

“Parents just don’t understand” – generational perceptions of education and work

Generational
perceptions
of education
and work

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Abstract

Purpose – Using a Southeast Asian context, this paper asks a question that has seldom been researched: Is there a divergence between parents’ and their college-going children’s perceptions of education and employability at a time of rapid economic change? If such a divergence exists, it would have hidden costs for the children. Parents’ choice of professions no longer in demand when their children reach working age can permanently damage the latter’s earning power. Also, parents’ choice of fields of study that their children are not proficient or interested in jeopardizes the latter’s chances of success in their studies. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected using mixed methods, a combination of structured online questionnaires from two local special-purpose sample surveys conducted by the authors, and follow-up interviews. Graduate Employment Survey 2 (GES2) was the second of a three-phase British Council-sponsored study, focusing on TNE, that used a structured online questionnaire for students of several tertiary education institutions, both in the public and private sectors, and for several group interviews of students in 2015. A structured questionnaire was also administered to a small number of parents.

Findings – In terms of employment, the rankings of HEIs by parents and students were generally consistent. Study in foreign HEIs abroad has the highest likelihood of employment. Branch campuses were ranked next highest. Despite this, of interest is the difference in mean scores between first and second ranked HEIs. Whereas students rate branch campuses as not much inferior to foreign university campuses, parents see a major gulf between them – they rate foreign campuses more highly than branch campuses more poorly. This difference is likely caused by parents’ traditional preference for foreign study over local, coupled with a lack of TNE knowledge.

Social implications – A fundamental issue of perception is how parents and students see the role of education. Is education a destination or is education a journey? This disconnect has consequences. Given the shifting nature of employment, the need for transferable skills and the fact that some of the jobs that the next generation will be doing are not even known today, parental advice based on what they know may not do justice to their children’s choice of career. Likewise, the approach of TNE to promote traditional degrees to job paths is also a conventional approach that has a limited shelf life.

Originality/value – The role of parents in education choice has received surprisingly scant academic attention. With technological change driving product and service innovation ever more rapidly, previously unknown types of work have emerged in a relatively short span of time. In this situation, the risk of

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mismatched perceptions between parents and their children, whose educational experience spans a generation, is becoming increasingly real. While most studies of a parental role have been undertaken for Western countries, there is much less research on East Asian parents' role in their children's education.

Keywords Employment, Education, Parents, Perceptions mismatch

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The opening lines of the 1989 Grammy Award winning song for Rap music “Parents Just Don’t Understand” are “You know parents are the same no matter time nor place [...]. There’s no need to argue, parents just don’t understand” (Esquire, 2014). How much truth is there in these lines when they relate to education of their children? This is an issue that has received surprisingly scant academic attention. With technological change driving product and service innovation ever more rapidly, previously unknown types of work have emerged in a relatively short span of time (Bughin *et al.*, 2016; Ross, 2016). In this situation, the risk of mismatched perceptions between parents and their children, whose educational experience spans a generation, is becoming increasingly real.

Parents’ role in their children’s education has been widely researched. There is general agreement that this role is important, explained by motivations like their self-perceived parental role, desire to help their children in school, and responding to their children’s or the school’s requests for help (De Fraga *et al.*, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). The specific role was shaped by “specific domains of skill and knowledge they possess, the demands on their time and energy, and specific requests for involvement from children and the school” (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). How well the parent plays this role depends on his/her education, family income, and, although much less researched, culture and ethnicity, the last mainly with reference to immigrants (Eccles and Davis-Kean, 2005; Grolnick *et al.*, 2009; Schuller, 2011). Overall, this role has been deemed to be positive, based on the parents’ experience being brought to bear in guiding their children (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). Beyond education, parents’ role in their children’s career choice has been found to be not only important, but also having a key impact because parental influence dominates that of teachers and counselors (Clutter, 2010). However, parents themselves may be unaware of or not acknowledge this very strong role of theirs (Taylor and Harris 2004).

While most studies of a parental role have been undertaken for Western countries, it is Asian parents who grab the occasional limelight. Through controversial writing like the novel *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, published in 2011, and through periodic reports (Breitenstein, 2013; Mansell, 2011; Sharma, 2013), Asian parents have gained a reputation for driving their children to academic success. Factors cited include “taking education seriously as a fundamental pillar of [...] Chinese identity” (Becky Davis, cited in Mansell, 2011) and a high value placed on education generating high expectations that are transferred through parenting to their children (Breitenstein, 2013).

