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Postdegree Intentions of Female International Undergraduate Students Studying in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has been positively linked with increased opportunity for women, including enhanced employability, increased migration, enriched cultural capital, and improved language skills. With the number of international students rising, understanding postdegree intentions is increasingly important for institutions, policy makers, and administrators. This qualitative study explored the postdegree intentions of female international undergraduate students at the Malaysian campus of an Australian university. In-depth interviews were conducted with students from a range of degree programs and data was studied using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that postdegree intentions were substantially influenced by other people and policies; a common aspiration was to balance career and family; postdegree intentions were not solely career-focused; and the students anticipated discrimination and inequality but were determined to successfully navigate these.

Keywords: expectations, female students, global mobility, influencing factors, international mobility, study abroad

INTRODUCTION

In a global landscape punctuated by international corporate collaborations, borderless social networks, rapidly advancing technology, changing economies, and fluctuating political agendas, international study has increased exponentially in recent years. In 1975, 0.8 million students were studying abroad. In 2017 this figure had increased to approximately 5.3 million students (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). Global projections suggest that the number of learners seeking international education in 2025 will have risen to over seven million (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015).

International study abroad has become a key differentiating experience for young adults enrolled in tertiary education. International study is seen as an opportunity to access quality education, to improve employability, to expand cultural knowledge and capital, and to improve language skills (OECD, 2017a; Salyers et al., 2015). After graduation, international students are an asset to their host country due to the value of their degree and the knowledge, skills, and cultural diversity they possess (Paile & Fatoki, 2014). These students also represent value to their home country by bringing back knowledge, providing opportunities for collaboration, fostering innovation, and having the potential for high earning capital (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Paile & Fatoki, 2014).

Higher education has been found to be positively linked with increased migration for women (Kanaiaupuni, 2000). In 2017, total female student migration comprised of 48% women to 52% men, although females outnumbered male migrants in Europe, Northern America, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2017). Despite this trend, we know little about what female students intend to do on completion of their studies. This study aims to emphasize the needs and highlight the abilities of female international undergraduate students, by increasing the evidence base surrounding the postdegree intentions of female international undergraduate students

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature on the postdegree intentions of female international students can be categorised into three broad themes: cultural expectations, gendered decisions, and migratory patterns based on opportunities.

Culture and home country have been noted as significant variables when evaluating the postdegree intentions of female students (Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lu et al., 2009; Takeuchi, 2008). Female Chinese students may be pulled to return home after study completion, due to a perceived need to be near parents, pressure to enhance family prestige, and desire to honor family (Bamber, 2014; Ito, 2003; Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lu et al., 2009; Qin & Lykes, 2006). In patrifocal Indian society, expectations on females had the opposite effect, in that female international students were encouraged to enhance their social mobility by obtaining a higher degree, traveling, and securing a prestigious job (King & Sondhi, 2016). Several authors noted that Japanese women were more likely to remain in the host country on completion of international studies, or were prepared to travel to a new destination, if

it would promote career advancement (Creamer, 2004; Heberle, 2010; Hines, 1994). Female international Kazakhstani students were motivated to return home on postdegree completion in order to “bring my experience back to the country” (Holloway et al., 2012, p. 2284).

Qualities such as emotional connectedness, relationships with friends, and a need to feel supported were found to be factors influencing the poststudy intentions of female international undergraduate students (Lu et al., 2009). In contrast, male international undergraduate students were more likely to be influenced by their own academic performance as to whether they returned home at the conclusion of their studies. These influences were exacerbated if the students were only children or other siblings had left home (Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lu et al., 2009; Takeuchi, 2008).

Migratory patterns are complex to summarize, but in a broad sense, the literature describes the economic, political, and societal opportunities that may influence students’ postdegree intentions to stay in the host country, return home, or seek to travel to another country. Lin and Kingminghae (2017) found that students studying business or law were more inclined to stay in the host country, possibly for economic reasons, while Ugwu and Adamuti-Trache (2016) noted students with a science or engineering degree had an increased likelihood of staying in host country, possibly to pursue a doctorate degree or further research. McGill (2013) identified visa availability and training opportunities as significant influences on the migratory pathways of international masters and doctoral students in the United States. Similarly, visa availability, or the 2011 withdrawal of the poststudy work visa in the United Kingdom, was a significant influence on postdegree student intentions (Moskal, 2017). To summarize a pattern in the migratory pathways of international students is difficult, due to the diverse variables unique to each student and their circumstances (Moskal, 2017, p. 135). A broad spatial frame, advocated by Holloway et al. (2012), is vital in ensuring that similarities and differences are considered when exploring these patterns.

