

Multicultural Benefits and Challenges for International Students during Period of Their Study: Case Study in Malaysia

Baharak Talebloo (Corresponding author)

Ph.D. Candidate Faculty of Educational Studies.

University Putra Malaysia. (Corresponding author) baharak.talebloo@gmail.com

Ramli Bin Basri

Faculty of Educational Studies. University Putra Malaysia.

ramlibasri@putra.upm.edu.my

Abstract

Current researches on internationalization claim “studying overseas” as a set of potential that assist the augmentation of “globalization”. This article presents the Multicultural Benefits and challenges for International Students during Period of their Study in university Putra Malaysia. Qualitative method and convenience sampling was applied. Semi-structured interview and in depth interviews were conducted on 20 postgraduate students from various fields of study. The result of study showed that the benefits and challenges faced by the international post-graduate students can classify into distinct categories. Studying overseas offers benefits and plus points in terms of Career perspective, cultural familiarity, self-development. The challenges included problems related to facilities, social environment, education system, financial problem and international office programs. The comments made by the students could be considered by the university authorities for improvement in quality of education for international students during their studies.

Keywords: international post-graduate students, challenges and benefits, qualitative method

Introduction

As the world is becoming immensely internationalized, it is fundamental that the college and university students be provided with the fully global academic opportunities. Increasing number of universities accepting higher number of international students each year in Malaysian universities shows the importance of the internationalization education in Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia is currently ranked 11th in the world by UNESCO in terms of the number of international students studying in the country (Benjamin, 2010). Ma-

laysia is not only accepting international students in undergraduate level, but also a large number of international students are being accepted in post graduate level. A research university and a well reputed one in Malaysia, recorded an increase in international graduate student recruitment with a total of 432 students in the second half of 2011/2012. Accordingly, it is considered as one of the main choice for international students to pursue their studies in this country.

International students in this research are defined as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to

participate in international educational exchange as students (Paige, 1990). International students come from different countries with different backgrounds and experience. Undoubtedly “*study abroad program*” offers the greatest potential for pragmatic international education, which is pertinent to the student’s academic, cultural, personal, and career goals (Brux & Fry, 2010). Lots of plus points can be enumerated for “study abroad” as: student will be capable of acquiring the wider viewpoint regarding to the human circumstances in the world and students exhibit an expanded vision of the world and become more tolerant in their approach to issues (Carlson & Burn, 1989; Brux & Fry, 2010). Study abroad program helps facilitate academic programs, volunteer positions, conducting research, internships and exchange programs around the world (Chang, 2011). Moreover, researchers indicated that international awareness, language skills and intercultural competency should be improved by study abroad (Duhon, 2006; Lewin, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Savicki, 2008; Williams, 2009).

According to Chang (2011) international Students believed that gaining international educational experiences was the opportunity to familiar with various cultures, obtain life experience and enrich their academic and research experience. Moreover, the results of studies illustrated that, the challenges faced by international students have been categorized by following five categories: (1) general living adjustment, such as adjusting to food, finding affordable and adequate housing and transportation, dealing with financial constraints; (2) academic difficulties,

such as lack of Method of Teaching Problems; (3) English-language proficiency; (4) socio-cultural difficulties, for example, experiencing culture shock, Recreational Problems (5); personal psychological adjustment, such as homesickness and depression experiences (Lin & Yi, 1997; Ying & Liese, 1994; Tseng and Newton, 2002; Norhasni Zainal, 2007; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2009; Mustapha, 2010; Marginson et al. 2010 ; Alavi & Shafeq, 2011; Chang, 2011).

This literature review revealed that postgraduate international students face different problems and experiences. Thus, to attract international students, universities need to understand the benefits and difficulties and to provide the right kind of support. In an attempt to fill this research gap, the main objective of this study is to identify benefits and difficulties faced by the international post-graduate students during their studies in University of Putra Malaysia. Although several researchers have studied to identify international post-graduate students benefits and challenges from the descriptive (mainly quantitatively), yet research needs to address these devices qualitatively. In contrast to previous studies, international post-graduate student’s challenges during the first year of study have not been researched qualitatively so far. The present study seeks to fill the research gap on to identify Multicultural benefits and challenges for international students during period of their Study in University of Putra Malaysia through addressing the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of “study in multicultural university “for the postgraduate students during the period of study?

2. What are the Challenges of “study in multicultural university “for the postgraduate students during the period of study?