By way of clarification and following Chao and Tseng (2002), we refer to “Asia” less in strict geographical terms and more in terms of societies and cultures in the region in which family plays a pre-eminent role and in which education is given high priority. This would apply particularly to Confucian cultures, broadly defined, in East Asia, such as China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), Japan, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam, and including Chinese overseas communities in Southeast Asia. It is neither suggested that societies in all countries in Asia are defined by these traits, nor that these traits are unique to Asia.

While Western media coverage typically documents children of immigrant parents, this phenomenon is clearly more widespread, as demonstrated by East Asian children perennially topping international tests like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). For instance, in the 2015 TIMSS study, Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and Japan

topped the 4th grade and Singapore, Japan and Taiwan topped the 8th grade. In the 2015 PISA test, the top five positions were occupied by Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea. Debates about their superior performance have revolved largely around the adequacy of Asian rote learning (see, for instance, Kember, 2015; Matthews, 2014), which may account as much as the mode of learning. There is much less research on East Asian parents' role in their children's education compared to parents from other areas and/or cultures. However, this is changing, as recent writings show the intense involvement of East Asian parents in ensuring that their children receive the best education they can afford (Sharma, 2013; Yan, 2015).

This paper attempts to bring together the above strands of the increasing rapid emergence of new occupations and of strong parental direction of their children's education in examining a parental role in education. Using a Southeast Asian context, it seeks to delve into the substance of this role, asking a question that has seldom been researched: Is there a divergence between parents' and their college-going children's perceptions of education and employability at a time of rapid economic change, as much of East and Southeast Asia is experiencing? If such a divergence exists, it would have hidden costs for the children. Parents' choice of professions no longer in demand when their children reach working age can permanently damage the latter's earning power. Also, parents' choice of fields of study that their children are not proficient or interested in jeopardizes the latter's chances of success in their studies. Times of rapid change heighten the risk of mismatch and hence its costs. Specifically, the research objectives are to plot the degree of correspondence between students' and their parents' perceptions of education and work, and to draw implications from these findings for the role of stakeholders in this crucial area.

The context for this paper's analysis is Malaysia, a choice made on the following bases. First, rapid advances in education marked by quotas in public higher education institutions (HEIs) have brought about a thriving private HEI sector. The emergence of the latter has spawned a range of fields of study and qualifications that parents, with their own study backgrounds, are likely to find it hard to grasp fully. Second, the country has a long tradition of sending students overseas, now complemented by internationalization of local education. Third, local education standards have fallen, rendering this sector no longer the premium choice it used to be. Fourth, some public HEIs have partnerships with foreign HEIs to provide undergraduate programs. For example, the University of Malaya has collaborated with the University of Wales to establish the International University of Malaya Wales. These developments give Malaysian parents a much larger scope for guiding their children in making education and career choices. Finally, Malaysia, dubbed by the World Bank as a "miracle" economy because of its record of impressive growth (World Bank, 1993), is witnessing a rising demand for new types of work as it struggles to upgrade its technological capability (Shamsuddin, 2017, p. 6).

The findings here, if extended to the Asian experience, should speak to the bigger picture of a possible mismatch between parent–children expectations. This can arise when the structure and range of opportunities may have grown, but parental perception still remains focused on a narrower range of traditional options so that parental advice is based on only partial understanding of the relevance and true value of different options and experience available to students. With time, the market will surely take care of this, but given the strong influence of parents on their children's education and career choice, this mismatch between parents' perceptions and reality can be a critical issue in determining employability, one of the net objectives and results of education.

Following the introduction in Section 1, the Malaysian context for parent–children perceptions on education and employment is sketched briefly in Section 2. Section 3 presents the data and methods used for analysis. Employment as a goal in education, a common theme running through other Asian studies (e.g. Shimomura *et al.*, 2007), is the

substance of Section 4. Section 5 then compares perceptions on post-education career. Section 6 concludes by drawing implications for Malaysia with extensions to the wider context of parent–children interactions.

