

What fuels students' ongoing aspirations to study abroad?

By Brendan Ch'ng, Irham Irham, & Ibro Him

In recent decades, higher education has become increasingly more accessible throughout the world. With the expansion of local universities, international branch campuses, and massive open online courses (MOOCs), students can pursue and earn a qualification from a well-established university in the comfort of their home without needing to leave their country.

However, the notion of going abroad to study still remains appealing despite the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as [many students still express interest in travelling abroad to further their studies](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated the growth of [virtual student mobility programmes](#), where university students are invited to participate in intercultural and knowledge exchange remotely instead of being physically present in the host country.

Meanwhile, higher education institutions across Asia have already been in a long pursuit in their quest to "internationalise" themselves with the rest of the world, and student mobility has become a key internationalisation strategy to attract talents from neighbouring regions and beyond ([Phan, 2017](#); [Sidhu et al., 2020](#)).

Flying to a foreign land to pursue a degree is undoubtedly an irresistible dream for some, but why are students willing to leave their comfort zone for something foreign and unpredictable?

One morning, this question became a topic of discussion as we reminisced about our aspirations for going abroad to study in the past. While our stories might not be particularly unique, it resonates much of what has been previously documented by other scholars on student mobility.

Seeking membership and legitimacy

Regardless of our country of origin, there was this consensus among us that going abroad to study would enable us to be recognised as legitimate members of our own community.

For example, the experience of studying in international branch campuses certainly cannot replicate the ones at the university's main campus. The programmes delivered at both campuses could be comparable in quality, yet being in the offshore campus may still not be

satisfactory enough for [students to feel that they truly belonged](#) to the community in their university.

“Deep inside, I felt that spending time studying on-site in Australia would give me the credibility to honestly say that I had an authentic Australian education – instead of just feeling like an imposter graduate who had Australian qualifications but had never set foot in Australia”, says Brendan who began his undergraduate studies at an Australian university’s international branch campus in Malaysia.

Besides that, studying in a foreign university not only presents an opportunity to enrich but also to [legitimise one’s professional identity](#) by virtue of having first-hand experience of being immersed into the target culture itself.

“Of course, I could do my postgraduate study in China. But deep in my heart, I felt it would be a great pity if a teacher of English did not have any experience studying in an English speaking country”, says Meng from China who completed his Master's in Australia.

“As an academic, it’s one thing to read something in the literature about higher education in Vietnam and another to have an experience yourself, especially from the inside as an outsider so to speak”, says Jonathan from the Caribbean who was already residing in Vietnam before he began his postgraduate studies there.

The potential for career advancement

Not surprisingly, the motivation to go abroad also stems from the widespread perception that obtaining a qualification from overseas could [potentially enhance one’s employability](#) at home, as societal and market demands seem to place greater value on these graduates who are more likely to have [developed the essential skills](#) needed for their careers.

“Although not explicitly written in the universities’ recruitment policy, for instance, applicants with Western degrees were more sought after than those with local qualifications”, says Irfham from Indonesia.

“I was captivated by the appealing stories from my lecturers and friends who have studied overseas and they too recommended that having an overseas qualification would be highly advantageous for my future career as a teacher or lecturer (of English)”, Meng added.

Satisfying curiosity and confirming realities

While there are many claims about advantages of studying in a transnational higher education institution at home, there have been concerns and questions regarding its [ability to deliver the same high-quality programmes](#) as the ones offered back at the main campus.

The difficulty for these offshore institutions to convince its students that they can provide the same level of quality and student experiences as advertised in its “mothership” campus can be a push factor for students to go abroad.

“I also wanted to compare how lectures and tutorials were conducted in Australia and Malaysia, and whether these differences would justify the claim that the quality of education was higher in the main campus than its offshore branches”, says Brendan.

Meanwhile, going abroad to study also provides opportunities for “intercultural engagement” by interacting with a foreign culture that one would not normally have back home ([Tulloch, 2018](#); [Tran & Pham, 2015](#)).

“In my college, there was an English Speaking course which was delivered by foreign teachers. They taught me a lot about “western cultures”. I began to sing English songs, celebrate western festivals, and watch Hollywood movies... Gradually, I had a dream to go abroad and immerse myself in the culture that I’ve learnt so much about”, says Meng from China.

“My friends who had gone overseas to study talked about the new and exciting experiences that they were having. The more I listened to them, the more curious I became. There was a prevailing perception, for example, that student life on campus in Western countries was far more exciting than in Malaysia due to its progressive values and diverse cultures” says Brendan.

Besides that, the genuine quest for enriching oneself with [diverse intellectual traditions](#) can also push someone to search for knowledge by travelling overseas.

For example, Ibro Him from Vietnam shared that he was excited to pursue his Masters in the United States as he was passionate to *“learn more about other knowledge traditions aside from the ones that I have learnt during my time in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Turkey. Travelling for learning also allows me to meet people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and truly widens my horizon”.*

What happens next

We have illustrated that the desires for studying abroad can be varied. On the one hand, there is a shared belief that studying abroad is a gateway to experiencing a new life that would be exciting, enriching, and enlightening to the mind and soul. On the other hand, to some extent such desires may have been subconsciously shaped by external factors that can be difficult to resist.

Higher education institutions across Asia are working towards meeting the demands and desires of the international student market as they are internationalising themselves through promoting student mobility. However, can these institutions ensure and promise that these desires become materialised? More often than not, students who participate in study abroad, whether inter-Asian mobilities or out-of-region mobilities, encounter realities and complexities that are not always aligned with their initial desires in pursuing a foreign degree.

In our upcoming article, we will address how our post-study abroad experiences have aligned or contradicted our desires for an international education. We will also share how our pursuit for postgraduate education in Asian universities after returning from abroad can be paradoxical - in what ways are Asian universities empowering or disempowering?

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