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International academics in Malaysian public universities: recruitment, integration, and retention

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Abstract

Malaysia aspires for its higher education to be relevant, referred, and respected globally. To achieve that, the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 spelt out the need to search for talent beyond national boundaries, as well as develop the capacity to attract, develop and retain this talent. International academics, who are non-Malaysian citizens, also make up part of this pool of talent. This paper examines issues surrounding the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics in three public research universities. In addition to understanding the trend for employing international academics, a typology of international academics is proposed to enable a more focused understanding of the challenges and constraints in recruiting, integrating, and retaining international academics in Malaysian public universities.

Keywords International academics · Foreign faculty · Malaysia · Public universities · Academic profession

Introduction

Malaysia aspires to have a quality higher education system with global prominence. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 (MEBHE) clearly outlines that global prominence is one of the shifts necessary to transform the Malaysian higher education system into one that is relevant, referred and respected globally (Ministry of Education 2015). In addition, the MEBHE also states the aspiration for Malaysia to have a quality higher education system through attracting talent in the form of inspiring educators, accomplished researchers, entrepreneurial personalities, and transformational thought leaders (MOE 2015). Thus, the strategies proposed in the MEBHE underline the need to attract, develop, and retain top talent, and importantly, the search for talent will have to go beyond local and national boundaries. In this respect, Malaysian universities are encouraged to attract top talent from broader professional, business, and international communities, including top international academics.

However, this aspiration predated the MEBHE. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007–2020 (NHESP), a national strategic document on higher education in Malaysia which was the precursor of the MEBHE, also identified intensifying internationalization as one of its seven thrusts. A key aspect of this thrust was to increase the numbers of international academics in Malaysian public universities, specifically the research universities. Before the NHESP was launched in 2007, public universities were allowed to recruit international academics only up to a quota of 5%. The goal of the NHESP was to achieve a 15% quota of international academics across public universities by 2020, to reflect the extent of internationalization in Malaysia's higher education system. In turn, it was intended for Malaysian universities to be competitive in global university rankings where internationalization, as measured by numbers of international academics, is an important criterion (Ministry of Higher Education 2007).

This paper aims to explore the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics in Malaysian public universities. Specifically, the focus is on the public research universities which are flagship institutions in the country, and where the bulk of the current international academics are based and are supported directly by the state.

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International academics

In the era of globalization, universities have become increasingly international. The notion of a borderless knowledge-driven economy has further intensified the need for universities, which are seen as crucial institutions in the business of knowledge production, application and dissemination, to attract talent from beyond the boundaries of the nation (Wildavsky 2010). As Smith (1978) postulates, "a university is its faculty (academics) and the excellence of a university is the excellence of its faculty" (p. 1). Hence, the talent needed in a university is none other than its academics.

Interestingly, the concept of 'wandering scholars,' who travel beyond their communities, has been a long-established feature in higher education, predating the era of globalization and even nation-states with defined boundaries. Back in the days of ancient and medieval universities, notable centers of learning such as Taxila, Nalanda, Pushpagiri, Fes, Cairo, Baghdad, Athens, Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge historically attracted scholars from different countries and regions to congregate for academic discourse (Altbach and Knight 2007; Collini 2012; Kim 2009; Wan et al. 2015). The interactions of scholars from diverse background and cultures were a great impetus in shaping ancient and medieval universities or centers of higher learning as truly global centers of knowledge in earlier eras.

However, even in this globalized era where it is common for academics to move across national boundaries to teach and conduct research, there remains a scarcity of statistics and comprehensive information in the literature concerning the academic profession, and we lack in-depth knowledge about international academics in various developed and developing systems (Altbach and Yudkevich 2017; Rumbley and de Wit 2017). There have been some attempts to capture the experiences of international academics in various countries and institutions (see Yudkevich et al. 2017), and this paper contributes to the growing literature by illustrating the situation of international academics in Malaysia, specifically illuminating the process and challenges relating to recruitment, integration and retention in public universities.

The context of Malaysia is interesting in several aspects, in that it is a developing country making a serious and concerted effort to internationalize its higher education system. At the same time, Malaysia maintains a balance between the needs of internationalization, such as the use of the English language as the *lingua franca* and increasing the numbers of international students and academics in universities, and the needs of localisation, with a national focus in terms of nation building and the preservation of national language, culture, and identity (see Wan and Morshidi 2018).

