

Overseas Education: The Perspective of the Acehese Scholarship Applicants

¹Restu Andrian, ²Teuku Azhari, ³Nur Akmaliah, ^{4*}Ika Kana Trisnawati, ⁵Muntasir Muntasir

¹Department of Islamic Religious Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh

²Chemical Engineering Department, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Malikussaleh

³Language Development Center, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry

⁴Department of English Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh

⁵Language Development Center, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry

*corresponding author: ika.kana@unmuha.ac.id

Abstract

Students leave their countries to pursue tertiary education abroad under different motives. To understand this case, this study aimed to identify the prospective students' perceptions on overseas academic settings. A total of 100 Acehese students applying for overseas scholarship were surveyed. The obtained data were then processed using *SPSS 24.0* for descriptive quantitative elaboration. The findings indicated that both females and males shared relatively similar views on the quality of international tertiary education. Both positively consider overseas universities to have better learning quality, better learning environment and better research experience. It is suggested that prospective students equip themselves with good English language competence to increase their chance to study abroad.

Keywords: motivation, overseas scholarships, international tertiary education.

Introduction

Each year, many students pursue their tertiary education overseas with considerably similar motives. Approximately, 1.8 million students who mostly came from developing and middle-income countries studied in more developed countries such as the United States dan the United Kingdom (Altbach, 2009). The image of a country can also play a role in affecting the students to choose a country for studying (Ghazarian, 2016). Research conducted by Ahmad, Hassan, and Al-Ahmedi (2017) found that almost 68.7%, 12.6%, and 7.6% of the research participants studied in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, respectively. Yet, this phenomenon is not unique to developed countries only, in Malaysia for example, foreigner students in Malaysian universities made up 28,837 or 5.15% of total students in 2014 (Yusuf, Ghazali, & Abdullah, 2017).

Ahmad, Hassan, and Al-Ahmedi (2017) noted that there were several reasons that drove the students to study abroad including "future career advancement", "high quality of overseas education", "experiencing a different teaching and learning style", "studying in a natural English language environment", and "cultural enrichment" (pp. 110-111). Having a chance to study in English language environment and being fluent in English specifically

helps the non-English speaking students to interact with more people from different backgrounds and leads them to have a better life socially, economically, and culturally.

In addition, a study conducted on international students in New Zealand by Doyle et al. (2010) pointed out that the advantages of studying abroad included having the exposure to a new culture and language, the opportunity to live and work overseas, the improved resume, and the chance to attend a world-class university. Therefore, it is understandable that many students expect to experience the privileges of being international students; however, due to some financial constraints, most of them often rely on student loan or scholarships to fund their studies.

The trend of studying abroad has also happened in Aceh. Aceh was badly hit by the 2004 tsunami and had gained huge attention and aids from the international communities, including in the form of scholarships. Scholarships are awarded for those who are eligible to receive after a careful selection or assessment, according to the applicants' levels of competence and quality (Wimatsari, Putra, & Buana, 2013). Since 2004, the government in partnership with international funds providers has sent a number of students to study master and PhD programs abroad, such as to Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The scholarships provided a chance for the Acehnese students to immerse themselves in the international contexts, study with high class universities, and gain valuable experiences from many reputable universities.

Now, fifteen years after tsunami, many universities in Indonesia and Aceh provide more and better programs for potential students, but the scholarships from the central and local governments, and also from foreign institutions are still ongoing. Apart from the availability of funds, little do we know what drives the students to study overseas despite the increasing quality of local universities. There has been little research covering this issue in the context of Indonesia, and therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap. Here, the study explores the perceptions of the Acehnese scholarship applicants on having education abroad.

Methodology

This study intended to investigate the academic phenomenon in the Acehnese community over the subject of motivation to apply scholarships to study abroad. It was intriguing to find out the prospective students' opinions on overseas education. To capture a large audience, the study distributed a survey through the online Google Form and the print-out version. The study employed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, adapted from West (2000) consisting demographic and overseas education-related questions. The obtained data were then processed using the SPSS ver. 24.0 to analyze the descriptive statistics of the data. However, the data was not normally distributed, and thus, Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the significance of the questionnaire items based on gender.

