

Exploring the internationalization strategy of higher education institutions and halal food ecosystem in Malaysia

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education has become a strategic agenda of the development in Malaysia. In the age of globalization, the higher education sector experiences rapid growth with the increasing number of international students choosing Malaysia as a destination in pursuing their tertiary education. One of the crucial roles for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is to successfully transform Malaysia to be the international hub for higher education. Globalization has changed the landscape of development in the higher education sector. Exploring the expectations, demands and preferences of international students is crucial in crafting the most suitable approach to enhance the internationalization strategy. As a multi-ethnic society with a majority Muslim population, Malaysian HEIs have the advantage to attract more international students through providing a 'Muslim-friendly' Halal ecosystem. A dearth in HEIs internationalization literature discussing on Halal food ecosystem indicates the urgency to discover the potential of Halal ecosystem in accelerating the HEIs internationalization strategy. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the experiences of international students on Halal food ecosystem in Malaysia. A qualitative methodology using phenomenology approach was used to gather the research data from informants studied in public universities in Klang Valley area. The preliminary findings indicated that the Halal food ecosystem has a positive contribution to the HEIs internationalization strategy.

1. Introduction

Malaysia as a developing state has used internationalization in promoting Higher Education in the efforts to attract massive mobility of international students to pursue their tertiary education. According to Altbach and Knight (2007) and Qiang (2003), profit-making is the key motivation for the internationalization strategy of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the recruitment of international students has become a significant factor for institutional income and of national economic interest. Nonetheless, there are some other objectives of HEIs internationalization which include to improve the quality and cultural composition of students, create the positive image and prestige of the HEIs. For instance, in the cultural aspect, internationalization serves to extend the values and principles of the states' distinctive culture to the world communities. Apart from

that, HEIs can be an instrument of Soft Power that provides a platform for these students to obtain international literacy, exposure and experiences which is different from environment at their country (Ardakani *et al.*, 2011). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia in the year 2018, the total population of the state is 32.4 million. The multiethnic societal background provides the additional distinctive experience and exposure for these international students. Statistically, 61.3 % population in the multiethnic society professed the religion of Islam, although differences in ethnic, language, religion and custom, there are living harmoniously and embrace the diversity and differences in the society. A Muslim-friendly environment and the Islamic consciousness in the society are among the aspects that provide an advantage to the Malaysian HEIs in improvising its internationalization strategy.

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Historically, the development of the Halal industry in Malaysia began in 1974 through the issuing of a standardized Halal certification under the Research Centre of the Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Office. The word 'Halal' means 'permissible' or 'allowed' in Arabic and in perspective of Islamic Jurisprudence- *fiqh*, the word represents a choice that is allowed by the religious Islamic law- Shariah-compliant practice (Anas et al., 2010; Askomi et al., 2018). Halal usually associates with Halal food and beverages consumption, nonetheless, Halal ecosystem comprises a bigger scope which is in Islamic Finance, Halal Travel, Modest Fashion, Halal Media and Recreation, and Halal Pharmaceuticals and Cosmetics (Thomson Reuters, 2016). The concept of Halal not only covers the Shariah requirement, it includes the sustainability concept of hygiene, sanitation, safety and health aspects (Kasmarini et al., 2015). It is a fundamental way of life for all Muslims. Overall, the concept of Halal in Islam has very specific objectives which are to preserve the purity of religion, to safeguard the Islamic mentality, to preserve life, to safeguard property, to safeguard future generations and to maintain self-respect and integrity (Zunirah et al., 2010).

Food is the most basic need for a human being. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food is categorized in the most bottom level known as psychological needs. In theory, the needs of each level must be satisfied started from the bottom level, which is psychological needs. Similar to Muslim, Halal foods are an essential part of the Islamic faith, it can be considered as the food for the soul of every Muslim. Moreover, with the growth of Muslim populations worldwide sparked the blooming of Halal ecosystem. Malaysia is not left behind in embracing the Halal ecosystem, in fact, the geographically small and developing state in the Southeast Asia region, Malaysia is championing by actively competing in the global stage through promoting, encouraging and participating in Halal ecosystem. Food is the nerve in Halal ecosystem, with the estimation spending of US\$3 trillion by 2023. The State of the Global Islamic Economy spent US\$2.1 trillion across the food, beverage and lifestyle sectors in 2017 and forecast Muslim spending to reach US\$3 trillion by 2023.