In the literature about international academics, there has been tendency towards narrating the stories of international 'star' academics much more than the 'worker bees' (Mihut et al. 2017). For instance, Wildavsky (2010) used the examples of prominent university presidents and academics, who took up positions in different countries from the ones in which they originated, grew up, educated, or trained. Not only was there less focus on narratives about the general population of academics who are internationally mobile, the direction of mobility also matters considerably. Many of the 'stars' tend to move from a university or higher education institution in the developing or developed system to one of the most renowned institutions in the world. However, the stories of academics moving from a more developed system to universities in the developing or less-developed world will almost certainly portray a different dimension and add to the understanding of the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics.

A common set of parameters used to understand individual academics who are internationally mobile is the push–pull factors underlying their decisions to relocate. These factors typically include economic and non-economic decisions, with the former relating to salary, access to facilities and funding or career opportunities and the latter concerning academic freedom, reputation, and the prestige of institutions (Cantwell and Taylor 2013; Mihut et al. 2017). Interestingly, however, the descriptions of push factors illuminate a typical case of universities in higher education systems that are developing or less-developed, while the pull factors tend to illustrate the situation across universities in a mature and developed higher education system. Even in the case of developing countries, pull factors may be present only in selected universities that are well resourced, such as Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, and it is also in these selected universities that the majority of international academics are based (Bilyalov 2017; Ruby et al. 2017). However, an interesting question that begs to be explored is: what are the pull and push factors for international academics who take up employment in universities that do not have attractive economic and non-economic pull factors such as higher salary, better facilities, greater academic freedom or being in a more prestigious institution? Thus, the context of public universities in Malaysia presents an appropriate avenue to explore the motivations of international academics from more developed systems and countries, who have relocated and taken up employment perhaps with a different set of push and pull factors.

The discourse about international academics also entails examining why universities and higher education systems employ these foreign talents. One of the important considerations is that international academics enhance the internationalization of higher education. The recruitment of these expatriates has many benefits for the development of a higher education system, especially in terms

of the internationalization agenda. Having a significant proportion of international academics is not only about numbers; importantly, the presence of these academics has been found to bring both tangible and intangible benefits. For instance, in the case of higher education in the United States, foreign-born and foreign-educated academics are significantly more productive than their local colleagues (Kim et al. 2011).

The presence of international academics in a higher education system contributes to the internationalization agenda and is a key indicator of the extent to which a university is internationalized. Indicators such as the percentages of international students and staff are used to tabulate the internationalization component in various global university rankings.

Furthermore, international academics can play a significant role in 'internationalization-at-home.' While it has been suggested that student mobility enhances the education and learning of students through a broader worldview, internationalization-at-home provides opportunities for students who have not gone abroad to experience intercultural learning and international experiences (Beelen and Jones 2015; Teekens 2013). Internationalization-at-home may include global elements in the domestic curriculum and teaching, but the presence of international academics also strengthens the intercultural and international elements in social learning. For instance, for a Malaysian social science student to learn about the socio-economic situation of Latin America, the physical presence of an international academic from that region and their close engagement may transform the learning from a mere knowledge gain to a real-life interaction.

Although there are significant advantages to having international academics for the institutions and higher education systems, it is arguably more expensive to hire these individuals. Typically, international academics are paid more than local academics (Altbach and Yudkevich 2017). In addition, these foreign hires may also receive additional monetary and non-monetary benefits, such as additional allowances for relocation and traveling. Furthermore, there are other forms of challenge in hiring international academics. These may include resentment among local academics, particularly if they are paid less, as well as cultural and language barriers for international academics to integrate into the norms and culture of the institution.

Hence, examining the recruitment of international academics is only half the story. The literature about international academics has a strong focus on why and how these foreign talents are persuaded to relocate. However, if we are to understand the experience of international academics more holistically, it is also imperative to explore the ways and the extent to which international academics are integrated and retained in the institution on a permanent or long-term basis.

The context of Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a population of 30 million, which consists of different ethnic groups such as the *Bumiputera* (literally translated as *Princes of the Soil*, used to describe ethnic Malays and indigenous groups) (67%), Chinese (25%), Indians (7%), and others (1%). Malaysia is a middle-income country with a gross domestic product per capita of USD 9,508 (World Bank 2017). The national language is *Bahasa Melayu*, but English is widely spoken alongside Mandarin (including various dialects) and Tamil, especially among the ethnic Chinese and Indians, respectively.

