

The benefits of overseas study for international postgraduate students in Malaysia

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Abstract This paper investigates the benefits of overseas tertiary education for international postgraduate students enrolled at a research-intensive university in Malaysia, an emerging yet under-researched Asian education hub. The study is based on 55 semi-structured qualitative interviews with international students and academic and professional support staff. Our analysis identified three sets of benefits linked to specific economic, educational, social and cultural pull factors: academic success, building knowledge and skills, and contributing to home country on return. Our analysis illustrates the interplay between macro and meso-level actors and policies in shaping the micro-level experiences of international students. The paper contributes new insights into vital nuances in the nature and lived experience of the key benefits of international education relating to academic success and time, language learning and friendship, and employability and ‘giving back’.

Keywords International students · Postgraduate · Malaysia · Study abroad

Introduction

The growth of international student mobility is now a well-documented facet of the internationalisation of higher education (HE). According to the OECD (2014), 4.5 million students pursued higher education outside their home countries in 2012, a number predicted to rise to 7.2 million by 2025 (Bohm et al. 2002). The dominant flow of international students continues to be from the Global South to the Global North (Stein and de Andreotti 2016), with economically developed and Anglophone countries in North America, Europe and Oceania comprising the centre

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of the global HE system (Chen and Barnett 2000). However, this picture is changing as former ‘exporters’ of students, particularly countries such as China, Singapore and Hong Kong, pursue strategies to internationalise their higher education systems (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2011) and become regional hubs of higher education (Knight 2011). Although research studies about such ‘non-centre’ contexts are increasing, they are still limited in number and scope, and more are required to enable the scholarly field to reflect better the contemporary realities of international student mobility.

Since the motivation for and nature of internationalisation varies by country and region (Hudzik 2014), it is vital that context-specific research is conducted in order to avoid ‘international [student] population homogenisation’ (Bamber 2014: 49) and the faulty universalisation of insights about international student mobility from the centre of the system. Limited research has been conducted in Malaysia, the context for this study, which aims to be recognised as an international hub of higher education excellence by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education 2011). The government’s Malaysian Internationalisation Policy document states that international student mobility is the main indicator of the internationalisation of Malaysian HE (Ministry of Higher Education 2011). Against this policy context, international student numbers have grown from 18, 242 in 2001 to 81, 797 in 2013 (Ministry of Higher Education 2007; Ministry of Education Malaysia 2014), and research-intensive universities are required to have an enrolment of at least 10% international postgraduate students (Ministry of Education 2004).

The rationale—or key benefits sought—for internationalisation is a key concern for governments, universities and scholars alike. It is perhaps little surprise, then, that the principal focus for international student mobility research has been with the concerns of macro (national HE systems) or meso (HE institutions) level actors, rather than with the micro-perspective of international students themselves (Bamber 2014). At the micro-level, it is push-pull models (Altbach 1998) of international student motives and decision-making prior to departure that constitutes the dominant frame for research. Studies using this model have identified a range of destination- and institution-specific factors that influence student mobility, yet minimal attention is typically paid to personal factors and student characteristics in shaping mobility (Li and Bray 2007) and to students’ experience of the lived benefits once overseas (Zhou 2015). These shortcomings in push-pull studies accentuate conceptually and methodologically the narrow geographical scope of international student mobility research.

To address these gaps in the existing literatures on international student mobility and international students in Malaysia, this paper sets the following research question: *What are the in situ and anticipated benefits of overseas tertiary education for international postgraduate students enrolled at a research-intensive university in Malaysia?* The study echoes earlier findings from other student cohorts and contexts, but provides more nuance on how the benefits of international higher education are articulated as a mosaic of global and local factors encompassing educational, economic, social and cultural concerns.

The paper is organised into four key sections. Section one further situates the research question above in prior research, followed by section two which provides details of the research design and methods. Section three presents key findings from the interview data and discussion of the three key themes identified via inductive data analysis. The final section provides a conclusion.