The huge spending allocations on the Halal foods portrayed the emerging profitable sector that Malaysian HEIs should be actively involved, especially in strengthening the internationalization strategy. As one of the members in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Malaysia is actively promoting the idea to be the recognized Halal hub for the OIC members. Among the effort, is the opening of Halal distribution hub at the duty

-free transhipments zone in the Southern region of Johor with the aim to facilitate the issuance of Halal certifications. This 'one-stop' focal point attracted the manufacturers to export from the center in Johor to other Muslim countries throughout the world (Rozailin et al., 2013). The emerging Halal industries in Malaysia with the expansion of Halal ecosystem will benefit the HEIs internationalization. Furthermore, the incorporation of Halal in the HEIs internationalization strategy will strengthen the bilateral relations between Malaysia and other states, especially among Muslim countries.

As an instrument of Soft Power, HEIs have the ability to boost the positive image of Malaysian through the incorporated of Halal ecosystem in its internationalization strategy. Halal ecosystem as one of the important factors that have the potential to spark future massification and increase the enrolment of international students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia. However, the hypothetical proposition is yet to be proven with more future research and studies. For an exploratory stage, this paper is sought to explore the linkage and significant between the HEIs internationalization strategy and Halal food ecosystem-based from the international students' experiences. The role of HEIs should be beyond the boundaries of providing valuable knowledge to these students, most important to ensure the students thrive after graduation. The students' experiences for a few years in Malaysia will be their memories for a lifetime. Therefore, formulating, designing and implementing the most suitable internationalization strategy in HEIs is a challenging endeavor.

2. Methodology

The research conducted using qualitative methodology with a phenomenology approach. Phenomenology describes the common meaning for several individuals of their 'lived experience' (Creswell, 2013). In exploring the Muslim international student insights and in-depth understanding on Halal ecosystem in Malaysia, phenomenology is the most suitable approach using the 'lived experiences' of 10 informants – Post Graduates students (PhD Students) were selected from HEIs around the Klang Valley. Semi-structures interviews were conducted to seek the informant further views and opinions through their experience pursuing tertiary education in Malaysia. Postgraduate students experience is necessary as their views can be the guideline to improve the HEIs internationalization strategy in attracting international students to choose Malaysia as the destination to pursue their tertiary education. Table 1 provides the list of informants' demographic and social characteristics.

All the informants were approached with their consent to participate in this research during Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) held on 3rd to 6th April 2019 at Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition (MITEC), Kuala Lumpur. The interview sessions were recorded and transformed into a standard verbatim transcript. Then, the coding process was conducted, and the findings were discussed under the theme captured from the analyzing stage.

Table 1. Informants' demographic and social characteristic

| Gender | Country of Origin | Age |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|
| Somaiya (F) | Yemen | 32 |
| Abdol Rahman (M) | Indonesia | 35 |
| Wadood (M) | Sudan | 39 |
| Aisyah (F) | Saudi Arabia | 41 |
| Yasmin (F) | Iran | 42 |
| Chan (M) | China | 37 |
| Rahul (M) | India | 29 |
| Aisyah (F) | Oman | 42 |
| Wadood (M) | Saudi Arabia | 38 |
| Abeo (M) | Nigeria | 45 |

3. Results and discussion

There are four themes emerged from the analysis. All informants agreed that Malaysia as their top destination to further tertiary education because of the safe and peaceful 'Muslim-friendly' environment. A multi-ethnic society with a diverse background in aspects of languages, ethnicity, religions, cultures, beliefs, customs provide greater exposure for them. All Muslim informants highlighted the importance of Halal food ecosystem in choosing the place for pursuing their tertiary education, while non-Muslim informants were comfortable with the Halal food ecosystem in Malaysia as for them, Halal concept provide cleanliness manifested through the assurance on the strict procedure and the preparation of the foods, starting from the selection of ingredients, preparation and processing. Figure 1 depicts Internationalization of Malaysian HEIs using Halal Food Ecosystem.

