |
| Indonesia | Accommodation | $r = -.129, p = 0.016 < 0.05$ |
| | English as medium of instruction | $r = -.116, p = 0.031 < 0.05$ |
| Kazakhstan | Accommodation | $r = -.113, p = 0.035 < 0.05$ |
| Tanzania | Graduate from international university | $r = -.135, p = 0.012 < 0.05$ |
| Maldives | Program is recognized | $r = -.273, p = 0.000 < 0.01$ |
| | Quality and experience lecturer | $r = -.193, p = 0.001 < 0.01$ |
| | Accommodation | $r = .130, p = 0.015 < 0.05$ |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The result on Table 3 shows that recognition of the programs and qualified and experienced lecturer influenced the decision of Iranian students in selecting Malaysia as a place for higher education with significant value $p = 0.008 < 0.01$ for program is recognized and $p = 0.005 < 0.01$ for quality and experienced lecturer. It is different with Yemeni students; three factors have been identified to have influenced them in choosing Malaysia to pursue their study. The three factors are graduating from international university ($p = 0.004 < 0.01$), dual degree programs ($p = 0.006 < 0.01$) and cost of living ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$). Meanwhile for Indonesian students, accommodation and use of English as medium of instruction are identified as the main factors for them to continue study in Malaysia with significant value $0.016 < 0.05$ (accommodation) and $0.031 < 0.05$ (English as medium of instruction). Accommodation is the only factor showing significant value with Kazakhstan students ($p = 0.035 < 0.05$) choosing Malaysia as first destination for their tertiary education. In contrast, for Tanzania students, being a graduate from International University ($p = 0.012 < 0.05$) is the main factor for them choose Malaysia as the place for higher institution. On the other hand, Maldives students have chosen Malaysia because of the recognition of the programs offered by higher institutions in Malaysia ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$), the second one because of the quality and experienced lecturers ($p = 0.001 < 0.01$) served in Malaysia universities and the third factor is accommodation ($p = .015 < 0.05$); most of the universities or colleges are located relatively close to students' accommodation and this helps student to reduce their expenses (Migin et.al, 2014).

Table 4: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

| Variables | Students' Nationality | Mean | Sig. |
|--|-----------------------|--------|-------|
| Tuition Fee | Iran | 3.0556 | 0.708 |
| | Yemen | 3.2540 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.1163 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.1707 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.1111 | |
| | Maldives | 2.9310 | |
| Diversity of Culture | Iran | 3.1944 | 0.360 |
| | Yemen | 3.0952 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.3721 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.2927 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.0139 | |
| | Maldives | 3.0345 | |
| English as Medium of instruction | Iran | 3.4444 | 0.113 |
| | Yemen | 3.1587 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.6744 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.5366 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.1806 | |
| | Maldives | 3.2931 | |
| Communication between Student and Lecturer | Iran | 3.1111 | 0.409 |
| | Yemen | 2.9524 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.3488 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.1951 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.0556 | |
| | Maldives | 2.8793 | |
| Graduate from International University | Iran | 3.7500 | 0.120 |
| | Yemen | 3.3968 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.8372 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.8780 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.7778 | |
| | Maldives | 3.8793 | |
| Dual-Degree Program | Iran | 3.3333 | 0.058 |
| | Yemen | 3.0317 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.6512 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.5341 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.3472 | |
| | Maldives | 3.4483 | |
| Recognized Programs | Iran | 2.7500 | 0.000 |
| | Yemen | 3.0635 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.2558 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 2.7317 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.0417 | |
| | Maldives | 3.7931 | |

| | | | |
|---|------------|--------|------|
| Teaching Facilities | Iran | 2.5278 | .247 |
| | Yemen | 2.6667 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.0465 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 2.8780 | |
| | Tanzania | 2.7083 | |
| | Maldives | 2.6724 | |
| Quality and Experienced Lecturer | Iran | 3.6389 | .001 |
| | Yemen | 3.8571 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.9070 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 4.2439 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.8472 | |
| | Maldives | 4.4655 | |
| Accommodation | Iran | 2.4306 | .000 |
| | Yemen | 2.8413 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.0000 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 2.8780 | |
| | Tanzania | 2.1389 | |
| | Maldives | 2.1379 | |
| Transportation | Iran | 3.4306 | .437 |
| | Yemen | 3.1429 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.3023 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.6829 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.2639 | |
| | Maldives | 3.4483 | |
| Cost of Living | Iran | 3.4861 | .002 |
| | Yemen | 2.9048 | |
| | Indonesia | 3.5349 | |
| | Kazakhstan | 3.7073 | |
| | Tanzania | 3.4861 | |
| | Maldives | 3.2414 | |

Significant level at 0.05

Further analysis has been done to identify the mean differences between the 12 factors that could influence student's choice in selecting Malaysia as a destination for higher education with students' nationality. Table 4 shows the result for analysis of variance (ANOVA) between all the variables involved in this study with students' nationality.