Literature review

Existing studies of international student mobility predominantly address the benefits (and challenges) for national government and higher education systems (e.g., in terms of export

earnings), and/or individual providers of higher education (e.g., in terms of cultivating global citizenship amongst students). Research shows that the political, economic and sociocultural rationales (or, constellation of benefits sought) for internationalisation vary by region/country (Knight 2004; Altbach and Knight 2007) and by institution. Seeber et al. (2016) identified several different institutional rationales including enhanced internationalisation of the curriculum, and improved quality of teaching and learning; strengthened institutional research, knowledge production capacity and networking by faculty; enhanced prestige/profile for the institution; and increased/diversified revenue generation. In their survey of 400 European higher education institutions, Seeber et al. (2016) found that ‘enhanced prestige’ was the key predictor of internationalisation. Delgado-Márquez et al. (2013) also determined that internationalisation moderated the relationship between institutional reputation and performance (*vis-à-vis* research and teaching quality, and graduate employability). Reputational factors not only shape national government and university strategy on internationalisation, but international students’ educational choices (Chen 2007). Western/Anglophone contexts have a comparative advantage as the most desirable international study destinations (Morrish and Lee 2011) on account of their elevated rankings in global university rankings, and the wider ‘global imaginary’ (Stein and de Andreotti 2016) which ascribes Western knowledges (and institutions) superior status to others.

Prior scholars (Li and Bray 2007; Bamber 2014) have argued that the predominance of these macro- and meso perspectives is detrimental to micro-level approaches to research on international students. Even (early) push-pull models (Altbach 1998) of international student mobility have been critiqued for their inability to attend in specific detail to the importance and role of personal factors and individual student characteristics. More typically, students’ own perspectives on the benefits they seek from an international experience are either aggregated for regression analysis in secondary data on student flows into selected nations (Wei 2013), or cross-sectional survey data (Petzold and Peter 2015) on push and pull factors that shape choice of country and institution for international study. Such studies usefully identify and measure the relative importance of certain categories of factor that motivate student choices. Li and Bray (2007), for instance, note that the key push and pull factors that shape international student mobility include academic and professional growth, economic benefits, individual internationalisation, and enhanced social status. Zhou (2015) adds intellectual stimulation and greater political freedom and stability to this list.

Whilst ‘unfavourable conditions’ in a student’s home country, such as limited access to higher education (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), constitute push factors, common pull factors include specific (and attractive) economic, cultural or ‘lifestyle’ characteristics of a host nation (Cantwell et al. 2009; Lesjak et al. 2015; Song and Liu 2014; Jiani *in press*); ranking and reputation of institutions (Chen 2007; Li and Bray 2007; Williams and van Dyke 2008); availability of financial support (e.g., scholarships) (Kondakci 2011; Lee and Seehole 2015); opportunity to develop cross-cultural competence, or language learning (Movondo et al. 2004; Devi and Nair 2008); and enhanced employability post-graduation (Brooks and Waters 2011; Bamber 2014).

Certain nuances and limitations are to be observed within this body of work. Starting with the nuances, the first is that several of these factors are inter-related; for example, a degree from a prestigious international university may enhance opportunities in the future (home or host country) labour market (Williams and van Dyke 2008). Second, Zhou (2015) draws upon value-expectancy achievement motivation theory to finesse the scholarly language for categorising and understanding international student motivations. Accordingly, an individual’s

achievement motivation (which creates goal-oriented behaviour) is an outcome of the value ('the perceived significance of a task or why one should engage in the task', Zhou 2015: 720) and expectancy ('an individual's perception about the likelihood of future success on a task', Zhou 2015: 722) associated with, in our case, the experience of international education. The concept of value can be intrinsic or extrinsic to the activity in hand (e.g., pursuing an international education for knowledge's/experience's own sake as opposed to gain better employment on completion). Or it can be attainment value relating to an individual's ability and reflected standing (e.g., the attainment of higher social status and prestige by pursuing a PhD overseas), or assessed in terms of different types of cost (e.g., anxiety, fear of failure, economic costs). Using this theoretical rubric, Zhou (2015) found that intrinsic interest in research and teaching, the high utility and prestige of a US PhD, and the high emotional and social costs of not completing the degree were the key motivations in her interview study of 41 US-based PhD candidates.

Third, the salience of factors differs across research setting and student cohort. For example, unlike studies reviewed above, high quality education and reputation were not primary motivators for student mobility in Jiani's (in press) study of international students coming to mainland China. Instead, 'the increase in the number of international students [to China] was mainly driven by China's rapid development and its future prospects' (Jiani in press). Moreover, several studies have found differences in the motivations to study in developing countries between students from developed and less developed countries (Cantwell et al. 2009; Jiani in press). Lee and Seehole (2015), for instance, found that non-African international students chose South Africa as a study destination for locational and cultural reasons, whilst African students cited financial incentives, quality higher education, job competitiveness enhancement, social connections and country stability as they more important factors. Similarly, a study from Turkey (Kondakci 2011) determined that financial and academic motives were most important for students from developing countries, whilst cultural experience was more influential for EU and US students.

