

Why university students choose an international education: A case study in Malaysia

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Abstract

Why has Australian offshore higher education become the educational investment of choice for many students? What benefits do students anticipate from this education? What is the relationship between educational goals and educational experience? To address these questions, this paper draws on findings from empirical research conducted with students studying at an offshore campus of an Australian university in Malaysia. It was found that students typically chose to enroll with the Australian university to receive an international education. Reasons offered for seeking an international education effectively delineated two groups of students. For Malaysian nationals, an international education was valued largely as a passport to employment with (Western) multinational corporations operating in Malaysia. Generally the Malaysian students made *positional* investments in Australian offshore higher education. For non-Malaysian students an international education was typically selected as an aid to procuring a new identity. These students chose an international education with the hope of expunging provincial outlooks. From international education, they wanted new ways of viewing the world, new habits of thinking and new skills and approaches. They sought a personal metamorphosis. These students, therefore, typically made *self-transformative* investments in international education. The paper further shows that investment choices influenced the way students experienced their education. Of the two populations distinguished by investment type, students who made self-transformative investments were more likely to respond positively to challenging education experiences associated with studying at the campus.

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1. Introduction

In 2005, there were more than 100,000 students studying with Australian universities while residing in countries other than Australia (Department of Education and Science Training (DEST), 2005).

Beyond the standard refrain that students are selecting Australian university courses in preference to courses offered by their local providers because of the “high quality” (Nelson, 2005) of Australian education, little is known about the reasons students have for choosing to study in this fashion.

This paper draws on findings from research conducted at an Australian university’s offshore campus in Malaysia to examine this matter. This research was done as the third in a series of studies

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intended to progress understandings about student engagement with Australian offshore higher education. An initial study (Pyvis and Chapman, 2005) was conducted with doctoral students enrolled with an Australian university in Hong Kong. A second study was made with students taking masters by coursework degrees with an Australian university in Singapore (Chapman and Pyvis, 2006). This study, in Malaysia, engaged both undergraduate and postgraduate participants.

In the first two investigations it was found that students often were seeking more from their studies than career placement or advancement. International exposure was for many the pressing incentive for undertaking studies with a ‘foreign’ university. The Malaysian research essentially was conducted to try to build on understandings about student choice.

There are three findings from the Malaysian study discussed in this paper. The first matter of note is that students at the campus typically chose to study with an Australian university in order to acquire an international education. The second key point relates to the reasons why students in the study sought an international education. At the campus, there were students from many countries including Brunei, Canada, mainland China, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Mozambique, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore. In the study it was found that non-Malaysian students typically chose an international education with a view to overcoming what they saw as the limitations of their own parochialism. These students wanted to become ‘international’ in outlook. They wanted an international education to set them on the road to being ‘international’ beings. That is, they made *self-transformative* investments in their education. In contrast, the Malaysian students typically valued an international education as a passport to employment, usually with multinational corporations operating in Malaysia. They saw international education as providing a competitive edge in the job market. Effectively then, the Malaysian students typically made *positional* investments in international education.

The third issue that concerns this paper is the effect the different investment strategies had in relation to student experiences of study. It was observed that students who made self-transformative investments generally were more accepting and welcoming of novel educational experiences and requirements associated with being a student at the campus than were students seeking positional advantage.

The next two sections of this paper provide background on Australian offshore higher education. This is followed with a description of the methodology of the research and then the case study findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications for international education.

2. The growth of Australian offshore higher education

Until relatively recently, little more than a handful of Australian university programmes could be undertaken by students wishing to study in locations other than in Australia. From 1904, when the first overseas students enrolled with Australian universities (Tootell, 1999), until the mid-1990s, offshore provision was a very marginal area within international education. For example, even in the mid-1980s, only about 2000 out of 13,000 international students (National Tertiary Education Union, 2004), were enrolled in Australian higher education. Since 1996, the trend in international enrolments has been an expanding demand for study options outside of Australia (IDP, 2000). In 2000, the international student enrolled with an Australian university was increasingly likely to be studying, not at a campus in Australia, but in Hong Kong, Singapore or Malaysia (Davis et al., 2000).

The growth in demand for offshore education has been addressed and encouraged by an expansion in the number of programmes offered overseas. For example, in May 1999, Australian universities were offering 581 offshore programmes, mainly in Asia (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). By May 2003, 1569 programmes were being offered. Recent estimates (Department of Education and Science Training (DEST), 2005) indicate that Australian universities are providing nearly 2000 programmes offshore to 100,000 students, with more than 70% of the programmes located in China (including Hong Kong), Singapore and Malaysia.

The situation now is that there are “numerous models of Australian university offshore programme delivery leading to an Australian higher education qualification” (National Tertiary Education Union, 2004, p. 4). The models that have developed for offshore delivery include:

- *twinning programmes*, where Australian university courses are offered offshore with the involvement of an overseas partner;

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