The pre-Australian study experience: An analysis of how Australian educated Malaysian women (and men) view their overseas education experience prior to their point of embarkation

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Abstract

This paper focuses on one part of the international education experience - the pre-Australian education experience. In addition to identifying factors motivating international students to pursue an overseas education, this study also considers particularly the family's socio-economic background; and, the participants' reflections on the attitudes, perceptions and aspirations they held in the period in which the decision to study in Australia was made. Using data from a social survey of Malaysian alumni from Monash University Australia supplemented with qualitative interviews with Monash Malaysian alumni, this paper also reports several significant gender differences during this stage of the sojourn. This paper aims to provide some baseline data, which providers of international education would be able to draw upon when analysing the overall impact of the international education experience, in addition to highlighting a significant variable of difference in their client base, that of gender.

Keywords: Pre-Australian education experience, gender difference, Malaysian alumni

Introduction

Understanding the "push pull" factors of international students in Australian tertiary institutions has long been identified as a key area of research for Australian educators and policy makers. Research by Mazzrol and Hosie (1996) and Mazzarol and Sourtar (2002) has been important in identifying the factors influencing international students' choices to pursue overseas higher education with reference to the long term strategic marketing of the international education as a major Australian export industry. Consequently, considerable effort has been made by Australian tertiary institutions to internationalise the curricula, raise the level of services and support to cater for the expansion of international student numbers in Australia. However, beyond identifying the factors motivating international students to pursue an overseas education, there is little literature exploring the attitudes, perceptions and aspirations of international students prior to the point of embarking on their path of career, professional and personal development outside their home country. With respect to a broader understanding of Australian international education and its outcomes for both the students themselves and the countries to which they, in many cases, return, Cuthbert, Smith and Boey (2008) point to the need for such data as it provide a key reference point to accurately measure the impacts and outcomes of international education.

Using data from a social survey of Malaysian alumni from Monash University Australia, supplemented with qualitative interviews with Monash Malaysian alumni, this paper focuses on the pre-Australian education experience. It considers particularly the family's socio-economic background; and, the participants' reflections on the attitudes, perceptions and aspirations they held in the period in which the decision to study in Australia was made. In the absence of genuine 'baseline' data (that is data actually collected at this point in the lives of the participants), this data on the participants memories and reflections on this pre-Australian study experience

phase, provide a valuable window on to this little understood part of the overseas study experience. We are aware that this reflective data may be somewhat influenced by the participants' subsequent experiences – with, for example, certain outcomes influencing their memories of this part of their lives – but nonetheless consider that it makes an important contribution to knowledge of the overseas study experience.

While our data reveal many common and shared experiences, this paper also reports several significant gender differences during this stage of the sojourn. Despite current research by educators and policy makers that reflect a growing recognition of the diversity in the international student population, the issue of gender or gender differences is often sidelined or masked by stereotypical or over determined concerns with the 'homogenised' international student. This area of study has also been under-researched because of predisposition to normalise the male student and thereby to assign to the woman student the subordinate status of 'other' (Kenway & Bullen 2003) or the tendency to view gender issues as supplementary questions only to be tackled when the general work is done (Wright 1997). Therefore, in addition to providing some baseline data, which providers of international education would be able to draw upon when analysing the overall impact of the international education experience, this paper also aims to highlight a significant variable of difference in their client base, that of gender. The paper concludes by suggesting that even while both male and female Malaysian students have equitable opportunities to embark on a path of career and professional development outside their home country, there are consistent differences between male and female students on how they value and perceive the overseas education.

Background

International students in Australia come from various countries of which the majority are from Asia. In 2006, the top four sources of international students in Australian tertiary institutions, in ranked order, were China, India, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia (Australian Education International 2007). While international students from China, India and the Republic of Korea represent the current dominant make-up of international students in Australia, Malaysia has been a major source of international students dating as far back to the early period of internationalisation and the Colombo Plan in the 1950s. Under the Colombo Plan, Australia provided scholarships and fellowships for students from a range of countries in the region and beyond to study in Australia (Oakman 2004), of which Malaysia was a primary recipient. During this time, the focus of Australian higher education was to provide 'education as aid' for its neighbouring countries that had little or no capacity for higher education. However, in the ensuing time, Australian higher education has transformed over the years and moved from an emphasis on 'aid' to an emphasis on 'trade' (Smart & Ang 1993). The number of Malaysian international students in Australia grew significantly in the early 80's with the internationalisation of the Australian higher education sector and up to today, Malaysia remains to be one of the key sources of international students in Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2005).