Turning to the limitations of extant research, the first is that classifications of push and pull factors (as typified by survey work) may create static representations of the potentially complex lived experience of international education, and iron out any potential nuances associated with the meaning or experience of a benefit from overseas study. There are also few studies that examine the benefits of international education using the voices not only of the international students' themselves, but also staff (both academic Faculty and professional support staff) who play a key role in shaping international students' academic achievement and broader institutional experience (Grayson 2008).

Second, there is a 'temporal' gap (Abdullah et al. 2014; Zhou 2015) in the literature caused by the dominant focus on student decision-making prior to departure, with less understood about the nature and experience of the benefits of international education once post-departure and post-graduation. Moreover, several of the key benefits typically associated with international education—like enhanced employability—are often uncontested, despite critical work in educational studies more broadly. As economy and education converge in neoliberal knowledge economies under the yoke of human capital theory (Becker 1993), governments around the world have called on higher learning institutions to cultivate 'work-ready' students for a competitive and sustainable labour force (Perrone and Vickers 2003) using strategies that will enhance students' skills and employability (Crebert et al. 2004; Mason et al. 2009). Internationalisation in its various guises comprises one such strategy which Fitzsimons (2015) pithily encapsulates by citing the OECD which wrote that 'internationalism should

be seen as a preparation for twenty first century capitalism' (OECD 1997: 11, as cited in: Fitzsimons 2015: 1). Critiques of the encroachment of this economic rationale into public universities are many, including Barnett's (2003) incisive criticism of the manner in which managerial ideologies are undermining the capacity for universities to produce knowledge based on 'reason' rather than 'interest'.

Finally, it is commonly noted that the internationalisation of HE and international student literatures are dominated by 'Western perspectives' in terms of dominant study settings and research cohorts (Bamber 2014; Jon et al. 2014), 'to the exclusion of samples of considerable numbers of international students studying in economically medium and less developed countries' (Jiani *in press*). That said, a small but growing corpus of country-specific work has emerged from settings including South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, China, and South Korea. But limited research has been conducted in Malaysia, particularly as regards postgraduate students (Kaur and Sidhu 2009; Yusoff 2012). Studies by Malaysian researchers typically focus on adjustment and associated challenges for international undergraduate students in Malaysia (Devi and Nair 2008; Mahmud et al. 2010; Najafi and Lea-Baranovich 2013; Olutokunbo et al. 2013; Yusoff 2012; Yusoff and Chelliah 2010). Only a handful of papers have investigated international postgraduate students' academic and social adjustment challenges in Malaysia (Asgari and Borzooei 2014; Kaur and Sidhu 2009; Pandian 2008; Trahar 2014), with the scope limited to teaching and learning experiences (Kaur and Sidhu 2009; Trahar 2014), and social interactions between postgraduate international and domestic students (Pandian 2008). The *in situ* benefits of postgraduate international students' experience of Malaysian universities are unexplored.

Research design and methodology

Appropriate for exploratory research goals, this study adopted an interpretive methodology and semi-structured interview research design underpinned by commitments from hermeneutic phenomenology. It sought to explore research participants' lived experiences of, and meanings attached to, the benefits of international higher education within a Malaysian higher education setting.

Sampling and data collection method

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit suitable groups of participants including international postgraduate students (to fill the gap in knowledge about this specific student group in Malaysia), professional staff who provide academic and non-academic support services to students (rarely covered in international student research), as well as academic staff who are directly involved in teaching and/or supervising them. A total of 55 research participants [33 postgraduate international students (see Table 1); 12 professional support staff (see Table 2); 10 academic staff (see Table 3)] studying or employed at one public research university in Malaysia took part in this study.

In addition to postgraduate international students, 12 professional staff members were involved in providing academic and non-academic support services to international students: eight females and four male professional staff members (see Table 2).

Table 1 Demographic profile of postgraduate international student participants

Information		Number of IS
Gender	Female	12
	Male	21
Nationality	Nigeria	3
	Iraq	4
	Yemen	3
	Iran	4
	China	3
	Sri Lanka	2
	Indonesia	3
	Pakistan	2
	Cambodia	1
	Bangladesh	1
	Palestine	2
	India	4
	Somalia	1
Degree	Masters	10
	PhD	23
Length of candidature	0–11 months	8
	1 st year	10
	2 nd year	4
	3 rd year	5
	4 th year	3
	5 th year	1
	Graduated	2

Ten academic staff members (seven male and three female) participated in this research study (Table 3). Academic staff members who participated have extensive knowledge of higher education and internationalisation policies as well as close experiences with international students through teaching and supervision roles.

