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Choices of destination for transnational higher education: “pull” factors in an Asia Pacific market

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ABSTRACT

Traditional assumptions favouring native English language countries in transnational higher education (TNHE) overlook experiences of international students in new emerging Asian education hubs. Specifically, there has been limited research relating to international students' choice for studying in Malaysia. Drawing from the “push-pull” model of factors influencing the movement of international student destination choice, this study identifies determinants of student destination decision for TNHE. While acknowledging perceived qualities and values of individual institutions as important criteria, findings from interviews with students that are currently enrolled at international branch campuses also indicated key influences driven by “pull” factors of country image – attractive features of Malaysia, i.e. comparatively low cost of living, low tuition fees, safe country for living, stable government, modern amenities, proximity in culture and religion and freedom from discrimination – as focal motives in their choice decision. These findings provide implications for policy-makers to deploy their educational resources as well as develop effective promotional and marketing strategies in promoting the local reputation and amenities in order to attract more international students.

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Introduction

Internationalisation of Malaysian higher education is a distinct departure from British Empire times, in which primary education was deemed sufficient for the locals (Welch 2011). Starting in 1929 with Raffles and the University of Malaya, a commitment to higher education has increasingly emerged. With the advent of transnational trends in education delivery, diversity through international students has become a vital competitive benchmark, as well as a significant source of growth and revenue for the nation's university systems.

Transnational education (TNE) has been widely studied (Huang 2007; Knight 2004; Marginson 2007; Rizvi and Lingard 2010), although not as much in Asian countries. Lawley and Perry (2015) found course and country characteristics to be major factors that influenced

destination choice for students from Hong Kong. The scope of their investigation of location characteristics included safety, potential to immigrate, general way of life, as well as perceptions of family and friends. Only recently has research appeared (Ahmad and Buchanan 2015; Akiba 2008; Hill et al. 2014; Lee 2000; Sirat and Azman 2014; Tham and Kam 2008) relating to directional flows of students to Asian countries, particularly to Malaysia. The population of transnational higher education (TNHE) students selecting Malaysia for their education source continues to rise annually (UNESCO 2014) as the nation is successfully making itself into an education hub in the region (Knight and Morshidi 2011). A beneficial synergy is emerging as multicultural participation amongst student populations in the country has been shown to be enhance the atmosphere of learning and active participation in the classroom environment (Pandian, Baboo, and Mahfoodh 2014). Research in this area contributes to the body of knowledge relating to public policy in emerging markets.

It is recorded that 18,242 international students studied in Malaysia in 2001 (Mohamed 2010) and in 10 years, it grew to 86,919, which was equivalent to a 16% growth per annum. The country has articulated goals of becoming the world's sixth-biggest education-exporting country by 2020 with a target of 2,00,000 international students studying in Malaysia's higher institutions (ICEF Monitor 2012). As of 2014, this goal is not on track to meet the target (Ali 2014) based primarily on declines in the three largest current sources of international students (Nigeria, Yemen and Iran) which provide nearly half the foreign students in Malaysia. The growth in students from other nations is not advancing greatly.

Exploratory studies of TNE (McMahon 1988, 1992) envisioned "push" factors based mostly on economic and developmental weaknesses of emerging market countries and "pull" factors with the assumption that the USA was the destination of choice. In a post-Western-dominated education era in which students are more frequently opting to stay closer to home for their education (Buchanan 2014), high-quality education is no longer the domain of European or North American universities (Mourshed, Farrell, and Barton 2012). "Push" factors are now characterised as a variety of influences to travel out of one's home country (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) and "pull" factors relating to the host who endeavours to attract foreign students (Li and Bray 2007).

