

## “All abroad”: Malaysians’ reasons for seeking an overseas-based doctorate

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*This article examines the process by which nine junior Malaysian academics came to complete doctoral degrees in non-Malaysian universities. It expands the scope and refines the focus of an existing study that considered international students’ experiences in New Zealand. Part of the motivation for the current study was the researcher’s recognition that he had sometimes struggled to adjust to the Malaysian university system. And, indeed, despite the vast sums of money the Malaysian government spends training academic staff overseas, little is known about their motivations for studying abroad, their experiences abroad, and how their experiences abroad shape their interactions within local institutions when they return. The article begins with a brief introduction, a discussion of the study and a description of the chosen methodological approach. The following key themes are then discussed: ‘choosing to study overseas’, ‘choosing advisors’, ‘family influences’ and ‘pre-departure training programs’.*

*Keywords: culture shock, doctoral studies, Malaysian students, overseas study*

### INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian academic climate is diverse, and the qualifications and experience of Malaysian academics vary immensely. While some established Malaysian universities are relatively competitive, others struggle to find academic staff with research-based masters degrees and are largely, therefore, only teaching institutions. While Malaysian universities fare well compared to those of other South East Asian nations, a 2002 study found that, in Malaysia, only “about 26% of the faculty in public institutions of high learning have a Ph.D. degree” (Lee 2006, p. 543). While this project began with the desire to study junior Malaysian academics’ experiences abroad, the researcher’s definition of “junior academic” (someone who has completed their doctorate within five years) needed to be adjusted, as it did not always match Malaysians’ perceptions. One young Malaysian academic, for example, described himself as very experienced because he had worked in a university for six years. Indeed, as he held a senior management position, there was some truth to his claim.

Because Malaysian academics may be promoted quickly upon completing doctoral degrees, the participants in this study do not necessarily just represent the *future* of Malaysian academia; some already *are* senior academics. This seems to occur for at least three reasons. Firstly, in Malaysian academia, a doctoral degree—especially an overseas-based doctoral degree—may be considered a significant academic achievement and not merely a “licence to drive.” Secondly, Malaysian academics may have five to ten years lecturing experience prior to engaging in their doctoral studies, and so may legitimately be considered senior upon

their return. Thirdly, teaching experience and not research publications may often contribute the most to candidates' prospects for promotion. The researcher has met a full professor in Malaysia who had apparently completed neither a doctorate nor an international peer-reviewed journal article; the professor, in turn, was equally surprised that the researcher completed a sociology doctorate in his twenties.

Shin and Harman (2009) suggest that, while governments of many Asian countries, such as Malaysia, see research universities as a way to "enhance their position in knowledge production . . . the costs of offering education in research universities is much more expensive than offering identical programs in teaching-oriented institutions" (pp. 11-12). While this may explain why, despite quality assurance issues, private sector involvement in higher education is "especially noticeable in China, India and Malaysia" (Shin & Harman, 2009, p. 7), it is important to note that education politics in Malaysia is also fraught with ethnic tensions. For example, in his excellent analysis of education and Malaysian racial politics, Graham Brown (2007) argues provocatively, but accurately, that "public education – particularly, but not exclusively, at the university level – is used as a tool for ethnic Malay interests" (p. 318).

Cummings (1984, p. 242) made a similar argument when comparing the patterns of Burmese, Malaysian, Iranian and South Korean students being "sent" overseas (whilst noting that "in capitalist countries usually no more than 5-10 percent receive government aid"). While he cited the high number of Malaysians studying abroad "with a Chinese ethnic background [that had been] refused admission to local universities" (p. 245) he also pointed out that, historically, British colonial governments were "active in promoting basic education for the common people but made exceptional efforts to preserve standards at the secondary and higher education levels" (p. 250). Malaysia has broken with this tradition, however, and has significantly liberalised its higher education policies since the 1990s (Hashim, 2009, p. 41) and there are currently twenty government universities and dozens of private universities, university colleges and foreign university campuses across Malaysia. However, the ethnic issues remain. Tyson (2011), for example, highlights the "intractable problem [that] relates to the 'ethnic question' in Malaysia, including the assumed correlation between special *bumiputera* rights and the tendency of non-Malays to seek work and study opportunities abroad" (p. 88).