The Malaysian higher education system is generally divided into public and private institutions. The public higher education system comprises twenty universities that are predominantly funded by the state and operate under the purview of the Ministry of Higher Education. The official medium of instruction is *Bahasa Melayu*, but English is used in teaching and research across most of these institutions. Meanwhile, private higher education is made up of universities, foreign branch campuses, university colleges and colleges, and the medium of instruction is English (Symaco and Wan 2017).

As pointed out by Mihut, de Gayardon and Rudt (2017) there has been difficulty in defining the concept of international academics across higher education systems, and the lack of definitional consistency has posed challenges to comparative examination of the trend towards employing international academics across countries. However, in Malaysia, the term 'international academics' refers to non-Malaysian citizens who hold a foreign passport and are employed on a full-time basis in Malaysian universities, usually on contract arrangements that range between 1 and 3 years. This contractual arrangement is due to the status of public universities as federal statutory bodies (falling under the umbrella of public services), which means that permanent positions are reserved only for Malaysian citizens. However, this restriction does not apply to private universities.

In 2013, there were 9393 international academics in the Malaysian higher education system (see Fig. 1) (MOE 2014). This is a significant increase from a mere 2403 in 2007. However, the growth in the number of international academics in Malaysia has mainly been driven by increases in private higher education institutions (HEIs). There was a sixfold growth in the number of international academics in private sector higher education in Malaysia between 2002 and 2013. The most recent breakdown by the four types of private HEIs indicated that 45% of the staff at foreign branch campuses were international academics, universities, and university colleges stood at 27%, and colleges made up 25% of their staff by international recruitment. However, the number of international

Fig. 1 International academics in the Malaysian higher education system, 2002–2016. Note (*): (i) data for public institutions is not available between 2002 and 2006. (ii) Data for private institutions in 2011 are based on 87.69% of institutions. (iii) Data for private institutions are not available in 2012. Reproduced with permission from MOE (2014), MOHE (n.d.) 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017
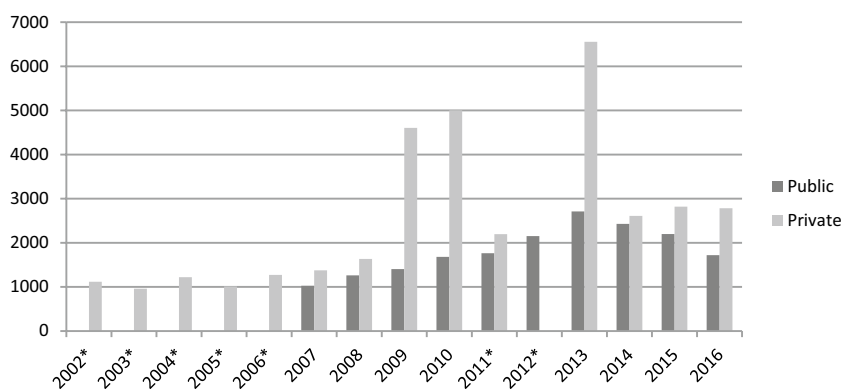
academics decreased significantly from its peak in 2013, dropping to 5039 and 5018 in 2014 and 2015, respectively (MOHE 2015, 2016).

Across the twenty public universities, although the proportion of international academics has remained small at approximately 8.5% of the total population, there was an almost threefold increase between 2007 and 2013—from only 1027 international academics in 2007, the number increased to 2838 in 2013. Similar to the overall trend for the employment of international academics in Malaysia, the number of international academics in public universities also began to decrease after 2013. In 2014 and 2015, respectively, 2430 and 2199 international academics were employed by the twenty public universities. In 2015, 35% of international academics were based in the five research universities, 15% in the International Islamic University of Malaysia, 12% in the *Universiti Teknologi MARA*, and the remaining international academics across thirteen other public universities.

The gradual increase in the number of international academics in public universities, between 2007 and 2013, can be seen as the result of systematic initiatives undertaken during the first phase of the action plan of the NHESP. The strategic plan launched in 2007 outlined the need for Malaysian universities to compete in the global university rankings as a way to enhance the prominence of Malaysian higher education and promote the country as a global higher education hub. Hence, research universities have been under pressure to increase publication targets, as citation and research outputs have been regarded as weaknesses to be overcome. Furthermore, Malaysian universities have also been urged to embark on the internationalization agenda, and a policy was designed to allow public universities to employ more than 10% of international academics among their academic staff.

