

What drives return and entrepreneurial engagement among malay overseas-educated returnee students?

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary paper blends the principles anchored in two distinguished theories namely; migration and entrepreneurship. In Malaysia and in many other countries, the drivers of international students' return and their entrepreneurial engagement have not been well researched, and the resulting findings not fully unveiled. As such, policy makers are deprived of valuable insights on an important part of the potential that returnee students could bring to the local economies. This paper focused on the scantily-researched field of returnee entrepreneurship in the context of overseas-educated students. It aimed to understand the return conditions of Malay returnee students who chose entrepreneurial career, and the drivers of their entrepreneurial choice. To do this, the study employed a generic qualitative exploratory design to reflect on the entrepreneurial experience of these students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth data which were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Our findings revealed that students' return is shaped by two drivers namely: social concerns and institutional obligations which often occur immediately after the end of study. Additionally, the entrepreneurial choice's drivers are autonomy, role model, employment conditions, and formation of business ideas overseas. Interestingly, we found evidence that the development of business ideas overseas and employment-related issues, as elements that reflect return conditions, were among the reasons that influenced the entrepreneurial choice, and that the development of entrepreneurial intention during the overseas stay was also observed among students who received study sponsors and had a commitment to return. The implications of these findings were discussed.

Keywords: Conditions, entrepreneurship, Malay, overseas-educated, returnee, students

Introduction

In a globalized world, returnee entrepreneurs (REs) are increasingly playing important socio-economic roles and, in turn, constituting an element of interest for policy makers around the world. This includes transfer of knowledge, technology, management styles, business practices and so on. Returnee entrepreneurs (REs) are people who return to their country of origin and start new

businesses after settling overseas for some time as workers, students, or trainees (Mosbah et al., 2023). One of the main features of returnees is their embeddedness in dual contexts which grant them numerous benefits.

Research findings have generally granted appreciation to returnee entrepreneurs because they contribute to the countries of origin. REs specifically contribute in many ways including the acceleration of developmental processes in the high-tech sectors (Kenney et al., 2013). Returnees also act as knowledge brokers in conducting innovation and transfer of knowledge (Wang & Bao, 2015), and participate effectively in building entrepreneurship ecosystems from a multi-level perspective (Liu, 2017 as found in Xiang et al., 2018). For example, in China, returnees were found to have introduced new management styles and innovative financial approaches, and influenced the entrepreneurship landscape profoundly (Wang & Bao, 2015).

So far, research on returnee entrepreneurship has been marked with the following issues: (i) it has majorly taken place in a few countries particularly China. (ii) focused on technology sectors (Ahuis et al., 2017), (iii) remained theoretically weak (Gruenhagen et al., 2020), and has not paid sufficient attention to the involvement of students returning from overseas into business ownership. In this regard, many studies have addressed entrepreneurship among returning students in the intra-country perspective (returning from a different province) but very little body of research has assessed this from international cross-border contexts (Gruenhagen et al., 2021). Moreover, the literature overlooks the study of students' return conditions and, even further, it fails to relate these conditions with the entrepreneurial choice, giving rise to a research gap that warrants further investigation.

We believe that the conditions that surround the return of overseas students to the home country play a significant role in determining their career choices. The example of such conditions may include the extent of available job opportunities, existing institutional support for entrepreneurship, the regulatory environment, and cultural expectations. For example, returnees who observed the conduct of entrepreneurship and independence overseas or encountered restricted access to employment opportunities in the home country may be forced to pursue self-employment, especially if they were involved in innovation-driven ecosystems. Additionally, social expectations -such as family preferences for entrepreneurship and freedom- can further encourage risk-taking choices like starting a business.

In response to these weaknesses, the current study, taking place in the Malaysia context, attempts to investigate Malay returnee students who choose to start their own businesses after study completion. The study aims to understand (i) the conditions that shape the return conditions of these graduates, and (ii) the drivers behind their entrepreneurial choice.

