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Belt & Road Initiative: A Qualitative Study on Malaysians' Awareness and Attitude on Education Opportunities

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Abstract

China has received overwhelming responses from the world since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by the Chinese President, Xi Jinping. Majority of country leaders are indeed demonstrated a positive attitude towards the potential and associated benefits that brought by BRI. The coverage of BRI is huge, comprising policy coordination, infrastructure development, economic integration, cultural exchange, as well as healthcare and education development, which bring impacts at country, industry and individual levels. This qualitative study strived to explore Malaysians perspective towards the education and human capital development that brought by BRI, in particularly their awareness and attitude. Focus group has been carried out, and the study involved 17 participants. The research findings demonstrated that Malaysians showed moderate level towards the education opportunities that brought by BRI, but basically for those who were aware of, their attitude was positive. Research implications were also discussed and recommendations were also provided to both policy makers and market practitioners in higher education industry.

Keywords: Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Education, Attitude, Awareness, Malaysia, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Introduction

President Xi Jinping's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)'s (一帶一路) clarity of vision, powerful means and combining movement, has created a strong impact on global businesses and international relations (Benjamin & Viktor, 2017). BRI is a global development strategy that mainly involves infrastructure development as well as investments in foreign countries and international organizations such as Asia, Europe, Middle East, Africa and America. The BRI was made official and announced globally on September 2013, which aims to act as a stepping stone for more distinctive foreign policies. Xi Jinping, the China's president announced two major initiatives which are the land-based 'Silk Route Economic Belt (SREB)' and the ocean going 'Maritime Silk Road' in 2013 (Leer & Yau, 2016). Table 1 detailed out two (2) main routes under BRI, and its sub-routes.

Table 1: Two Main Routes under BRI

Source: *Fung Business Intelligence (2015)*

Silk Road Economic Belt	21st Century Maritime Silk Road
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China – Central Asia – Russia – Europe (the Baltic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coastal China – South China Sea – Indian Ocean – Europe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China – Central Asia – West Asia – Persian Gulf – Mediterranean Sea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coastal China – South China Sea – South Pacific
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China – Southeast Asia – South Asia – Indian Ocean 	

This is in-lined with the vision of the President Xi, the plans for this initiative typically covering the transportation projects that aims in enhancing China's economic integration with other parts of the world, including Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean, Central and Eastern Europe, Germany and Netherlands. Indeed, the BEI is also acts as a common platform for economic security in conjunction with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals by connecting global north to global south (United Nations, 2017). Hence, underdeveloped countries are also given opportunities to learn from developed countries through economic globalization and economic integration, China's outward foreign direct investment can be promoted overall through reducing the institutional differences (Gao, 2017).

China sees connectivity and co-development as the common interests and keys to peace and prosperity (Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, 2015), and these connectivities that can be achieved via the BRI are:

- Policy coordination;
- Facilities connectivity;
- Unimpeded trade;
- Financial integration; and,

- People-to-people bonds.

The focus of relevant projects under the coverage of BRI is on the development of a vast array of resources consists of roads, railways, ports, airports, oil and gas pipelines and refineries, power plants, Free Trade Zone (FTZ) as well as information technology, telecommunication and financial infrastructure (Leer & Yau, 2016). BRI has brought tremendous opportunities to business practitioners and individuals from both China and participating countries. For example, China's GDP has improved for approximately USD 10,893.64 since the launched of BRI in September 2013 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018).

China has invested more than US\$50 billion in the Belt & Road countries since the initiative was proposed, and has achieved a great number of early harvest results (Belt & Road Portal, 2017). With tremendous positive outcomes associated with the aim of this initiative in promoting integration within the world, infrastructure comprising railways, ports and roads, together with telecommunications networks receive the most attention amongst (The Economist, 2017), however education sector has also been taken seriously.

This study covers the efforts of China in internationalizing their education system, particularly in collaboration with Malaysian universities, and aims to explore Malaysians' awareness and attitude towards education opportunities provided under BRI. Malaysia has been chosen as the country of study as the country's early embrace of China's BRI has led to a flood of Chinese investments in the country, boosting the Southeast Asian nation's economy (Xin, 2017).

Literature Review

The Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed that the BRI aims to progress towards the direction of peace, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness and education benefits, which is the core component features of the OBOR Initiative (Jinping, 2017). From general perspective, Malaysian universities have much been benefited from the BRI, not only from the perspective of infrastructure development, foreign direct investment inflow, knowledge and technology sharing, but also talent development via education opportunity and collaborations.

The strengths and the potential outcomes of BRI are undeniable, and it will also prove to be very impactful towards education with its highly adaptability for all nations. The efforts made including the opening of universities around the globe, or even providing scholarships/provision for international students to study overseas or vice versa. By collaborating and combining foreign investment in setting up campuses alongside academic partnership, a wider level or connections between China and stakeholders can be achieved and enhanced that can improve better academic and research works, as well as fostering stronger collaboration relationships and cultural connections. For example, such institution as the Xiamen University campus in Malaysia are instances of China's increasing overseas presence.

As the education sector will be benefited under the closed collaboration between Malaysia with China, students and faculty exchanges are occurring more often. Besides that, another strategy that can be seen is with the establishment of educational institution to promote its program. Many academic institutions strive to enter into agreement and partnerships with international colleagues to take advantage of worldwide trends (Polan, 2012). The importance of education as per highlighted in BRI is in accord with the focus of the Malaysian government.

Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Malaysian government aims to provide high quality education, and the country is heading its direction in becoming a center for education excellence. The country is Table 2 shows the efforts made by Malaysia in developing its human capital.