Referring to Table 4, the result of a one-way ANOVA revealed that from all these 12 factors that have been examined; there were 4 factors have shown significant differences that can influence student's decision in selecting Malaysia as a place to pursue higher education. The first factor is recognized programs with significant value $0.000 < 0.05$, second factor is quality and experienced lecturers with significant value $0.001 < 0.05$, the third factor is accommodation with significant value $0.000 < 0.05$ and the fourth factor is cost of living with significant value $0.002 < 0.05$. Based on this analysis, tuition fee factor has a significantly higher mean score for Yemen students ($M=3.2540$) than for the factor of diversity of culture, English as a medium of instruction and communication between students and lecturers. The higher mean score for these three factor belong to Indonesia students ($M=3.3721$), ($M=3.6744$) and ($M=3.3488$). Next for the factor graduate from international university, the mean score is significantly higher for Maldives students with ($M=3.8793$) while for the factor of dual-degree programs, Indonesian students have significantly higher mean score with ($M=3.6512$). The higher mean score has been indicated for Maldives students with ($M=3.7931$) for the factor of recognized programs than for teaching facilities. Factor of teaching facilities is reported of having the higher mean score for Indonesia students ($M=3.0465$). Maldives students indicated higher mean score ($M=4.4655$) for the factor quality and experienced lecturers while the higher mean score ($M=3.000$) is recorded for Indonesian students for accommodation factor. The last two factors transportation and cost of living have shown higher mean score for Kazakhstan students with ($M=3.6829$) and ($M=3.7073$) respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

It can be concluded from the findings that students of different nationalities have shown different preferences in determining the factors that influenced their decision to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia. For Yemeni students, graduating from an international university, dual degree programs and cost of living are the first factors that they will consider.

Meanwhile, Maldivian anticipates the factors of recognized programs, quality and experienced lecturers and accommodation as the important elements to consider before they come to study in Malaysia. One interesting finding was that English being used as medium of instruction is among the factors that Indonesians have considered. This factor is not the significant value recorded for students from other nationalities. The medium of instruction in Indonesian schools and majority of the universities there are still using Bahasa Indonesia, thus English being used as medium of instruction is seen as an improved prestige and identified in this research as the key factor for them to study in Malaysia.

In a general perspective, international students from 6 nationalities indicated 4 main factors that influence them to study in Malaysia. The key influence factors are recognized programs, quality and experienced lecturer, accommodation and cost of living. Different variables are shown between the various nationalities of the international students. Hence the diversity of the nationality has significantly contributed to the results of the study. This study, however, is not without limitations. One may argue that private institutions alone cannot represent the many international universities in the country, and the scenario among them is not a portrayal of the others in general. It is crucial to emphasize, therefore, that the choice of these three private institutions with comparatively large enrolment of foreign students is particularly significant for the purpose and setting of this case study. Being a case study, moreover, this is an attempt to examine the main factors attracting international students to the university based on the factors identified in previous studies, not to conclude that the results will be identical should it be carried out in other international colleges or universities. The methods as well as findings of this case study, nonetheless, could act as another source of reference for future research regarding Institutions of Higher Education, both in private and public higher learning institutions.

For future research, all the identified limitations should be remedied or minimized accordingly to meet the objectives of the particular study. This study can also be extended into a comparative study between Malaysian and international students or between private and public institutions of higher learning. Besides the variables tested in this study, there are other factors that can be examined in developing the research dimensions in future. These, as suggested by Courts (2004), include institutional branding, correct market segmentation and communication strategy. By understanding and recognizing these dimensions, the university can fit a better positioning strategy that will attract more applicants especially from overseas. There are indeed many areas that are yet to be explored in this field. It is hoped that the outcome of this particular study will be of a significant contribution as a point of reference for further research by other Malaysian institutes of higher learning. In short, this study has established the fact that there are appropriate variables that can be utilized as strategic marketing tools to attract international students to study in private institution particular and Malaysia in general, thus contributing to the successful implementation of internationalization of higher education.

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