While the lack of a clear understanding on why and how returning students involved in entrepreneurship is a problem worth attention, forming a base knowledge on this, and particularly achieving the above two aims, would be helpful to students and policy makers alike. On the one hand, students could not just be enlightened with regards to the benefits of possible entrepreneurial career path as compared to employment but also how to materialize and optimise their overseas-attained knowledge, experience and business ideas in the home country. Policy makers, on the other hand, would benefit from the resulting insights to form policies that guide overseas students return process, reduce perceived estrangement (Gruenhagen et al., 2021), and facilitate their integration, and direct them to relevant sectors where they can contribute maximum value adding to the economy.

Migrants' return conditions and entrepreneurship as a career choice

Understanding the real reasons for returning to one's home country remains complicated because of the multifaceted nature of these reasons as exemplified in the dynamism that surrounds the whole migration process. This applies to international students as well as highlighted across many recent studies (see. e.g. Alves, 2022; Gutema et al., 2024; Hari et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, the push and pull factors, which have been extensively examined in their effect on the decision to migrate, have also been used to explain the return decisions (see eg. Mohamed and Abdul-Talib, 2020; Nyame-Asiamah et al., 2020). For example, Wassink and Hagan (2018) see the return as an interplay of international migration experiences and the labour market mobility which can only be understood by considering the social and economic circumstances of migrants before, during, and after migration. Ghosh (2000: 185) argues that return "is largely influenced by the initial motivations for migration as well as by the duration of the stay abroad and particularly by the conditions under which the return takes place". For this, the length of stay overseas is likely to relate positively with the entrepreneurial intention in the host country and is more likely that it relates negatively with the decision to return. That is; the more a person stays overseas, the more he/she adjusts culturally and professionally which, in turn, reduces his/her chances for return (Mosbah et al., 2020).

Cassarino (2004, 2008), addressed the return process via the lenses of preparedness of the migrants to return and argued that preparedness is not just about the willingness and readiness to return but also the return process progresses in time and is shaped by changing circumstances like personal experiences.

Regarding the career engagement of returnees, evidence shows that not just returnees are heterogeneous in their professional choice but it seems that this heterogeneity changes over time. For example, Ammassari (2004) used data concerning highly-skilled elite migrants who have returned to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. He noticed that the return patterns vary in relationship to historical periods. While earlier returnees tended to contribute in the realm of nation-building (in the labour market), recent returnees are more explicit in entrepreneurship.

In the Malaysian context, Chur-Hansen (2004) studied the extent to which Malaysian medical students in Australia were prepared for working in Malaysia and found several concerns that precluded their involvement in the local job market including language difficulties, lack of practical skills compared to their domestic counterparts, medical communication skill incompatibilities across cultures, expectations to perform complex or unfamiliar tasks with minimal supervision and substantial burdens of responsibility with long working hours. Because of these issues, they did not feel greatly prepared for their return home to practise medicine. The elective placement was not well utilised by the majority of students in this study. Besides, Ismail et al., (2016) studied the influence of a set of pull and push factors on career choices of Malaysian repatriates and found that political/regulatory factors and personal and family factors as important in predicting repatriates' career aspirations.

Malaysia's diaspora, overseas students and returnee entrepreneurship: Facts and policy efforts

Malaysia is not just home to millions of migrants but it is also a land of emigration. Its diaspora has grown from 1.5 million people in 2011 (Hugo, 2011) to 1.73 million in 2019 (UN, 2019).

According to the European Union Global Diaspora Facility - EUGDF (2025), Malaysia's diaspora constitutes around 5% of the total population of Malaysia, concentrates majorly in the following destinations respectively: Singapore, Bangladesh, Australia, United Kingdom, and United States, and contributes more than USD 1.6 billion of remittances. The world bank (2011) adds that around a third of it has a tertiary education level. According to a study conducted by Ismail et al. (2014), a good portion of Malaysians studying overseas concentrate in United Kingdom, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Korea and the United States, preferring accounting, finance and medicine as programs of study. In the US, the number of Malaysia students was 7709 in the academic year of 2018-19 and dropped to 5280 in 2021/22 due to Covid-19. Target programs include Engineering, Business and Management, Mathematics and Computer Sciences, Social Sciences, Physical and Life Sciences (US ITA, 2022).