Education in Malaysia

A brief note on the Malaysian context is necessary for an understanding of the experiences of Malaysian international students prior to the point of embarking on path of career, professional and personal development outside their home country. Malaysia is an ex- British colony that achieved independence in 1957. A distinct feature of the Malaysian population is its ethnic mix of Malays (65.1%) including the indigenous people from East Malaysia who are referred to as *Bumiputra*, Chinese (26.0%) and Indian (7.7%) (Malaysia Department of Statistics 2000). During the colonial period and the early post independence period in Malaysia, female daughters had limited access to formal schooling as compared to male sons as it was a commonly held belief by most parents that girls should stay at home as they were destined for domesticity (Ariffin 1992). However, as noted by Razali and Yusoff (2003), by the 1970s this traditional view that schooling was not suitable for female daughters was no longer accepted by society and this was clearly shown by the diminishing imbalances in male and female school enrolments. Two factors that were critical for this narrowing of the gap in school enrolment rates of boys and girls were the provision for equal access to free and compulsory primary and secondary education and the changing mindset of Malaysian parents that reflected the importance of education as a means to better employment opportunities and improved social mobility. By 1979, female student enrolments at the primary and secondary level of education were 49% and 47% respectively (Ariffin 1992).

In terms of higher education, women started to advance numerically in tertiary institutions by the 1980s as education was viewed a prerequisite to increase women's participation in the higher levels of the economy. As the industrial development of the country moves from a production-based to a knowledge-based economy, the importance of education for women is even more apparent (Omar 2009; Ong & Lee 2003). Recent data indicate

that Malaysian women are almost on par with men in terms of attaining tertiary education (Malaysia Department of Statistics 2002), hence once again challenging the traditional gender roles in a culturally bounded society. However, it is ethnicity that emerges as a further salient issue at the tertiary education level in Malaysia. As part of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which aimed to redress the social and economic imbalance among the different ethnic groups, the Malays were provided preferential treatment into local universities to make it possible for more Malays, especially those from rural areas to move up educational levels and thereby participate in the modern sectors of the economy (Kandasamy & Santhiram 2000). Because of the admission quota and the limited spaces in public tertiary institutions, many non- Malay students were forced to go overseas in pursuit of higher education (Lee 1997). At the same time, this affirmative action for ethnic Malays also led many Malay students under government scholarships to Australia for higher education. Therefore, the implementation of the NEP in 1971 could be deemed the starting point for many Malaysian students to look abroad for further educational opportunities.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are from a social survey of Malaysian alumni from Monash University Australia, which was then supplemented with data gathered in the qualitative research phase, namely a series of interviews with Monash Malaysian graduates living in Malaysia. Monash University has had a long involvement in international education dating as far back to the Colombo Plan in the 1950s (Marginson 2000). The number of international students enrolled in Monash University exceeded 17,000 in 2007, of which Malaysian international students represented the largest group of international student enrolments (Monash University, The Office of Planning and Quality 2008). While we acknowledge the limitation of a one institution study, we believe that the profile of Monash University provides a good window into international education in Australia.

The first phase of the study involved a web-based and mail survey of over 6000 Monash Malaysian alumni, administered by the Monash University campus in Malaysia in 2005. The quantitative survey aimed to collect data on the pre-Australian experience, the Australian study experience, post-graduation career outcomes and reflections. Of the 500 plus responses that were received by the closing date, 440 responses were identified as useable for the purpose of the study. There are several factors that may have affected a higher response rate. These include the detailed and comprehensive nature of the survey which may have been a disincentive for some in completing the survey; a less than efficient postal system in Malaysia; and the difficulties of maintaining email and mailing addresses on the Monash Alumni database. Nevertheless, the 440 valid responses are deemed more than satisfactory as many of the respondents provided rich and heartfelt comments of which some were personal in nature through different and sometimes challenging sections of the questionnaire. Responses were examined using cross tabulations to identify the relationship between the various variables discussed in this paper.