Table 2: Malaysian Government's Commitments in Human Capital Development

Budget (RM)	Usage
2.9 Billion	Aid for students who are from low-incomes families
625 Million	Upgrading and maintaining of schools
250 Million	To be allocated for national schools
52 Million	Registered <i>pondok</i> schools will receive RM25m, national types secondary schools will get RM15m and the Chinese private secondary schools will receive RM12m.
100 Million	Allocation towards the rebuilding of dilapidated schools
206 Million	Development and enhancement of training programmes at polytechnics and community colleges
30 Million	Setting up of Technical Vocational Education and Training Fund
20 Million	TVET Boot camp Programme (Technical and vocational education and training)
400 Million	Research and development for Private higher learning institutions
3.8 Billion	Student loans and scholarships program
-	PTPTN Loaners will have the option to repay their loan by deduction of their salary (2% - 15%)
-	Companies that helps in their staffs PTPTN loan will receive tax break
-	Individual income tax breaks for the national education saving scheme will be increased by RM2000, from the initial amount of RM6000 to RM8000
-	PTPTN loaners aged above 60, who are earning wages less than RM4000 will be waived.

Source: *syudymalaysia.com* (2018)

Researchers commented that Malaysian education system has been restructured in line with the socio- economic ambitions of the government and growth (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy,

2012; Singh et al., 2010). Malaysia's economy had been focused on agriculture operations between 1960 and 1980, later its slowly moving towards industrial growth, and its presently directing to knowledge-based economy start from the year 2000, and hence the country demands extremely qualified and highly educated talents (Singh et al., 2010). The restructuring of education policy indeed has provided international stakeholders with opportunities to conduct twinning programs with local colleges and universities and to open international branch campuses in Malaysia (Grapragasem et al., 2014). These are congruent with the government's desire and efforts to establish Malaysia as a regional hub for higher education and as the main choice for international students and intellectuals by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, in which focus group has been carried out. Qualitative research was chosen in this study as it offers deep insights and comprehension of the environment of problems and its goal is to obtain deep qualitative insights of the underlying factors and motivations. Under the focus group discussion, a total of 17 participants were invited to respond to a series of both open- and closed-ended questions. Basically, closed-ended questions focused on participants' socio-demographic profile. The sample of this study included undergraduates, postgraduates and lecturers at a private university in Malaysia.

Findings

A simple frequency analysis was performed on closed-ended questions. Amongst, 64.7% of them have heard about BRI, and their main source of information about BRI was actually social media. The result revealed that the main information source was social media (40%), and followed by university's marketing effort (20%), as well as friends, class teaching by lecturers, newspaper and television (10% each).

Furthermore, 52.9% of them were not aware on the scholarship opportunities funded by the Chinese government for foreign students to pursue their study in Chinese universities. For those who possessed awareness on such information, they were asked on their perception and attitude towards this practice. Their responses were positive, in which they explained that they believe BRI will benefit to Malaysian students via education, in terms of culture exploration, learning different education system from other country, gaining new knowledge and innovative ideas, and improve both economy status and education system of Malaysia.

With regard to improving education system of Malaysia, they commented through BRI, this will be made available as more international fund will flow into Malaysia, by importing academic staff from China, via student- and academic-exchange programs, learning new education system and teaching methods, exposed different learning style, dual-language teaching and learning, as well as through intense research collaborations.

In terms of dual-language teaching and learning, Malaysian students will be able to learn via dual-language such as Mandarin and English for studying material. Apart of that, as China government is providing scholarship to Malaysian students, it also means that students are getting more opportunities in obtaining higher education. Further, upon completion of study, they can share their learning experiences in China and Chinese education system. From these experiences, it will be a good reference model for Malaysia to learn and potentially adapt a new education system, which can subsequently improve the education system in Malaysia.

Discussion and Recommendations

The research findings revealed that Malaysians presents a positive attitude towards BRI, particularly from the perspective of education as this brings abundance of benefits to Malaysia at four levels, namely country, industry, higher education institution and individual levels. It is strongly believed that education system of both countries will have major improvement by establishing a closed collaborative relationship at country and institution levels.

Policy makers of both countries should work harder in increasing public awareness about the education opportunities and its associated benefits to individual students and academic staff, and at large to the higher education institutions, industry, society and country. They can enforce a practice that ensures universities to create awareness regarding about this initiative during open or event coming out with a one-day informative program for student or even parents, particularly in gaining relevant information about relevant education opportunities and channels. Another recommendation is introducing academic exchange programme between Malaysia and China. By allowing lecturer/tutor of Malaysia to travel to host country in order to enhance their teaching and research skills and knowledge, this can eventually enhance the quality of education in both countries.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research findings of this study have lend empirical evidence on the favourable responses from the public towards the BRI, especially in the aspect of talent development. Even though there are still lack of awareness from certain groups on the scholarship opportunities given by the Chinese government, but basically for those who were aware about tend to present a positive and aggressive attitude towards the opportunities given.

These research findings have also brought important message to policy makers and industry players in both countries, particularly in improving the awareness of public, the selection of communication channels in information delivery, as well as further insights on the associated potential practical outcomes. Education is an important element towards the future progression of every individual and with the initiative that is being taken place, there surely be improvement towards the graduates as well as the countries development as well. When quality education is ensured, it gives birth to quality individuals that will eventually help in the countries development as well in the near future as these quality individuals will be able to contribute back towards the nation by working and from there, spreading relevant knowledge in all areas.

Towards the education sector, BRI would also prove to be beneficial towards the development of technologies as well as overall governing strategy. Being part of Asia, China has seen tremendous growth, from being a country that is solely focused on agriculture, in becoming one of the top exporters of the world presently. With such amazing transformation within a short period of time, the Malaysian government must be open and be willing to accept and learn from China, and apply it smartly towards the development of the country. With a proper strategy and initiative, Malaysia will then be able to see improvements towards the development as well as the GDP of the country.

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