While there is a lack of specific statistics on the involvement of returnee students in entrepreneurship, domestic figures point to interesting facts with regards to student employability. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2025), the total number of graduates reached 5.98 million persons in 2024 with an increase of 4.1 percent whereas the graduate unemployment rate continued to decline to 3.2 percent from 3.4 percent in 2023. The study of Fabeil et al. (2022) investigated self-employment among a sample of 108 entrepreneurship graduate students who started their own ventures during Covid-19 and found that despite the Covid conditions more than half of them did so because they identified a viable business opportunity (opportunity-driven entrepreneurs). These facts indicate the potential that the domestic business market offers for domestic and overseas-educated graduates willing to engage in business ownership.

Several push and pull factors fuel the migratory choices as well as return and non-return among Malaysian diasporas. While covering the reasons for migration is out of the scope of this paper, uncovering the challenges and obstacles that impede return remains something crucial. The European Union Global Diaspora Facility - EUGDF (2025) highlighted two obstacles that act as barriers in this context namely; the inadequacy of opportunities and economic prospects, and insufficient awareness of the programs that target return. Other factors include the potential loss of local networks, gaps in salary wages compared to host countries, bureaucratic hurdles, limited high-skilled employment opportunities, difficulties to reintegrate domestically after return (Chur-Hansen, 2004; Gruenhagen et al., 2020)

Following awareness of the importance and potential of the overseas diaspora in deriving economic development of the nation, the successive Malaysia governments set a policy and regulatory framework to attract and retain its talents, including both students enrolled overseas and individuals who are interested in entrepreneurship. This has translated into various initiatives and programs that have been implemented since the mid-1990s. For this also, funds were allocated especially as part of solving the brain drain issue (Hoo et al., 2014; Wahab, 2014). The table below explains these main initiatives and programs.

Table 1. Policy frameworks in favour of Malaysian diaspora

Initiative/Program	Focus
First scheme (1994)	Attracting overseas Malaysians and scientists to work in sectors identified as a priority
Second scheme (2001)	Gave incentives such as tax and some import tariff exemption, granted permanent residence to spouses and children of foreign scientists
Brain Gain Malaysia (BGM) Programme 2006.	Leveraging Malaysian diaspora to upgrade the country into an innovation-led economy, using a set of incentives such as tax concessions. Priority clusters include scientific and technical disciplines such as cybersecurity, bio informatics, energy, and climate change technology Achievements: reached around 700 successful applicants mostly in the field of medicine and ICT (EUGDF (2025))
Third scheme (under the New Economic Model - 2010)	Emphasizing innovation; aiming to attract high-skilled diasporas while preventing more brain drain
TalentCorp program - 2011	Creating awareness of career and business possibilities, and targeting the return of Malaysians who have no intentions to return. Achievement: It approved 5,366 applications between 2011 and 2019 (EUGDF (2025)). Also, the approval increases the return probability by 40 percent among applicants who have pre-existing job offer (Del Caprio et al., 2016)
Returning Expert Programme (REP) 2015.	Targeting Malaysians who have expertise in advanced manufacturing and materials, ICT, energy, biotechnology, microelectronics, pharmaceuticals, and aerospace. Achievements: approving 840 out of 1455 applications between 2001 and 2010, and 5,366 applications between 2011 and 2019 under TalentCorp, program
Talent Roadmap (2020)	Boosting local talents, facilitating the pooling of global talent and developing networks of elite talent
12th Malaysia Plan (12MP)	It manages a comprehensive database on the diaspora and aim to utilise diaspora talents for national interest. The diaspora is considered as an unexploited labour supply asset
Xpats Gateway 2023	Managing the expat inflows to the country. Also, streamlining and fastening the process of work permits issued for foreign talents

Source: Synthetized by the researchers

More broadly, Malaysia's diaspora engagement policies strive to align return migration with national development goals by easing reintegration barriers and incentivizing knowledge transfer. For example, the Returning Expert Programme (REP) primarily targets skilled professionals but also accommodates self-employed applicants, indirectly supporting entrepreneurial activity. The programme states that returnees who start a company in which they

serve as executive directors will have their director's fees or salaries eligible for the 15% incentive (L&CO Chartered Accountants, 2026).