After analysis of the quantitative data, the second stage of study, the qualitative phase, was undertaken in Malaysia. The main objective of the interviews was to expand on the key findings of the survey and to further investigate some of the unexpected results arising from the survey. A total of thirty interviews were collected with male and female Monash Australia alumni working (or retired) and residing in Malaysia. Each interview lasted between an hour to an hour and a half. For the purpose of this paper, 5 interviews have been selected which best illustrate the issues discussed in this paper.

Findings

Of the 440 responses received from the survey, 247 (56%) responses were from males and 193 (44%) were from females. A gender breakdown by ethnicity, year of graduation and field of study of the survey respondents is summarised in Table 1. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 90% of female and male respondents are of Chinese ethnicity, which reflects the lack of opportunities in local universities for non-Malays as a result of the NEP in Malaysia. On the other hand, the gender breakdown in terms of year of graduation and field of study raises some interesting questions. First, the female cohort is represented by approximately 45% of graduates in the 2000's as compared with only 32% in the male sample. The overwhelming representation of young female graduates in the sample suggests two possibilities: either that this cohort was enthusiastic to participate in the study or the possibility that young women are more prominent in international education today.

In terms of gender breakdown and the field of study, there is some evidence of gender streaming with female over-representation in the arts or humanities and under-representation in the information technology and engineering departments. However, one striking feature in Table 1 is the overwhelming representation of the

female sample from the Faculty of Business and Economics. Almost 60% of the female sample graduated from this faculty as opposed to only 35% of the male sample. The high representation of young female graduates from the Faculty of Business and Economics was explored in the qualitative study. Preliminary findings suggest that many female interviewees placed a strong interest in this field of study, however, several other interviewees suggest that it was often their parents' decision. In addition, several female interviews felt that the degree was broad enough to provide a wide range of career opportunities upon graduation.

Table 1. Ethnicity, field of study and year of graduation of survey respondents, by gender (percentage)

	Female Respondents (n=193)	Male Respondents (n=247)
Ethnicity		
Chinese	91.2	89.5
Malay	3.6	6.1
Indian	2.1	2.0
Other	3.1	2.0
Field of Study		
Art and Design	1.0	0
Arts	7.8	2.0
Business and Economics	56.5	34.8
Education	0.5	0
Engineering	3.6	23.1
Information Technology	11.4	20.2
Law	2.6	0.8
Medicine, Nursing & Health Science	1.6	4.0
Pharmacy	2.6	0.8
Science	8.3	6.5
Double Degree	3.6	7.7
Year of Graduation		
60's	0	0.4
70's	2.6	7.3
80's	13.5	18.6
90's	37.8	40.5
2000+	45.1	31.6

Social Economic Background of Graduates' Families

The survey questionnaire was also designed to seek information regarding the social economic background of the respondent's family. A key objective of this section of the survey was to provide a context for the decision to study in Australia both in terms of the educational background of the parents and siblings of respondents, and their families' financial position.

Almost 50% of fathers of the respondents obtained a diploma or trade qualification or above (which include a Bachelor, Masters or PhD degree). On the other hand, only 31% of mothers obtained similar qualifications, with a mere 8% holding a Bachelor degree or above. Almost all respondents (over 90%) with parents with a Bachelor degree, Masters or PhD are recent graduates, either from the cohorts from the 1990s or 2000+ cohort. This reflects the growing importance of tertiary education for upward social mobility within a rapidly developing country like Malaysia.

In the next section of the survey, respondents were asked to detail their parents' current job position or their

position prior to retirement. Such data is vital as it provide an insight into the families' financial position and social standing. The split between single and double income families is almost 50/50: notably in all single income families, it was the mothers who did not work. Fathers in double income families were more likely to be well educated (64% with a diploma or trade qualification or above) whereas fathers' in single income families were more likely to receive less education (70% with only secondary or primary education). Given that fathers in single income families represent the sole breadwinners for their families, the education qualification of these fathers is not a true indicator of the family's financial position. Many fathers in this category were classified as 'businessman' or entrepreneurs' and are likely to own their own business. This is an activity which has traditionally been pursued without tertiary qualifications. They are often coined as the 'old middle class' or the 'entrepreneurial middle class' (Kahn 1996) in Malaysian society. Fathers with a diploma qualification or a bachelor degree (or above) are often termed as the new middle class. Many of them are most likely to be managers, lawyers, doctors, and directors, working mostly in the private sector.

An interesting note to make here is that despite the level of education attained by the mothers, the majority of them worked in the highly gendered occupations of teacher, nurse or clerk. There were only a small handful of mothers with professional or business positions. Over 90% of mothers from single income families were only educated to the end of primary school or, at the most, secondary school.