One of the authors conducted the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews over a 3-month period. All interviews (except with one professional staff member who spoke in Malay language) were conducted in English, audio-recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed, and typically lasted 45–60 min. Informed by hermeneutic phenomenological approaches to interviewing (Kvale 2007), the semi-structured template was used sensitively

Table 2 Demographic profile of professional support staff participants

Information		Number of PS
Gender	Female	8
	Male	4
Position	Deputy Registrar	1
	Assistant Registrar	3
	Senior Assistant Registrar	1
	Residential Manager	2
	Librarian	3
	Statistical Administrator	1
	Editing Advisor	1
	Postgraduate Student Office	6
Department	Library	3
	Hostel	2
	Faculty	1

Table 3 Demographic profile of academic staff participants

Information		Number of AS
Gender	Female	3
	Male	7
Position	Dean	2
	Deputy Dean for Graduate Study	1
	Deputy Dean for Postgraduate and Research	2
	Senior Lecturer	2
	Language Instructor	1
	Language Coordinator	1
	Lecturer	1
Male	Professor	2
	Associate Professor	5
	Female	1
Female	Professor	1
	Language Teachers	2

to allow participants to reflect (should they choose to) in-depth and on their own terms about their experience of studying in Malaysia. It also furnished participants with an opportunity to tell and interpret their experiences, opinions, views, hopes, fears and dreams in their own words (Denscombe 2007).

Mode of analysis and reflexivity

The mode of analysis in this study was influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology as conceived by Heidegger, rather than his teacher Husserl whose idea of *epoché* (or bracketing) is a well-known tenet of phenomenology. Bracketing is an exercise in which the analyst is supposed to set aside their presuppositions and experiences in order ‘to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination’ (Åkerlind 2012: 80) and to enable participants ‘to describe the “things themselves”’ (Langdridge 2007: 17). Heidegger rejected Husserl’s concept of *epoché* in this form, arguing that it is impossible to bracket off all presuppositions because of (the researcher’s) prior knowledge about the particular phenomenon under study (Giorgi 2006). We share this view and acknowledge that our own life experiences and social positions will inevitably affect how we view and understand the phenomenon of international student education. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2011), we acknowledge that as a Malaysian researcher (author one) who has been an international student (and who conducted the interviews) and a British researcher (author two) who has also been an international student, we bring our own experiences to bear in understanding the data. Author one was a former professional staff member at the Research University for about 6 years before embarking on her Master’s and PhD degrees in Australia. She resigned from her position before leaving for Australia and never taught students at the Research University. Author two has no connections with the Research University, but supervised the research study on which this co-authored article is based.

Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology did not come with a set of codified rules for analysing texts. Author one undertook a thematic analysis (Ezzy 2002), and as a key part of it, followed two of three hermeneutic phenomenologically inspired approaches to ‘reading’ textual data offered by van Manen (1990). These three approaches are (1) the holistic reading approach to achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomenon; (2) the selective reading

approach, highlighting significant statements to formulate meanings; and (3) a detailed or line-by-line reading approach looks at every single sentence. As part of an inductive thematic analysis, the first author undertook holistic and selective readings. Both these approaches enabled her to assign a code to key words that articulated the benefits of international education and then to group codes together, noting data excerpts that illustrated the codes. Themes that enveloped similar codes were then generated (Ezzy 2002).

Findings

Our findings reveal a number of experienced or anticipated benefits of overseas higher education experience for international students whilst in situ. Whilst there are several shared views about the nature of these benefits, the interviews also demonstrated differences and nuances. And whilst some of these benefits were specific to the Malaysian context, others resonated with prior research insights from different contexts. The benefits are categorised into three key themes: academic success, developing skills and experiences, and contributing to home country on return. Quotations are assigned to research participants using the following acronyms: AS (academic staff), PS (professional support staff), IS (international postgraduate student)—with a corresponding participant number.

Academic success

The principal benefit identified by all participants was the attainment of a tertiary level qualification at a research-intensive international university, which we labelled ‘academic success’. For some students—scholarship recipients—this benefit was closely associated with the timely completion of their studies. As noted by one language teacher:

They don’t want [to extend], because if they are on a scholarship and they extend, that means they have to fork out their own fees, so many of them they tend to... they want to finish on time. (AS10)

It was not just scholarship students for whom time was of the essence. Interviews with professional and academic staff also highlighted the vital role of timely completions to the university’s success. For these participants, timely completion was a pressure associated with the university’s key performance indicators instituted to enhance its national and global ranking. One staff member, for instance, noted how:

The Graduate on Time program (GOT), the university is going to push... [to] get the supervisor to push the students to graduate on time... We can get more student to graduate fast... It kind of helps in university [rankings]. (AS 7)