2. The Malaysian context

Malaysia's education scene has several distinctive features that render a study of student–parent perceptions particularly interesting. The first is the co-existence of a large private sector alongside the public sector in higher education provision. The rapid expansion of private sector higher education began in the 1980s but was given impetus by the *Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996 (Act 555)*. The rise of private higher education owed much to the government's policy of affirmative action in which places in public universities were reserved for the local population, primarily Malays (*Bumiputera*), leaving insufficient places for the non-*Bumiputera* students graduating from secondary education. While students from affluent families were able to travel overseas for their education, those less affluent had to seek alternatives. These came in the form of private higher education (Tan, 2002). But more than catering for these students, private HEIs served to meet the demand for higher education that public education could not meet. The government's passage of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act in 1996 permitted the private sector to register its education establishments as HEIs (Tan, 2002, p. 124). The result was a more than twofold increase, roughly 118 percent, in the number of private HEIs from 280 to 611 in the four years from 1995 to 1999; while the expansion of enrollment in these institutions took a little longer to materialize, the share of private higher education enrollment rose from 32 to 43 percent in the five years from 2006 to 2010, based on World Bank data.

Second, the recent growth of transnational higher education (TNHE) is directly related to the expansion of private higher education. TNHE in Malaysia goes back all the way to the country's independence in 1957, even earlier on if the large number of Malaysian students on scholarships or privately-funded sent overseas is included. At that time, much of the TNHE arrangements focused on professional and skills-based qualifications such as Pitman, and City and Guilds Certificates.

Originally disallowed by the government from awarding degree qualifications, colleges offering certificate and diploma courses in the private education sub-sector sought partnerships with foreign tertiary institutions that could. These partnerships took the form of a variety of arrangements, e.g. from “1+2” (one year in Malaysia and two years in the overseas university), “3+0,” and “4+0” programs to joint degrees. To date, nine branch campuses of foreign universities – Curtin, Monash, Swinburne (Australia), Heriot-Watt, Newcastle, Nottingham, Reading, Southampton (UK) and Xiamen (China) – have also been established in Malaysia. More cost effective than going overseas to obtain a foreign degree or one recognized internationally and with English as the medium of instruction, these programs have become immensely popular. As a result, government policy shifted to view the promotion of TNHE as part of the official strategy to turn Malaysia into a regional education hub. Over time and with greater exposure to and experience with TNHE, the local system has evolved from just an importer of TNHE programs to a creator.

Third, even as public education expanded in terms of enrollment and the number of HEIs, made possible by public expenditures as a share of GDP that is one of the highest in Asia (Fernandez-Chung *et al.*, 2014), quality has eroded. This erosion can be attributed to deteriorating English language proficiency consequent upon the switch of the medium of instruction in schools to the Malay language and to the enforcement of affirmative action in education (Cheong *et al.*, 2016). This has been demonstrated by Malaysian student performance in the international benchmark tests like the TIMSS, conducted every four years, and the OECD study PISA conducted in 2009, 2012 and 2015. For TIMSS, Malaysia's absolute scores, not just rankings, in mathematics and science for Grade 8-equivalent

students have fallen between 1999 and 2011, dipping below the international average score of 500 by 2007. This stands in sharp contrast to the performance of the newly industrialized economies (NIEs) Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan that consistently top all other countries. The results from PISA are similar. Malaysia's scores are below average and far below those of the NIEs.

Fourth, given the affirmative policy of the Malaysian government, public higher education has a large proportion of *Bumiputera* students, whilst private high education is dominated by the non-*Bumiputera*. Parents of private tertiary students are more driven than those with children enrolled in public HEIs who are more assured of public sector employment. Tuition fees imposed by private HEIs are about three or four times higher than those charged by public universities. Yet, to many a parent, cost is secondary because a good education is about ensuring survival. Parents want to give their children an education that will be valuable for life. They do not mind paying for this experience – perceived to be made available in private HEIs where the medium of instruction is English, curriculum and academic staff are internationalized with the inclusion of TNE and joint-degree programs, and competition prevails among students who are “fighting to be among the best” and staying challenged by their peers. There is therefore a demarcation pertaining to the output of graduates from public and private HEIs, the former who feel that they will be given greater opportunities to join the public sector, while the latter are likely to gravitate toward the private sector (Lee and Khalid, 2016; Fernandez-Chung and Leong, 2018).

Fifth, focus-group discussion with senior management and academic staff of selected public and private HEIs suggest that they have more problems when it came to convincing parents in the choice of studies for their children (Fernandez-Chung and Leong, 2018). It was indicated that “Ensuring parents’ knowledge of the labor market is not so relevant in the UK but in Malaysia, parents seem to follow a pattern and it is usually something pre-determined. It is difficult to convince them otherwise” (p. 96).

