Chapter 6
Expanding Access While Narrowing Outcomes: The Paradox of Malaysia’s International Branch Campuses

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ABSTRACT
As Malaysia attempts to expand access for their minority groups using international branch campuses (IBCs), the IBC emphasis on developing students into tech-savvy, English-speaking, business leaders is leading to divisions based on language and ability that present new accessibility challenges. This chapter draws on the findings from a qualitative study conducted at three IBCs in the greater Kuala Lumpur area of Malaysia to understand how IBCs both facilitate and obstruct access to higher education for Malaysia’s diverse population, and to reframe how access is understood in an area of cross-border higher education. This study found that: a) the instructional approach used in the business degrees at Malaysia’s IBCs provides a very different pedagogical experience for students compared with the forms of instruction at their secondary schools; b) the new English-only, group-based learning highlights students’ ethnic and linguistic differences; and c) students’ successful transition to the surrounding business sector depends on their ability to acquire skills offered at the IBC.

INTRODUCTION
Over the past thirty years, new countries have taken prominence in the global economy and are faced with the prospect of educating their growing middle class. Higher education, in particular, is an essential component of national development goals, yet few governments can afford to provide it for all their citizens. To address this shortfall, many governments have recruited foreign private institutions
which enter their country eager to make a profit and increase their international reputation. Most parties benefit from these new delivery modes of higher education; the middle class has more access to higher education, and institutions expand their global networks. For students, however, expanding access via foreign providers leads to new challenges amid the benefits. Although there are more places available to attend university, foreign providers bring new forms of pedagogy to which students must adapt in order to succeed.

In Malaysia, the situation is uniquely complex. Many of the young adults in the growing middle class belong to the large Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian Indian minority groups. These individuals often come from families with significant financial assets, having succeeded in the burgeoning business sector. Yet Malaysia’s particular history of ethnic tensions has limited the number of spaces available for these students at public universities and they must look elsewhere for their degree. Many are attracted to international branch campuses (IBCs) from Western countries, considering them prestigious alternatives to the unattainable, public universities. However, IBCs raise significant questions about access to higher education in the 21st century. For politically complex, diverse nations like Malaysia, IBCs may broaden access through participation, but they also lead to new divisions based on language and ability that present new accessibility challenges for Malaysia’s minority groups.

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is first, to examine how IBCs both facilitate and obstruct access to higher education for Malaysia’s diverse population; and second, to consider how this reframes the way access is understood in an era of cross-border higher education. Section one reviews the classic theoretical literature on access to higher education, exploring the multiple ways that access has been conceptualized in Western scholarship on university students. Section two provides an historical overview of Malaysia’s journey toward nationhood, and how various ethnic groups were positioned in relation to the state and public institutions. This section also explains how the current higher education sector in Malaysia was unintentionally developed to situate and service particular ethnic groups. Section three describes the broader study of which this research is a part of, and the methods used to collect and analyse data on higher education access in Malaysia. Section four presents the study’s findings: a) the collaborative, group-based business pedagogy at the IBC is a stark contrast to students’ previous modes of learning; b) this pedagogy, combined with the exclusive use of English, often highlights students’ ethnic and linguistic differences; and c) students need to acquire these skills, offered by the IBC, to gain employment in the surrounding business sector. Finally, section five considers what these findings mean for Malaysia’s institutions and suggests several new understandings of access in an era of cross-border higher education.

Theory: Perspectives on Access in a Global World

Expanding access to higher education has been an unquestioned goal of governments for the past fifty years. A postsecondary degree is no longer the exclusive privilege of a small elite and countries are racing to arrive at the lauded goal of universal higher education, defined by Trow as more than 60 percent of the population (Trow, 2007). Yet providing higher education to an entire generation of young adults is no simple task. Most governments cannot afford to fund public higher education to this extent and strategically open the market to private providers to increase supply. This strategy is often successful at increasing access, when defined as the overall number of student spaces. However, numerous scholars
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