In focusing on host country "pull" factors, the purpose of this study is to examine effectiveness criteria of TNE in Malaysia. Extensive documentation has observed mobility trends of international students (OECD 2013); however, little research (Lawley and Perry 2015; Li and Bray 2007) has addressed the factors influencing the flow of international students enrolled in universities in the Asian region generally, and Malaysia in particular, in the context of "pull" factors. International students in Asian countries have started choosing to study abroad in nearby Asian countries, frequently selecting Malaysia as their study destination. This is a new trend that has emerged due to the establishment of many international branch campuses in Malaysia, Singapore and China (Ahmad 2014). Therefore, in an effort to redress a gap in research, the current study seeks to explore the focal destination choices of international students currently enrolled at international branch campuses located in Malaysia, a country that has emerged among "new" higher education hubs in Asia. Although institutional features are extremely important such as quality of education, brand image/reputation and facilities available (Fang and Wang 2014; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman 2012a), it is clear from the context of this study that perceived country features of Malaysia weigh heavily in international student decision-making choice. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the internationalisation strategy of higher education

Table 1. International branch campuses in Malaysia.

University	Year of establishment	Campus of origin	Branch location in Malaysia
Monash University	1998	Australia	Petaling Jaya (near Kuala Lumpur)
Curtin University of Technology	1999	Australia	Miri, Sarawak
The University of Nottingham	2000	United Kingdom	Semenyih (near Kuala Lumpur)
Swinburne University of Technology	2004	Australia	Kuching, Sarawak
Newcastle University	2009	United Kingdom	Nusajaya (Johor)
The Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology (NMIT)	2010	Netherlands	Johor Baharu (Johor)
Manipal International University	2011	India	Nilai (near Kuala Lumpur)
Raffles University	2011	Singapore	Johor Baharu (Johor)
Southampton University	2012	United Kingdom	Nusajaya (Johor)
Heriot-Watt University	2013	United Kingdom	Putrajaya (near Kuala Lumpur)
University of Reading	2012	United Kingdom	Johor Baharu (Johor)
Xiamen University	2015	China	Sepang (near Kuala Lumpur)

in Malaysia. The paper then describes the methodology employed in the study. Empirical results and discussion are presented. Finally, a conclusion is summarised.

The strategy of higher education in Malaysia

Malaysia has in recent years been establishing itself as a regional higher educational hub and a rapidly emerging competitor in the recruitment of international students (Wilkins and Huisman 2011). The country's National Higher Education Strategic Plan of 2007 has declared ambitions to become a major exporter of higher education by 2020 (MOHE 2011). It was estimated that each international student is spending € 6500 per year in the country throughout the course of their study, which translates to approximately € 450 million at the level of 70,000 international students residing in the country (MOHE 2011).

Higher education institutions in Malaysia are of two main types: public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). At present, there are currently 20 public universities in the country and are categorised into 3 groups: research universities (5), focused universities (11) (technical, education, management and defence) and comprehensive universities (4). On the other hand, there are 493 private universities and universities colleges (MOHE 2014). The desire to be internationally competitive in the knowledge-based economy and the goal of becoming a regional hub for higher education have led Malaysia to target the development of international branch campuses. The purpose of establishing international branch campuses is to reduce the outflow of funds for overseas education (MAPCU 2014), and these institutions give local and international students an option to earn a foreign degree at lower cost than studying abroad.

An overview of international branch campuses in Malaysia

With the nation's intention to become leading players in the global international student market and to be recognised as an excellent international hub of higher education by the year 2020 (MOHE 2007), reputable foreign universities have been invited from the UK,

Australia, the Netherlands, Singapore, China and India to offer niche programmes according to their individual strengths to set-up international branch campuses in the country. Monash University of Australia had become the first foreign university establishing their international branch campus in 1998. The university has partnered with SungeiWay Group – a successful Malaysian conglomerate with interests in construction, manufacturing, leisure and tourism (Sirat 2006). Since then, numerous foreign universities established international branch campuses and to date, there are 11 international branch campuses in operation (Table 1). In 2013, the Malaysian Government announced the first international branch campus from a university in China that will be established in the country and built in Salak Tinggi, about 16 km from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang. It is expected to be operational in September 2015. International branch campuses are located in various parts of Malaysia and use different approaches in establishing roles and responsibilities between the home and branch institutions. The international branch campuses in Malaysia are particularly well placed geographically to attract local and international students from other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and India, as well as from several Arab and African countries (Tham and Kam 2008). They offer recognised undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that are identical to that of their main campus overseas (Banks and McBurnie 1999). At most institutions, undergraduate programmes are heavily focused on professional occupations, including business, engineering, technology and communications, although several universities also offer liberal arts programmes. It is worth noting that the initiative of international branch campuses in Malaysia is focused on supporting both teaching and research agenda. This distinguishes it from other international branch campuses such as in the UAE and in Qatar which are mainly oriented to the recruitment of international students for training, profit and profile purposes (Knight and Sirat 2011).