Furthermore, the twelve key economic areas identified by the government involves immense entrepreneurial opportunities, whereas the third area "business services" provides viable avenues in which small scale and agile firms can flourish. The sub categories and sectors in this area are, but not limited to engineering, law, accounting, logistics and global business services. Such policies reflect a strategic shift toward leveraging returnees not only as employees but also as entrepreneurs who can establish firms, create job opportunities, and connect Malaysia to global economies, in accordance with evidence that returnee entrepreneurship policies can improve income generation and economic linkages (Sun et al., 2025).

Method and study area

The study is qualitative in nature and employed a generic qualitative exploratory design (Ellis & Hart, 2023), which is appropriate when research questions are exploratory in nature (Kahlkie, 2014). Besides, the study employed purposive sampling which involves selecting participants (cases) who are convenient in their proximity and willingness to participate (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling is subject to a set of criteria and consists of selecting participants who are able to provide value-adding and relevant information (Kelly, 2010). Here, the study applied two criteria: (i) participants must be Malay graduates who had previously enrolled in universities abroad, and (ii) they must have started their own businesses in Malaysia after their return.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven Malay overseas-educated returnee entrepreneurs who engaged in business ownership after returning from abroad. The study considers the size of the sample as sufficient in generating data that will yield reliable conclusions. For this, many scholars consider sample size not to be an issue in qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005), whereas some experts contend that two interviews or cases are enough to yield saturation and that samples of a single case/interview can be very informative in the field of management and medicine (Boddy, 2016). Furthermore, qualitative methodologists tend to recognise the challenges associated with access to a large number of participants. This challenge has, indeed, taken place in the current research due to the limited size of the population under investigation. This is, in part, due to the fact that a good portion of Malaysians who study overseas are either sponsored by the government (Sirat, 2023) or the family and often need to serve in the government sector or the family businesses after returning. This fact showcases a limited population of returnees who engage in business.

Prior to conducting the interviews, all the participants consented to be part of the study and provide the required information on their return conditions and the entrepreneurial choice they made. Participants were briefed about the purpose of the research and ensured data confidentiality as well as the anonymity of their identities. These measures are deemed important to create a conducive atmosphere for data collection and generate appropriate and most reflective information from the informants. These measures also align with ethical research procedures for which the ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All the interviews were conducted in English, recorded, then transcribed in a later phase. These interviews lasted between 35 minutes to 60 minutes each, and were permitted to generate rich and insightful data.

Thematic analysis was used in the current research. The thematic analysis process involves several steps that can be summarized into three key ones: generation of codes, development and review of themes from the codes, and final writing with quotation support (Braun & Clark, 2006; Mosbah, 2024). Specifically, the research adopted the analysis model developed by (Braun & Clark, 2006) which emphasises (i) the “inductive” approach (based on data instead of theories) to deal with the source or origin of the themes, and (ii) the “semantic/surface” approach related to the level of meanings in the data (as opposed to the “implicit/latent” approach). Overall, the thematic analysis requires a process that is based on coding the available data and generating (emerging) themes. NVivo software refers to codes as “child codes” and labels themes as “parent codes.”

Results and discussion

a. Description of the sample

Table 2. Descriptions of the participants and their businesses

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7
Owner characteristics							
Age	41	31	41	66	41	29	30
Involvement overseas	Study	Study	Study	Study	Study & work	Study	study
Length of stay overseas	7 years	2 years	4 years	3 years	6 years	≤ 1 year	≤ 1 year
Host country	UK	UK	UK	UK	New Zealand & UK	China	Turkey
Firm characteristics							
Business age	5 years	2 years	16 years	22 years	6 years	3.5 years	
Industry	IT, Accounting & Audits, and media company	Property , digital	Advertising , Events, Promotions	Audit and Tax	Digital Manufacturing	Food	Food & beverage
No of employees	120+	15	1	13	17	15	1