The opportunities and issues related to private tertiary education imply more and more open choices for parents and students as they decide on the type of programs that the latter should pursue. For parents, many of the THNE arrangements represent new, often unfamiliar, options that they did not have in their own time.

Two international surveys speak to the attitudes/preferences of parents and students in the Malaysian context. These are the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) Survey and the Student Barometer Survey (SBS), both of which had sub-samples of Malaysian students. HSBC commissions an annual survey of parents as part of its “Value of Education” series of studies. In the 2015 Learning for Life Report, the independent consumer research study into global education trends covered parents’ attitude and behavior toward their children’s education in 16 countries and territories worldwide. SBS is a global survey with feedback from over two million respondents from 1,400 education institutions in 28 countries. In Malaysia, six tertiary institutions participated with over 12,000 student respondents in 2014.

The HSBC 2015 survey casts some light on students’ and parents’ perception on the role of education and shows this to be an area of perception convergence. This survey shows parents to favor occupations in the physical sciences – medicine, engineering and computer science – that are reputed to bring high income and courses with high prospects of employment. Table I shows that 83 percent of all parents surveyed had specific occupations in mind for their children, and of these 83 percent, three occupations were mentioned by 38 percent of these parents. Malaysian parents were even more decisive; 92 percent had specific occupations for their children and the same three occupations were mentioned by 46 percent of the parents. And they expect a good education to enhance competitiveness at work. This suggests a focus on income earning potential (monetary return to education) and employment as a destination in that the occupation/job their children secure after

Table I.
Parents' perceptions of
aspects of children's
education, total sample
and Malaysia,
2015, in percentages

Perception	Total sample	Malaysia
Have specific occupation in mind for children: of which	83	92
Medicine	19	25
Engineering	11	18
Computer science	8	3
Prefer children to study in all 5 subjects below:	58	72
Medicine	17	21
Business, management and finance	14	18
Engineering	13	25
Computer and information sciences	9	6
Law	5	2
Competitiveness at work is expected of university education	43	52
Prepared to send children abroad	77	80
Prepared to pay at least 25% more to send children abroad	69	68

Source: HSBC (2015)

completion of education will be their occupation/job for life. Career success is also emphasized in the choice of subjects.

In the SBS, earning potential, institution reputation and research quality are assessed to be so close together that it is hard to tell which is more important (SBS: 15). Nevertheless, the results signal broad agreement with HSBC's surveyed parents.

Do these findings mean that perception divergence is not an issue in Malaysia? This paper addresses this question using two alternative primary data sources from studies undertaken by the authors. However, the HSBC and SBS surveys provide bases for comparison with these alternative data sources.

3. Data and methodology

The data used in this paper come from a local special-purpose sample survey conducted by the authors. This was a 2015 Graduate Employment Study (GES 2), sponsored by the British Council, and with particular emphasis on TNHE. Students who responded were mainly enrolled in private HEIs. Responses from 358 students (83 percent), 31 parents (7 percent) and 40 students (10 percent), the latter involved in focus-group discussion and interviews, were obtained. Data from the 358 student respondents were from a structured questionnaire administered online to students of several tertiary education institutions, both in the public and private sectors. The 40 students participated in several group interviews of students, in four focus-groups. A separate online questionnaire was also used to collect data from the sampled parents.

As for demographics, the student survey respondents from GES2 consisted of more females (58 percent) than males (42 percent), who were mostly Malaysians (78 percent), enrolled more in the social (56 percent) than the physical sciences and, mostly, in private tertiary education institutions (76 percent). Among the 358 student respondents, only 31 parents responded. The composition of parent respondents was in line with that of students, with 77 percent being Malaysians, 84 percent with children in private institutions and 59 percent enrolled in social science programs.

An issue of note is the choice of analytical method in comparing perceptions. Since these comparisons involve numerical values – mean scores – tests like the two-sample *t*-test of means and the Wilcoxon rank sum test are suggested. However, since scores given are completely subjective, it is possible that one party will score consistently above the other. As a result, such tests would not yield meaningful results. Hence, only qualitative comparison of rankings is possible and used in this paper.

4. Perceptions on employment as a goal in education

4.1 Employment and education

A fundamental issue of perception is how parents and students see the role of education. Is education an end in itself (education as destination) or is it just the means to an end (education as journey)? Earlier, it was revealed that students and parents broadly concur on the role of education. The Malaysian survey GES2 does not address this issue directly but only indirectly.

