

International Students in Websites of Public and Private Universities in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis through Academic Capitalism Framing

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ABSTRACT

University websites provide information that may influence international students' choice of an institution. In the context of Malaysia, studies on university websites remain minimal and highly contextual. To address this gap, this study will conduct a discourse analysis on websites of both public and private universities in Malaysia. A total of 40 websites were selected to form a corpus. The analysis involved the identification of significant collocates for the key words "international" and "student(s)". These collocates were then discussed through academic capitalism framing. The findings indicated that university websites offered information that was either procedural, or that which explained how an institution was international. This analysis painted international students as customers requiring assistance from a university. Findings also showed that being an international student in Malaysia would bring about social mobility through interactions with other international students.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; international students; university websites

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, Malaysia and the greater region of Southeast Asia have enjoyed the financial returns and the inflow of human resources through the arrival of international students (Nachatar Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2014). The arrival of international students is mediated by various reasons, such as affordable tuition fees and living expenses, safety of the host country, and the reputation of the institution (Ahmad, & Buchanan, (2017). Aside from these, another mediating reason is the information available to prospective international students. In fact, recent studies have indicated how information from university websites is often considered trustworthy and taken seriously in students' decision-making process

(McNicholas, & Marcella, 2022). As such, it is crucial that universities provide information in their websites that would persuade international students to select them. While studies on university websites have been conducted in other parts of the world, there remains a limited amount of such studies pertaining to Malaysian universities (Ooi, Ho, & Amri, 2010). Hence, to address this gap in the literature on university websites in the Malaysian context, this study aims to conduct a discourse analysis on a corpus of selected university website pages. Specifically, this study will use the academic capitalism framing to analyse the portrayal of international students in both public and private university websites.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of Universities in Malaysia

The movement of international students has shifted from east-to-west, to east-to-east. Asian tertiary institutions located in China, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia have witnessed an influx in international student arrival. The internationalization of universities in Malaysia is reported to be driven by several factors, which are economic: to generate revenue through fee-paying international students; socio-cultural: to encourage intercultural exchange; academic: to support academic collaborations either in teaching or research; and political: to promote the status of the nation as an international education hub. Among these factors, the economic factor may be considered significant, given neoliberal approaches taken by the nation and educational institutions. The neo-liberalization of higher education may be characterized as the reduction of state welfare and support to public universities in lieu of institutions' ramping up on their own efforts in economic efficiency, along with the establishment of more privatized universities. This has also brought about an increase of private universities in Malaysia, and the corporatization of public universities, where state institutions are encouraged to create income-generating programs. The internationalization of higher education in Malaysia is thus the effect of the nation's educational and economic aspiration and its response to globalization. To this end, Malaysia aims to be an educational hub for international students from around the globe. This is supported and promoted by national policies and educational blueprints, where structures have been laid to attract foreign investors and to adjust teaching practices, such as the choice of the language of instruction (Munusamy, & Hashim, 2019).

International Students in Malaysia

In terms of attracting international students, Malaysia has enjoyed its status as a destination country for many from within the region, particularly from ASEAN member nations. This is partly due to the country's proximity to ASEAN and other Asian countries, the ease of air travel and access, and the similarities of cultural norms (Chao, 2020). The growing number of international students has subsequently encouraged the increase of educational institutions that are either funded by the state or through fee-paying students.

Aside from expanding the options for tertiary education, the increase of institutions has allowed students from disparate socio-economic backgrounds to enjoy an international and overseas study experience. This is apparent in Malaysia, where international students coming from rural and lower-income areas have been able to enroll into university programs at an affordable cost. Furthermore, given the largely positive experience of studying in Malaysia, researchers have reported the high possibility of international students returning for further education.

The economic returns that Malaysia reaps from international students, however, is not one that is experienced by other countries in the region. Researchers have pointed out the imbalance in international student movement. Moreover, intra-ASEAN international students may not be that many, as they typically rely on the availability of financial assistance from the host or their home countries (Chao, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

In the previous section, the aspirations of Malaysia to become an educational hub for international students were discussed. To offer a better understanding of this matter, this study aims to analyse the discourse of university websites in Malaysia. In particular, this study will use academic capitalism framing to determine the portrayal of international students in the websites of both public and private universities in Malaysia.

This next section will explain the context of the data, which is university websites, as well as how data was collected to create a corpus, and subsequently analysed.

Context of Data: University Websites

Websites of any organization may be viewed as an 'electronic storefront'. A website can provide

“frames of symbolic representations that inform and lure these potential stakeholders in to take a closer look, and perhaps interact with the firm in some capacity. The selected text, images and colors, as well as the structure of the arrangements (e.g., the layout of information, or the configuration of hyperlink paths) creates impressions not only about the product or service offered, but also about the characteristics of the organizations that provide them” (Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003, p. 311].