Malaysia: international student attraction

In terms of international student recruitment, Malaysia has expected to attract 1,50,000 international students by 2015, focusing on postgraduate and sponsored international students in particular. The main target countries for international student recruitment are from Asian, Middle East and African countries. China, India and Indonesia are targeted because they are the largest student markets in the region and because they share language and cultural similarities with Malaysia's Chinese, Indian and Malay communities, respectively. Indonesia and the UAE are target markets due to sociocultural and religious similarities (i.e. Islam) they share with Malaysia. Malaysia's second group of target countries includes Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam and Thailand because they are neighbouring nations with established or growing middle classes and high-performing or emerging economies, and because in several of these countries, there is an increasing demand for higher education. The third group of countries targeted by the Malaysian Government includes Russia, Australia, the Middle East and North Africa region (including Iran, Jordan, Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia) and Africa. In recent years, the Malaysian Government has stepped up its recruitment efforts for international students in African countries, such as Botswana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Mauritius, all of which are developing nations in need of human capital development and whose training needs Malaysia, as a former developing country, understands well, according to the government (Becker and Kolster 2012).

ASEAN Region



Figure 1. ASEAN region. Source: ICEF Monitor 2014.

With the emergence of international branch campuses and flow of international students as a back ground, the purpose of this study is to examine why international students have selected an international branch campus located in Malaysia as a choice for higher education, with a particular emphasis on the role that place played in that decision-making. By focusing the study in this field, this qualitative research would reduce a gap in the current literature of student mobility, which will enable the development of student decision-making model and provide much needed information for policy-makers and HEIs to develop effective promotional and marketing strategies in promoting the country's reputation in order to attract more international students.

Pull factors in destination choice for higher education

Many studies have tried to identify the reasons international students seek an international education (Eder, Smith, and Pitts 2010; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Mehtap-Smadi and Hashemipour 2011; Nachatar Singh, Schapper, and Jack 2014; Pimpa 2004; Wilkins, Shams, and Huisman 2013). The decision to study abroad involves a complex set of processes, multistage in nature, and can be influenced by various factors. A marketing approach was taken in examining institutional features and learning experiences in universities locating themselves in host countries, focusing more on the schools themselves than the destinations in general (Wilkins and Huisman 2015; Wilkins et al. 2012). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) contend that study abroad choice involves three distinct phases – first, the student decision to study internationally rather than at home; second, the choice of host country or city for study destination and third, the institution in the host country chosen. Most research however in this field tends to concentrate on the decision-making of local students choosing to study in Western or English language-originated countries such as the UK, USA and Australia. An

example of one such study by Davey (2005) explores the motivations of Chinese students in the UK. The results show that by studying in the UK, Chinese students feel it would be easier and cheaper for them to travel across Europe during out of semester periods. The availability of one-year postgraduate programmes is appealing (rather than three years in other countries) and also the British education system is perceived as the one of the best and being recognised internationally.

In an education selection study by Chen (2007), it appeared that the choice of East Asia students to pursue their higher education in Canada was substantially guided by the programmes offered by the Canadian institutions. In addition, host country pulling factors such as economic stability and safe environment as well as a set of negative pushing factors from third countries such as the USA due to complexity of visa application process has influenced the decision of international students for an alternative destination. The study undertaken by Shah, Sid Nair and Bennett (2013) in Australia with 120 students on factors influencing student choice to study with private HEIs suggests that the characteristics related to quality of the institutions, quality of instructors or quality of academic programmes and infrastructure guided the decision-making process. On the other hand, European Union students choose the UK for higher education mainly because it provides them an opportunity to learn the English language and UK cultural traditions (Davey 2005).