By contrast, some interviewees stated that the very act of completing one’s studies regardless of the time taken was more important. It was the intrinsic value of graduating with a qualification, rather than the extrinsic value (i.e., enhancing university prestige) or cost-related factors (i.e., expiration of financial support through a scholarship) placed on educational attainment by a fixed point in time, that mattered. One professional staff member put it (with reference to postgraduate students) as follows:

They should be able to graduate, it doesn't matter how many years you are taking. This is my understanding, because postgraduate studies are different from undergraduate studies. So basically if they can graduate with their objectives achieved, maybe they are doing research, they get the best research, it doesn't matter how long, that will be a success. (PS 6)

For another professional staff member, time did matter, in so far as they viewed international students as needing more of it to finish their studies due to the distinctive academic and social challenges they faced (*vis-à-vis* domestic students). A number of the research students themselves identified challenges, and specifically supervision difficulties, that made timely completion a struggle. For them, making it to the end when they could was paramount.

Recognition of academic achievements with awards (Dean's List awards, scholarships), or through successful patenting of research work, was mentioned as a benefit of studying at an international research-intensive university by PhD students in particular.

Numbers on the Dean's List and then numbers of students who get an award in the convocation. (PS 8)

Getting a patent or getting an award of course, it's an academic achievement. (IS 14)

This student theme of recognition also stretched to the reputation of the university itself. Two newly enrolled PhD students (from India and Pakistan) noted that the university's reputation as a high quality overseas institution was a particular benefit to them. They said:

[If] I complete my PhD from here, it will be a badge in my profile that I have done it abroad. (IS 25)

Firstly that you are doing your higher study, you are moving. I have my degree from a very good institute. (IS 5)

Employability is a benefit that spans this theme and the third one (contribution to home country on return) and has a link here to reputational issues. In relation to academic success, academic staff associated the attainment of good grades with employment upon graduation. AS7 for instance stated that: 'doing well means CGPA counts for coursework students ... the grades are very important'. These staff in particular explained the importance of GPA with reference to the common practice amongst Malaysian employers of shortlisting graduates for interviews primarily on the basis of their CGPA performance (usually requiring a 3.00 CGPA or above), according to Hashim (2009). Many of the students expected the benefit of gaining employment upon graduation, with one suggesting that: 'You need to get the job that you deserve. If you don't get that, then it's no point; a proper job according to your qualification.' (IS 16). Whilst several staff talked about employment in relation to the Malaysian context, it was the case (as unpacked further in the third theme) that international students in this study more readily considered employment in relation to their home country.

Overall, the benefit of 'academic success' as the attainment of a tertiary qualification through international study confirms evidence of the interplay of certain pull factors noted in prior studies. For instance, our study established a link between the following sets of factors: educational outcomes and institutional reputation (c.f., Perna et al. 2015); educational outcomes and the availability of scholarships (c.f., Kondakci 2011) and other financial/non-financial awards; educational outcomes, institutional reputation and employability (c.f., Brooks and Waters 2011). The theme of institutional reputation and awards was the strongest amongst the PhD students in the study, a cohort for whom the intrinsic and attainment values

associated with doctoral research were paramount (in line with Zhou's (2015) US-based study). However, institutional reputation was distinctively connected to the university ranking systems (e.g., in relation to the imperative of 'timely completion') by professional and academic staff as opposed to students. This discrepancy should be interpreted in terms of the interaction between policy settings at the macro and meso levels (government, institution) and the motivations and professional behaviours of staff. It is staff that are provided behavioural incentives (through university strategy, policy and associated performance indicators) to focus on the successful implementation of programs like 'Graduate on Time', indicating the global spread of 'managerialism' (Barnett 2003) in the university. This is not to say that students (especially those on a scholarship) are not concerned with timely completions, but that the factors that motivate staff and student behaviour differ, and that there is not always an alignment between the study's participants and the goals of the institution in this regard.

Whilst sharing certain similarities with prior research, this study also illuminates some specific differences in regard to the question of time in 'timely completion'. Some interviewees equated academic success with attaining a qualification within the institution's specified time limits (and of the subsequent extrinsic employment-related benefits post-graduation) (if for a variety of different reasons as noted above). By contrast, those interviewees (spanning all participant groups) who underscored the importance of educational outcomes regardless of the prescribed institutional time limits (thus ascribing an intrinsic value to educational outcomes) brought forth a different property of time in their interviews. Rather than time as a fixed end point in a chronological conception of time, they focused more on the quality of time and qualitative properties of time as a lived experience. This finding is novel in research on international student mobility. It pushes researchers not only to move the 'focal time' (Zhou 2015) of their research from pre-departure studies to in situ concerns, but also to consider more finessed ways of approaching the very concept of time in international student research.

