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Factors That Influence the International Students' Decisions to Study in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the motivating factors and criteria for international students to choose Malaysia and its higher education institutions as study destination. The total participants in the study are 200 international students chosen based on random sampling method, who are currently enrolled in one of the top public universities – University of Malaya in 2014. The data is analyzed via descriptive analysis. The findings indicate the most 5 influential factors that influence international students' decisions to choose Malaysia as study destination are: cost of tuition/ fees, the academic reputation of institution, competitive program fees in comparison to those of other countries, lifestyle and culture, and a safe place to live. The study also finds the top five criteria for international students choosing University of Malaya as a place to study: the recognition of degrees, cost of education, the quality of faculty courses, availability of courses and Image/Reputation of this institution in my country. The paper makes a contribution to unfold various factors why foreign students choose Malaysia as their study destination. This knowledge is significant to formulate more effective recruitment strategies for Malaysian higher institutions to attract more international students.

Key words: International students; Factors; Education; Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

For several decades, international education has become a competitive industry and the number of students who choose to study abroad has grown dramatically. Growth in the internationalization of tertiary education reflects the globalization of economies and societies, and also the expansion of tertiary systems and institutions throughout the world. In many countries such as U.S., Canada and Australia, international students contribute with huge sums to the economy and generate a substantive amount of work for the host country. As international students not only contribute with tuition fees they also spend a huge amount on accommodation, food and so on (Mazzarol, 2002). There is a prediction that over 7 million foreign students will enroll in higher education institutions all over the world by 2025 (Perraton, 2004).

According to the "Global Education Digest 2010" UNESCO, Malaysia has become the first choice of destination for students from Sudan, Yemen, Maldives and Somalia in 2009. As a whole, the admission of international students contributed approximately RM2.6 billion to the national income in 2010 (Global Education Digest, 2010). Verbik (2007) claimed Malaysia developed as an emerging contender in providing higher education service possessing above 80,000 foreign students in 2009.

A. Statement of Problem

To be able to succeed in attracting more international students it is necessary to understand what factors influence international students' decisions to study abroad. This is especially true for Malaysia that has engaged in attracting more international students to achieve 200,000 by the year 2020 to become an international hub of excellence for higher education. However, there are currently few researches in Malaysia focusing on understanding international students' needs and their reasons why choose Malaysia as study destination. Engelke (2008) identified that there is relationship

between emphasizing student's needs and a higher institution's attractiveness towards foreign students. Thus, there is a need to fill the gap to investigate what factors influence international students' decisions and mobility, especially from a student perspective. The study also attempts to contribute to formulate better recruitment strategies and policies to attract international students for higher education institutions in Malaysia.

B. Purposes and Questions

The main purposes of this study are to explore foreign students' motivating factors to study in Malaysia and to provide suggestions on recruitment policy for Malaysian higher institutions to attract more international students. To answer these questions, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the factors that influence international students' decision in selecting Malaysia as a destination to study?
- b) What are the criteria that decide international students choose to study in University of Malaya (UM)?
- c) How can Malaysian higher institutions use this knowledge to better design their marketing and recruitment strategies towards international students?

C. Significance of the Study

Under the intensive international competition around the world for foreign students, there is a necessary to better understand the motivating factors for international students to choose specific study destination. However, limited researches have focused on the factors that play significant role on decisions for foreign students to choose study destination. In order to address this, the study is an attempt to fill that research gap in order to contribute for Malaysian higher institutions to formulate more suitable recruitment strategies for attracting more international students.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to attract more enrollments from overseas, tremendous studies have been carried out to understand various factors that influence international students' decisions to choose study destination all over the world. Throsby (1999, p.11) indicates that a large number of students choose to study abroad based on the reasons for improved international communication channels, declining air travel cost, various educational opportunities, broadened global labor markets and so on. Russell, Allan and Jill (2010) state students choose to study overseas because it is a mandatory portion of their degree course. What's more, Bodycott (2009) claimed students often take facilities, accommodation and scholarships availability into account when they make decision. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) clarified that there are six main factors influencing the choice of study destination: a) knowledge

of the host country, b) personal recommendations, c) cost of study and living, d) overall environment, e) geographic location and f) social connection.