Apart from the increase in the number of international academics in Malaysian universities, which to a large extent has been driven by national initiatives such as the NHESP and the MEBHE, internationalization in higher education as a global trend has also contributed to this development. Internationalization, or globalization in the form of the movement of persons, which in this case means academics,

has been recognized as one of the four modes of free trade in education under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Tilak 2011). Although the NHESP launched in 2007 limited international academics to a certain percentage, especially in public universities, this limitation or barrier in the context of internationalization and cross-border trade in higher education has not been maintained in the latest MEBHE.

However, the decrease in numbers from 2013 onward, particularly between 2014 and 2016, has been due to reduced funding and changes in administrative policies in public universities, as well as the volatility of the economic situation in Malaysia, which has adversely affected the exchange rate between the Malaysian Ringgit and the US Dollar. These developments have resulted in the decrease in numbers and proportion of international academics. In the absence of the most up-to-date statistics, we hypothesize that the numbers of international academics will maintain a decreasing trend, and it is within this context that this paper examines the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics in Malaysian public universities.

Methodology

Given that public research universities have the largest concentration of international academics among public universities in Malaysia, we selected three of the five public research universities as our research sites. However, due to the need for individual and institutional anonymity, we cannot provide detailed descriptions of the institutions chosen, except to note that these three universities have significantly large numbers of international academics, one in particular has its own language policy, and another has the geographical constraint of being located outside of the capital. The primary data collection technique was semi-structured interviews, carried out between March and April 2016.

In each of the institutions chosen, administrators involved in the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics were interviewed. In addition, thirteen

international academics from a variety of disciplines, including medicine, engineering, sciences, social sciences, business, and languages, participated in this study. Among the thirteen academic participants, four were professors, two were associate professors, six were senior lecturers, and one was a language teacher. Five of the thirteen participants were female. The participants were nationals of Bangladesh, France, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Myanmar, the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and Yemen. The detailed breakdown of international academics by nationalities, disciplines, age groups, gender, and status within the three universities is provided in the "Appendix" to enable a clearer understanding of the population of international academics institutionally. However, a point to note is that this sampling of academics was not intended to be a statistical representation; rather, the selection was influenced by the principle of selecting contrasting cases, to allow for maximum diversity of views and potentially to increase the robustness of the findings (Schofield 2002). Hence, the selection of participants was intended to be as diverse as possible in terms of nationalities, geographical regions, gender, seniority, and disciplines.

Interviews were conducted in English and carried out by an interviewer and a note taker. Interviews were digitally recorded with the written consent of the participants. Interview notes were reconciled with the recordings by both the interviewer and note taker. Thematic content analysis was used to identify the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Findings and discussion

We have divided this section of the paper into three parts. The first identifies the typology of international academics, since there are seemingly different types of international academics in these public universities. The typology is intended as a systematic framework, within which we will discuss the different groups of international academics in subsequent sections. The second part presents the narratives and motivations of these international academics as they relocated to Malaysia. The third focuses on discussing issues and challenges relating to the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics that emerged from the interviews conducted with the participants.

Typology of international academics

While international academics bring tangible and intangible benefits to the development of higher education, the roles and expectations of international academics across the three universities can be summarized into three types. *Type 1* International academics are recruited to enhance academic programs, especially for professional programs such as medicine, dentistry, and engineering. These academics are typically specialists and consultants in the medical field or *ingenieurs* in engineering. For accreditation purposes as well as to counter a possible shortage of home-grown professionals, specialists, or consultants in Malaysia, universities have to resort to recruiting international academics. Many who were recruited may not have high numbers of citations or publications, but they have reputable clinical or professional experience.

Type 2a International academics are recruited for the purpose of global university rankings. These academics are well established and renowned scholars and researchers, and a university recruits them to enhance the reputation of the institution. For instance, they could be academics of the caliber of a Nobel Laureate and Field Medallist, or someone of similar professional stature. These academics are typically recruited with attractive salary packages and extensive funding to set up laboratories for research.

Type 2b Other international academics may also be recruited for the purpose of global university rankings, but these academics are expected to contribute predominantly through research and publication. This group of academics is relatively junior in the hierarchy of their institution and department, but is highly productive in terms of numbers of publications. In short, these are individuals employed to churn out academic publications to boost the rankings.

Type 3 International academics are recruited based on needs. These are typically academics recruited to fill a specific position or area of expertise. This group of academics is also commonly taken into account as part of the succession plan within a department or institute. Due to a lack of local expertise, these academics are also expected to play a part in developing the next generation of local academics, on top of their more usual tasks of teaching and conducting research in their particular area of knowledge. In some instances, international academics that are categorized in this group have been former postgraduate students in the same department or institution, and they either stay on after graduation or return to assume an academic position. There is a tendency for this group of international academics to be formed of international students who have completed their doctorates in Malaysia and been recruited by their supervisors, heads of department or deans.