Source: Synthetized by the researchers

Table 2 shows that all the participants involved in this study migrated for education purpose while five of them chose the UK to accomplish their academic pursuit. The UK choice is due to many reasons including the historical and colonial linkages, the widespread use of English language, the inclination of Malaysian parents to valuing the prestige of British universities, the presence of considerable Malaysian student communities, and availability of scholarships from UK universities. The UK is now among the top destinations for the Malaysian Diaspora. With regards to the size of the business and its industrial concentration, the sample comprises enterprises that dominantly fall within the “micro” and “small” categories of the SMEs classification, whereas six of them are in services industries. Yet, the study shall acknowledge that these two observations

are influenced by the sampling strategy, which is not random, and their characteristics do not deviate from the often resource-less small-scaled types of firms.

b. Thematic analysis

Table 3. outputs of the thematic analysis

Examples of codes		Themes
Objective 1: Return conditions		
Return conditions	Missing family, homesickness, friends' decision, wife pressure, pass away, mom, dad, friends Sponsored study, scholarship, government, contract	Social considerations Institutional obligations
Objective 2: Drivers of the career choice (Entrepreneurship as compared to employment)		
Drivers of the career choice	Wanted to be my own boss, not working for people, time, freedom, office work, superior Survive, becomes big name today No job, insufficient salary, employer/sector crisis 3D printing in the UK, Turkish food, learn from Chinese business, eye opening	Autonomy Role model Employment conditions Imported business ideas

Source: Synthetized by the researchers

Objective 1: Return conditions

Theme 1: Social considerations

The thematic analysis engendered insightful findings. Two themes were identified in terms of return conditions namely: social considerations and institutional obligations. Social factors appeared as a leading reason as was emphasised by many informants. This is captured clearly in the case of Informants 1 as well as in the case of Informant 5 who had a plan to settle in the UK after he obtained a job and bought a house:

“So, what happened was that my mom passed away. I was the third child in the family and the only married among my siblings. Here is when my dad asked me to come back to Malaysia to be close to them?” Informant 1.

“So, when my mom passed away, my dad asked me,” Can you come back to Malaysia?” But I was happy in the UK because I already bought a house. I was trying to settle down in the UK, but I decided to return to Malaysia. So, when I returned to Malaysia basically I didn't know what to do” Informant 5.

Indeed, the strong emotional and social attachment are not specific to Malaysian but can be seen in almost all eastern countries which are classified in cultural theories as collective cultures. In these cultures, family and social ties are strong among groups. Compared to

individualistic cultures, dominant in the West, eastern cultures' individuals tend to feel and act as parts of groups, acting less individually while interacting frequently. These cultural differences impact social connectedness, creating a strong pull to return home to fulfil familial responsibilities, participate in social networks, and preserve their sense of belonging, which can outweigh career or financial incentives abroad (Hofstede, 2001).

The study of Mustafa (2017) which explored the adaptation experiences of overseas Malaysian students gives support to this finding especially among undergraduate students within whom some may not be mature enough to cope with life overseas. Mohd Nasir et al. (2022) argued that for Malaysian Malay expatriates, social connectedness is more than just a means of social relationship or social networking, but it is a motivating factor for survival and a way to reduce feelings of social anxiety and frustrations.

Theme 2: Institutional obligations

Furthermore, the theme “institutional obligations” emerging from the analysis refers to the commitment of those who obtained familial and organisational sponsor or governmental scholarship for studying abroad to return to Malaysia after graduation to serve in government sectors or in the sponsoring organisation. An elucidation of this is clarified in the following statement:

“I was offered a scholarship to study in UK, and since my scholarship was offered by the government, I had to come back and serve the government after completing my study. I had signed a contract obliging me to serve the government for 5 years.” Informant 4.

These findings align best with the tenets of social network theory which highlights the impact of social ties on emigration and return decisions, suggesting that migrants may prefer to re-join family or communities in the home country; sometimes they are tied up by social obligations which force their return. In both cases of re-joining the same organisation that sponsored one's studies or serving in the country based on an earlier contract signed with the government, returning students may enjoy benefits but also face drawbacks.

On the plus side, they benefit from job security, familiar environment and surroundings, smoother transition and chances to apply the acquired knowledge. On the downside, their roles may be unfit with the new expertise and may face slower professional growth. In retrospect, it is not unlikely that those who returned because of such obligations may have found it not suitable, unwell rewarding, or exhausting, or because the entrepreneurial journey was expected to be more advantageous.