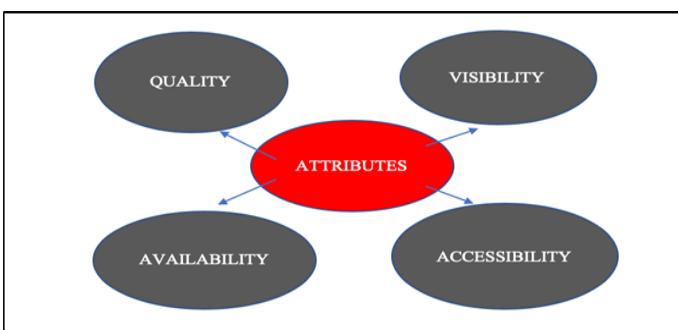


Figure 1. Internationalization of Malaysian HEIs using Halal Food Ecosystem

The informants mentioned the quality of the foods that they consumed is important. Halal foods guarantee the cleanliness and transparency, thus, ensure high quality of the foods. The informants highlighted as the cost of health is quite high, and with the limitation of budget as a student, the need to consume a quality of food is vital and without doubt Halal foods is the best as the procedure in preparing the foods are monitored closely following with the Shariah-compliant that met with the Islamic dietary guidelines. Secondly, visibility of the Halal food in Malaysia, according to informants they felt secured when consuming Halal foods with the Halal logo and marking. Halal logos labelled in the foods and restaurants provide a 'sense of security' for informants in consuming the foods. Third, the availability of Halal foods in Malaysia, even though Malaysia is a multiethnic society with majority Muslim population, they noticed that most non-Muslim sellers or manufacturers compliance with the Halal requirements. The informants conveyed they have the opportunity to taste the Halal ethnic foods from a different ethnic like Malays, Chinese and Indian. The availability of Halal 'foreign' fast foods like McDonald's, KFC, Starbucks contributes to more variety of options for them. Even though the availability of Halal foods in Malaysia is another attribute that attracts these international students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia, they are still facing issues of 'trustworthiness' on the authenticity of 'Halalness' of foods, especially from the non-Muslim manufacturers or sellers. Lastly, the informants were quite impressed with the accessibility of Halal foods, alternatively, despite they go to the nearest Halal food restaurant or grocery, they ordered Halal foods through online delivery. The online delivery platform provides a greater choice for these informants to consume Halal foods in Malaysia. According to informants, among their favorite online Halal Foods delivery are foodpanda.my, dahnakan.com and GrabFood. Four attributes emphasize the importance of Halal food ecosystem analyzed from the international post-graduates' students' experiences in Malaysia HEIs around the Klang Valley area.

4. Discussion

Among Muslim the Halal consciousness is vital. However, the literature in the internationalization of HEIs is lacking in discussing the important aspect of Halal ecosystem. As being mentioned by Eshaby (2019), the Halal food was one of the important factors that attract the international students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia, nonetheless, research and studies on this area are very limited. Even though the studies were conducted with the informants that pursuing the tertiary education in HEIs around Klang Valley, the findings analyzed from their lived experience confirmed

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the earlier findings indicated by Eshaby (2019) that Halal food is a significant factor that attracts these international students. Past studies conducted by Aiedah and Sharifah (2015) indicated several factors influenced Halal food consumption of the Generation Y which includes positive attitude towards the Halal food, social influences from the family and friends and lastly, perceived behavioural such as the availability and price do influence the decision in consuming the Halal food among Generation Y. Furthermore, they added that religion factor has an influence on Muslim consumer attitude and behaviour, food purchasing decisions and eating habits (Nisha and Iqbal, 2017; Baldassarre and Campo, 2015). It is noted that Halal is a fundamental way of life for every Muslim.

The past studies (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Bashir, 2007; Ragayah, 2013) have highlighted the pull and push factors in strategizing the internationalization of HEIs. Although they discussed the several factors, the missing discussion on the potential of Halal ecosystem needs to be actively discussed in future. From the preliminary findings, four attributes of Halal food have a significant impact on international students' experiences. The quality, visibility, availability and accessibility of Halal foods indicates the influential Halal foods ecosystem in international student decision making to choose Malaysia to obtain higher education. Malaysia is a non- Native English-Speaking state, however, according to a global survey on English skills, the EF Education First ranked Malaysia at No. 22 over another 88 countries under the category 'high proficiency' of English (Chin, 2018). Geographically placed in the 'heart' of Southeast Asia region, Malaysia is a good case study on the HEIs internationalization. Internationalization is one of the critical agendas in the transformation of Malaysian higher education with the target to be the international hub of higher education excellence by 2020.