Research has shown that a great number of international students who leave their home country for higher education abroad are influenced by a combination of push–pull factors (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). A fundamental requirement is that students have access to resources for college. Generally, push factors refer to the characteristics of the home environment that are considered by students as unsatisfactory and initiate a student's decision to undertake study abroad. These include unfavourable conditions in their home countries (Altbach 1998), poor career prospects in home country and future migration opportunities after graduation (Hung, Chung, and Ho 2000), adverse social or political conditions (Maringe and Carter 2007), low-quality educational provision and lack of choice of programmes in home country (Altbach 2004), insufficient capacity, infrastructure and resources to accommodate all students (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Shanka, Quintal, and Taylor 2005), ineligibility to enter state/public higher institution (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman 2012a), limited access to funding and fewer world class institutions offering postgraduate programmes (Altbach 2004). From the range of these reasons, it is the students' assessment of their nation's current circumstances that contribute to their reasons to move beyond their national boundaries for higher education (Maringe and Carter 2007).

However, pull factors according to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) emerge as a result of the various aspects such as attractiveness of a destination country over other countries (Bodycott and Lai 2012), reputation of country or city for high-quality education and recommendations from friends, relatives or parents (Gatfield and Chen 2006), safe environment and opportunity to learn in a multicultural environment (Chen 2008), quality academic and non-academic services and facilities (Ahmad 2014), future employment prospects (Pimpa 2005), the prestige of international degree (Mavondo, Tsarenko, and Gabbott 2004), English language-speaking environment (Bodycott 2009), the institution's global ranking (Marginson 2007), lower cost of living and comparatively low tuition fees (Shanka, Quintal, and Taylor 2005) and existing social links and cultural perspectives (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman 2012a) and availability of scholarships (McMahon 1992). Within this list of factors that pull

students' decision-making choice to study abroad, it is the perceived offerings of a particular country, its availability of resources and facilities, its quality of education and reputation of institution and so on that attract students to enrol in their universities.

The Malaysian Government's Vision 2020 includes the deliberate development into a modern knowledge economy and a regional "eduhub" (Welch 2011). The term "glocal" describes the new student generation which has global ambitions but prefers to stay in their own region for education, if possible. The emergence of improving quality universities in the ASEAN region makes this possible. In linking Malaysian and European perspectives, the Ministry of Higher Education is collaborating with the European Union in a programme known as MYEULINK. It actively promotes the dynamics of the Bologna process, which has fuelled great student mobility in Europe and North Africa, and shows potential for universities in Malaysia (Bernama Media 2012). Of special interest are assurances of educational quality arising from the EU initiatives, which create international recognition of degree credentials, and attract students globally (Sirat, Azman, and Bakar 2014). On a multination basis, the ASEAN International Mobility for Students programme membership now includes 59 universities (ICEF Monitor 2014). It is the higher education component of the ASEAN trade agreement (See Figure 1).

The research setting

The study of the destination choice of students to undertake undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at an international branch campus located in Malaysia is relevant to this research because of the Malaysian Government's strategies to become a major exporter of higher education in the Asian region. The government has taken tremendous steps by inviting reputable foreign universities from the UK, Australia, India, Singapore and China to establish their presence and provide "world-class" and "western-style" higher education system to attract international students studying in the country. Most of these foreign university campuses are located in or near Kuala Lumpur, the capital city. In Southern Malaysia, Educity Iskandar Johor is in an economic free zone being established next to Singapore. It will include industries, residential areas, port facilities, a medical park, national and state government areas, tourist attractions as well as Educity (Iskandar Malaysia 2010). These two education centres point to the potential to serve as regional "eduhubs" (Welch 2011; Wilkins and Huisman 2015) that are largely driven by high student demand and superior infrastructure, coupled with the country's need to build a knowledge- and service-driven economy to achieve a developed country status in line with Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. The value is clear that the increasing number of international branch campuses is turning Malaysia into the education "hub" for South-east Asia it aspires to be (Sharma 2014). According to UNESCO student mobility report, the country is currently ranked as the 11th most preferred country as a study destination in the world (UNESCO 2014). Therefore, understanding the potential students' decision-making criteria for choosing a study in Malaysia is thus of crucial strategic importance to the Malaysian Government. The following qualitative inquiry looked at criteria of education recipients in the choice to seek TNHE in Malaysia rather than in their home country or elsewhere in the region or globally. The findings are intended to assist policy-makers in understanding the decision criteria, both initially and ongoing.