Method

The study was conducted at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The participants were twenty international postgraduate students, who are doing their MS/PhD studies in biotechnology, TESL, educational administration, management, engineering, economic, food science and computer sciences and came from Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Nigeria and Sudan. Convenience sampling was applied to select the samples because the researcher had an easy access to them. Patton (2002) states that qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth. The interviewees were contacted by email. Out of 25 students who were sent an email, twenty accepted to participate in the interview. Each interview took maximum thirty minutes. Having the participants’ permission, the interviews were digitally recorded. However one participant did not allow the researcher to record the interview. The main purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human life experience (Lichtman, 2006). It was meant to collect direct speech of the people about their experience, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 1991). Through the process a special kind of information stored is ‘in and on someone else’s mind’ could be collected. Therefore, the semi-

structured, face-to-face interview was applied to collect specific data (Merriam, 1998). Based on a review of the literature, a set of questions was developed in advance. Before the interviews were conducted, the interview questions were examined by two experts in the field of education and their comments on the each question were taken into account. Then, objective of the study were clarified to the informants and later transcription of the interviews sent to the informants. They confirmed what was transcribed as comments of their own to the interview questions. The reliability of the findings was also strengthened to the scope of study by similarity of responses to the pertinent literature.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in relation to the purpose of the study. Dates were coded into categories. The process was carried out inductively that involves examining many small pieces of information and building connection between them. There were then developed based on the code categories.

Table1
Challenges categories common code from international students

Themes	Categories
Accommodation, transportation, food	Facilities
Cultural, communication and English difficulties	Social and communication differences.
Academic system, lecturers and methodology, faculty supervisor	Education challenges.
Lack of entertaining activities	International office program.
Costs of living and study	Financial problems.

Table 2
Benefits categories common code from international students

Themes	Categories
International work culture	Career perspective
Intercultural exchange, effective communication and new friendship, and global perceptions	Cultural familiarity
Autonomy and independence, self-awareness, academic skill, financial management.	Self-development

Result

Findings of this research are divided into three parts based on the two research questions. The first part deals with the benefits and the second belong to barriers.

The plus points of study abroad

The participants' perceptions about the benefits of their study abroad are categorized into three main benefits.

Cultural familiarity

Based on the results obtained in this research, one of the benefits of being an international student was about cultural familiarities which were classified into three categories: intercultural exchange, effective communication and new friendship, and global perceptions. Stephanie McLeod & Wainwright (2009) indicated that hostess country have the ability to boost intercultural competence goals by developing

intercultural. Moreover, Zhai and Scheer (2004) indicated that cultural diversity leads to higher global perceptions and have positive attitudes toward diversity of culture. International students' have ability to communicate with other culture and understand the feelings of people who belong to another culture (Hammer, 1987; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978). Thus, UPM as an international university does provide international situation for cultural exchange. The interviewees' comments are mentioned as follows:

One student stated that "*as international student, we have an opportunity to learn to be more respectful of other cultures and political.*" Likewise, some students believed that students are likely to have increased respect for other cultures and appreciate the differences between cultures, and this is the best way to makes them better team worker and problem-solvers. One student believed that, the experience which we can obtain from studying abroad can be much more than the experience gained in our home country. The result is supported by the literature, in which cultural difference between host and home country can lead to significant intercultural experience in studying abroad (Paige et al. 2006; Hofstede et al. 2010). Also, majority of them stated that, during study abroad programs, students transform their experience into learning and share their knowledge without any prejudice. It is the best opportunity for interaction with different people and culture and sharing of their knowledge.

Regarding cultural familiarity, some students believed that they are not only learning about

other cultures and find new friends with different culture, but the experience is also very rewarding. Also, one of them said that *“after finish our study, we make contact with our international friends and this interaction could be rewarding”*. The results of the interview also indicate that all of the students believed that study abroad give them an opportunity to know a great group of friends with different culture.

According to the interview, all the students believed that *“studying in another country give them the position to view the world from different perspectives. Likewise, another one indicated that “Spending in a overseas country leads to look at the world wider and growing our life experience “*.The majority believed that *“study on foreign country tends to adaption to different points of view”*.

Self-development

According to the results of the study conducted, another benefit of study abroad is self-development which is categorized into four dimensions: autonomy and independence, self-awareness, gain academic skill, financial managing. These results match the literature, in which many authors had highlighted the fact that categories of benefits to international students are open perspectives and independence (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2009; Lin & Yi, 1997; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Mustapha, 2010; Alavi & Shafeq, 2011).

Among the benefits that all of the students in this study mentioned, opportunity to discover

their ability and understanding their interest and habits was obvious. One participant believed that, *“study on another country give me an opportunity to understand my adaptation ability to different situations”*. Also, all students remarked that *“independent nature is bringing out by being in overseas country”*. Furthermore, all of participants stated that, *“our confidence and independence was improved by studying and living in another country”*. In this research international students believed that studying abroad leads those to new situations the whole time. They believed that, when we try to convey our needs and thoughts by new language and intercultural skills, it helps us to be more independent and gives us confidence during our study. Also, some participants believed that as result of being independents in our life, our decision-making and problem-solving skills are improved. The result is supported by the literature where, international experiences had an impact on student’s personal development and confidence growth. Therefore, international experiences are opportunity to explore best ways of for solving that challenges (Lee, 2004).