Motivation for coming to Malaysia

Although there are different types of international academics in Malaysia, there is a good deal of commonality in their motivations for relocating to Malaysia. Motivations or push–pull factors can be summarized into three categories.

The first relates to religious, cultural, and geographical proximity. For international academics who are Muslims, Malaysia is an attractive destination for them to pursue their

career and relocate their families because Islam is the official religion of the country and is practiced in a moderate manner. Apart from this religious consideration, many of the international academics from neighboring countries were motivated to come to Malaysia due to its cultural and geographical proximity. For instance, for the two participants from Indonesia and the Philippines, their main reason for choosing Malaysia over other Western and developed countries relates to the fact that it is relatively close and easy to get to and they can return to their home countries easily, as well as some commonalities in language and culture between Malaysia and Indonesia that helped to make them feel at home.

Second, a pre-existing personal or professional Malaysian connection was an important motivation for some of the international academics in deciding to work in Malaysian universities. Of the thirteen participants in this study, five were married to a Malaysian, and another five had studied in a Malaysian university. In addition, another participant had conducted the fieldwork for her doctoral research in Malaysia and developed professional networks with local academics. Interestingly, however, two of the longest serving international academics in this study had no prior connection to Malaysian universities and joined their institutions more than two decades ago, although they did know others from their country who were already in Malaysia. Hence, the Malaysian connection, either through study, marriage or (to a lesser extent) networking, was a major factor in bringing these international academics to Malaysia.

Third, although Malaysia may not exert a strong pull as a destination to pursue an academic career, especially when compared to more developed higher education systems such as those in the US, the UK, Europe or even some other Asian countries like Japan, nevertheless it compares well with the home countries of some of these international academics and is a viable and attractive option. For example, the international academics from Iraq and Myanmar (who had been in Malaysia for two decades) have found Malaysia to be an attractive destination to work and relocate their family. In addition to having higher academic salaries than their home countries, the relatively stable political, economic and security environment was a positive consideration in their decisions to relocate their families and bring up their children in Malaysia.

Issues and challenges

However, despite the benefits that international academics may bring to the development of universities and higher education in Malaysia, there are also issues and challenges concerning the recruitment, integration, and retention of these academics into the local context.

Institutional constraints

First and foremost, it is important to note that international academics can only be recruited in public universities as contract staff. Owing to immigration regulations, a noncitizen can only be employed on a contract of not more than 3 years. However, to complicate the situation, in Financial Instruction No. 1/2015 issued by the Ministry of Education, all staff employed on a contractual basis have to be paid through the financial vote for professional services (vote 29,000). This is a relatively new arrangement; previously, all salaries and emoluments were allocated into the financial vote for salary and emolument (vote 21,000). Previously, universities made internal arrangements to employ international academics by utilizing vacant positions that had been identified for Malaysians who were under an academic training scheme. The implications of this new financial arrangement are that the financial vote 29,000 has a limit in terms of the amount for allocation, and this has restrained public universities from employing more contractual staff, with reductions in the numbers of Malaysian academics beyond compulsory retirement age and international academics. In addition, the budget announcement for 2016 saw total funding for public universities reduced by 15%, and this was further recalibrated at the beginning of the year (Astro Awani 2016; Sharma 2015). The budget for 2017 also saw another round of budget cuts with the operating expenditure for public universities decreasing for the second consecutive year by another 19% (Malay Mail 2016). Due to this administrative change compounded by the financial constraints faced by public universities, the recruitment and retention of international academics have become much more challenging.

Of the thirteen participants, two had been informed at the time of this study that their contracts would not be renewed. Another six participants whose contracts were ending in the next 6–12 months at the time of this study had not received any indication of whether their contracts would be renewed or terminated. Those whose contracts would not be renewed or who had yet to be informed were considering moving to private higher education institutions in Malaysia. At the very least, the Malaysian higher education system as whole and the receiving private institutions might still enjoy the benefits and expertise brought by these international academics, but not the public universities which recruited them in the first place.