Very few studies consider the postdegree intentions of international students, even less so those of female international undergraduate students. Particularly, there is a gap in literature about the postdegree intentions of female international undergraduate students studying in Malaysia. The studies on postdegree intentions that do exist suggest that culture, gender, and migratory pathways may be significant and interchangeable variables in influencing postdegree intentions of female undergraduate students.

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, within a population of female international undergraduate students, with the aim of addressing the following research questions: (a) What are the postdegree intentions of female international undergraduate students at an offshore Malaysian campus of an Australian university, and (b) What are the factors that may influence postdegree intentions of female international undergraduate students?

METHODS

Research Setting

The study was conducted at an offshore campus of an Australian university in Malaysia due to the strong focus on the internationalization of higher education in Malaysia. For example, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education outlined an objective to enroll 200,000 foreign students by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). International student numbers have grown 189.7% from 2002 to 2009 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2013). Malaysia's desire to attract international students and its emerging status as an important player in the internationalization of higher education indicate this to be a favorable location in which to position the study.

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was adopted because of its effectiveness in “understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture ... and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, p. 1). Within this qualitative approach, thematic analysis was employed to analyze data. Thematic analysis encourages rich and in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and therefore was considered an appropriate method for analyzing the students' envisaged postdegree intentions and factors that may influence these intentions.

Sampling and Recruitment

All female international undergraduates enrolled in the 2015 academic year ($n = 100$) were invited to participate in this study. To be eligible for the study, there were three inclusion criteria: (a) be enrolled in an undergraduate course at the time of the study, (b) identify as female, and (c) have citizenship outside Malaysia. Students were recruited via direct email and posts on social media. All students who volunteered to participate in the study satisfied the inclusion criteria. The students were provided with information explaining the project and practical details about the interview, after which the participants provided consent. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the funding university and all practices adhered to the recommended standards of conduct.

Participants

Nine women were interviewed for the purpose of the study. Student details can be seen in Table 1, with pseudonyms used for each student. All of the students were fluent in English and most were multilingual, with languages such as Igbo, Shona, African Swahili, Arabic, and Mandarin spoken with family. The age of the women ranged from 19–28, and some were in the first year of university study, while others were in the final year of their degree. Three of the students had transferred from a

previous course at the same institution or had partially completed an undergraduate degree elsewhere.

The students all volunteered to participate in their research and several stated at the end of the interview that they enjoyed being asked to talk about their own thoughts and opinions.

Table 1: Participant’s Demographic Details

Pseudonym	Age	Country of citizenship	Field of study
Adaku	24	Nigeria	Bachelor of Arts
Yen	28	People’s Republic of China	Bachelor of Commerce
Xylia	23	People’s Republic of China	Bachelor of Commerce
Faith	22	Singapore	Bachelor of Science
Cebile	24	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Commerce
Panashe	19	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Commerce
Kaiya	24	Oman	Bachelor of Technology
Sabina	24	Mauritius	Bachelor of Engineering
Bahar	24	Oman	Bachelor of Engineering

Data Collection

I conducted face-to-face interviews with the students on campus in Malaysia. A literature search and the pilot interviews guided interview questions and format, underpinned by information on the local context, such as undergraduate courses on offer, immigration requirements and employment eligibility. Prior to travel, I conducted pilot interviews with female international undergraduate students at the Australian campus of the same university, to test appropriateness and relevance of the interview format. As a result, I refined some of the interview prompts and questions. I audio-recorded interviews with a digital recorder and a recording scribe device. With the exception of two students who preferred to be interviewed as a pair, I conducted all interviews individually, and each lasted between 60 to 90 min. I conducted all interviews in English, as all courses at the university were delivered in English. I used semistructured interview prompts to explore student thoughts such as postdegree intentions and factors that may help or hinder postdegree intentions. For example, some of the prompts used were:

- What do you want to do when you complete your studies?
- How do you intend to achieve this?
- How do you envision yourself 5 years after completing your degree?

Data Analysis

I performed data analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). I transcribed each interview verbatim and cross-checked with the audio recording for accuracy. I deidentified transcripts and allocated a unique code to preserve anonymity. The six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided my work. According to Braun and Clark (2006), familiarization with the data set is the first step. This included reading the full interview transcripts, making notes, and re-reading the transcripts. I reviewed and refined notes to generate initial codes, then used NVivo, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to organize and arrange these codes methodically. Once I had scoured the transcripts for codes, ideas with particular relevance to the aims of the study were denoted as themes. The next phase of thematic analysis involved reviewing the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic map of the analysis. I scrutinized the transcripts, codes, and themes to consider multiple viewpoints and perspectives, ensuring sufficient rigour of analysis. Defining and naming themes occurred by way of ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme. The final stage of thematic analysis included selecting compelling ideas and qualitative data from the transcripts in order to address the research question in a scholarly format, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the evidence base surrounding the topic.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis identified patterns and commonalities across participant interviews regarding the postdegree intentions. These intentions were intertwined with perceived barriers and enablers and were underpinned by how the students viewed their future selves. Consequently, the data elicited rich descriptions of factors that influence postdegree intentions, which were arranged into the following themes: family, culture, gendered expectations, institutional and political factors, and personal efficacy.