Moreover, some students believed that studying abroad is the best way for understanding their interests. They also mentioned that, they can often take courses and chose the field of their research based on their interest. The results also indicate that, experience in different styles of education was the other benefits of study in overseas. According to the student’s report, by attending to abroad program, not only there is chance to choose the major that you may not find in home country but also it is the opportunity to

access to different education system. Therefore, according to the participant's opinion, one would return with a new perspective on education and learning. Finally, some students revealed that they "*Learn research methods and appropriate methodologies maintaining a field journal that prepare them to undertake fieldwork on topics connected to the program theme*".

Career perspective

Career perspective was another benefit of studying overseas. These results match the literature, in which many authors had highlighted the fact that, undertaking a course in overseas for professional advancement prepares students for work as academics in their own country (Margaret et al. 2006) and influences their career development (Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

The majority of the students in this study stated that studying abroad will improve their career prospects and attractiveness to future employers. Likewise, one study indicates that of all respondents have engaged in international work or volunteerism since studying abroad.

In this research it has also been found that the international students believed that studying abroad helps gain professional benefits and competitive edge in their career. Moreover, some students assert that, "*get a job overseas and work for a multinational country was the benefits of study foreign country*". One participant believed that "*Employers often seek employees with the ability to speak other languages or understand other cultures. Studying abroad is imperative*

for students who wish to enter international business, and employers look for the skills study abroad students have, such as communication, analytical abilities, teamwork and flexibility". This was mentioned in the literature, Evans and Stevenson(2010) who said that according to international Australian PhD students the PhD degree will enhance their career prospects.

The Challenges of study abroad

The second research question focused on the challenges encountered by international post-graduate students which can be categorised into four.

Facilities

According to the results of the study conducted, the students have also faced facilities barriers which in turn are categorized into three main groups: habitation, transportation, campus restaurants. Lu (2001) stated that housing and food was the two problematic areas for international students when they arrive in the US. Regarding Accommodation facilities, some students believed that they are not only inappropriate, unsafe, poor, and inconvenient, but also very expensive. Also, UPM does not provide information about accommodation. The interviewees' comments are mentioned as follows:

Some student stated that "*UPM's International Housing Complex not only the rent was very high, but also the facilities were so poor and there was not conveniently situated. Being located*

at the end of the academic area, it was very isolated and I did not feel really secure at night.” According to the results of the study, not enough information is given on accommodation. The majority of students mentioned that “*UPM does not provide information about accommodation inside and outside the campus.*”

The results of the interview also indicate that the students have easy access to transportation inside and outside the campus. However, some students have complained that the buses do not run on time. Most of them stated that UPM does not provide information about bus schedule. Also some international student’s whose are staying outside campus said that there is a lack of transportation outside university. This study has also revealed that all the students had a problem with campus restaurants. In fact they had no idea of where to find suitable food. According to this study these international students were not satisfied with sanitation quality of campus restaurants. They believed that there are not enough restaurants and presently the available restaurants are not clean as well.

Social and communication differences

The second category of barriers faced by the international post-graduate students was about the difference in social communication which translates into cultural difficulties, especially difficulties in communicating in English. These results match the literature, in which many authors had highlighted the fact that international students face more difficulties adapting to the new situation. They face various challenges in

terms of culture and communication, loss of social support, language difficulties (Lin & Yi, 1997; Yeh & Inose, 2002; Hus, 2003; Andrade, 2006; Kelly, 2008; Lui, 2009; Sovic, 2009; Zubaidi & Rechards, 2009; Sherry, 2010; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Mustapha, 2010; Alavi & Shafeg, 2011). According to Yusoff & Chelliah (2010), adjustments by students fall into two categories: socio-cultural adjustments are related to behavioural ability to fit in and could be considered from a social learning perspective predicted by variables related to the social skills acquisitions and cognitive factors. Others have categorized the challenges facing international students. To include 1), social and curriculum and general living adjustment, 2) socio-cultural adjustment, 3) personal psychological adjustment, 4) academic adjustment and 5) Languages Difficulties (Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2009; Alavi & Shafeq, 2011).