These obligations leave no doors for thinking about the next immediate step and many return soon after graduating. In such a scenario, although they may not be deeply in the host country, there is still a possibility that they gain experience and observations related to entrepreneurship and the formation of business ideas. In less frequent cases, many international students prefer to extend the migration and stay overseas, regardless of their ultimate intention of return. This scenario is widely observed in the case of students from developing countries who study in developed/industrial countries (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Zhang et al., 2022). However, although the majority of the students in this study sample were involved in countries that have good socio-economic systems, they all decided to return, usually soon after they obtained their degrees. In fact, five of the seven informants attached their decision to return to the completion of

study. The next two statements of Informant 3 and Informant 6 not just highlights this idea but also touches upon some social considerations especially missing the family.

“The reason I returned to Malaysia after completing my studies in Engineering from Warwick University in the UK is because me and my friends all wanted to return to Malaysia. At the same time, I missed my family and wanted to be close to it” Informant 3.

“My studies in China ended. It was on an exchange program between [name of the university in Malaysia] and a Chinese university. After it concluded, I returned to Malaysia.” Informant 6.

One would reflect that the above themes emerged from the codes which are not necessarily identical among all participants; meaning that a single participant may have been driven by more than one of these patterns. This is indeed the case for Participant 1 and Participant 3 who returned because of both social connectedness and end of study.

Objective 2: Drivers of the career choice (Entrepreneurship as compared to employment)

Theme 1: Autonomy

It is widely accepted in entrepreneurship research that autonomy is one of the key drivers that pull people towards entrepreneurship (Benz & Frey, 2008; Clark & Lee, 2006; Sobel, 2015). The effect of this factors was also captured in the current study and reported by many informants who expressed it using different terminologies (codes) either directly such as “be my own boss” and “freedom” or indirectly by pointing to the downside of “working in office”, “having superior”, to mention only a few. In the two statements below, Informant 4 and Informant 6 provide insights and hints that reflect autonomy, emphasizing freedom, time and the avoidance of working for others.

“After working for the government and a few years in the private sector, I realize that I should do it on my own. The first reason is freedom of time. I can work at my own time rather than normal office hours. If I work harder or overtime, I will get more income rather than working with others. I don’t need to follow the clock in and clock out which is 8am to 5pm. I realized that I need freedom of time, not working overtime or 8 to 5pm daily.” Informant 4.

“But after my contract ended [referring to his previous employer], I did not pursue further one of the reasons why I wanted to be involved with business is because I just don’t see myself working in an office... go to traffics, having to answer to your superiors and writing emails and doing his cut calls. This is not me! I sat back and had a very good reflection and I decided to evolve with business.” Informant 6.

Freedom responds to an individual's core desire for self-determination and autonomy. It allows the alignment of work and efforts with personal values and aspirations, and offers control over work, decisions, time management, income and planning. Similarly, it gives entrepreneurs

the ability to skip the hassle of corporate hierarchies and rigid rules. Further to this, research has shown that doing one's own entrepreneurial work yields greater satisfaction from work than those working in organisations, regardless of income or the number of working hours (Benz & Frey, 2008).

Theme 2: Role model

The nexus between role models and entrepreneurial engagement intention has been affirmed in various studies (Bosma et al., 2012). However, a good part of these studies has focused on family members as role models (see. eg. Amofah & Saladrighes, 2022; Hoffman et al., 2015), marginalising the possible influence of members from outside the family. From this study data, the evidence for the impact of role models in the development of entrepreneurship intention and the execution of own businesses is well captured in the case of Informant 1 who related the formation of the business idea with the success of a friend entrepreneur. He argued that:

“Before I started my own business, I had to work for a few companies mostly in banking, after a few years in banking only then I joined a friend of mine's company. My friend gave me exposure to business and how to grow a business. I learn a lot about the struggle they have and how they survived and became a big name today. After that I resigned and created my own company.” Informant 1.

In the Malaysian context, Roslan et al. (2020) found a similar pattern on the impact of role models on students' entrepreneurship intentions. Indeed, the process or mechanism of such impact happens because the role models shape an individual's normative, motivational and cognitive belief on entrepreneurship. Observing successful entrepreneurs and businessmen provides nascent entrepreneurs (such as students in this study case) vicarious learning abilities and exposure to experiences that improve one's entrepreneurial self-efficacy and feasibility. This becomes so effective with the realisation that challenges can be managed and starting a (successful) business venture can be achieved.