Family

A prominent and recurring theme for all of the participants was the importance of having a family of their own, particularly how this expectation influenced their future plans. Frequently, the postdegree plans featured commentary on marriage, children, and future caretaking responsibilities. For example, Sabina noted that she would like to settle down with her own family and successful career. Combining career and child-raising was important to her: “I want to be part of my children’s life. I like traveling and doing interesting stuff but I think that I will want to be part of their lives”.

Many of the women accepted the expectations of family members as a defining influence on their future plans. For example, Yen expressed how her father controlled her decisions:

I'm not going to call him a control freak but he is. If one day I go to him and tell him, "Hey dad I want to major in Arts, I want to study to learn how to paint stuff because I feel like painting's pretty cool" he's not going to agree with that.

Similarly, Kaiya said that while her family is "open compared to other Middle Eastern countries," upon her return home her father will not allow her to leave the country or get married to anyone outside the country.

However, expectations from family members could also be a source of motivation for many of the women. Sabina wished to join her father at his factory as an engineer, but wanted to gain more experience so she could learn how to best manage it one day. Bahar explained that she was finishing her degree for herself, but also so her parents could be proud of her.

For me, I want to finish my degree to make myself feel better but the second thing is I really want my parents to be proud of me. It's very important to me for my parents to be proud of me. I don't want them to look at me with disappointment in their eyes. That's just something that I would hate to see.
—*Bahar*

Culture

The women in the study represented a diverse mixture of cultural backgrounds, with Africa and Asia featuring as common geographical provenance (see Table 1). Many of the participants described strong cultural identities, and religion, tradition, and conventional practices were mentioned frequently. The strength of cultural influences often indicated these expectations were nonnegotiable.

Gendered Expectations

The poststudy intentions of the women were influenced by gendered expectations of their capabilities and prospects, which are often closely tied to cultural backgrounds. The women frequently mentioned discrimination and prejudice as a barrier to their future opportunities. Yen recalled how she told her mom she wanted to start a company doing financial security work, but her mother responded, "You're a girl, why bother? Just find a job that's stable and get nice pay, that's ok." She went on to acknowledge that a woman's success isn't measured in the same way as men. Instead, women are judged for whether they are good mothers or wives, not for their careers.

Kaiya, who was from the Middle East, explained that having a degree didn't change expectations for women:

You don't just move out of the house because you already have your degree or you're already working and can afford it on your own – no. Some of the families won't even allow you to step out of the house, especially for girls. For guys it's a bit easier but for girls it's more strict. So usually what girls do is they go and get their degree but then when they come back, or if they

do their degree back home when they finish their degree, they straight away get married and they don't do anything with their degree. —*Kaiya*

However, all of the women vocalized a determined pragmatism to negotiate around the discrimination and stereotypes. This ranged from not being deterred by lowered expectations to actively seeking out roles traditionally viewed as being suited to men.

... they just want to employ a guy.... so in the beginning they just look at you with “what’s a girl doing with safety boots and with a helmet”, they give you the look but after they get used to it. It’s just you need to change their mindset – *Bahar*.

Institutional and Political Factors

The rules or reputation of a country and its educational institutions directly affect postdegree outcomes of international students. For example, Yen planned on studying for her master’s degree in Australia because she was now familiar with the education system. A country’s opportunities for international graduates also affects postdegree plans. For example, employment law prevented the students from working in the host country on completion of their undergraduate degree, but they could remain if engaged as an unpaid intern. Faith acknowledged that there would be many obstacles in trying to remain in the country, including finding, securing, and maintaining a job.

Personal Efficacy

How the women viewed their position in the world—what they should do as opposed to what they could do—was a powerful narrative that influenced postdegree intentions across several themes. Their generalized beliefs about their own capabilities and the degree to which the women believed they had control over their lives, were reoccurring subthemes articulated by the women. Duffy (2010) stated that students who felt supported had a high sense of personal power and had a positive emotional disposition and were more likely to feel confident in their career decision making. In general, the participants viewed themselves as possessing a level of power, underpinned by the barriers they must be equipped to overcome and fueled by a desire to achieve.