Cummings (1984, p. 251-252) also noted the effect of linguistic and/or political isolation and political uncertainty on national patterns of sending. To a certain degree, these patterns have persisted within the Malaysian context. For example, because Malaysia remains well integrated into the global community, students can access support networks in most potential host nations. While Malaysians' English language proficiency has declined since Bahasa Malay (the Malay language) became Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), those who graduate "from private [Malaysian] universities or universities abroad are usually favoured by employers mainly because of their competency in English" (Hashim, 2009, p. 41). And, while Malaysia may be considered a politically stable Southeast Asian nation, the following statement still remains true today: "Malaysia's policy of promoting Malay unity has made the country less attractive for ethnic Chinese, and thus rapidly increasing numbers of students have sought to use overseas study as a means for exploring a permanent change of nationality" (Cummings, 1984, p. 255).

In light of the stark differences between Malaysian higher education and, for example, New Zealand universities, it may be instructive to first consider what we already know about international students' experiences in New Zealand.

## **BACKGROUND STUDY**

Deloitte (2008) describes a large-scale online survey it conducted on behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Department of Labour. The survey examined the experiences and opinions of 2,677 international students studying at New Zealand secondary schools (n=467, or 17%); English language institutes and post-secondary level training institutions (n=659, or 25%); and tertiary education providers, including both universities (n=1136, 42%) and independent tertiary providers (n=415, or 16%). The study focussed on the following eight themes (Deloitte 2008, p. 1):

1. Factors influencing choice of New Zealand as a study destination
2. Students’ living arrangements, including homestays
3. Students’ educational and work-related experiences and self-reported academic progress
4. Availability of and satisfaction with institutional services and facilities
5. Availability of and satisfaction with sources of social support
6. Social relationships of international students
7. Life satisfaction
8. Students’ future plans.

A total of 8,944 international students were invited to complete the survey and, of the 2,677 participants (a 30% response rate), 42% were from China, 11% from Korea, 7% from Japan, 6% from Malaysia, 5% from India, 3% from each of Thailand, Hong Kong and Germany, and 2% from each of Indonesia and Taiwan (Deloitte 2008, p. 29). Malaysians comprise a significant proportion of international students in New Zealand tertiary institutions, with 10% of participants in tertiary education identified as Malaysian, compared to just 1% in secondary schools and 2% in English language and other post-secondary institutions (Deloitte, 2008, p. 30).

The first of Deloitte’s eight key themes: “the factors influencing students’ choice of New Zealand as a study destination” (p. 41), is of particular relevance to this article. Under this theme Deloitte considered the proportion of participants that selected New Zealand as their first choice of destination (and the reasons why) and the proportion who favoured other destinations (and the reasons why). Deloitte found that 64% of participants cited New Zealand as their first choice destination, compared to 84% within a similar study of Australian-based international students in 2006 (Deloitte 2008, p. 2) and that other favourite destinations were Australia (10% of participants), the United States of America (9%), and the UK (7%) (Deloitte, 2008, p. 43).

Deloitte found that the participants’ preference for studying in New Zealand were driven mainly by issues such as “safety, quality, recognition of New Zealand qualifications and cost” (2008, p. 2). Although participants generally said their choice of destination took precedence over family members’ preferences, this was “significantly more important to North American and German students than Chinese, Korean, Thai and Malaysian students” (Deloitte, 2008, p. 46). Participants from Asian countries also tended to consider themes such as travel, scenery and lifestyle *less* important than did participants from North and South America, Europe and Australia. Western students, unlike Asian students, seemed to “prefer to seek a lifestyle-based educational experience more than a career development opportunity” (Deloitte, 2008, p. 46).

The present study examines four key sub-themes in relation to how participants go about selecting their overseas doctoral degree destination. As presented in Table 1, these sub-

themes are (1) the participants' reasons for choosing an overseas-based doctoral program, (2) a consideration of the people who influenced the participants' decisions (with a specific focus on family members and colleagues), (3) the process by which participants chose a specific doctoral program, and (4) the influence of and usefulness of pre-departure training programs.