A problem that the majority of the students in this study faced was the English proficiency which they did not find comprehensible enough. All students remarked that “*lack of English knowledge during their study is the main problem to transfer when communicating their ideas to lecturer and other students. They believed that they cannot show their real ability as a result of lack of English*”. In this research it has also been found that the international students have all had communication problems with others which could be due to the cultural differences. The results show that they are not satisfied with the staff behaviour at all. This could partly occur as a result of misunderstanding due to the lack of English knowledge and cultural

differences. The result is supported by the literature, in which (Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010) identified Socio-cultural adjustments are related to behavioural ability to fit in and can be viewed from a social learning perspective predicted by variables related to the social skills acquisitions and cognitive factors. According to Marinis (2008) there are similar problems among international students when adapting to a new environment are, important differences between cultural groups are missed when classifying this population as one homogenous group. Moreover, the result shows that there is a problem in finding places, buildings and faculties as all names are in Bahasa. This was mentioned in the literature, Malakolunthu and Sateyan (2011) who suggested that both academic and non-academic university staff members need to equip themselves with sufficient knowledge of the various backgrounds of international students. The Malaysian higher education sector also needs to streamline its strategy for internationalization with greater improvement on the course, and the quality of student services.

Education challenges

Lack of academic system, teaching methodology and faculty supervisor was international post graduate-students barriers which were encountered during their studies. This is supported by Al-Zubaidi & Rechards (2009) who stated that academic difficulty categories among international students refer to the academic system, lecturers and methodology of teaching. Furthermore, Harman and Hayden

(2010) find that, significant challenges with regards to teaching and learning environment in Vietnam includes the lack of qualifications, and poor teaching preparation among academic staff. According to the results, the system of education is based more on practical and research issues than theoretical ones. However, this might be problematic for those lacking a research background. Team work which is observed in most of the classes is a positive feature of the Malaysian education system, making education more efficient. The two students highlighted that “*Here, less emphasis is laid on theory and it is very important to put whatever you learn in practice*”. Furthermore, the finding illustrated that, there is no significant problems between the international students and faculty supervisor. According to the students report, the main problem with faculty supervisor related to lack of time, and unclear feedback. Five students mentioned that their supervisor does not have enough time for holding a regular meeting. Moreover; three students reported they did not obtain clear feedback from their supervisor. Chests (1997), Blunt & Li (1998) and Adrian & Kimberly et al. (2007) point out that, graduate students had a problem with their supervisor in lack of useful feedback, different expectations, lack of time, cultural background and gender-based discrimination. Based on the interview, some of them illustrated that their conflict with their supervisor were not significant and with sufficient discussion the conflict was eliminated. Furthermore, Majority of student indicated that they have problem with their writing skills and they need for assistance in their project writing. Similarly, Sherry et al. (2009) indicated that

international student needs writing centre for help student.

Financial problem

Financial matter is one of the problems that some international students face. Some students are not supported by their government and they are self-paid. Leaving abroad for these students is with stress of not having enough money for paying their fees or their living expenses. Prior research indicated that international students' challenges may occur in dealing with financial challenges (Hsu, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Similarity, the study about the experiences of international students at The University of Toledo illustrated that international students experience financial problem during their study (Sherry et al.2009).

The Majority of students indicated that they have financial problems, while five participate said that they had not experienced such financial difficulties. Two of those who reported receiving a graduate assistantship stated that this funding had been the reason why they had not experienced any financial problems, whereas other complained that they had experienced such problems because they didn't give financial support.

International office program

Lack of entertaining activities was the international post graduate-students challenges which were made by international service during their studies. The students are not informed well regarding the events and facilities. Homesickness

is a problem that a large number of international students experience while staying away from family and hometown and the interviewees of this research highlighted that lack of entertaining activities was a tangible problem. However, no events are organized to help them overcome the above mentioned problem. This results is in line with Lui (2009) findings who reported that lack of entertaining activities is then an important issue that international students face. Similarly some interviewees mentioned that "*activity programs for international student are very weak*". The indicated that, there is no outside camp activities and trips for international students. According to Wang (2007), Lin & Yi (1997) and Lu (2009), the international student services offices are needed much more especially to help students navigate the new rules and regulations relating to immigration, visas, etc.

Conclusion

The aim of this research is to identify the international post-graduate students' benefits and barriers faced during the first year of studies at University of Putra Malaysia. According to the result, career perspective, familiarity with various culture and self-awareness, independence, global perceptions are the benefits of studying in UPM as international students. Zhai and Scheer (2004) believed that higher level of global perceptions leads to positive attitudes toward contact with international people. According to the results, students' knowledge is applicable and adaptable to international situations. Therefore this leads them to be more competitive in a globalization

world. Based on the results of the interviews conducted in this research, it can be concluded that international students suffer from a variety of challenges during their first year of studies. These challenges were reported to be insufficient facilities, different social environment, academic problems, and lack of international service programs and financials problem. Alavi and Shafeq (2011) indicated that the most disturbing categories of problems among international

students at UTM are social and recreational problems as well as the curriculum and method of teaching problems. The findings are very specific. However, the more significant results can be achieved if bigger sample and various research methodologies are employed. Despite its limitation, this study is significant as it finds students' problems and the information can help administrators to be aware of the international students' benefits and challenges.

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