Theme 3: Employment-related concerns

The entrepreneurship literature is not short of evidence on how employment related issues, such as unemployment, limited job offerings and the level of salaries, can shape intention for entrepreneurship. Often, people who are attracted to entrepreneurship because of these and similar conditions are labelled as “necessity entrepreneurs”. It is generally agreed upon that, as opposed to the “opportunity entrepreneurs” who are driven to business ownership by pull motivators, necessity entrepreneurs are usually driven by push factors, that is; when there are “no better choices for work” (Reynolds et al., 2005, p. 217). Necessity entrepreneurs tend to start small, labour intensive and survival-oriented enterprises in traditional sectors. These enterprises are often characterised by limited innovation, growth and scalability.

Referring to this study data, the study found evidence among participants that their engagement in business is associated with certain employment-related issues. This can be well enumerated through the following two statements:

“Coming back with an Architect degree with specialisation in airport design does not really help me in getting a good paying job specially with rare demand for airport architects. So it's either that I became a low paying architect, or look for other opportunities to gain higher income.” Informant 2.

“So when I'm back in Malaysia If I've been offered a job, I need to have a decent salary to really start in Malaysia, you know, I can't because I went to a few companies, and their offer was not enough to actually sustain myself and my family.” Informant 5.

Indeed, entrepreneurship constitutes a good alternative when such unpromising market expectations and rewards are manifested. Parallel to this, the study of Lim et al. (2021) reached empirical evidence that entrepreneurial career choice among Malaysian graduates not just diminished the unemployment duration but also reduced the likelihood of long-term unemployment. Yet a surprising finding in our study is that in contrast to the prevailing view in the literature, it was revealed that in five cases the created businesses featured opportunity-based characteristics (see cases 1 to 5 in the descriptive table above) not necessity-related enterprises. Opportunity-related firms are more profitable and usually operate in professional services, knowledge-based and technology sectors, emphasizing innovation and growth (Fabeil et al., 2022; Van der Zwan et al., 2016).

Theme 4: Formation of business ideas

Developing a business idea while settling overseas is uncommon in entrepreneurship. This was the case in this study data where informants declared that they had developed a business idea overseas and wanted to implement it in Malaysia. A capturing explanation appears in the next statements of Informants 7 who studied in Turkey and liked the idea of a Turkish food outlet in Malaysia:

“One benefit is that you get exposed to different interesting ideas, You can also see that many Malaysians return from overseas with the idea they saw in their host country. I was particularly interested in all these tech start-up companies which also had led me to start up my own tech solution company.” Informant 2.

Informant 6 further clarified the formation of business ideas in China emphasizing the bigger picture of the economy as a whole as well as the dynamism domains such as ecommerce which has not just become an integral part of the economy but continues shaping the daily commercial transactions of firms and consumers. The study affirms that similar impressions on the unique business conduct in China and its impact on social behaviours could be shared by almost everyone who visits the country.

“I had some ideas and it has to do a lot with how China is growing in terms of economically um everywhere you go, you just see the potential of a you get an idea of how to start the business or the tricks around it because, as the study all know, China is such a huge economy and I think how they achieve it is something that the study have to learn from them. I mean, if I look at the surrounding of the country itself from the public, to electric vehicles and the usage of technology as well. uh, especially with e-

commerce, it's eye-opening for me and also for the rest of my colleagues.” Informant 6.

In a similar fashion, informant 7 highlighted the wide acceptance of Turkish food globally. This Informant has had a clear imagination on why starting a business in Malaysia on this cuisine is likely to be a success. Among the reasons, there is the fact that Malaysia is an open and multicultural country.

“As you know, Turkey is famous for its cuisine, especially kebabs and Shawarma. These are iconic and widely loved foods there. I thought about the possibility of starting a similar food business, but not in Turkey itself..... Competing in that market [Turkey] felt very challenging. Instead, I thought about bringing the unique taste of Turkish food to Malaysia. I believe Malaysia, being a multicultural country, is open to and enjoys experiencing different traditional cuisines. so introducing something like authentic Turkish cuisine seemed like a great idea. I figured it could be well-received here because it offers a unique cultural experience.” Informant 7.