## METHODOLOGY

In contrast to Noordin and Jusoff's (2009) broad survey of 237 participants and Deloitte's (2008) larger study of 2,677 participants, the present project uses qualitative methods. The intention, therefore, is to obtain a richly detailed discussion with a smaller number of participants about their experiences. Indeed Deloitte (2008, p. 102) themselves advocated for in-depth qualitative research to follow their research, although they were primarily interested in the relationship between the after-study intentions of those from particular "markets of interest" and the barriers they face transitioning into the New Zealand workforce.

The current study, of which this paper comprises a very small part, consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine participants. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), while structured interviews attempt to "objectively" group participants' responses into prearranged categories, unstructured interviewing aims to "understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any *a priori* categorization that may limit the field of enquiry" (p. 706). Blaikie (2000) adds that the main objective of qualitative research is based around "a commitment to viewing the social world – social action and events from the viewpoint(s) of the people being studied. This commitment involves discovering *their* socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities" (p. 51).

While some researchers advocate entering "the field" with absolutely no preconceptions at all, and even avoiding research questions entirely, this seemed both unrealistic and impractical in this particular instance. The researcher, as a Malaysian-based New Zealand academic, cannot help but have a general understanding of the key differences between Malaysian and New Zealand universities, as noted above. As an educational sociologist (teaching courses on curricula, no less) the researcher has inevitably had conversations with Malaysian academics and students about such matters. Consequently, a rather comprehensive, yet also extremely flexible, interview framework was devised (see Table 1). The framework consists of nine major sections (each of which has between three and ten sub-themes), but this paper only discusses data relating to the first theme (Preparing to go overseas), which more of less correlates with Deloitte's theme "Making a choice about where to study" (2008, p. 41).

**Table 1. Interview framework**

	Section	Themes
1.	Preparing to go overseas	Reason for going overseas, who influenced your decision, choosing the location, pre-departure programs
2.	Overall experience	First impressions, most positive and negative experiences, what you learned about host and about yourself
3.	Academic issues	Hardest aspect of overseas studies, differences in the systems and facilities, English level

4.	Social issues	Socialising with locals/Malaysians, food, accommodation, prayer rooms, toilets, public affection, alcohol, support services, children’s experiences
	Hosts’	
5.	perception of you	Discrimination, safety (off/on campus)
6.	Economic issues	Working, scholarship funds, types of accommodation
7.	Returning	Changing views of Malaysia, readjusting to life/university, thoughts on bonding, intercultural identity
8.	Back in Malaysia	Ideas to put in place, career/salary satisfaction, teaching styles
9.	The future	academic freedom, plagiarism, future plans, advice to future students

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These themes emerged from texts including books by Mahathir (1970) and Musa (2003) and academic articles including Brown (2007), Butcher and McGrath (2004), Deloitte (2008), Noordin and Jusoff (2009), Novera (2004) and Saha and Atkinson (1978). Themes also emerged from the researcher’s own experiences living and working in Malaysian universities (including living on two Malaysian campuses), from reading newspaper articles and online political commentaries, and from informal conversations with Malaysian academics and students.

The interviews ranged from around 97 minutes long (over one-and-a-half hours) to a little over 219 minutes long (nearly three-and-three-quarter hours), with a median of just under 150 minutes (about two-and-a-half hours). One participant withdrew in order to attend to an urgent matter. Three potential participants refused to take part in the study; citing, perhaps fairly, other commitments (often with supporting evidence)—however, they may also have been wary of “speaking up” because, as Lee (2006) notes, in contrast to “the academic traditions in the West, the governments in Southeast Asian countries have considerable power over higher education” (p. 542). Indeed, in Malaysia, government university academics are considered civil servants and have limited freedom of speech. “Academic freedom in some countries – like Singapore and Malaysia”, as Lee (2006) notes, “is quite limited when compared to other countries, with restrictions on what can be researched and what the academic community can express to the public” (p. 550). Malaysia’s poor rating in *Reporters Sans Frontières’* 2012 Press Freedom Index (that is, slightly below Cambodia, Fiji, Oman, Venezuela and Zimbabwe) provides a broader context (Reporters Without Borders, 2012). Once in the interviews, however, participants were rather forthcoming. This may be because they had, by definition, some experience of Western traditions of free speech and ethically sound research. It may also be because the interviewer, himself of European decent, took the time to outline their rights in terms of issues such as confidentiality and informed consent.