However, the GES2 results that address this issue indirectly through the choice of HEIs to study not only contradict those found in the HSBC and SBS surveys, but also point to a potential disconnect between parents and their children as students. Table II, in Section 4.1.1 shows that, while parents prioritized the reputation of institutions, presumably assuming that good reputation automatically ensures employability, students were more focused directly on employability. This potential source of disconnect has consequences. Given the shifting nature of employment, the need for transferable skills and the fact that some of the jobs that the next generation will be doing are not even known today, parental advice based on what they know may not do justice to their children’s choice of career. Likewise, the approach of TNE to promote traditional degrees to job paths is also a conventional approach that has a limited shelf life. With neither parents nor institutions prepared to respond with anything other than what they know and have always used/thought and with students relying heavily on parental advice, a mismatch between perception and reality is looming that can lead to students making sub-optimal career choices.

4.1.1 Choice of institutions to study. How are these preferences manifested in key decisions relating to their children’s education? For instance, what criterion is the most important, namely, employability or academic quality in the selection of an education institution for the children? The HSBC study suggested, albeit obliquely, that it was employability since parents saw “the job market as increasingly competitive” (HSBC, 2015, p. 19).

As already indicated, data from the GES2 showed a divergence between parents’ and students’ perceptions. Malaysian parents valued good academic reputation and record over employability. Of course these criteria are related; good academic reputation leads to better employability. Malaysian students were more focused on employability (Table II). A plausible argument explaining this divergence of views is the change in the job market over a generation. When the parents left school or university to seek work, competition in the job market and the types of occupations available were more limited so that a good academic record was a guarantee of a good job. In the more competitive job environment that requires a wider range of skills today, students recognize this in itself is no longer enough. Also of relevance, although not a top-five priority, affordability was, understandably, viewed much more important by parents than by students.

In the GES2 study, students chose TNHE study mostly because of its international recognition (mean score 3.5 out of 4) rather than earning potential (3.0) (Hill *et al.*, 2014).

Students Reason for choice of institution	Weighted mean scores		Parents Reason for choice of institution
International recognition	3.48	3.50	Good reputation
Degree valued by employers	3.34	3.39	Good academic record
More prestigious than others	3.33	3.33	Good branding
Institution well regarded	3.30	3.21	International recognition
Good academic record	3.18	3.11	Qualification valued by employers

Source: Graduate Employment Study (2015)

Table II.
Top five reasons for
choice of education
institution given by
students and parents

They gave the same reason for enrolling in the particular HEI and also believed that UK HEI should be the party entrusted with quality control, implicitly acknowledging that these have higher quality programs than their Malaysian counterparts.

Since both parties' judgments are grounded in a recognizable and understandable methodology, namely knowledge of the job market through experience, social contacts, and/or the media, the difference in perception must have arisen from the changed context with reference to the job market. The context that is relevant can be inferred from the perception of employers who are the consumers of the graduates' talent, skills and knowledge. The GES2 found employers to emphasize the importance of soft skills and personal values over hard skills that a good degree brings, tending therefore to support the students' perspective (Cheong *et al.*, 2015). Parents' failure to recognize this is rooted in ignorance of new or recent developments. In the HSBC survey, the percentage of Malaysian parents who sought vocational advice and realizing that they were not aware of "new careers" in the labor market was as high as 82 percent (HSBC, 2015, p. 16). Failure to recognize these realities is likely to leave children dependent on parental advice unprepared for entry into the job market.

It is also worthy of note that of all the responses received in GES2, not a single student or parent made reference to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as an option despite its contribution to technological upgrading in countries like Germany, Korea and Singapore. This is confirmation of the finding from Cheong *et al.* (2013) that TVET has a negative image among Malaysians.

4.1.2 Studying abroad. Parents are aware their children have more opportunities for oversea study than when they were students themselves (HSBC, 2015, p. 26). This explains their willingness to send their children abroad for studies (Table II). However, in the HSBC survey, the proportion of parents having this willingness was reported to decline for parents with older children, presumably as the cost implications become more real at this stage (HSBC, 2015, pp. 26-27). The costs are clearly material – the proportion of parents who were prepared to pay more for their children's international education was lower than the proportion indicating willingness to send their children overseas.