The image or reputation of a country and an institution impose great influences on international students' decision (Cubillo et al., 2006). Lay and Maguire (1981) observed that the most influential factor that decides students to choose the institution is to evaluate the reputation of the universities. Keling (2007) reconfirmed that students often judge the reputation of specific institutions before selecting their final destination.

Cost is another crucial factor for foreign students as most of the time, the cost of tuition and living together is a huge burden for same mid-class family. Not only Maringe (2006) observed costs are considered as factor to decide study destination, but also Ivy (2010) argued that financial limitation place impact on students' decision, probably because increasingly high education costs will prevent some family to consider a number of top ranking universities in developed countries. Students who are cost-sensitive prefer to choose institution with high quality courses but at reasonable cost (Fernandez, 2010).

There are some internal factors that place impact on students' decision, such family recommendations (Ivy, 2010). Opinions from friends and peers normally influence the mind of those applicants to consider their study destination (Hayden, 2000). Besides, the availability of certain programs is a power factor for new students to decide specific university (Yusof et al., 2008).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were international students who enroll in University of Malaya (UM) in 2014.

The total population of international students in UM in 2014 is about 3,700 (International Student Center, 2014). Research claimed that sample size is decided by some factors, such as time and cost (Bryman, 2008). Thus, the sampling for this study is 200 based on limited time and cost. The data was collected using questionnaire that was sent to international students through the researcher's university and personal networks and were therefore a result of convenience sampling. The sample size is also limited by the availability of participants and is not pre-decided in the research approach. 200 questionnaires have been delivered among international students during 21 April-9 May and then 183 copies have been collected back, giving a response rate of 91.5%.

2.2 Study Instrument

In this study, the instrument is the structured survey for international students' studying and living experience in University of Malaya designed to seek relevant information. The answers for key questions are designed

by using the five point Likert –scale (where 1 = Very Unimportant, 2 = Unimportant, 3 = Neither, 4 = Important, and 5 = Very Important). The higher score means the higher influence or importance for the students’ decision and the lower score means the lower influence.

2.3 Data Analysis

The study conducted quantitative analysis after data collection. Descriptive statistics include numerical presentation such as frequency or percentage distribution of the variables. The means (*M*) for each item provide a clear understanding of the importance of each factor. Then the study easily concludes the top influential factors for foreign students choosing Malaysia and UM as their study destination respectively.

3. RESULTS

Among the 183 international students responding to the survey, 58.5% were male, compared with 41.5% female. The most common age group of participants was 25-30 years old (51.4%), followed by 18-24 years (31.7%) and 31-35 years (12.6%). 82.5% of the respondents are single and 17.5% are married. The paper indicated the vast majority (92.4%) of international student came from Asia continent (including Eastern Asia, South East Asia, South West Asia, and West Asia), except Nigeria and Sudan. The top 3 counties of origin were China (35.5% of respondents), Iran (16.4%) and Pakistan (10.4%) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Top 10 Countries of Origin of Survey Respondents

| No. | Origin country | Number | Percentage |
|-------|----------------|--------|------------|
| 1. | China | 65 | 35.5% |
| 2. | Iran | 30 | 16.4% |
| 3. | Pakistan | 19 | 10.4% |
| 4. | Iraq | 16 | 8.8% |
| 5. | Palestine | 13 | 7.1% |
| 6. | Indonesia | 12 | 6.6% |
| 7. | Nigeria | 9 | 4.9% |
| 8. | Myanmar | 7 | 3.8% |
| 9. | Bangladesh | 7 | 3.8% |
| 10. | Sudan | 5 | 2.7% |
| Total | 10 | 183 | 100% |

Foreign students were asked to rate 15 factors that may have influenced their choice to study in Malaysia. The findings reveal the most 5 influential factors for them to choose Malaysia as the study destination is the cost of tuition followed by academic reputation of the institution,

competitive program fees, lifestyle and culture and a safe place to live, as reflected in Table 2.