Developing skills and experiences

The second theme related to the development of professional and personal skills and experiences, together comprising a multidimensional benefit.

Professional growth

All participant groups articulated professional skills development in relation to the growth of (in the main) PhD students' research capacity—the growth of research knowledge, publication skills and conference presentation skills. One academic explained it in terms of students' ability to appreciate and construct knowledge:

From the time the student enrolls until the time the student graduates, it must be a difference in the way they look at knowledge. There must be a difference in the way they construct, think and produce knowledge...so that growth must be there. (AS 5)

A university librarian is more specific about the kind of knowledge students will develop in relation to positivist survey research:

To formulate a good research statement, research problem, that is the main point to their success, research question must be articulate[d]. From a good research method and research question, you can come up with clear and concise independent and dependent

variables. [...] Once you know what you want to research to study, then you are safe, you can come up with a clear questionnaire, the research method, the research question, the research statement must be very clear. (PS 9)

The view above of what counts as good knowledge of research practice is echoed by an international student from Palestine (who is a university lecturer in his home).

[it] is to know the correct way of doing research. A research problem, for example, or design problem, there is something you should solve. You should find the suitable answer for that thing. So being able to follow the correct procedures to reach the correct answer for this problem is the success. (IS 8)

Developing the ability to publish research in high-impact journals and international conference participation were also mentioned by students. For some, the motif of ‘the more [publications and conferences attended] the better’ summed up how they viewed what counted as becoming a successful researcher, as IS 30 describes:

So now what do quality mean to a researcher? Publishing in a very good journal, getting international exposure. So far I am holding the record now, nobody has published 10 articles during their PhD in impact-factor journals. Secondly I got two international awards...writing quality papers, attending quality conferences, presenting quality presentations, giving quality talks.

The development of such research-related knowledge and skills is emphasised in this research-intensive university. Postgraduate international students’ research outputs may enhance the university’s global reputation, aligning student behaviour with institutional imperatives and wider government policy.

The above notwithstanding, Malaysia’s Ministry of Higher Education (2007) has also underscored the importance of holistic student development (for all students), especially through the facilitation of soft skills. Several academics mentioned ‘transferable skills’ as key benefits that international students can glean from their educational experience. Whilst some academics linked these skills to research development specifically, others connected it to employability more broadly (thus connecting ‘holistic’ to ‘employable’) like AS1.

It is also critical now for them to acquire what we call transferable skills. These are sort of personal skills for postgraduate students...presentation skills, communication skills, writing skills, things like networking, teamwork, so these are all the other side of somebody who is going to go to the market job sort of area. It is very critical that they have these kind of skills.

The aspects of professional growth outlined above demonstrate the influence of two sets of ‘Western’ knowledge and skills-related discourse in this non-Western context. First, the ‘publish or perish’ imperative common in the North American and other Anglophone university systems is clear at this Malaysian research-intensive university, with some students ‘subjecting’ themselves whilst being subjected to the demands of getting published in highly ranked international outlets (c.f., Tan and Goh 2014). A more critical interpretation might suggest that a kind of epistemic coloniality (Ibarra-Colado 2006) is at work here, with local Malaysian universities consenting to a hegemonic global imaginary (Stein and de Andreotti 2016). Second, the Western notion of ‘transferable skills’ linked to human capital theory also suggests a globalising influence of neoliberal ideology in the Malaysian university context.

Personal growth

As for personal development, students and academic staff alike outlined different positive facets of having an ‘international’ experience in a culturally and linguistically distinctive host country setting. The university organised on-campus cultural events which gave students an international experience. An Indonesian student purposively sought out such experiences:

As international students, we experience international life...get together with others and then share the cultures. I get involved a lot in international activities regarding cultural exchange, cultural shows. (IS 2)

In addition to formally organised events, students also explained the importance of organically-evolving everyday interactions with students from different cultures. A female Pakistani PhD student explained that by talking with students with a different native tongue, and hearing that language, she felt her cultural horizons were expanding:

I am a social bird, I love to talk to people. Over here we come across different nationals, and when we talk to them, we come across their language, their customs. I love to talk to people of different languages. It broadens your vision about different culture in the world. (IS 25)

Several other international students took the step of learning the local Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) (even though the official language of instruction is English) in order to befriend local Malaysian students. Two female students explained:

To be friendly with Malaysian students, to have a good experience with Malaysian culture and Malaysian students ... know the Malay language, for example. (IS 19)