As of April 2019, there are 20 public HEIs and 449 private higher education institutions registered with the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). Observing from the mushrooming of HEIs, Malaysia have the potential to champion the internationalization of HEIs in the Southeast Asia region using a suitable approach. There is a rising trend in the number of students to pursue higher education outside their home state. According to Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017), the increase in international student enrolment has been driven by a variety of domestic and external push (encouraging outward mobility) and pull (encouraging inward mobility) factors and about five million students were expected to leave their home state in pursuit of higher education, which half of the number were from Asia, 25

percent from Europe and eight percent from Africa (OECD, 2017). Approximately, in Malaysia, there are expected a total of 177, 000 international students were accepted to pursue their higher education (The Sun Daily, 2018). The efforts for internationalization of HEIs has started with the release of two important documents by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), now under the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2007 - the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP), a blueprint to transform Malaysia into a hub of higher education excellence by 2020 using internationalization strategy as one of the main keys thrust. Another document is known as the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010. Several studies have been conducted to identify factors that attract international students to enrol their higher education in Malaysia. As summarized by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Ragayah (2013), the factor can be divided into two, push and pull factors. Push factors include the unavailability or lack of access to higher education within home countries, the perception that the quality of tertiary education available in their home countries was lower than in the host countries, major economic and political shifts in students' home countries may influence the student decisions to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia.

The pull factors include the demand for a better-quality degree and greater relevance in the job market with the expectation of higher rates of return. The studies conducted by Bashir (2007) on the growth of multinational corporations and domestic firms and domestic enterprises competing in the global market encourage the youths to feel that foreign education and exposure will impress these transnational employers. Factor include the cost of education abroad, the possibility of temporary or permanent migration to the host country, importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country- historical or colonial links between host and source countries are important in determining the direction of international student flow, commonality of language, the availability of science and technology-based programs, the importance of social links and geographic proximity of the home and host countries and recommendation from family, friends or agents, quality and reputation of an institution, the recognition of the institution's qualifications in their home country, the international strategic alliances of a HEI, its alumni base and its existing international student population. In the studies conducted by Ragayah (2013) the findings highlighted the top reason or push factors why students chose Malaysia because of the lack of access to higher education the limited choice of program, political unrest and difficulties to obtain good quality of higher education in their home countries and pull factor

including the similarity of the majority population in aspect of religion background. Thus, with the majority population professed the religion of Islam, Malaysian HEIs have an advantage in promoting the 'Muslim-friendly' ecosystem in their internationalization strategy. The multi-ethnic society with the majority Muslim population provides a greater opportunity for the Malaysian HEIs to attract international students, especially from the Muslim states.

Several past studies highlighted that religion has an influence on Muslim consumer attitude and behaviour, food purchasing decisions and eating habits (Baldassarre and Campo, 2015; Nisha and Iqbal, 2017), it is supporting with the findings that the Halal food ecosystem have the capability to attract individual in choosing the destination for their studies. There are about 469 HEIs registered with MOE, with this capacity of Malaysian HEIs, using the right approaches, HEIs could contribute successfully in ensuring that Malaysia will be not only the favourite higher education hub but as well as Halal hub recognized globally. Furthermore, the Global Islamic Economy Indicator (GIEI) that measure the strength of Islamic economy for 73 states highlighted on the latest GIEI Report 2018/19 top 15 countries with Malaysia leading the chart. Malaysia at the top of the list in the development of Halal ecosystem and maintain ranked No. 1 for five consecutive years for GIEI. These criteria could contribute to a better internationalization strategy.

Halal practices apply to all product and service following the Muslim's way of living. Food and Beverage are leading the Halal practice. Malaysia place at the second after UAE in the Halal Food sectoral indicator score. Halal food sector is no longer an industry that complies with religious requirements, it is becoming an economic force in its own right domestically and globally, even many states such as Thailand and the Philippines with minority Muslim are aware of the importance of Halal and aggressively investing in Halal food productions (Mohamad and Backhouse, 2014). With the vast experiences, expertise and a good reputation in Halal globally, Malaysia HEIs should take consideration in improving their internationalization strategy by including the halal food ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

This is preliminary research tends to explore the significance of halal ecosystem in Malaysia using the international students' experiences. Strong linkage between the halal food and the choice of Malaysia as the destination to pursue tertiary education by these international students. The findings signalled the need

and urgency to explore further the internationalization strategy of HEIs and Halal ecosystem in Malaysia. Since the informant participation for this preliminary is limited to the postgraduate studied in HEIs around Klang Valley area. The future work can be expanded to other state or area in Malaysia with a greater number of informants. Nonetheless, the scope of Halal ecosystem should be expanded to another sector, not only concentrate on Halal food per se. Overall, the higher education sector has transformed drastically in the age of globalization. The massive development of higher education in Malaysia contributes to the economic development of the state. Based on the research, the findings indicated that Halal food ecosystem contributed to the betterment of HEIs internationalization strategy in Malaysia.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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