In terms of siblings' education, respondents were asked to detail the sex, education levels and the destinations for tertiary education of their siblings. It was hypothesized that Malaysian parents may prefer to send their sons to the UK or the US as the level of education was deemed superior and more expensive and to send their daughters to Australia, Singapore or any other less expensive destination. However, it was impossible to draw any relationship between gender and tertiary education destination from the survey sample. One key feature of the Malaysian middle-class family is to reinforce and enhance their economic position which includes reproducing their class position among their children. Hence, to reinforce their class position, their children, regardless of gender, are given the best educational opportunities to increase their mobility on the social and economic ladder (Jomo 1999; Kahn 1996). The data certainly confirm this view. Additionally, many families were also more likely to place a higher value on the overseas education as compared to local tertiary education. One female interviewee reflected on how her parents viewed overseas education. Su Lin, a law student who graduated in 1998, indicated that her parents felt that it was not so much a dream but a necessity to provide all three daughters with an overseas tertiary education.

> I think my mum was very [much] for the exposure part [of studying overseas]… because of her background, most of her siblings have migrated, and she grew up in a fairly liberal upbringing, because her father was in the restaurant business in Penang. Both my parents are from Penang… and it really catered for the expat, so she was fairly westernized from young. Hence she always felt that the exposure was a very important part. My dad, surprisingly, that's the one thing they agreed upon. My dad was the opposite; he had a very traditional upbringing. Both parents are from China and he was actually born in China. But he was somehow very western centric, because at that time America was on the rise, so he always said that Chinese education is bad, western education is better because you come out with thinkers… so I have to say that they actually planned us to have that exposure…

The decision to come to Australia

This section of the paper looks in detail at the pre-Australian study experience using data from the survey questionnaire and the interviews. In addition to identifying factors motivating international students to pursue an overseas education, this section also aims to identify, retrospectively, their values and attitudes at the point before they embarked on study in Australia and to gather data on their perceptions of the changes they have experienced (or in some cases, resisted) after their return from Australia. In terms of the key reasons for choosing to study in Australia as opposed to another country, the responses from the survey correspond with the various other studies (i.e. Gardiner & Hirst 1990; Harman 2004), that is, the good education system, the lower cost and the proximity of Australia to Malaysia. When asked specifically about Monash University, almost 40% of respondents identified the reputation and the academic standing of the university, with another 25% of respondents noting specific attributes such as the location, campus environment and facilities of the university as being influential on their decision. While responses to these two sets of questions are not clearly differentiated along gender lines, significant gender differences occur when respondents are asked to recall their aspirations or their dreams prior to coming to Australia.

The primary aspiration for both male and female respondents was career and educational goals (65% for female respondents and 77% for male respondents); this aspiration was then followed by social and cultural objectives. It is interesting to note that the ambition for social and cultural exchange and the desire to seek independence featured almost twice as many times amongst female respondents (32%) as compared to male respondents (18%). Several female interviewees commented on both a desire to succeed in their studies and an aspiration to learn about a new culture, to experience the Australian lifestyle and to gain independence.

> Well, obviously cultural experience, being away from the country was one, I guess *being free from the family*, to do whatever I wanted (laughs)… I guess a sense of *independence*, experience new things and of course my degree… So basically, it's being somewhere else, being in a completely new environment, adapting, learning about them and getting a degree at the same time. (Amelia, a recent Business and Marketing graduate) (*emphasis added*)

Cindy, a Business and Economics graduate, cautiously echoed similar aspirations:

> Of course to come back with a degree… (laughs). But like in a way, it was going to be like an *adventure* because it was the first time I was going to be overseas. The furthest that time I have been away was Singapore. So it was like one adventure and of course to come home with a degree… It's a totally new culture, being in Malaysia most of my school life, so exploring a new culture and a chance to travel. (*emphasis added*)

This corroborates the findings of a study of Japanese postgraduate females students in Australia (Ichimoto 2004). The female participants in this study also disclosed 'other' reasons for enrolling as postgraduates in Australia, which were not directly academically orientated. These women were more concerned to escape or secure a temporary reprieve from the societal pressure for Japanese women to marry, the lack of employment opportunities for university-educated women in Japan and the opportunity for a new life in Australia.