Malaysian data did not speak to the extent parents would go to fund foreign study. This issue was however addressed with respect to East Asia (China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong) and Singapore (Sharma, 2013) with the observation, although anecdotal, that parents would go to such lengths as selling assets, get into debt, and cut back on other expenses to send their children, including abroad, for higher education. An entry in an education portal for China (EduGlobal Blog, 2015) that reviews criteria of parents noted that cost "is almost an afterthought for applicants to undergraduate programmes but is paramount to most applicants to graduate programmes." The most important considerations were a specific country, branding, and international ranking. These considerations differ from the criteria used by Western parents, whose choices were based more on the substance of the education their children would receive, such as "school climate and classroom discipline" (Kelly and Scafidi, 2013, p. 1).

In the GES2, students stress the importance of internationalism more than their parents (Table III in Section 4.1.3). An important question to ask is what formed the basis of such a perception? Social media and networking may underline this belief, as much as knowledge, even if from hearsay, that foreign graduates find it easier to secure employment and are accorded preference for selection and promotion. Employers certainly rate foreign graduates above all other graduates but are also aware of their limitations (Cheong *et al.*, 2015, pp. 10-11). Students see international education enhancing their employment prospects (62 percent of students responding), including gaining connections worldwide (45 percent). Also relevant must be knowledge of their parents' views about the desirability of a foreign education. Students' positive views are not likely

to be diluted by considerations of cost, given their assumption that it is their parents who need to fund their overseas study. These findings coincide broadly with those from the QS survey. In Question 4 of the QS survey, students were asked the benefits they perceived of attending internationally recognized universities. Their response: employment prospects 62 percent of respondents; connections worldwide 45 percent; quality of education 34 percent; student experience 28 percent; and travel opportunities 27 percent.

4.1.3 Choice of TNHE. With Malaysia being a major player in TNHE, studying abroad is not the only option for students aspiring to an international education. However, TNHE, to the extent it is understood, is widely considered to be a second-best option compared to study abroad, especially by parents taking into consideration financial costs and social and cultural factors like preference for children to remain home for safety reasons and the anxiety created lest they mix with the wrong company. Understanding why students and parents opt for TNHE not only opens another window to perceptions of internationalization of tertiary education but also says something about whether the TNHE concept itself is adequately understood.

As Table III from the GES2 data shows, students rank international exposure highest, consistent with their choice of HEI. Employment considerations were ranked third and lower. Parents were more focused on first English language proficiency, second on the ease with which their children can get a job, and third in commanding a high salary. All three reasons are about getting their children good jobs, reflecting the aspirations of the parents' own generation. Parents' average scores were uniformly higher than students', suggesting they had stronger views than the students themselves. On the use of English, parents' views were aligned with employers, as a recent poll showed (Malaysian Insider, 2015). The extent to which programs selected were only offered in the TNHE mode was low, suggesting that both parents and students made a conscious choice with respect to TNHE.

The different perceptions on TNHE are suggestive of differences in understanding about the role of TNHE. Whereas students are aware of the advantage of international exposure through TNHE, indeed its major selling point, parents have limited understanding of this type of education, equating "transnationality" to "foreign" and therefore good for employability.

5. Perceptions on career

No less important a question to ask is whether there is convergence in career choice between parents and their children as students. To the extent that parents are able to decide their children's career choice, their children's disagreement with that choice can lead to a lack of interest in their field of study or be trapped in a profession for which they have no interest or competence. Of the two data sources, only the GES2 provided data that permit direct comparison of career prospects. A question in the GES2 asked about the HEI from which students have the most likelihood of gaining employment and another asked about the skills that were most important. This is discussed next.

Students	Weighted mean scores		Parents
Reason for choice of TNE program			Reason for choice of TNE program
Greater international exposure	3.25	3.75	English proficiency for employment
Cheaper than going abroad	3.21	3.63	Easier to get job
Use of English preferred by employers	3.18	3.50	Earn higher salary
Easy to obtain employment	2.93	3.29	Cheaper than going abroad
Earn higher salary	2.66	3.25	International exposure
Program only offered in TNE mode	2.38	2.29	Program only offered in TNE mode