I have been able to learn the Malay language....making friends, learning about the people, their culture, their beliefs. If you don't know the beliefs and their culture, you may end up going the other way against them, which maybe not too good for you. (IS 26)

Whilst students and staff alike noted how interaction with local and other international students raises cultural awareness, sensitivity and learning of different beliefs, norms and values (in line with Baron and Strout-Dapaz 2001), the sub-theme of friendship was particular to our student participants. Language learning for the purposes of friendship (as well as cultural understanding and respect) is a variation on a theme noted in the existing literature. For example, Mahmud et al.'s (2010) study suggested that learning the Malay language was important for better interactions with local host nationals and understanding their culture. Unlike Mahmud et al., however, we did not find that local language learning was undertaken by international postgraduate students with the express purpose of improving communications with lecturers or supervisors, nor to settle down in the new cultural environment (though these may have been implicit and ensuing secondary benefits). Friendship building with local students in particular was a more pressing and specific motivation for language learning by international students in this case. It is also noteworthy that there was little mention by students of how their international experience, and cross-cultural learning, would ‘equip’ them to be ‘global citizens’ in the manner imagined by several existing studies and policies of international higher education (Montgomery and McDowell 2009).

Some of the academic and professional staff emphasised how developing international students’ local cultural knowledge could facilitate social integration in the host country. The

university senior lecturer involved in the co-ordination of international student activities explained the ‘value-add’ of participation in extra-curricular events:

Be involved in the fun activities held by the university, such as the cultural night and then the cultural talk, and then we have cultural exhibition. We have the cultural food festival, and then we have the visits to places, visiting orphanages and then go and stay with the foster family for few days.

Orphanage visits and foster families point to this university’s concern to take students beyond the confines of their campus. Though no doubt beneficial for international students themselves (as found by Adrian-Taylor et al. 2007), these activities are perhaps better interpreted as a reflection of Malaysian government policy in cultural context and the institution’s view of how to enable cultural interaction. In its internationalisation policy (Ministry of Higher Education 2007), there is a statement that the integration of domestic and international students should be encouraged in order to create a positive learning experience for international students that can be branded as a ‘Malaysian Higher Education experience’. To this end, the Ministry proposes that universities offer international cultural programs, language support programs and local homestay programs.

Further in this regard, professional staff members especially (like some of the students) talked of the international students’ interaction with locals (including but not limited to domestic students) as a key part of demonstrating respect. Malaysians hold strong Eastern values based on multi-racial and religious backgrounds which demand respect from international students, as encoded in government statements (Ministry of Higher Education 2011). Off-campus sociality was therefore not only conceived as a distinctive Malaysian cross-cultural experience for international students by professional staff in particular; it was also about honouring the locals. This strong policy and cultural imperative for showing respect is a distinctive aspect of the findings of this study.

Contribution to home country on return

The final key theme that emerged from the analysis of interviews with all participant groups is the beneficial contribution that international students can make to their home country upon return from overseas study. The context is crucial here: most international students who study in Malaysia come from so-called bottom billion countries which PS10 defines as ‘under-developed countries [such as] Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Africa [sic], Zimbabwe’. That is to say, we have an international student flow from less developed countries to a developing/middle-income country. With an international qualification, postgraduate international students may contribute to the economic and social development of their countries through the application of their newly formed (scientific, technological—similarly to Perna et al.’s (2015) Kazakhstani study) knowledge base and skills. Two staff members explained as follows:

Go back to his or her country and contribute to the development of that country, both in the economy and the well-being of the people. (AS 9)

Of course to gain knowledge that not only pictures how successful your research is but to be able to spread the knowledge to other people, especially the bottom billion, because most of our students are from those countries where need is in terms of

knowledge. So if they are able to spread it to their country and also to us that is success. (PS 12)

Students took a similar view, articulating their roles upon repatriation as pedagogical or potentially as ‘change agents’ of social progress. IS2 for instance said that:

Once I return to my society, this knowledge is meaningful for them. So I can use this knowledge to share maybe with the students or with my society, so that encourages them to change. The knowledge is not only for me but, most important, the knowledge is valuable and important for others also.

Another student who will return to China to work as a tourism planner in a poor rural community—IS 9—expressed this theme in terms of moral duty:

Before I came here, I worked in a planning company in China, you know, in the tourism field: if you are a tourism planner, you often go to the rural areas to plan tourism destinations, so when I am there, when I saw the poor people, it is my obligation to help them. I want to use my knowledge to help them. I will go back to China and I will continue my career.