Two key issue with the research design need to be noted, however. Firstly, many participants were located through snowball sampling. Although participants represented a wide range of disciplines across the three major domains of the physical sciences (physics, chemistry and biology), some participants would likely have known other participants (although their identities were never disclosed). For this reason, this research is only partially interested in *recurrent* themes; unusual narratives are treated with as much interest as common experiences. Secondly, a search for data saturation, or “the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 59) was not the sole factor determining the number of participants within the study. Another form of saturation also played a part; the reality of transcribing and wading through some

two hundred and twenty-five pages (or 138,000 words) of interview meant limiting the study from the original estimate of between fifteen and twenty participants.

The intention was to seek a range of different perspectives and focuses on data validity rather than data generalisability. This was because, as Blaikie (2000) notes, “qualitative data do not lend themselves to the kind of generalization commonly used in quantitative research” (p. 253). The desire to seek a range of perspectives is partially reflected in the participants’ demographics. Of the nine participants, five were male and four were female, and five were Malay and four were non-Malay (from three different ethnic groups). Six participants identified as married (all with children) and three as single (none with children). The participants were all between thirty and forty years old, with the average age thirty-three years old. Five participants originated from metropolitan areas of Malaysia similar to Kuala Lumpur (the capital city of Malaysia), three originated from regional areas similar to Kuala Terengganu (where the researcher currently lives), and one originated from a place in East Malaysia similar to Kuching (where the researcher previously lived). While the initial intention was to only interview government-funded participants, one person was later included in order to gain understanding about why a non-bonded doctoral graduate might return to Malaysia. Furthermore, during the course of another interview, it became apparent that the participant had actually received a host nation scholarship rather than a government-funded scholarship. Consequently, seven participants were government-funded and two received other scholarships. None were self-funded.

### STUDYING OVERSEAS

Most participants in the present study, but surprisingly not all, said they actively wanted to study overseas, and this was mainly for academic reasons. Ironically—given that they currently work in Malaysian universities—two explicitly wanted to leave the Malaysian higher education system. These two were, then, mainly driven by push factors, which, according to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), “operate within the source country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study” (p. 82), rather than pull factors, which “operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students” , p. 82. This seems to support Deloitte’s (2008) finding that Asian students, more often than Western students, tend to focus on career development rather than “a lifestyle-based educational experience” (p. 46).

All participants except one seemed to feel that overseas-based universities were inherently stronger than Malaysian ones. The dissenting participant argued that while “I think in Malaysian uni[versities] you can get the same quality of PhD . . . you may not expose the students to surroundings where . . . they have to survive and where they have to work hard for it.” This is to say that much may be gained from learning to adjust to a different culture. This participant searched across fifteen international universities before choosing an advisor because of the way he responded “when I got enquiries and questions is, for me, appropriate and shows that he’s willing to guide me.”

The two participants who took host nation scholarships rather than Malaysian government scholarships seemed actively determined to *not* pursue further studies in Malaysia. Both expressed dissatisfaction with Malaysian universities in general and one took issue with specific academic staff. The first explained that Malaysian university “lecturers were pretty crap . . . and they didn’t do any kind of research that I could see that was of international quality.” Not surprisingly, then, this participant’s specific choice of research destination was

driven by the desire to find the strongest research advisor possible. The pointed nature and brevity of this response, “The researcher”, presented in a stern tone, made it clear that was all to be said on the matter.

The other participant argued that “doing a PhD is something I want to do overseas because I want to go to a good university.” The participant explained that their previous Malaysian research advisor “did not really supervise me in that sense . . . [but was instead] running a consultancy firm outside the university.” The participant also made a serious allegation of abuse of power and religious discrimination; the participant claimed to have initially failed their master’s thesis simply because of religious differences with the internal examiner. The overseas-based examiner, by contrast, was “satisfied with my thesis and he wanted me to . . . do [a] PhD under him.” Securing financial support through a full overseas-based scholarship became a priority for this participant, as their own university was sending few candidates overseas.