Table 2. Profile of the selected international students for this study.

Age	Level of study	Course enrolled	Country of origin
<20 = 4	Undergraduate = 19	Arts and social sciences = 9	Iran = 3
21–25 = 13	Postgraduate = 5	Science = 3	Indonesia = 2
26–30 = 4		Engineering = 7	Singapore = 1
>30 = 3		Foundation courses = 5	China = 3
			India = 2
			Botswana = 1
			Yemen = 3
			Iraq = 2
			Vietnam = 2
			Oman = 1
			Mauritius = 1
			Cambodia = 1
			Nigeria = 2

Note: $n = 24$.

Method

A qualitative approach through semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews based upon open-ended questions to TNHE respondents was selected, similar to a Turkish TNHE study by Özoğlu, Gür and Coşkun (2015). Being highly exploratory in nature, the researchers did not want to constrain this study with preconceived notions that might unduly steer the findings. Additionally, in research such as this, the use of quantitative methods with self-report outcome variables can tend to be unavoidably subjective in nature. The qualitative approach has its merits and is popular to develop depth in understanding the issues.

To ensure consistency between interviews and to increase the reliability of the findings, an interview protocol was used as a guide (Boyce and Neale 2006). The interview protocol was taken or adapted from various studies on student destination choice of HEIs, e.g. Ahmad (2014), Fang and Wang (2014), Shah, Sid Nair and Bennett (2013), Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman (2012a), Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010), Bodycott (2009) and Pimpa (2005). Among questions included concerning the factors that influence decisions: the desire to study abroad; institutional selection, and examining the destination choices – particularly to review the reasons why Malaysia was selected as a destination country to pursue higher education. Additional questions were asked pertaining to possible improvements to attract international students and the demographics of the respondents.

Sampling

To reflect students' nationality, level of study, course enrolled, gender and cultural diversity of the respondents, purposive and snowball sampling were conducted with 24 full-time international students which were currently enrolled at 3 international branch campuses. An Australian-based university, UK-based university and an India-based university with branches located in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, were selected for this study. Interviews were conducted in-person in English for between 55 and 90 min each. The ages of the majority of respondents ranged from 20 to 30 years. The levels of education of the subjects were undergraduate (19 students) and postgraduate (5 students). The interviews took place in university coffee shops, recreational areas or other public places around the international branch campuses involved. During the interviews, detailed notes were taken

and the discussions were tape recorded. All the respondents were very cooperative and open, as the researcher had clearly explained the aims of the research. The profile of the sample is presented in Table 2.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a qualitative-phenomenological approach as the qualitative analysis technique. The interview transcripts were read, reread and reread again to identify the many themes that emerged from the data. The subsequent coding process was carried out manually assigning key words, grouping codes, highlighting quotes that supported the codes and then establishing themes from the codes (Ezzy 2002). Key themes and patterns emerged from the coding process. Coding was mostly based on a single phrase or significant meaningful statements that generated themes related to the research questions. The following section explores the results of the primary research conducted for this study. The analysis of the findings has been done through identifying emergent themes.

International students' decision choice to studying in Malaysia

Many important themes emerged from careful analysis of the data. The finding reveals that all the 24 international students interviewed agreed that Malaysia has a very positive pull factor and this is congruent with the research conducted by Nachatar Singh, Schapper and Jack (2014). Several students indicated a clear emphasis on the features of the international branch campuses such as its brand image, reputation of the institutions, facilities available, quality of education, reputable degree programme and future employment prospects influencing their decision choice. Analysis of the characteristics of any particular institution is beyond the scope of this study. We focus on the role of the country destination choices. Most international students interviewed considered the country's reputation important when making their international study decision. Although Malaysia would be classified as not being an English language-originated country, the respondents seemed to feel comfortable to choose Malaysia for instruction done in English language. A respondent from Oman claimed that "the reputation of Malaysia as Muslim and safe country made me decide to study here. My parents also agreed with my decision". Most of the international students from the Gulf region had a favourable impression of the country and stated similar factors. The dominant four reasons to choose TNHE in Malaysia are: first, low tuition fees and relatively cheaper cost of living compared to home campuses or international branch campuses located in other countries such as in the UAE and Singapore, second, the reputation of Malaysia as a Muslim nation where there are minimal cultural differences compared to the Western countries such as the USA, UK and Australia, third, Malaysia is a politically stable and safe country with an open and friendly learning environment and English language is widely spoken and finally, its exposure to diverse multicultural experience in a popular country for travel destination. This indicates that their personal preferences were aligned with the unique features and social philosophy that Malaysia has to offer, consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) "push-pull" factors. The following responses are illustrative of these attributes:

In term of tuition fees, the cost of education at an international branch campus in Malaysia is about one-third of the cost in the America and European countries [Respondent from Yemen]

As a Muslim country, the adjustment phase in Malaysia for me and the rest of my colleague is much easier.....most of the local people are friendly.....freedom from discrimination [Respondent from Iran]

Although the country is not an English-language originated country, the language is widely use and known by the local people.....it's much easier to find Muslim food and in fact there are many Arab restaurants operated in this country [Iraq international student]

World financial crisis of 2007–2008 has made the cost of living and studying in the UK become more expensive. Since I would prefer to have a British education system, Malaysia has become my choice as the cost is much cheaper [Nigerian international student]

Malaysia has relatively quick and hassle-free immigration procedures for international students from our country [Yemeni international student]

Our country is politically unstable, jobs are hard to find, and many of us tried to find country that could give us residence or work permit. This is my intention after graduation [Iraqi respondent]

The country offers varieties of tourism destinations. I like to travel and I choose to study in Malaysia so that I could travel within the country and Asian countries as well [Botswana international student]

What is interesting in this study is that majority of the respondents claimed that their friends, relatives and family members helped make their decision. They were influenced by the family member and friends' own experience or stories about the country, and reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with the image of Malaysia. The two responses below were typical.

My father work in Malaysia before and he is the one promoted the country to me for further my study [Yemeni international student]

As suggested by few friends to choose Malaysia for education, I had no regrets to come here – especially considering the country's stunning natural beauty and warm climate [International student from Iran]

According to the Asian international students that participated in this research, there are many factors influencing their decision to choose to study in Malaysia. The majority of the respondents reported attractiveness of the location close to their home country and similarities in culture, language, religion and climate heavily influenced their decision. Of great value were low cost of living and competitive tuition fees compared to other higher learning institutions in the West. Easy visa and immigration process make the country an attractive study destination. It is worth noting that these positive factors perceived by Asian international students are relatively different than students from the Gulf and Middle Eastern regions in some aspects. For instance, an international student from Indonesia claimed that he choose to study in Malaysia due to similarity between Malaysian and Indonesian languages that are widely understood. According to an international student from Cambodia, she stated that "I choose Malaysia for my study destination as the country near to my home country and also easy for me to travel back home". For Singaporean students, among the reasons for choosing Malaysia is being near and cheap to travel back to Singapore. The following statements highlighted the reasons for Asian international students to choose to study in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a popular destination for higher education among us due to similarity in cultural, religion practice and language [China international student]

The local climate is similar to my country.....I have been in the UK and I don't like the weather there [Vietnam international student]

As an Asian country, the cultural environment in Malaysia is easy to adapt. The country is safe.....there are many Airlines travel to Vietnam.....easy for me to travel back home [Another Vietnamese international student]

The living cost here is relatively cheaper than in the Western, and that's why I'm choosing Malaysia [Indonesian international student]

Malaysia and China have a long standing political ties and history link, and therefore, I do not have any problem in getting visa application process to study here [Another China international student]

The Malaysian culture is similar to my culture. I am an Indian, so I thought that Malaysia ... the culture is very similar to what we have in India [International student from India]

One of the advantages to study in Malaysia is – as an international student; we are allowed to work for up to 20 h a week [Another international student from India]

Malaysia is one of the advanced countries with modern facilities in Asia. The infrastructure for higher education here is much better than in my country [International student from Mauritius]