The desire to make a difference in the world steered the postdegree intentions of several of the women, as well. Typically, this featured commentary around the work role, but also in the context of supporting family, helping others, being a role model, and volunteering. Sabina looked forward to being a role model for her family and finding independence in her career. She stated, “So when I graduate I think the respect part, the confidence part and you have an income of your own, you don’t depend on anyone and you are just independent and showing example to my younger cousins and all.” Faith, who planned on going into park services, was eager to work because she saw her education as a geologist as equipping her to help people. She was motivated by wanting to make a difference in people’s lives.

DISCUSSION

The five emergent themes from this study influencing postdegree intentions these were family, culture, and gendered expectations, as well as institutional and political factors and perceptions of personal efficacy. These five themes were relatively consistent with the three main categories identified in the extant literature—culture, gendered qualities, and migratory patterns.

Largely, there was a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic factors, in that all of the women seemed to possess an understanding of the interplay between factors that they could not control (such as job opportunities and immigration law), contrasted with their individual qualities and behaviours that would enable and empower them to realize their vision of future self (locus of control, potency, and desire to make a difference). The women tended to have a pragmatic focus when verbalizing their intentions immediately postdegree, such as securing employment or enrolling in a higher degree. Beyond this, the intentions of the women encompassed visions of family and children, with particular reference to envisaging how they would maintain dual roles of work and motherhood successfully. This is consistent with work by Barnes (2010), Hoffnung (2004), and Meeussen et al. (2016), whose studies suggest that younger women (final year of high school or undergraduate) consistently envisage their future selves as successfully combining career and motherhood. The women in this study actively articulated strategies on how they would balance the demands of a career with the responsibility of motherhood. Many of the women also anticipated bias and discrimination, based on their age and gender and pondered how this may impact the practicalities of work or career opportunities.

Postdegree intentions are not just about work. The women in this study richly described postdegree intentions that included further study, care of family, making a difference to the world landscape, having children, meeting their life partner, being financially comfortable, starting their own business, eliciting pride from their family, and achieving independence. This is consistent with recent work by Arthur et al. (2016) who advocated strategies for pursuing a personally and socially meaningful career in the 21st century that encapsulates many life strands, including personal, family, work, and community.

Implications

The findings of this study indicate a need for higher education institutions to understand the complex and multi-faceted nature of the decision-making processes that accompany postdegree intentions. Graduate outcome surveys from higher education institutions use indicators such as engagement in employment, enrollment in further study, and median salary to assess postdegree outcomes. Similarly, course experience questionnaires focus on aspects of the study experience that may inform efficacy and course quality indicators, but without links to student outcomes. Very few instruments capture postdegree intentions before (reasons for enrolling in the degree and institution), during (the experience of studying and plans for the future), and after (the actual postdegree activity). Linking these stages of decision-making would elicit a deeper understanding of the full student experience.

This is especially important to study within the international student population. Higher education institutions that are keen to attract international students would be more likely to do so if they better understood the decision-making processes employed by the students in choosing an international education and a provider. Pragmatically, career counseling services, course-switching options, work-integrated learning, or opportunities to explore postdegree endeavors are important support for international students.

The importance of self-efficacy and its impact on the postdegree intentions of the women in this study should not be ignored. If students who feel supported have a high sense of personal power and a positive emotional disposition, they are more likely to feel and be confident in their decision making (Duffy, 2010). This is important for women from cultures that place lesser value on women and their achievements.

Limitations

The study was based on female international undergraduate students at one campus only and therefore cannot be generalized to a wider population. A larger sample size would have added to the breadth of the findings, although it must be noted that the aim of the study was not to offer a generalized view but an enhanced understanding of the individualized experiences of the study's participants. The university featured in the study offers a selection of science, engineering, and humanities courses, but areas such as health were not represented. There may be different influences affecting decision making for students in other courses—for example, health profession students who may have a more prescribed occupational pathway. Bias due to self-reporting may be a limitation in the findings, as interviews with the researcher were the primary form of data collection.

CONCLUSION

The women interviewed in our study provided a rich insight into their plans and visions upon completion of undergraduate degree. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the postdegree intentions of female international undergraduates and the factors that may influence these intentions. These factors were summarized as five themes, which were comprised of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Underpinning these intentions was the students' vision of their future self, which aligned with the postdegree intentions, or was an extension of it.

The findings highlight a number of implications. On a theoretical level, we must consider the journey to postdegree plans from pre-admission to postgraduation. We must embrace the complex uniqueness each student brings to the international study experience. Similarly, we must stop thinking about postdegree decision making as being relevant only to careers and ensure that a holistic approach, incorporating other life variables, is considered.

Finally, we must embrace gender parity and ensure that young women engaged in international student mobility are not just provided with the opportunity to study, but are also afforded the career pathways and opportunities consistent with women's equality.

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