However, the majority of participants, in stark contrast to those above, framed their narrative as an enthusiastic yet slightly passive appreciation for the opportunity to study abroad. Gratitude was directed at the Malaysian government, which seemed in some cases to be conflated with the ruling political coalition. One participant explained it was government policy to send candidates overseas in order to “make like exposures”, or allow them to develop new ways of thinking. Another said that when the Malaysian government offers doctoral scholarships they “ask you whether you can further your studies abroad or locally.” This participant actively wanted to “see the differences between the education system[s]” and wanted to “open my mind and [get] to know other places.” A third participant described the experience as “an opportunity from this university.” After having completed a master’s degree at a local university, the participant wanted “to take this opportunity to [gain] experience, knowledge etc.” Finally, a fourth participant described it as “a good chance for me to gain some more experience, overseas.” After applying all over world, this participant actually ended up in a non-English speaking university. Indeed, a number of participants seemed to actively seek out additional challenges.

### **CHOOSING ADVISORS**

As suggested above, many participants described selecting their research advisor as the main priority. One participant selected a university with an advisor that was “one of the top well known professors in the field”, but also noted in passing that “at that time the [Malaysian] university would like me to go into this field.” So while the participant was free to choose their study destination, the sponsoring university directed the research agenda rather than allow the candidate to choose their own topic or allow it to be determined by their advisor’s research program and funding sources. Another participant said that the Malaysian government preferred to send candidates to low-cost-of-living countries and not, for example, to the UK. They added that “out of ten applications only three or four [potential advisors] replied to my enquiries” and that [they were drawn to] “the way that my supervisor replied that I think that he is very interested with me.”

So, although all participants were driven by a desire for a suitable supervisor, not all were looking for the same qualities: the first two wished to work with an experienced researcher; the third sought out a supportive advisor; another demonstrated less control over the whole process—the participant initially intended to study in one country, was convinced by a third party to work with someone else in a different country, but then, on arrival, discovered that

the recommended individual had recently retired—nonetheless, the participant took a “look at the research, [found it] very interesting, and then I [took a] look at the facilities; [realised] everything is there, so yeah [accepted the offer].”

Surprisingly absent from the government-sponsored participants’ narratives was any suggestion that they felt they had particularly earned their scholarship. Even though they *had* evidently earned a place, the government-sponsored participants exuded so little sense of entitlement that it was unclear whether they felt that way themselves or whether they were just being extremely humble. And while it was also unclear whether or not they felt ready to complete an overseas-based doctoral degree, one participant did state, rather matter-of-factly, that they had *not* expected to be able to do so. Because this participant’s previous academic performance was apparently “not very good . . . when the chance or the opportunity [did] come to me, I . . . want[ed] to grab it.” This was much less clearly the case among the two host nation-sponsored participants, one of whom, for example, discussed the rather difficult task of choosing between host nation scholarships at several different prestigious universities.

One participant even said that they had studied overseas against their will. This participant said they would rather have completed a doctorate in a local university, but that their employer expected them to earn an overseas-based doctorate. While the participant felt more “comfortable” within a Malaysian university context and therefore saw little reason to go overseas, they were ultimately transferred to a different university which was more “towards the research” and insisted that their staff study abroad. This participant was primarily interested in staying in Malaysia due to family commitments, which are discussed in more detail below.

### FAMILY INFLUENCES

Although family influences proved significant for all participants, this was more the case for some than others. Participants were significantly older than those studied by Deloitte (2008), had (by definition) completed at least an undergraduate qualification and, in most cases, had university teaching experience. The fact that participants were *sent* overseas by Malaysian universities seemed to undermine family member’s influence in the decision-making process. But while this could conceivably make it easier for them to resist their family members’ wishes without being held solely to blame, participants seemed concerned about family members’ opinions. This seems to support Deloitte’s (2008, p. 46) suggestion that Malaysian students are generally more concerned about family members’ views regarding study destinations than are students from, for example, North America and Germany.

Of course the effect of family influence depended on whether or not the participants’ and their family members’ views were aligned. One participant’s family was apparently strongly in favour of overseas study, partly because it was “just for three years” but also—perhaps ironically—because an extended family member was already in the host country and could help the participant adjust. By contrast, the family of another participant with a similar demographic profile were initially against the idea because they were “scared that I’ll be converted to Christianity and get married there or whatever and never come back.” Interestingly, this participant’s colleagues were also unsupportive, arguing—possibly out of jealousy—that “it’s more convenient and comfortable” in Malaysia. These colleagues presented “stigma things” such as saying that the host country “is this and this, [so] why don’t you just do it here?” Nonetheless, the participant, who described having a “strong



affinity” with the host country, resisted the pressure, saying that it was important to “make your own decision.” This sort of statement can be considered rather unusual among the government-funded participants. Generally speaking, there was a perception that these concerns were felt more acutely within Malay Malaysian communities than, in particular, Chinese Malaysian communities.