The motivations identified by the international students in this study are consistent with previous literature that has been published to date on this topic. For instance, these findings are consistent with Maringe and Carter (2007) who identified that a safe place to study was one of the key considerations for international students. It was particularly true for Malaysia that attracted many more Middle East students right after the impact of the 11 September 2001 incident in the USA (Sirat 2008). During the interviews with several Middle Eastern students, they consistently mentioned the event as a point in which their parents first truly entered their consciousness to encourage their family members to study in other non-Western countries particularly to Muslim country such as in Malaysia. The image of Malaysia as a modern Islamic country has clearly made it an attractive destination for many international students from Islamic countries.

The world financial crisis of 2007–2008 also was a contributory factor to increase the number of international students to choose to study in Malaysia. With the least expensive cost of living and tuition fees out of all of the leading higher education destinations in the USA, UK and European countries, it is hardly surprising that the country has proven popular amongst students from developing nations, especially given how close it is in terms of geography to Asia and the South Pacific. This is typified by response from one of the international student from China such as: "As self-financed student, I'm sensitive to economic conditions; and easily choose for destination and educational institutions that is low in tuition fees, higher quality and closer to home".

Jang and Wu (2006) found culture makes a country attractive, either because the culture is similar to one's own or because it is a new experience. In the case of Malaysia, the country has a multicultural environment. The majority of the population is comprised of ethnic Malays, followed by Chinese and Indians. The local cuisine, therefore, includes not just local fare, but also a rich variety of international flavours. With its rich culture and natural beauty, Malaysia regularly features among the top-10 travel destinations in the world (Verma 2013). Garver and Divine (2007, 191) stated that TNE experience is generally "associated with increasing students' cultural awareness, perceived acquisition of international knowledge, world-mindedness, and receptiveness to global perspectives on issues".

Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman's (2012b) study indicated the importance of country-specific advantages as one of the primary features attracting TNHE. Likewise, these findings are also supported by several studies; for example, Nachatar Singh, Schapper and Jack (2014), Bodycott (2009) and Chen (2007). Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) concluded that the pull factors operating in the host country attract students to that particular country over other countries. UNESCO's (2013) report of international students' mobility in

Asia Pacific uncovered four factors influencing the decision for higher education: (a) course characteristics; (b) country characteristics; (c) administrative processes; and (d) costs. This is contrary to results of Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010), who found that (a) English-speaking country; (b) availability of courses and department; and (c) the particular city were the main reasons for choosing a place as a study destination. In summary, international students who participated in this study have offered a clear indication of the importance of country image and reputation of Malaysia in their choice of study destination.

Discussion

The push–pull model advanced by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) is taken as the background for this empirical study. “Push” factors that motivate studying abroad primarily relate to the quality and availability, both at home and abroad. Much of this is predicated on reputation and recommendations from others, which creates perceived value for the student. Based upon the years of TNHE activity that has taken place in Malaysia, the push factors are securely in place. The reputation of Malaysia is strong, and there are 11 foreign universities with active programmes operating in the country.

This leads to the “pull” factors of attractiveness to students outside the country. Social links have been established in which families, friends and former students support the pursuit of Malaysian education. The natural selection elements which include proximity, physical security, language, culture and/or religion also pull students favourably towards Malaysia. Commitment and essential resources from the Malaysian Government are enhanced by affordability, in which the costs of education are reasonable and manageable for families, and students noted that they like being able to work while studying and self-funding their education. Politically stable, safe and peaceful environment of the country is an issue that attracts international students. From the country image perspective, strong promotional and marketing strategies that emphasise the attributes of the country to international students are amongst the most important influences. Respondents had also positively chosen to study in Malaysia to experience and explore the unique Malaysian culture. The insights generated from such interviews are valuable for the Malaysian Government in acquiring a better understanding of reasons for international students’ decision to travel to Malaysia to seek higher education.

