A STUDY ON FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHOICE OF MALAYSIAN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine the factors that influence the choice of institution for international graduate students. This research has looked at the pulling factors which influences international student choosing to study in Malaysia in terms of environments, emotional support, finances, academic qualities, location and culture. The population with 344 respondents chosen for this exercise comes from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The research instrument utilized in this research was a questionnaire and the results obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation methods. The results from of this study reveal that factors that influence choice of institution are emotional support, environment quality, finance and culture. The study recommends how Malaysia can chart its way to become the education hub in the Asian region as an alternative to the traditional education destinations like the UK and the US.

Keywords*: graduate education, international student, finances, academic qualities, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education in Malaysia is becoming increasingly important as it plays a major role in ensuring the realization of becoming an industrialized nation by the year 2020. In a double- pronged action, it contributes to not only the development of quality human resources but also creating a sustainable business as it provides services to its customers. Graduate studies have become an essential branch of education as it provides filed specific knowledge. In reaching the aim of being the regional educational hub (Koh, 2003), the Malaysian tertiary education has to be relevant and competitive in order to attract more students locally and international.

In its effort to become the regional education hub, Malaysia must look at the country that has long made education its national industry-United Kingdom. Its variety and availability combined with its quality of education has made it attractive to potential students worldwide. However, the high value of Pound Sterling has made it unaffordable to a certain segment of the potential student population (Bekhradnia, 2004; Aston 2004 and (Weko, 2004).

The most important factor in choosing an institution for graduate studies is the academic quality or the scholarship of the said institution (Holmes and McElwee, 1995; Bowden, 1997). In addition to that, environmental quality is also a key consideration as the students need to feel secure emotionally and physically and supported in their quest for knowledge. One of the major factors for students in continuing education at the graduate level is the financial aspect. Zhao (2003) contends that cost plays an important role in the decision-making process as to the location of the institution for the students to continue their education.

Additionally, other problems which relate to both course and non-course related matters impede academic success of international students. For instance, problems can arise due to cultural differences. This is stated by Prieto (1995), in that the bigger the cultural differences between the student's home culture and the host culture, the more complicated their adjustment is likely to be. Other factors include the subject content, the delivery of the course content, loneliness, financial pressures and adjustments in a totally new and academic environment.

Although there are many problems in this area, many of the studies remain theoretical. This provides the catalyst for the current empirical study. The data gathered from this study will shed light on the factors affecting the success of international students in their courses and, will enable the universities to develop programmes for the staff and students so that social, cultural, academic and intellectual needs of these students can be addressed at an early stage.

Hence, this paves way for the objective of the study which is to determine the factors that influence the choice of institution for international graduate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students arrive in Malaysia with a wide range of English language competency levels. For some students, the adjustment to hearing and speaking English is relatively swift and simple. For others, however, the transition is much more difficult. Selvadurai (1991) claims that the first barrier encountered by international students is language. In fact, many researchers have found a direct correlation between language fluency and ease of adjustment, with students who are less fluent in English exhibiting more adjustment problems overall (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Parr, et al., 1991; Zimmermann, 1995). In addition, students may find it even more difficult to express themselves in English during stressful situations (Aubrey, 1991), which they certainly face frequently during the process of adapting to the Malaysian culture.

Students' ability to speak, understand, and write English affects both their academic and their personal lives. In the classrooms, students may find it difficult to comprehend what their professors and their classmates are saying. To compound the problem, many may be reluctant to ask for help because of their discomfort of communicating in English. Outside of the academic world, students may also find it difficult to reach out to fellow students on a personal level to begin the process of developing friendships and support network.

In addition, the language barrier may have an impact on the simple logistics of international students' lives. Shopping for groceries, buying clothes, opening a bank account, searching for an apartment – these and other activities that people deal with on a regular basis are made much more difficult and uncomfortable for the student

who is forced to do everything using a new language.

To a certain extent, self-esteem is bolstered by the support network that individuals build for themselves over time. When international students choose to come Malaysia to pursue their education, they are leaving their established personal supports behind and may consequently experience a dip in their levels of self-esteem (Barratt & Huba, 1994). Thus, not only do international students miss their loved ones and experience homesickness and loneliness, the absence of these personal relationships may also affect their attitudes towards themselves.

International students' self-confidence may also suffer due to the way they are sometimes treated in Malaysia. Although many foreign students are among the brightest in their home countries, problems associated with the language barrier keep many of them from being able to communicate effectively with those around them in Malaysia. Few foreigners are treated as if they are ignorant simply because they may have difficulty speaking English.

The language barrier may also keep very intelligent students from excelling in their classes in the way they are used to doing at home. Aubrey asserts "receiving a bad grade not only adds to a foreign student's fear of failure but is likely to accentuate feelings of isolation from peers perceived as doing better" (1991; 22). Students who receive poor grades due to language difficulties may feel that they are failing both academically and in their ability to learn English.

To further compound the problems international students face with language and cultural adjustments, Malaysian government regulations make it extremely difficult for foreign students to enter the country, to work here, and to stay here. Visa requirements vary widely by country, and some students have a much easier time than others acquiring the necessary paperwork. Regulations are so complicated, however, that most colleges and universities find it necessary to have at least one staff person who is responsible for all visa and work permit issues (Woolston, 1983).