The target population of this study was the Acehnese scholarship applicants who resided in Aceh. A total of 100 respondents participated in this research: 32 males and 62 females, and 6 missing data. The respondents came from various backgrounds including private employees (21.6%), civil servants (38.1%), freelancers (10.3%), students (22.7%), and entrepreneurs (7.2%). The majority of the respondents opted for overseas scholarships (53.6%), followed by government scholarships (42.3%), and then non-government sponsored scholarships (4.1%).

Results and Discussion

The results from the study were broken down into a variable: gender. In terms of the academic settings, the respondents were found to be very inclined to getting overseas education. The following are the results.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Perceptions of Overseas Education

Statement	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error
I think that my preferred course has a better quality abroad	Male	35	4.49	.781	.132
	Female	62	4.45	.694	.088
	Total	97	4.46	.723	.073
I want to experience foreign academic environment	Male	35	4.71	.519	.088
	Female	62	4.82	.426	.054
	Total	97	4.78	.462	.047
I want to get better research experience than I could get in my home country	Male	35	4.23	1.165	.197
	Female	62	4.53	.762	.097
	Total	97	4.42	.934	.095

Taking gender into account, table 1 shows that both males and females have positive views on all statements. Statement 1 on the preferences in taking courses abroad because of its quality have the means of 4.49 for males and of 4.45 for females, indicating that both genders agreed that the standard of international higher education was better than that of local universities. Statement 2 on having foreign learning environment have the means of 4.71 for males and of 4.82 for females, suggesting both genders shared a bit similar opinion on getting overseas exposure. Statement 3 on getting better research experiences also shows higher means of 4.23 for males and of 4.53 for females. In general, both genders see the academic experiences in terms of the quality, the environment, and the research opportunities are better opted abroad. These findings are in line with what Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) had found, that the majority of the students surveyed chose to study overseas because the courses were better there than the local counterpart.

Table 2. Perception on overseas education

Statement	Chi-square	Asymp. Sig.
I think that my preferred course has a better quality abroad	.242	.622
I want to experience foreign academic environment	1.298	.255
I want to get better research experience than I could get in my home country	.994	.319

Table 2 shows that overall there were no significant differences among the Acehese prospective students' perceptions on overseas education (>0.05). It was found that Asymp.Sig scores was 0.622 for perception on better quality of overseas universities, 0.255 for experiencing foreign academic environment, and 0.319 for better research experience. Both males and females shared relatively similar views in pursuing international tertiary education.

Based on above findings, our study indicated that the Acehese scholarship applicants placed higher emphasis on learning experiences in overseas educational environment settings. In a similar vein, several studies have also pointed out that international exposure and better-quality education were considered as the highest priority by the people on choosing to study abroad (Bodycott, 2009; Ahmad, Hassan, & Al-Ahmedi, 2017). Such findings could be said to be not surprising since central motivation for cross-border education is related to academic advancement (Ahmad, Hassan, & Al-Ahmedi, 2017). People need to equip themselves with good education for improved academic skills. New skills are key to new possibilities and chances, and therefore as revealed in our study, international tertiary education has been perceived to offer better educational systems.

Conclusion

Overseas education is often viewed as an attractive study choice for many scholarship applicants. The motivation to pursue higher education abroad is mostly influenced by the applicants' positive perceptions. In general, our study found that both men and women shared similar opinions on the standard of overseas universities such as having better quality, better learning environment and better research experience.

There are some implications from the results of this study. First, knowing that students have certain perceptions on studying at universities abroad, it is important for the government and related institutions to provide clear information on what the students can learn and achieve during their studies in Indonesia. By doing so, the students can plan their studies properly in the future before deciding on which universities to apply. Second, the universities in Indonesia and Aceh, in particular, have to improve their educational services in order to facilitate the needs of potential students, including learning and researching facilities.

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