Implications

The contribution of this work is to examine the perceptions of students themselves, rather than primarily the viewpoints of institutions and policy-makers, although the implications are useful for all parties. Higher education is a big business that also adds to a nation’s stature. In terms of human capital to serve the country’s needs, workers with skills are essential. From the policy side, emerging markets in South America, MENA and Asia (Buchanan 2014) are all grappling with issues of educational funding, privatisation and assurance of quality so that schools do not become diploma mills. Consideration of EU initiatives particularly the Bologna process shows substantial merit for Malaysia, as has been the case in Morocco and Tunisia in the MENA region.

Limitations and future research

This research has limitations typical of exploratory work, including relatively small sample size, the use of convenience sampling and questions of generalisability to other markets. Future research would benefit from wider sampling, as well as some cross-cultural comparative survey in other developing markets. In staying with the student experience in the stakeholder model, it would be useful to add longitudinal elements of postgraduate outcomes in terms of employability and retrospective satisfactions. With the identification of appropriate variables in this study, quantitative variables can be employed in future work, based upon hypotheses. Some elements to consider in future studies might relate to quality evaluation of transnational providers who are sometimes accused of not holding the home campus standards in their international branch campuses (Altbach 2010; Donn and Al Manthri 2010; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman 2012a).

Conclusion

Within the past decade, changing geo-political and financial events has brought much focus to Asia and the Pacific region. One of the changes is the increasing number of international students choosing to study abroad in this region. Malaysia has positioned itself as an “eduhub” for South-east Asia and marketed itself effectively to international students, thus becoming a major competitor. The growing presence of English language international branch campuses located in Malaysia makes the country an increasingly appealing study destination, attracting student enrolment from more than 80 countries. This paper has focused on the importance destination choice for international students. The reputation of the institutions, quality and experience of learning and recognition of gained qualification are judged to be primary criteria for higher education (Ahmad 2014; Wilkins and Huisman 2015; Wilkins et al. 2012). The findings from this study also found that the international students drew on a range of factors including comparatively low cost of living, low tuition fees, safe country for living, stable government, modern amenities, proximity in culture and religion and freedom from discrimination in choosing Malaysia as a study destination. These findings are consistent with those of Lawley and Perry (2015) in which course and country characteristics were more important than entrance exams, visa process and cost elements. Similarly, in a Turkish study, Özoğlu, Gür and Coşkun (2015) found pull factors such as historical, cultural and religious interests to be highly influential in attracting international students, particularly from the surrounding region. Malaysia has natural geographic and demographic advantages. Use of English language in the country’s institutions makes it increasingly popular amongst non-native English-speaking students, in successfully blending diverse cultures who can share the common language. For these reasons, Malaysia is evolving into an attractive foreign student destination. The paper would strongly confirm the wisdom of the Malaysian Government in its higher education investment strategy in recent years. The Malaysian Government should continue to emphasise the perceived features of the country as an ideal place for the study. With “country image” provision and an international reputation for quality of higher education, Malaysia has the potential to take its place among the most competitive higher education destinations. Thailand in particular could take a cue from Malaysia, in the power of attracting international universities to establish branches in the country: a focal competitive advantage for the host country which Thailand does not avail

itself of. Indonesia and Philippines need to make some strategic decisions on supporting TNE or resolve themselves to see their students go elsewhere, with the attending "brain drain" that ensues to the detriment of the nation. Given the growing international competition between countries for international students, it has become increasingly imperative for governments and other policy-makers to have a full understanding of the primary criteria that influence students' selection and decisions for study. NOCSyed Zamberi Ahmad holds a Ph.D from the Hull University Business School (HUBS), United Kingdom. His research interests include firm evolution and growth strategies including alliance, market entry and internationalisation strategies of SMEs and multinational firms. His research interests also lie in the areas of entrepreneurial management, entrepreneurship education and small- and medium-sized business strategies. He is currently an Associate Professor of International Business and Entrepreneurship Management at College of Business Administration, Abu Dhabi University, United Arab Emirates. Prior to entering academia, he had several years' industrial experience in international banking department of several reputable banks in Malaysia. Dr. Ahmad had served several universities in Malaysia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Frederick Robert Buchanan is an associate professor of International Business at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. His interests are global competitiveness and sustainability in industry and higher education. Bob's work has appeared in Journal of Consumer Marketing, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process, Business Horizons, and Career Development International.

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