Wider policy constraints

As a result of contractual restrictions due to immigration and public service regulations, there is a perceived lack of job security for international academics, who are at the mercy of administrators in their departments and institutions for contract renewal. The decision-making process for

contract renewal is not entirely transparent to the individuals concerned. Furthermore, these contractual arrangements have also seen their benefits becoming less attractive. For instance, it used to be the case that the academic, his or her spouse and their children all received full medical coverage within the public healthcare system like other Malaysian academics. However, this benefit has now been reduced to only the academic; the medical benefits for spouse and children have been withdrawn. This reduced sense of job security has also been compounded by the fact that previously, at the end of a contract the academic was entitled to a gratuity as well as flight tickets for the entire family to return to their home country. However, in one of the three universities, the gratuity has been limited to only the first contract, and home visits for the family have been discontinued. Even for academics who have become permanent residents (PR) in Malaysia, their employment arrangements as contract staff continue. Among the thirteen participants, one was in the process of applying for citizenship, another was already a PR, and another was in the process of applying to be a PR. However, in general the lack of job security was one of the most common concerns and sources of frustration among these international academics, resulting from the rigid policy constraint of only allowing citizens to be employed permanently in public universities.

Institutional strategies

The recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics is heavily dependent on individuals, and there is a perceived lack of institutional strategies to achieve or even to coordinate these efforts. The individuals involved typically include university leaders, deans, heads of department or even colleagues of the international academics. There is a lack of direction and strategic planning by universities in the recruitment, integration, and retention of these academics. There are no advertisements for vacancies for international academics, with existing academics being either 'headhunted,' recommended by an insider, or having studied previously in their department or institution. According to one of the senior administrators, vacancies in public universities were widely circulated in the past, but because interest tended to be confined to certain geographical areas, many public universities saw fit to recruit directly based on other recruitment channels and methods which were more cost-effective. Hence, the recruitment process is predominantly bottom-up from the individual academics, departments, schools, or faculties. In other words, the three universities in this study had not advertised globally to recruit the best scholars and researchers, as recommended by the aspirations of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 (MEBHE). Recruitment is still highly dependent on the connections and networks of existing people within the university.

Besides lacking in terms of systematic institutional strategies for recruitment, there is also a lack of support for international academics by their institutions. Although universities provide some forms of relocation support such as temporary housing for the first month and facilitating visa applications, other forms of support for the individual to start work as an academic staff member are left to the department, school, or faculty. New international academics are not mandated to attend any orientation courses, unlike local academics. As most of the international academics are not proficient in *Bahasa Melayu* (the national and official language in public universities), it is left to their own initiative to seek support to learn the language and communicate officially within the university. In most cases, international academics have to rely heavily on their colleagues in order to integrate themselves into the university, and some continue to rely on Google Translate to keep track of official communication from the university.

Apart from the language barrier in official communication, one of the three universities also has a policy that all academic programs must use the national language. The other two universities do not enforce this policy as strictly, especially in science, engineering, and professional programs. As a result, international academics in the particular university that strictly enforces the language policy are mainly employed in research institutes, where their primary responsibility is to conduct research with minimal or even without any teaching responsibility at all. At the time of the study, in this university, there were fifty-two international academics, with twenty-two of them concentrated in eight research institutes and the remaining thirty dispersed across eleven schools. Interestingly, out of the thirty, nine taught in the medical school and five in the engineering school, where a significant part of the academic programs were conducted bilingually in English and *Bahasa Melayu*.

The lack of promotion opportunities has been one of the major challenges to retaining international academics. To begin with, international academics cannot be promoted while they are employed on a contractual basis. Promotion can only take place during the contract renewal process. Furthermore, universities have adopted a points system to determine eligibility to apply for promotion, and this system has also deterred some international academics, because unlike Malaysian academics they are only eligible to be considered for promotion towards the end of their contracts. Furthermore, for senior professor positions a professor has to be invited for promotion, and there was also an instance where a non-Malaysian professor had to wait for 7 years before being invited for promotion, despite the fact that he was one of the most outstanding academics in the university.

Economic constraints

The economic situation and the strength of the Malaysian Ringgit against foreign currencies can be a challenge in retaining international academics. On the one hand, austerity measures which have reduced the funding of public universities have forced institutions to readjust their packages for international academics. These adjustments include abolishing the end of contract gratuity and other non-monetary benefits. Hence, the remuneration package for international academics as a whole has become less attractive. In addition, the depreciation of the Malaysian Ringgit has also reduced the value of remuneration packages. Between September 2014 and September 2015 the Malaysian Ringgit depreciated by 26% against the US Dollar, by 17% against the Euro and by almost 20% against the Japanese Yen (Astro Awani 2015). In other words, international academics experienced a drastic pay cut in comparison with the currency of their home countries.