Table 2
Factors Influencing decision to Study in Malaysia (Ranking)

| No. | Item | Mean |
|-----|--|------|
| 1. | Cost of tuition/ fees | 3.57 |
| 2. | The academic reputation of institution | 3.54 |
| 3. | Competitive program fees in comparison to those of other countries | 3.23 |
| 4. | Lifestyle and culture | 3.11 |
| 5. | A safe place to live | 3.10 |
| 6. | Recommendation of friends or family | 3.02 |
| 7. | Natural attractions and climate | 2.93 |
| 8. | Job opportunity after graduation | 2.93 |
| 9. | A scholarship or other financial support to study in the Institution | 2.70 |
| 10. | Islamic country | 2.68 |
| 11. | Political stability | 2.66 |
| 12. | Advertisements for studying and living in Malaysia | 2.53 |
| 13. | My course is not presented in my home country | 2.45 |
| 14. | Opportunity to live in Malaysia later | 2.40 |
| 15. | Family members or friends in Malaysia | 2.29 |

There are 8 criteria chosen to measure the impact that may have imposed on international students’ decision to study in University of Malaya (UM). For international students, the five most important criteria used to decide to study in UM are: the recognition of degrees (*M*=3.88), cost of education (*M*=3.73), quality of faculty courses (*M*=3.69), availability of courses (*M*=3.69), and reputation of the institution (*M*=3.64). The entry requirements (*M*=3.57) and learning/teaching styles (*M*=3.60) are the least important criteria for them to decide to study in University of Malaya (see Table 3).

Table 3
Criteria Influencing Decision to Study in UM (Ranking)

| No. | Item | Mean |
|-----|--|------|
| 1. | Recognition of degrees | 3.88 |
| 2. | Cost of education | 3.73 |
| 3. | Quality of faculty courses | 3.69 |
| 3. | Availability of courses | 3.69 |
| 5. | Image/reputation of this institution in my country | 3.64 |
| 6. | Opportunity to improve English language skills | 3.61 |
| 7. | Entry requirements | 3.57 |
| 8. | Learning/teaching styles | 3.60 |

Compared the factors that place vital influence for international students to choose Malaysia and UM, the

study found two overlap determinants have impacted them to consider the country and institution synchronously: Cost and Reputation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research indicates the most 5 influential factors that influence international students' decision on study in Malaysia, which include cost of tuition/ fees, the academic reputation of institution, competitive program fees in comparison to those of other countries, lifestyle and culture, and a safe place to live.

The study also finds the top five criteria for international students choosing University of Malaya (UM) as a place to study are: the recognition of degrees, cost of education, the quality of faculty courses, availability of courses and reputation of the institution.

In summary, cost of tuition and reputation of institution contribute as the most influential factors for international students to choose the country and institutions. According to Wagner and Fard (2009), policy makers and institutions should maintain the reasonable education costs as advantage to promote their academic programs worldwide. That is to say, University of Malaya and other universities or colleges should reexamine their price policy of the tuitions and accommodation on campus to make sure cost always play as a competitive advantage to attract international students. On the other hand, university rankings around the world weigh heavily for the reputation of institution, thus Malaysian higher education institutions should devote more resources to increase the world rankings to establish the image with high quality of education. For the specialized colleges or private universities, international cooperation or exchange programs with top universities all over the world is an effective way to promote good reputation for higher education. Besides, the research revealed the majority of the international students come from Asia countries. UM and other higher education institutions should pay more attention to the understanding of youth from Asia countries in order to prepare well to be the host country when they arrive.

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