One participant claimed that “most Asian families” wanted their children to go overseas and stay there “forever and ever.” Although a sweeping generalisation indeed, there does seem to be some element of truth, at least in relation to Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians. However, there seems to be a perception that this generalisation is less applicable to Malay people. Furthermore, while this participant’s own family “wanted to avoid the ‘empty nest syndrome’”, the family of another participant did seem to support the first participant’s claim, saying “Yes! Yes, of course” the family supported the opportunity to study overseas. This second participant also felt strong support from their university, generally, and from their faculty dean and head of department, specifically; the study abroad was simply an opportunity “to get more experience.”

There was some conflicting evidence about whether the larger authority (the government) increased or decreased participants’ liberty in relation to the sometimes rather significant family pressures, and this is perhaps best highlighted in the experiences of three female Muslim participants. The first described studying overseas as “an opportunity” and, having not studied outside of Malaysia before, was very excited about the possibility of new experiences and new knowledge. This participant’s immediate family were “very supportive”, however because her husband could only travel abroad for a total of one year, his “side” of the family required some persuading: “But then after I gave explanation,” she said, “I told them that I should be okay, so they accepted. So it takes time to make them understand.” It is entirely possible that neither side of the participant’s family would have supported such a long separation under other circumstances. In this sense the government’s approach to sending students overseas could allow some freedom in individual cases; indeed it remains a rather liberal policy to encourage a married Muslim woman to live alone in a foreign country for an extended period. However, Malay people, and particularly those from urban areas on the west coast of the peninsula, tend to be more liberal in terms of gender relations than Muslims from the Middle East or Indian subcontinent.

Another female participant seemed to have the opposite experience: while she “wanted to do it” in Malaysia, her university encouraged her to go. Subsequently, she explained, she ended up going overseas “without my own willing.” Because the family also felt “proud” having a relative studying overseas, her wishes were outweighed by the combined force of the university and the family. Indeed, in some ways, the government’s policy toward sending students abroad seems fickle; the participant lamented that “they [decided to] send one batch overseas, and then now they’re like stopping them from going overseas.” The experience of a third female Muslim participant provides yet another perspective; she had always wanted to study overseas and had an extremely supportive family. Her husband resigned from a professional job in Malaysia and was at first unemployed overseas and from then on only performed menial work. The participant was very unhappy “because my husband is not happy, but at the same time I need to carry out . . . my study.” This story is interesting because of the way it challenges the stereotypes about power relations between Muslim women and men (see Tagg, 2008, p. 56).

Given the sectarian nature of Malaysian politics and society—the ruling coalition essentially consists of the United Malays National Organisation, the Malaysian Chinese Association

and the Malaysian Indian Congress—it is important to examine the relationships between cultural background and family influences on participants' decision-making processes. In Malaysia, one often hears that Malay Malaysians are inherently more patriotic than, in particular, Chinese Malaysians. Teoh (2011), for example, describes former newspaper editor Ahmad Rejal Arbee's criticism of "the patriotism of non-Malays, especially Chinese, who do not embrace the Malay language." Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed had earlier argued that because Malaysia is *Tanah Melayu* (Malay land) all Malaysians must accept Malay culture and language (Asrul, 2011).

Even though Malay Malaysians may more often remain in Malaysia and/or return from abroad, the implicit assumption that these differences vary as a function of inherent cultural values seems misleading. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Malay Malaysians do more often rely on overseas-based Malaysian support networks compared to Chinese Malaysians and this may, in part, be because they more often prefer to feel "secure." However, given that one could argue that expatriate mainland Chinese students often also feel this way, we would then need to explain the differences between mainland Chinese and Chinese Malaysian cultural values. It might seem more reasonable, then, to postulate that Chinese Malaysians more often prefer to be overseas simply because they already have experience living as part of a minority ethnic/linguistic group and can generally cope better than either Malay Malaysians or mainland Chinese. Chinese Malaysians may also prefer to remain overseas not out of a lack of patriotism but because they will have comparative advantages in meritocratic societies compared to a "Malay land."