Settling overseas and being exposed to the life prospects there seems to have not just helped in the formation of clear business ideas but also boosted students' interest for entrepreneurship. Yet while the topic of imported business ideas is yet to capture proper scholarly interest, reflections on this niche research issue should seek to understand why such business ideas were not implemented overseas and, most importantly, identify the types of adjustment needed for its success when implemented in the home country. This implies primarily taking in account the multifaceted business environment conditions in both the home country and host country. The study shall note in the context of this study this issue is somehow related to the above-mentioned return conditions such is the case for students who were obliged to return because of the institutional obligations and those whose settlement overseas was strictly for the education purpose. These conditions prevent the implementation of the formed business ideas overseas.

Conclusion

In this study we addressed Malaysia's overseas-educated students who became entrepreneurs. The aim of the study was to understand their return conditions and the drivers of their entrepreneurial choice as opposed to employment. The findings of the study are insightful and revealed two themes that reflected the conditions surrounding the return of the sampled returnee students, namely social considerations and institutional obligations. The findings also demonstrated four themes reflecting the drivers that influenced the entrepreneurial choice as career path. These themes are: independence, role model, employment-related conditions, as well as the availability and desire to implement imported business ideas. The formation of business ideas is more likely to trigger intention for starting one's own business. Because entrepreneurs are often resourceless, the implementation of these ideas is not just a matter of time; but requires the necessary conditions to be met. It is important to highlight here that not all the sampled students have engaged in creating their own businesses immediately after return but some have joined the corporate world for some time before shifting to self-employment.

Given this, the current paper contributes as follow: theoretically, it adds to the under-researched gap of how returning students transit into entrepreneurship and the role of return conditions in this path. In practical terms the study guides policy on two key events. The first relates to encouraging investments in opportunity-related industries since these industries add better economic values and are more likely to support the upgrading of the economy. Second, the provision of proper environment (regulations, infrastructures and incentives) for the replication of successful business models from overseas.

Implications

The findings propose that while return conditions are tightly structured by social obligations and sponsorship-related institutional commitments that often imply immediate reintegration into the home labour market, these same restraints may inadvertently encourage entrepreneurial orientation by allowing students to compare between different institutional environments and observe adaptive agency. Notably, the development of business ideas during overseas stay and the formation of entrepreneurial desire even among sponsored graduates suggest that entrepreneurship can progress as a “parallel pathway” along with obligatory return line rather than as a totally voluntary career endeavour. This underlines the need for subsidizing institutions and policymakers to surpass the view that returnee students will exclusively serve as labour-market actors but instead recognise them as reliable entrepreneurial agents whose interest for business is shaped through international learning experiences and institutional exposure. Research similarly stresses that migrant and returnee entrepreneurship is impacted by both opportunity structures available overseas and institutional conditions at home, highlighting the influence of embedded experiences in shaping entrepreneurial interest, mind-set and results (Gruenhagen, 2021; Mosbah et al., 2023).

Limitations and directions for future research

Given the nature of the sampling strategy and the sample characteristics, the findings cannot be generalizable to the whole population of Malaysia’s returning students who opted for entrepreneurship in their home country. Moreover, the findings of the current study bring to light the need for investigating the following three topics. First, exploring imported business ideas in more detail. This implies, specifically, considering how they are adjusted to suit the local demand. The study regards this almost-untouched research topic as promising since there is a considerable gap in the literature on it.

Second, the study calls for further research on how and under which circumstances do unpromising market conditions push towards the establishment of opportunity related ventures instead of necessity related ventures. The study observed that in most of these study cases, the returning entrepreneurs established opportunity-based business not necessity-related ones. Emphasizing the institutional catalysts and challenges will add significant theoretical and practical values. Third, the transition from employment to self-employment among student entrepreneurs who studied overseas under scholarship (obligation). Here, the study recommends researchers to address the set of factors that drive them to relinquish their corporate positions for which they invested heavily by migrating overseas to prepare (study) for it.

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