Given that the Internet is ubiquitous, websites have become a primary space where information about a higher education institution may be readily accessed. Researchers reported that international students are typically represented in university websites as being an aggregated group. This gives the sense that there is a global representation of that university, which may amount to a prestige asset (Ford, & Cate, 2020). Moreover, university websites depict learning and living experiences of university students as holistic (McNicholas, & Marcella, 2022). It is also common to find information about how an institution may offer ‘social mobility’ to prospective students, instead of equitable and public good that was traditionally associated with any institutions for learning (Saichai, & Morphew, 2014). Marketing a university as offering social mobility is effective, especially to convince students who are still considering whether to join the university (Zhang, 2017).

Data Preparation and Collection

The data for this study is derived from university websites of both public and private institutions in Malaysia. These universities were identified through www.studymalaysia.com – a one-stop comprehensive online portal for prospective local and international students.

Table 1: List of institutions included in the study

Public	Private
1. Universiti Malaya (UM)	1. Multimedia University (MMU)
2. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	2. Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN)
3. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	3. Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UniRAZAK)
4. Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	4. Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP)
5. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)	5. International Medical University (IMU)
6. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	6. Universiti Selangor (UNISEL)
7. Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM)	7. Open University Malaysia (OUM)
8. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	8. Malaysia University of Science & Technology (MUST)
9. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)	9. AIMST University (AIMST)
10. Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	10. Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR)
11. Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	11. Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL)
12. Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)	12. Wawasan Open University (WOU)

Public	Private
13. Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	13. Albukhary International University (AIU)
14. Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	14. Al-Madinah International University (MEDIU)
15. Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM)	15. International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF)
16. Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)	16. Limkokwing University of Creative Technology (LKW)
17. Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)	17. Management and Science University (MSU)
18. Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA)	18. Asia e University (AeU)
19. Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)	19. UCSI University (UCSI)
20. Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia, (UPNM)	20. Quest International University (Quest)

In this website, both public and private universities in Malaysia are listed: there are 20 public universities and 50 private universities. Information in this website was consolidated from the official Malaysian Ministry of Education website. To ensure that the data was comparable, only the first 20 private universities listed were included in the data collection. All in all, 40 websites contributed to the data for this study (see Table 1).

Information from website pages that were directly linked or indirectly related with international students was collected. Then, the data was read thoroughly and iteratively for the purpose of coding. There were two codes that emerged from this step, the first code is *procedural information*, which refers to university websites that offer information on application and registration processes, visa or accommodation services for international students, or even tuition fee payment methods. The second code *information on the internationalization of the institution*. This code presents information about how an institution positions itself as an education hub for international students, or how its programs are international.

After coding, the framing of international students was analysed through the identification of significant collocates of the key words “student(s)” and “international” through a free corpus tool (AntConc) (Loo, & Lagason, 2022).

Data Analysis: Academic Capitalism Framing

This study utilized academic capitalism framing as its analytical tool. Academic capitalism is concerned with market-like strategies and behavior of an institution (Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003) and the monetization of knowledge and educational experiences (McClure, 2016). In this study, the academic capitalism frame is defined as experiences that are personally, academically, and professionally rewarding (McClure, 2016). These experiences will be induced through the identification of significant collocates of the key words

“international” and “student(s)”. Collocates have been found to provide insights into discursive patterns, which may uncover implicit meanings (Ajšić, 2021). It was decided that collocates within a three-word span to the right of the key words will be considered. This span was decided given that the genre of websites would normally have shorter texts. Furthermore, since these collocates would take on the predicate position of the key words and phrases (nouns), they would provide attributive information which may help us better understand information associated with “international student(s)” (Åhäll, & Borg, 2013), particularly those concerning procedures of being an international student in Malaysia, and the internationalization of a Malaysian institution.

4. FINDINGS

There were 40 website pages analysed in this study: 20 from public universities and 20 from the private universities. Information from these websites contributed to the creation of a corpus that consisted of 2736-word tokens, and 885 word types. In the iterative reading and subsequent coding of information, it was found that slightly more than half of the public and private university website pages provided information about procedures, while the remaining about the internationalization of the institution (Table 2).

Table 2: Types of information presented in university websites

Website information type	Public	Private
Procedural information	25% (n=10)	30% (n=12)
Information on internationalization	25% (n=10)	20% (n=8)

Collocates of the words “international” and “student(s)” were identified through AntConc. These words were found to be significant based on the comparison of the corpus data (university website texts) with a benchmark corpus (top 5000 words from the Corpus of Contemporary American English). Due to space constraints, only the first four significant collocates were included for analysis. The significant collocates, their concordance lines, and the source of information (institution) are provided in the tables below.