One final aspect of the relationship between family influences and study abroad plans relates to participants' *children's* perspectives and experiences. As noted earlier, six of the nine participants identified as married and all said they had children. While some of the participants' children were evidently born overseas, others had Malaysian-born children both prior and subsequent to the travels abroad. The data relating to these participants' experiences is too exhaustive to be fully discussed within the present article; however a couple of comments are worth making. One participant explained the difficulty associated with being separated from both their spouse and their infant child, which perhaps explains this participant's desire to seek a supportive rather than competitive research advisor and also provides some context regarding the family's concern about the participant studying abroad. In stark contrast, another participant—whose spouse also travelled overseas—said it was always "part of the plan" to raise at least one child in the host country "just [to] have a view about how the . . . early childcare system works there."

### PRE-DEPARTURE PROGRAMS

Another provocative theme relates to the lack of pre-departure training for overseas-based Malaysian doctoral students. Historically, all Malaysian students studying abroad on government scholarships attend programs organised by *Biro Tata Negara* (BTN, or the National Civics Bureau). However, these programs are essentially about political indoctrination, not preparation for studying abroad. Indeed, from 2009, the Selangor and Penang state governments *prohibited* their civil servants from attending such courses because, in the words of the Penang Deputy Chief Minister, they "had negative effects and were used by Barisan Nasional (BN) to spread propaganda" (Bernama, 2009). The propaganda, presumably, was against the opposition-controlled state governments of Selangor, Penang, Kelantan, and Kedah. Informal discussions confirmed that this program is a politically charged issue. Some foreign organisations (such as the British Council), private

sponsors (such as Petronas), private colleges with twinning programs (such as HELP University), and governmental bodies (such as the Public Service Department) do provide genuine pre-departure training, but these programs are typically only offered to undergraduate, not postgraduate, students.

Among the seven participants who attended such programs, responses fell into three categories: those that supported the aims (but not necessarily the methods) of the program; those who rejected the courses’ agenda; and those who were anxious to discuss the topic. Three participants, including those who had only recently returned from abroad, appeared slightly anxious. One simply said “we have to do that, yes” and that the program was not about helping Malaysians adjust to different cultures, but rather “on stressing the political situation in Malaysia and how we should handle ourselves overseas.” Another participant seemed surprised when asked about this theme, but eventually just described it as some “mixed programs; some physical programs and some mentality programs.” The participant added that “I don’t feel that it’s hard for me . . . in one way it’s good for me to get this course for my study abroad.” When asked whether the program was helpful, the participant simply responded, “Yes.” The third participant said there were no pre-departure programs and that “they just drop[ed] us there [overseas].” Only later did the participant remember the BTN program and said that it was “to tell us that if you go there, you have to come back; you have to service your country.”

Two participants defended the program’s intentions. The first said “some of the participants, maybe they don’t like the BTN kind of program.” However they added that it was important to remember that the government invests a great deal of money in overseas-based doctoral candidates and therefore has a legitimate interest in whether “when you go there [and] you found a lot of opportunities [that] you don’t want to go back.” Subsequently it is important that upon return people “serve them . . . to make sure that, not the government, but the country, all the people can get the benefit from what they have give[n] to us.” Another participant said that although they were “not [well] prepared to go to overseas” they did go on a ten-day course “to educate us about the government policies, the rules and regulations and contracts and [to emphasise that] once we’ve finished our studies we have to come back.” The participant added that the BTN course was “very, very important” because people need “to obey or to abide by the . . . regulations of the Malaysian Government . . . and [need] to understand our history, and how we are.”

Two participants spoke out very strongly against the BTN program. Both had been back in the country some time, perhaps felt more secure in their positions, and began their responses with spontaneous outbursts. One said “BTN? Oh that’s *useless*. Oops! Haha! Ah, it’s not necessary.” The other said “BTN, yes. Haha. That was a funny thing as well. BTN, hmmm.” Both then highlighted the key objectives of the program in much the same way as the other participants, sprinkled with intermittent criticism. One challenged both the political propaganda—“they just want to look at whether we are support the government . . . they not allows us to be *opinionated* or to supporting [any] opposition party”—and the practical component of the course—“[please] don’t force us to go to such a military course . . . I don’t know why they ask us to do flying fox and abseiling . . . [and other] silly little things.” The participant suggested that the propaganda would be unnecessary if the government had confidence in their own policies. The participant also resented being forced to say, before being allowed to study abroad, “oh, I like your program, yes!” An alternative would be to “just come up with like a seminar . . . [about] how to adapt . . . [and] what else we need to know” about various host countries.