Source: Graduate Employment Study

Table III. Reasons for choice of TNE program given by students and parents

5.1 *Employment likelihood*

In terms of the likelihood of employment, the rankings of HEIs by parents and students were generally consistent. Study in foreign (Western) HEIs outside Malaysia has the highest likelihood of employment. Their branch campuses in Malaysia have been ranked next highest (Table IV). Despite the similar ranking, of interest is the difference in mean scores between first and second ranked HEIs. Whereas students rate international branch campuses as not much inferior to foreign university campuses, parents see a major gulf between them – they rate foreign campuses more highly than branch campuses more poorly. This difference is likely caused by parents’ traditional preference for foreign study over anything that is local, coupled with a lack of knowledge about TNHE in general. In any case, branch campuses did not exist in their time. However, as already indicated, sending their children abroad has major cost implications that some would find hard to afford. Thus, parental preference and ultimate choice of HEI for their children represent a compromise between perceived quality and real costs.

Another major difference is how public sector HEIs are ranked. Parents rate public sector HEIs lowest and students the third lowest. It is likely that parents were evaluating public HEIs in terms of what they were in their time and remained the HEIs of choice in tertiary education. Students, armed with better access to information, nevertheless had no solid basis for comparing the decline of public higher education (Cheong *et al.*, 2011; Mukherjee and Wong, 2011). This revelation must have opened the eyes of parents to the world of private sector HEIs.

5.2 *Soft vs hard skills*

Parents’ and students’ prioritization of the skills they bring to an employment interview can say a great deal about their perceptions of what skills HEIs should transfer to help their graduates secure employment. As Table V shows, students emphasized soft skills over hard skills, whereas parents emphasized the opposite. Students’ focus on soft skills reflects their recognition of what employers require of employees, this information coming from friends or through advertisements in the media. The GES2 findings for students are consistent and find validation with those from the SBS. As Table VI from the SBS shows, students are more satisfied with the teaching of English, a soft skill, over program content, a hard skill. It is noted that this perception applied to Malaysian students only; international students in the SBS were more satisfied with hard skills that they had gained.

On the other hand, parents, basing their views on their past experience, still believed in the preeminence of hard skills. This is consistent with their views about the greater importance of a good qualification over employability and of quality in the choice of an HEI over other criteria discussed earlier. This is another instance in which parents’ use of the past to judge their children’s future may lead their children to be poorly prepared to enter the job market.

Students	Weighted mean scores		Parents
Type of HEI			Type of HEI
Foreign HEIs outside Malaysia	4.34	4.63	Foreign HEIs outside Malaysia
International branch campuses in Malaysia	4.22	3.84	International branch campuses in Malaysia
Local private HEIs	3.74	3.79	Local private HEIs
Local public HEIs	3.59	3.39	Local university colleges
Local private colleges	3.45	3.26	Local private colleges
Local university colleges	3.34	2.79	Local public HEIs

Table IV. Students’ and parents’ perceptions of employment likelihood for graduates of different types of HEIs

Source: Graduate employment study

Table V. Students' and parents' perceptions of importance of types of skills

Students Types of skill	Weighted mean scores		Parents Types of skill
Soft skills, including language	4.49	3.59	Hard skill – knowledge
Hard skill – knowledge	4.41	3.50	Soft skills, including language
Personality	4.36	3.48	Job-specific competencies
Job-specific competencies	4.35	3.32	Values
Values	4.32	3.27	Personality
Career experience	4.05	3.18	Exposure to different environments
Exposure to different environments	4.01	3.14	Internship experience
Internship experience	3.96	3.00	Knowledge of IT
Knowledge of IT	3.92		

Source: Graduate Employment Study

Table VI. Student satisfaction with selected aspects of teaching, 2014 in percentages

	Malaysian students	International students	Total students in Malaysia
Academics' English	91.7	83.4	90.1
Expert lecturers	90.8	86.3	89.9
Quality lectures	86.5	81.6	85.5
Program content	87.3	86.2	87.4

Source: Student Barometer Survey (2015, pp. 19-21)

6. Conclusions and implications

While much of the extant literature assumes and lauds the positive role of parents and parenting in their children's education (see, e.g. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995), the findings from Malaysian data, limited as they are, reveal areas of divergence in parental and student perceptions that can lead to a revision, if not contradiction, of this view. These aspects, seldom discussed, relate to parental and student perceptions of the area of study and hence of career choice when times have changed.