There are two discussion points here: firstly, the policy context. The Malaysian government prefers its international students to return home after completion, as graduates ‘who are knowledgeable and competent in their fields, as well as to be able to put into practice knowledge gained’ (Ministry of Higher Education 2007, p. 12). It may be interpreted as reflecting a human capital policy orientation, in which Malaysia’s research-intensive universities are developing talent as part of a ‘soft power’ approach to higher education as a foreign policy concern (Singh 2017). Economic and political rationales for internationalisation and international student mobility intersect: human capital development meets a kind of ‘charity’ (here a non-Western benevolence that shifts the coordinates of the West-centred global imaginary conceived by Stein and de Andreotti (2016) to co-produce international students as global ambassadors for Malaysian higher education). Our findings contrast sharply with Bamber’s (2014) investigation of Chinese women studying in the UK who considered the idea of technology/knowledge transfer as a motivation for higher education a ‘humorous and outdated’ notion (p. 52). We would thus consider it infelicitous to follow Li and Bray (2007), as Bamber does, in surmising that ‘student mobility is less about aid and more about trade; cultural exchange has become a secondary motivation to economic factors’ (Bamber 2014: 52).

The second discussion point is related: we have two distinct conceptions of employability evident across the first theme (on academic success) and this third one. With reference to the former, the goal of international higher education is to create employability in terms of the individual student getting a well-paid job that provides him/her with economic benefit, and social status. As for the latter, the goal of those who are successful is to benefit society by teaching the next generation and acting as change agents for the betterment of others. These competing notions of education as economic driver (the heart of human capital theory) and as a social/public good are more pronounced in our study than others in the field. The co-existence of both notions is arguably less a contradiction, than a reflection of the specific geopolitical and cultural location of Malaysia as an emerging Asian knowledge hub within the “new pattern” of cross-border flows (Zhou 2015). As Malaysia further integrates into the neoliberal global economy, it is not surprising that it takes up the ideological aspects of human capital and employability discourse. But at the same time, Malaysia is now a hub of educational expertise,

occupying a semi-peripheral location in the global knowledge system to which students and other stakeholders from other peripheral locations might look for expertise, knowledge and know-how.

In other words, it is the very core-periphery system of the global market for higher education—dynamic as it is—that should be viewed as materially and discursively constitutive of the nature of the policies undertaken by the Malaysian government and its leading universities, and how those policies interact with the push-pull factors that motivate international student choices and in situ experiences. That being said, the findings from this study do give hope that the seemingly intractable march of neoliberal and instrumental logic that seems to be the destiny of Western universities (c.f., Barnett 2003) is not all-encompassing of the international student experience in Malaysia. The prominent role in our findings of ‘non-timely’ completions, language learning aimed at building friendships and showing respect (rather than building ‘competence’), and the moral duty of giving back and working towards social change in students’ home countries present a non-hegemonic trajectory for the future of higher education in Malaysia and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The multiple benefits of higher education sought and experienced by international postgraduate students in this study might best be viewed as a mosaic of local (specific to Malaysia and the particular institution) and global (factors external to Malaysia, and linked to the neoliberal globalisation of HE) factors encompassing educational, economic, social and cultural concerns. Only certain categories of push and pull factors were identified as important to this cohort, and the interplay between the macro and meso levels in shaping the micro-level experiences of international students themselves was shown to be vital in explaining and interpreting the benefits of international education. Furthermore, the study has demonstrated some vital nuances in the nature and lived experience of key benefits in relation to academic success and time, language learning and friendship, and employability and ‘giving back’. Finally, whilst the globalising discourses of human capital and economic development are at work in this case, these nuances are demonstrative of the paramount importance of context-specific insights in international student research.

There are implications of this study for international students, universities and government policy. For the Malaysian government, it can build on the positive insights that international students consider its research-intensive universities prestigious and contributing to research capacity building and outputs that enhance its university rankings. However, it would also be wise to play up the benefits of its semi-peripheral location with international students (cultural and geopolitical location; distinct research expertise) to strengthen the distinctive Malaysian experience of HE. For universities, they should continue to build support services and curricula that deliver research capacity building, enhanced employability (equally emphasising employment as a private and public good), language learning and friendship building between locals and international students, perhaps through community engagement programs. Finally, we laud the diverse benefits sought for international students themselves, seeking not only to ‘get on’ in the global labour market, but also to undertake education for reasons associated with giving back, moral duty, social change, friendship and cultural bonds, and learning for learning’s sake. Herein lie the existing alternatives that fuel Barnett’s (2003) optimism for a virtuous rather than purely ideological university for the future.

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