The other participant said that the government was worried that Malaysians “are not patriotic enough when we further our studies abroad [and that] we might be brainwashed by the Western ideas”, which included “the truth about democracy . . . [and] freedom of speech.” Similarly, Brown (2007) argues that in Malaysia, rather than “being taught a ‘critical attitude to authority’, [school] pupils are constantly barraged with terms such as respect (*hormat*), loyalty (*kesetiaan*), and obedience (*taat*)” (p. 329). While this participant said that the idea of the course is “okay” the specific programs are both “such a waste of money” and “a bit stupid” because “three or four days in the jungle somewhere . . . doesn’t change my patriotism much.” Rather, “it makes most of them when they go abroad get exposed more and then open my mind about the truth about our country.” The participant admitted, however, that during the training “we were like ‘oh, wow, that’s a good thing to improve our patriotism to our country’” but then when living abroad “we just realised “oh, that’s what they are trying to intend to do to us.”” In other words, for at least some people, the programs achieved precisely the opposite objective to the one intended; the authoritarian nature of this program only served to highlight the freedom of speech enjoyed in the host nations.

## CONCLUSIONS

By drawing attention to the particular issues young Malaysians navigate when considering overseas-based doctoral programs, this article provides a richer, more qualitative analysis of themes identified by Deloitte (2008). Participants in this study negotiated with a range of different stakeholders, which included immediate and extended family, the sponsoring institution, the Malaysian government, the host institution and the host advisor, before making decisions about overseas-based study. Although some participants ultimately sought host-institution or host-nation funding, their ability to do so was mediated by factors such as their beliefs about the Malaysian education system and their broader career objectives. These ideas were, in turn, shaped by the local political, economic and cultural contexts in which they were situated.

It is, in some regards, rather difficult to interpret the participants’ arguments given the politically charged nature of much of the material discussed in this article. It is entirely possible that the two participants who critiqued the BTN program, for example, only did so because they assumed that a liberal Western sociologist would himself disapprove of such an authoritarian indoctrination program. Similarly, it is rather difficult to assess the extent to which those apparently supporting the program did so because it was the most politically safe response to give; this seems plausible in light of the remaining participants’ anxiety discussing the program and the dissenting participant who claimed that they were essentially forced to support the program.

In spite of the limitations, however, we can make the following tentative observations. There was a widespread belief that significant academic and non-academic benefits were associated with completing an overseas-based doctorate. In many regards this seemed to go beyond Hashim’s (2009, p. 41) point about the advantages of speaking good English; there was a general perception that overseas-based universities were generally stronger academically than Malaysian universities and status was also associated with attending non-English medium university, and particularly those in Europe and East Asia. Although for these participants career factors did outweigh “lifestyle” factors, most participants did, nonetheless, acknowledge the benefits associated with being exposed to different ideas as part of the process.

Family influences did generally play a significant role in the decision-making process, but this influence was both confounded and compounded—depending on the specific situation—by the influence of government university policy, which also had a significant influence. Children’s influence on the participants’ decision-making process was significant and it was also generally felt that children, too, could benefit from an overseas experience. Finally, there was significant evidence to suggest that the pre-departure training programs failed to adequately prepare participants for their overseas study and, in some cases, also failed in their objective to foster patriotism and encourage Malaysians to serve the nation upon graduation.

Although all participants in this study had, by definition, returned to Malaysia, their narratives nonetheless support Cummings’ (1984, p. 255) point that Malaysians do sometimes view study abroad as a way to leave their country indefinitely. The narratives also suggest that Malaysians who had originally intended to return may change their mind when they are away. Cultural background also shaped the participants’ decision-making processes: generally speaking there appear to be an assumption that Malay Malaysians will usually return to Malaysia after study abroad and that Chinese Malaysians, in particular, may not.

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