In Malaysia, as in other countries in Asia, students rely heavily on family advice in major decisions about their education and their subsequent career. Indeed, in the choice of education institutions, the SBS for Malaysia showed that 58 percent of the respondents indicated that their family helped decide these, while another 44 percent indicated that friends helped (I-Graduate, 2015, p. 17). It is therefore no surprise that, in general, students and their parents have a similar set of criteria they consider important. What sets the country apart is the rapid expansion of TNHE consequent upon the government's liberalization of the private tertiary education sector. And this development coincides with the phase of intergenerational change when parents of current students had completed their education by the time TNHE became widespread, while their children enrolled in private tertiary institutions are beneficiaries of an expanding variety of TNHE collaborative arrangements. Also, integral to this dynamic is the fact that the job market has also expanded, both in terms of variety not only of jobs but also of the skills required to adapt to different job situations. Globalization has also intensified competition and the need for competitiveness in the labor market, giving employers greater leverage over and expectations of employee skills.

Under these circumstances, parents' views on education and career based on past experience are not necessarily good guideposts for their children. The Malaysian data show them to rely on good teaching quality and institutional reputation over other intangible attributes like international recognition and hence hard skills over soft. They tend also to view study abroad as by far the best experience, believing that foreign universities are better than all other options. Yet they appear not really conversant about what other benefits of an international education bring.

They also saw their children's job as a permanent vocation, i.e., employment as a destination. The children, however, with greater access to current information, had views more in line with what employers wanted – soft skills, personal values, and English language proficiency. They saw soft skills giving them the flexibility to move from one job to another, seeing employment as a journey to be traveled. However, while appreciative of an international education, be it through overseas study or TNHE, they cannot fully articulate what are its benefits.

What implications can be drawn from this disconnect between parent and student perceptions in these crucial areas of study and career? First, parent–children divergence in views has hidden costs. Parental advice may not always be appropriate for the work environment their children will face. If children rely on this advice, they may end up doing subjects they have little interest or competency in, or worse, being unprepared for the job market when they complete their studies. In a highly competitive labor market, a good academic qualification can only go so far. Furthermore, parents' understanding of why and how the job market has become more competitive may be quite imperfect. Traditional work virtues are becoming less relevant as a deciding factor as competition for jobs intensifies. Students, on the other hand, have access to a wider spectrum of information sources due to globalization and the Internet and can interact with friends who also have the same access. This has given them some idea of what the market wants.

Second, these hidden costs, though difficult to estimate, need to be explicitly taken into account in theoretical discussions and/or modeling of the impact of parental influence on their children's education, much of which are focused on benefits (e.g. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). These costs may be structural (reflected in the parent-child or family relationship) and/or contextual (reflected in the extent of intergenerational change in the education and work environment).

Third, dependence on family (and friends) for advice speaks poorly of the role of education institutions in providing guidance and counseling to students. Indeed, in the Malaysian case, it is unclear if HEIs themselves have sufficient awareness of or knowledge about what employers want. It also reflects badly on the role of employers in conveying what skills they need directly to the public. The other major stakeholder, the government, also cannot be absolved from blame in not facilitating, if not engineering, closer links between employers and HEIs that would permit an exchange of information. Rather than supplant parental influence, an alternative strategy is to leverage parental influence through involving them in institutional counseling mechanisms and through updating their knowledge so that the costs described above can be mitigated. Unfortunately, this has seldom occurred. It also suggests that instead of a top-down, directive approach the government currently practices, a more inclusive role for key stakeholders, especially parents and industry, should be adopted in areas like education planning, curriculum development, internships, career counseling and advice. Fourth, the focus on academic studies by both parents and students to the neglect of TVET must be a factor contributing to Malaysia's skill shortage. The government itself, although having strengthened TVET over the past decade, has not until recently, under the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016 – 2020) (Government of Malaysia, 2016), made TVET a central theme of national educational planning. Whether policy rhetoric is translated into measures on the ground remains to be seen.

Finally, although confined to Malaysian data, this study's findings have relevance for other countries in Asia and elsewhere, where family advice is a major factor in children's education and career choice. At the same time, countries differ, even in Asia, with respect to the role of families, education systems and the extent of government involvement in education. Contextual and situational differences will bring about differences in parental impact. In the Malaysian case, in addition to the centrality of family in decision-making, the fact that respondents are associated with private tertiary education and are the subject of discrimination renders its situation arguably to be at variance with that of its regional peers. The actual impact of parental influence in each country must depend on a mix of generic and country-specific factors.

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