Not surprisingly, international students experiencing so many significant changes and challenges usually go through a period of culture shock after first coming Malaysia. Culture shock has been described as a continuum of stress reactions to experienced conflict. "Culture shock may range from mildly heightened vulnerability to extreme depression, fear, and suspicion" (Aubrey, 1991; 23).

Prieto (1995) identifies three stages of culture shock. During the first stage, or "contact" phase, students typically feel "excited and happy" (1995;204). Also referred to as a type of "honeymoon" phase (Aubrey, 1991, p. 23), this is a time when students experience all of the new and different things in their environment as being inherently positive. The second stage is termed the "conflict" stage and is marked by feelings of depression, anxiety, confusion, and anger (Prieto, 1995; 204). Students may begin to feel overwhelmed by all of the differences they are experiencing and by the adjustments they are being forced to make. Difficulties with English only worsen these feelings. The novelty of the cross-cultural experience begins to wear off; dealing with cultural differences and communicating in a foreign language on a daily basis become simply exhausting.

The third stage, the "adaptation" phase, describes the time when students feel "more comfortable in the host culture, not as upset, anxious or depressed" (Prieto, 1995; 204). Students in this stage have become more accustomed to cultural differences and are

better acclimated to their environment in which some things are accepted and others things are rejected (Aubrey, 1991).

Both the timing and the severity of the conflict stage are influenced by several factors, including the extent of difference between the home and host culture; "personality factors (including maturity, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility and emotional stability)"; the degree to which the student prepares for his/her sojourn prior to leaving his/her home country; and "how satisfied the student was in his/her home culture" (Prieto, 1995; 212). In addition, this difficult time can be complicated by students' unwillingness or inability to communicate their feelings with anyone.

Having to admit one is unhappy may imply loss of face; a situation very threatening to Asian, African and Middle-Eastern students taught not to express negative emotions overtly. However, when such feelings are denied or repressed, stress often results. (Aubrey, 1991). Hence, student affairs professionals must learn to recognize these patterns and signs of culture shock in order to improve their ability to help international students who are experiencing what can truly be overwhelming difficulties.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative survey was adopted to derive answers to the question the study seeks on the factors influencing the choice of Malaysian institutions of higher learning (IHLs) among the international students enrolled in selected Malaysian institutions of higher learning and its relationship with students' profile. A questionnaire utilizing a four-point Likert Scale was used to measure the variables of cost, environmental quality, academic quality and publicity.

In the four-point Likert scale, 1 denotes strong disagreement, 2 – disagreement, 4-agreement and 5- strong agreement. The four-point Likert scale is chosen to reduce ambiguity with the deletion of "not sure". A pilot test was conducted to test its reliability and validity in achieving its purpose. A reliability test using SPSS for Windows Version 13.0 software was also conducted.

The questionnaires were personally administered by the writers of this paper to the sample drawn for this study. The population chosen for this exercise comes from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Purposive random sampling was used by taking the respondents in proportion to the percentage of the graduate student population of the different countries to the whole population of the international graduate students of the university. The number of the respondents involved in this study is approximately 344 individuals.

The following section presents the results of this study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The result section is ordered according to institutions which participated in the study.

The table 4.1 shows that the majority of the respondents in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) indicated culture and emotional support (mean: 4.03; 4.00) as factors most influencing choice of institution, followed by the quality of the environment

(mean: 3.95). Ironically, respondents indicated academic quality of UKM as the lowest as the factor influencing choice of institution (mean: 3.15). This may be due to the fact that being a research university and having a ranking of less than 200 in Times Higher Education ranking system speaks volumes of its academic quality. Hence, its academic strength may not be a problem for the respondents, rather the culture and emotional support.

Table 4.1: UKM: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

NO.	ITEM	Mean	SD
1.	Academic quality	2.15	1.679
2.	Environment quality	3.95	1.905
3.	Emotional support	4.00	1.919
4.	Finance	3.69	2.129
5.	Location	3.72	1.919
6.	Culture	4.03	1.926

The table 4.2 below shows that majority of the respondents indicated emotional support (mean: 4.30), location (mean: 4.22) and culture (mean: 4.14) as factors most influencing choice of institution. Similar to UKM, academic quality of Universiti Sains Malaysia ranked the lowest as the factor influencing choice of institution (mean: 2.82). This could be because, since Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is an APEX university in Malaysia, the academic quality of USM may not be an issue for the respondents.

Table 4.2: USM: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

NO.	ITEM	Mean	SD
1.	Academic quality	2.82	2.076
2.	Environment quality	3.68	1.751
3.	Emotional support	4.30	1.748
4.	Finance	2.94	2.061
5.	Location	4.22	1.759
6.	Culture	4.13	1.719

The table 4.3 below shows the majority of the respondents of Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) indicated that emotional support (mean: 4.81) followed by location (mean: 4.61) and culture (mean: 4.58) as the factors most influencing choice of institution. The lowest item influencing choice of institution is academic quality (mean: 2.58). This could be due to the fact that UIAM is an established university in the international circuit for its academic quality, thus this may not pose a problem for the

respondents.