International academics who are less affected by the depreciation of remuneration packages are either those from countries that are economically weaker than Malaysia, or those who are married to Malaysians and who will remain in the country due to family commitments. Among the thirteen international academics who participated in this study, five were married to Malaysians and the remaining were from countries either in difficult circumstances or in the region of Southeast Asia. It seems that although economic considerations have not been a major motivator for existing international academics in public universities, this issue remains a major challenge for Malaysian universities to be able to recruit the best talents globally. Crucially, as one of the tracking measures for Shift in Talents in the MEBHE was the number of international staff recruited, economic circumstances will continue to pose a significant challenge not only to recruitment but also to the retention of international academics in public universities.

Talent development and retention

Apart from the challenges related to promotion and the lack of job security, international academics in public universities are not considered for academic leadership and administrative positions, at least across the three universities studied here. The only leadership and administrative positions that international academics may assume in public universities are program chairperson or head of a research cluster. There are no international academics on university boards, in senior leadership positions such as the Vice Chancellor or Deputies, or even holding the office of Deans, Deputy Deans or Heads of Department. The lack of participation by international academics in leadership and administrative positions can be attributed to the fact that individuals in

these positions are required and expected to be highly proficient in *Bahasa Melayu* as the official language.

However, the MEBHE clearly states that as a way to shift towards a quality higher education in Malaysia, there is a need to unleash talents among academics. One of the tracking measures, therefore, is to take into account the number of top international academics in senior leadership, university board member and department head roles within public universities. The rationale of this measure is to facilitate local capacity-building. However, clearly there is a mismatch between the ideal and the reality in terms of tapping the potential talents among international academics. Not only has the language policy been a barrier in accessing the expertise of international academics to provide institutional leadership, but in addition the language policy has also sometimes underlined a sense of being differentiated or discriminated against among some of these international academics.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Examining the experience of international academics in Malaysian public universities, in terms of their recruitment, integration, and retention, has highlighted a wide range of pull and push factors. To begin with, Malaysian public universities may not offer attractive pull factors such as high salaries or being highly prestigious institutions. Instead, international academics were found to be lacking in job security and faced many challenges in integrating into the local system with minimal support. However, there are other pull factors that were instrumental in attracting these foreign talents to work in Malaysian universities, such as Malaysia's reputation in the ASEAN region as a modern, democratic, moderate and forward-looking Islamic country, as well as individual networking, connectivity and human relationships with people and institutions in Malaysia. In addition, relatively more attractive pull factors in Malaysia as compared to some other countries have also influenced international academics to relocate and stay on to work in Malaysian public universities.

This study was also conducted at a crucial juncture in the higher education development of Malaysia, which is currently facing austerity measures and an economic downturn, and therefore the findings also have direct policy implications. It is indisputable that international academics are present in Malaysian universities not to compete with the locals, but crucially to complement their departments and faculties in transforming these institutions and helping them to become more internationalized and achieve global prominence. However, the current economic situation and recent administrative changes in public service have posed significant challenges to the recruitment, integration, and

retention of international academics. Although Malaysia is keen to attract global talent to Malaysian public universities and international academics have displayed an equal keenness to pursue their careers in this country, it seems that there has been little attention to how these challenges can be affected through actions. In other words, policies and actions need serious alignment.

While some of these challenges may not be within the reach of universities or the state to tackle, there remain plausible strategies that may be considered by the Malaysian higher education system and its public universities in moving forward in terms of the recruitment, integration, and retention of international academics. The first proposed strategy would be to minimize the recruitment of Type 2a and Type 2b academics. Instead, priority should be given to Type 1 and Type 3 academics, taking into account future scenarios and potential needs for Malaysian universities. This is also a more cost-effective option. The recruitment of Type 1 and Type 3 academics should not be only limited to the mere presence in universities, strategies and institutional support must also be put in place to integrate and retain them, so as to allow them to unleash their full potential and impact the current and next generations of local academics.

Clearly *Bahasa Melayu* is the national language and should remain the official medium of communication in public universities. However, as a way to fully utilize the expertise of international academics as well as integrate them into Malaysian universities, the second strategy involves a two-pronged approach. First, comprehensive support should be provided for international academics to at least bring them up to a basic level of proficiency in *Bahasa Melayu*. Second, institutions should allow the possibility of the bilingual use of *Bahasa Melayu* and English in official communication within the universities, or at least within faculties.