By distinction, the majority of male respondents reported narrowly focused objectives before coming to Australia. Their comments relate directly to academic success and their career ambitions once they returned home to Malaysia. Chin Meng, an engineering student who graduated in 1968, described his aspiration as reflecting and being limited to both the tough economic conditions that then prevailed and parental pressure to succeed during his time in Australia. There was no hint of the spirit of 'adventure' spoken of by female respondents in his response:

> I think at our time, in fact it was a very hard time when the economy is concerned, so at that time, parents send their children to study mainly to have a good job, that's all, making money. At that time that was the main thing.

Similarly, Sharul, a Masters graduate also expressed some parental pressure when he reflecting on his personal ambitions:

> To tell you the truth, it was the paper [i.e. the degree]. Just the paper. I was working in …the design industry…and things were bad. It was just after the 97' crisis. And things didn't really pick up…so my mother said this is the only money we have now, please go and do this now… so I decided I would follow what my mother wants and hopefully God will help me! So it was purely paper qualification.

Generally speaking, while both male and female interviewees were consciously aiming to achieve the main objective of their sojourn to Australia, which was to obtain their degree, female interviewees were also more likely to view their overseas education experience as an opportunity to broaden their cross-cultural understanding of Australia and for personal development.

The value of the Australian study experience

From the survey questionnaire, female respondents were also more likely to place greater importance on the opportunity to get away from home than male respondents when questioned about the value of the Australian study experience (68% for female respondents and 57% for male respondents). Given that this was a close-ended question in the survey, this was one of the key issues raised with female interviewees. Several female interviewees usefully elaborated on the constraints of gender roles in their family. May Lin, an Economics graduate, commented: 'Yeah, because that time our parents are strict, to go out for a party is hard enough, the

curfew would be 10 o'clock, and suddenly [in Australia] you no longer have a curfew'. May Lin and several other female interviews felt that there would be fewer restrictions had they been male. However, during my interview with Amelia and Cindy, both described the opportunity to get away from home was not only the opportunity to get away from a restrictive family but more so an opportunity to get away from the country, Malaysia.

> Amelia: Not that my parents are not liberal, the main reason that I wanted to go away, now in retrospect as well, it's not so much my paper qualification, I think it's more about *learning new things and broadening the horizon* and bringing all those things back here, or else I would be stuck in the *Malaysian mentality* and I didn't want that. I wanted to be exposed to other things and bring that back here some way. *(emphasis added)*

> Cindy: … well I had the option of studying locally or going overseas, so I guess probably at that point of time, it was like, why not go overseas and see what happens. It was not so much a deliberate attempt to get away from the parents or the family, but I guess it more like out of curiosity or in away to seek out that *adventure*. *(emphasis added)*

It appears that while this question aims to tease out the constraints of gender roles found in many Asian families, several female interviews used this question also as an opportunity to reinforce their desire to experience life in Australia, to learn a new culture and to seek a new adventure beyond what life in Malaysia could provide.

Conclusion

This paper argues that both male and female Malaysian students often have equitable opportunities to embark on a path of career and professional development outside their home country. Both male and female children are given the best educational opportunities to enhance their social and economic position, which in turn strengthens the family's class position within the growing Malaysian middle-class However, these equitable conditions of both access and expectation for young Malaysians should not blind us to the gendered differences in the way male and female students experience this educational opportunity. Our data indicate consistently that the attitudes, perceptions and aspirations they held in the period in which the decision to study in Australia was made are different for male and female students. Female respondents in the study describe wider ambitions than their male counterparts which extend beyond academic success in their aspirations to study abroad. Of course, gender is not the only element at work here, as neither race nor ethnicity can be overlooked in the Malaysian context. However, gender appears to represent a consistent, if sometime subtle, factor in the different aspirations and feelings reflected on by the study sample.

The finding of gender as a significant variable in the aspirations and feelings of young Malaysians before embarking on study in Australia is not diminished by the retrospective collection of the data. Arguably, only baseline data collected prior to the Australian study experience can *accurately* reflect the feelings and aspirations of young Malaysians at this point in their careers. The gender differential we have observed is equally applicable with the data collected retrospectively. Whether telling us what the participants actually thought at the point before they embarked on the Australian study experience, or telling us what they now remember that they thought, the differences between the responses of male and female participants alerts us to the under-researched importance of gender to the international student experience.

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