Table 3: Collocates, concordance lines, and institution for the analysis of “international”

Key word	Collocates	Concordance	Institution
International	Students unit handle	The International Students Unit handles all matters pertaining to international students.	Private – UniRAZAK
	Students to get	Assists international students to get adjusted in the new environment	Private – MSU

	Student population comes	University of Malaya is the first choice of Malaysia's top students and our international student population comes from more than 80 different countries.	Public – UM
	Students even prior	The unit provides services to the international students even prior to their arrival in Malaysia.	Private – UniRAZAK

When considering the concordances of the significant collocates for “international” (Table 3), we could see that the information is largely procedural, and originating from websites of private universities. The procedural information, while helpful, framed students as requiring services and the institutions as rendering these services.

Table 4: Collocates, concordance lines, and institution for the analysis of “student”

Key word	Collocates	Concordance	Institution
Student	pass for current	Providing services pertaining to visa & immigration matters including processing student pass applications for new students and renewal of student pass for current students	Private – AIU
	you can join	As a UniKL student, you can join various clubs and societies based on your interests in each campus, and participate in programmes for new students such as International Welcome Week and International Orientation.	Private – UniKL
	community of more	With an international student community of more than 1,000 students from 65 countries worldwide, you can choose from over 140 programmes in 12 campuses located throughout Peninsular Malaysia.	Private – UniKL
	Student society supports	In MSU, the International Student Society supports all international students and activities	Private – MSU

For the key word “student” (Table 4), findings showed that the significant collocates were identified from the websites of private institutions. The information gleaned from the concordances was procedural- again, with the students framed as requiring services; nonetheless, there were also experiences for international students in relation to clubs or societies, and the possibility of meeting students from a wide range of countries studying different programs.

For the key word “students” (Table 5), significant collocates pointed towards concordances that reflect the contribution of graduate students, as well as international students in terms of promoting multiculturalism and diversity, leading to a better understanding of self and of others.

Table 5: Collocates, concordance lines, and institution for the analysis of “students”

Key word	Collocates	Concordance	Institution
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Students	Play a valued	Graduate students play a valued and important role in the School's contribution to scholarship and research excellence.	Public – UTHM
	From enrolment until	To provide support services to all international students from enrolment until the completion of their studies.	Private – UTAR
	Experiences in terms	UM believes that a multicultural and multinational campus will enrich students' experiences in terms of social and cultural diversity.	Public – UM
	Build a stronger sense	We know from experience that the diversity helps students build a stronger sense of who they are, while developing better perspectives of not only their own, but equally important, others' strengths and abilities.	Public – UMP

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study are aligned with literature regarding international students in Malaysia, and the internationalization of universities in Malaysia. Based on the type of information presented, it seemed that international students had been framed as customers, where they are promised help and services for their relocation to, and studies in Malaysia. International students were also framed as being able to experience social mobility through the potential interaction with other international students; however, there was no distinction made about the types of international students or where they may come from. This reflects the aggregation of international students as a homogenous group (Ford, & Cate, 2020). This could be quite misleading as it paints the picture of students being similar and able to assimilate well.

Besides help and services offered to international students, other information were focused on the types of activities for international students, and their potential contribution to the university. Such a discursive framing presents a promotional discourse, where experiences are perceived as valuable for international students, and the academic benefit that international students may bring to the institution. It is important to note, though, that while international students may bring about “scholarship and research excellence”, as seen in the website of UTHM, all of this will ultimately contribute to the institution’s ranking in the global educational sphere. This is a form of economic mileage that institutions can gain from international students, which aligns with the neoliberal and globalization agenda in the higher education realm (Munusamy, & Hashim, 2019).

Based on the findings of this study, an implication worth pointing out is the possible shift in international students’ decision-making process in their pursuit for higher education in Malaysia. The lack of critical insights as to how institutions in Malaysia serve the

educational needs of international students may signify the established reputation of Malaysian universities. It may also be the case that explicit information on websites is not required, due to other factors such as word of mouth regarding an institution, which was not examined in this study. Students may also gauge the standing of universities, such as the global ranking of universities, from other online sources.

6. CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand how international students were framed based on the academic capitalism perspective. Through a corpus and discourse analysis approach, it was found that international students were framed as customers who would receive help and services in their relocation to Malaysia. International students were also framed as being given the experience of social mobility, particularly through the opportunities to interact with other international students. Finally, international students were also framed as an economic source for institutions, especially through their contribution towards scholarship and research. To expand on this current study, future researchers could consider a comparison of information presented in university websites with international students' actual experiences.

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