Although reform to immigration and public service policies may not be within the purview of the Ministry of Higher Education and universities, the third strategy involves drastic changes to immigration and civil service regulations, as these developments nationally are fundamental for Malaysian universities to be able to truly reach out and bring in the very best talents beyond national boundaries. It is interesting to note that more than 40% of academics in Australian universities were not born in Australia (Bradley et al. 2008; Saltmarsh and Swirski 2010), the numbers of international academics in British and American universities have also increased significantly in the last two decades (Pherali 2012), and in the two oldest universities in Singapore, three quarters of the early career academics on tenure tracks are international (Holden 2014).

Thus, for Malaysian universities to become globally prominent, recruiting, integrating, and retaining international academics who can contribute to the development of our universities is paramount. This group of academics must not be differentiated, but should be integrated. It is also crucial that Malaysian universities are not seen to only want these international academics around when times are good, quickly abandoning them when circumstances become more challenging. Recruiting, integrating, and retaining talented international academics, specifically those of Type 3, into Malaysian public universities must continue regardless of the wider situation, and must become a part of our organizational culture. Focusing on Type 3 academics is also in tune with ideas floated during the NHESP implementation period, suggesting that Malaysia as an international student destination must upgrade itself and be recognized as an international hub for knowledge and talent. Success in this upgrade, from being an international student hub to a talent and knowledge hub, is in itself a pull factor for Malaysia in terms of attracting international academic talents.

Appendix

All information in the appendix is provided by the respective universities. See Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 1 Gender of international academics

Gender	University 1	University 2	University 3
Male	238	39	77
Female	84	13	24
Total	322	52	101

Table 2 Age group of international academics

Gender	University 1	University 2	University 3
< 30	5	0	2
30–39	123	13	24
40–49	96	24	33
50–59	63	10	41
60–69	28	4	
≥ 70	7	1	1
Total	322	52	101

Table 3 Academic position of international academics

Academic position	University 1	University 2	University 3
Post-doctoral fellow/visiting lecturer	32	0	12
Language teacher	46	3	5
Lecturer	11	0	2
Senior lecturer (research fellow)	140	18	46
Associate professor (senior research fellow)	61	19	28
Professor (principal research fellow)	32	12	8
Total	322	52	101

Table 4 Discipline of international academics

Discipline	University 1	University 2	University 3
Accounting, business, economics, and management	9	2	4
Engineering and architecture	36	9	11
Medical sciences, pharmacy, dentistry, and health sciences	75	14	52
Science, technology, and mathematics	70	14	17
Social sciences, education, and humanities	74	13	17
Unknown/cross-disciplinary	58	0	0
Total	322	52	101

The faculties, institutes, and schools have been reorganized by the authors to enable comparability and avoid identification that may jeopardize the anonymity of institutions and participants

Table 5 Nationality of international academics

Nationality	University 1	University 2	University 3
Algeria	3	0	0
Australia	3	0	0
Bangladesh	31	17	10
Belgium	1	0	1
Brazil	1	0	0
Bulgaria	1	0	0
Canada	1	0	0
China	11	0	2
Colombia	1	0	0
Comoros	0	0	1
Cuba	0	0	2
Ecuador	1	0	0
Egypt	2	0	2
France	2	1	0
Germany	6	0	2
Ghana	0	1	0
Guatemala	1	0	0
Hungary	0	0	1
India	53	2	22
Indonesia	14	13	11
Iran	42	2	5
Iraq	15	1	12
Italy	2	0	0
Ivory Coast	1	0	0
Japan	37	2	4
Jordan	3	1	0
Kyrgyzstan	1	0	0

Table 5 (continued)

Nationality	University 1	University 2	University 3
Libya	1	0	0
Morocco	1	0	0
Myanmar	7	3	6
Netherlands	1	0	0
New Zealand	1	0	0
Nigeria	4	0	1
Pakistan	9	1	6
Palestine	0	0	1
Philippines	5	0	0
Russia	1	0	0
Singapore	5	0	0
South Korea	6	1	1
Sri Lanka	2	1	0
Sudan	2	1	0
Sweden	1	0	0
Syria	1	0	1
Taiwan	1	0	0
Thailand	4	2	2
Tunisia	1	0	0
Ukraine	0	0	1
United Kingdom	15	0	2
United States Of America	8	2	4
Vietnam	2	0	0
Yemen	11	0	1
Zimbabwe	0	1	0
Total	322	52	101

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