Table 4. 3: UIAM: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

NO.	ITEM	Mean	SD
1.	Academic quality	2.58	2.089
2.	Environment quality	3.78	1.869
3.	Emotional support	4.81	1.431
4.	Finance	3.78	1.958
5.	Location	4.61	1.728
6.	Culture	4.58	1.697

The table 4.4 below shows that the majority of the respondents of Universiti Utara Malaysia ranked culture and location (mean: 4.52; 4.38) followed by emotional support (mean: 4.29), environment quality (mean: 4.25) and finance (mean: 3.31) as the factors most influencing choice of institution. Similar to other institutions of higher learning in this study, the lowest factor influencing choice of institution was academic quality (mean: 2.62).

Table 4.4 : UUM: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

NO.	ITEM	Mean	SD
1.	Academic quality	2.62	1.982
2.	Environment quality	4.25	1.595
3.	Emotional support	4.29	1.588
4.	Finance	3.31	1.884
5.	Location	4.38	1.549
6.	Culture	4.52	1.663

The table 4.5 below shows the majority of the respondents Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) ranked culture and emotional support (mean: 4.05; 3.95) followed by environment quality (mean: 3.64), location (mean: 3.51), finance (mean: 3.51) as the factors most influencing choice of institution. The lowest item is the academic quality (mean: 2.04).

Table 4.5: UTM: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

NO.	ITEM	Mean	SD
1.	Academic quality	2.04	1.567
2.	Environment quality	3.64	1.821
3.	Emotional support	3.95	1.699
4.	Finance	3.26	1.849
5.	Location	3.51	1.692
6.	Culture	4.05	1.739

Since academic quality was not ranked highly as the factor that most influences choice of institution by the respondents of this study, this item was subjected to further analysis.It was found that a majority of the respondents state academic quality as one the best aspect of Malaysia (mean: 3.65) and they expressed satisfaction of the IHLs (mean: 3.59). This finding corroborates with the findings in tables 4.1- 4.5, in which academic quality was ranked the factor that least influences choice of institution by the respondents of this study.

Table 4.6: ACADEMIC QUALITY

Rank	Academic Quality	Mean
1.	High academic quality	3.65
2.	Satisfied with the academic quality	3.59
3.	Recommend institution to friends and relative	3.51
4.	IHL reputation	3.51
5.	Academicians reputation	3.50
6.	Fulfills my expectation	3.47

RECOMMENDATION

When international students first arrive in Malaysia, every effort should be made to provide them with an in-depth and effective orientation to what awaits them. Practical matters (Where do I shop? How do I sign up for classes? Where do I go to do my banking?) should certainly be covered, but issues of emotional adjustment should also not be neglected. Talking to students about some of the cultural differences they are likely to encounter may help them to recognize these issues when they begin to experience culture shock.

Woolston (1983) recommends that colleges and universities consider planning an ongoing, long-term orientation; due to the adjustments students face when they first come, they may not absorb everything they need to learn at a standard orientation held shortly after arrival in Malaysia. Zimmermann (1995) and Parr, et al. (1991) recommend also including already established international students as peer counselors to aid incoming students in the adjustment process.

Colleges and universities should ensure that international students are made aware of the various resources that the campus has to offer them. Students need to know where and to whom they can turn to when they are facing the ups and downs of culture shock. Informing international students of available co-curricular activities and encouraging them to participate is also one way to assist them in establishing meaningful relationships with other students (Christensen & Thielen, 1983). Barratt and Huba (1994) examined international students' participation in available campus and community activities and found a positive relationship between that participation and students' self-esteem.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

International students come from a wide range of social, cultural, academic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. They bring with them the cultural and intellectual wealth of their home country and take with them the culture of the host country. In fact, they are the messengers of the cultural, educational and linguistic exchange internationally. Newness and strangeness in the educational and social environment affect them academically, drain them out mentally and exhaust them psychologically. Traditional attitudes to knowledge and styles of learning can lead to severe problems of intellectual cultural shock (Ballard, 1987:109). Hence,in a competitive education industry, it is necessary that the educational services are provided with due care, skill and diligence addressing the needs of our 'clients'. It is utmost necessary that adequate support systems be provided for large intake of international students.

From the research it can be concluded that Malaysia is on its way to becoming the regional education hub as envisioned by the Malaysian government. It appears that Malaysia's official religion and its political stability are crucial factors influencing the international students' choice of Malaysian graduate education. The findings shows that the international graduate students are attracted to Malaysian graduate education because they perceive it as offering good value for money. The highest pulling factor is Malaysia's academic quality and reasonable cost with the low exchange rates of Malaysian Ringgit in comparison to other education destinations like the US, UK and even Singapore. Moreover, they feel that although the Malaysian graduate education has significant advantages and disadvantages, they still feel good about recommending it to others in their home countries.

However, it is still not a secure level for Malaysia. It still has to strive to improve our facilities to hold our place as an up-and-coming education destination.

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