

Chinese students fall prey to agents

Malaysian private colleges are fast becoming a popular destination for Chinese nationals in search of tertiary education with a difference. Unable to afford a degree programme in Britain or the United States, they get the best of both worlds here — a foreign degree at an affordable fee.

However, this comes with a price — many fall victim to unscrupulous middlemen who recruit them in China at exorbitant fees and with false promises. LEE SIEW YEE reports.

WHEN Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak led a delegation to China in June last year to sign an MoU on education between Malaysian and Chinese education institutions, the stage was set for the public and private sectors of both countries to explore various opportunities.

Arrangements were made for the academic staff and students of both countries to visit each other on an exchange programme basis. More importantly, the Malaysian private education sector was also invited to recruit students from one of the world's largest markets.

With aggressive marketing efforts, the private colleges here have successfully enrolled no less than 500 Chinese students since then.

Stamford College, for example, received its first batch of 150 Chinese students two months ago while Kolej Aman has about 200 students in its new campus in Bukit Sentosa, Rawang.

Despite the efforts of the private colleges to promote Malaysia as the regional centre of education excellence, there have been hitches in their recruitment of Chinese nationals.

Why they seek Malaysia

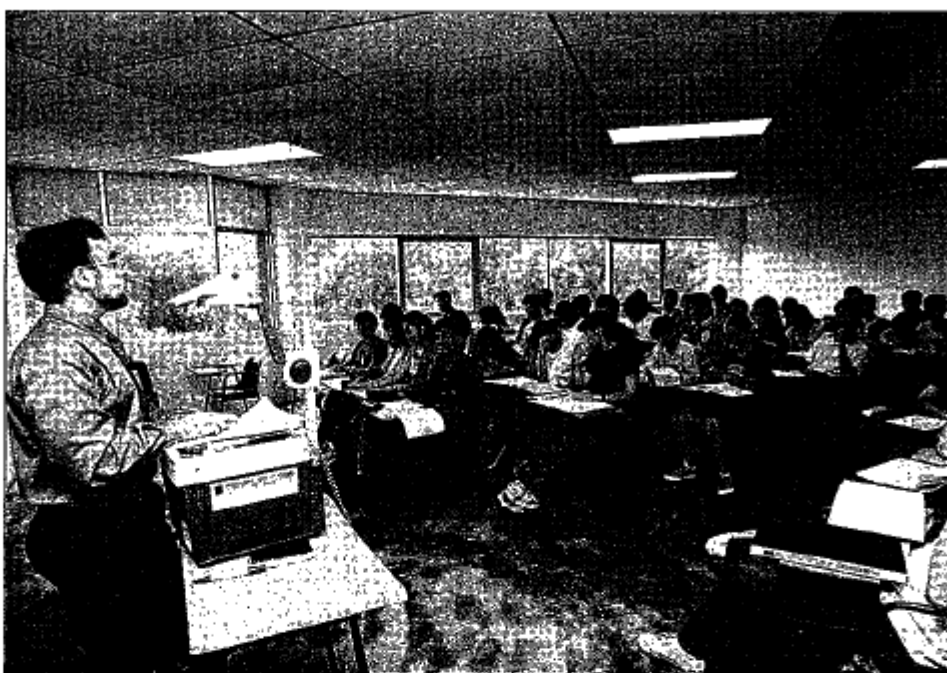
Malaysia has become an educational haven to the Chinese students for many reasons, among them cheaper tuition fees and the ease of obtaining student visas. Many are also attracted by the widespread use of English in the country.

Says Haidi Liu, an MBA student from China: "I am here to improve my knowledge in international trade as I studied mechanical engineering. To do international trade, I will need to learn English. But in China, there is a gap in English education."

Liu, 28, who is a new arrival at Kolej Aman, says she had worked for six years before deciding to return to school.

"Tuition fees in private colleges here are lower. It is easier to adjust to a different environment here compared to a Western country. The Malaysian education system is also quite similar to that of the British," says Liu, who learned about the college from a Malaysian working in China.

The uniqueness of the twinning arrangement between Malaysian private institutions and foreign universities is another pull factor. Many have come with the hope of transferring to



WHY THEY COME...relatively cheap tuition fees and the widespread use of English attract students from China.



Chow... 'at times, we do not know what the agents tell students'

the partner university in Britain or the United States, that is, if they are able to obtain visa into those countries.

At least, that is the aim of Michael Zhu and his friend Alfred Zhao of Sedaya College, who are pursuing twinning programmes with the University of Manitoba and New Brunswick, and the University of Winnipeg respectively. To them, a Malaysian private college is a mere stepping stone.

"But I know it is difficult to get visa to these countries. If need be, I will complete my studies here," says Zhao, 25, who wants to major in computer science.

Hitches

For students like Zhao, the pursuit of education outside his country has not been without hitches. For many of these students, the first hurdle is the long hours they have to travel from their remote villages to get to the city.

Given China's geographical vastness, many potential students are confronted with limited access to information on education opportunities in Malaysia.

Except for those who could surf a college website on the Internet, many have little choice but to rely on agents operating in the republic for various services, from obtaining information about a college to applying for



Ng... Sedaya has its own recruitment office in China

college entry and getting their visa to enter Malaysia.

Imagine the surprise of many of these students when they find out, upon their arrival here, that they have been overcharged by these agents responsible for promoting the Malaysian private colleges in China.

Some have paid a hefty price, ranging from RM10,000 to RM15,000, to the agent for the services.

Furthermore, some were disappointed to learn from their colleges that their transfer to the partner university in Britain, the United States or Canada was not guaranteed as the agents had said.

Says Zhao: "I paid 30,000 renminbi (RM15,000) to the agent to apply on my behalf. It is difficult to go about applying in China as many Chinese stay outside of the main cities."

Zhao is not alone in this problem. Ted Lee (not his real name) says he had paid about RM19,000 to an agent in China to apply for his studies in Malaysia. The fees include his application to Kolej Aman and getting a student visa.

"Upon arriving here, I found out that only RM2,750 of the total amount paid was used as my tuition deposit," says the foundation studies student who had learnt of study opportunities in Malaysia through a friend.

Lee, 20, says he was also told he could complete a foreign

degree programme in Malaysia but found out later that the college had yet to get approval to offer a 3+0 (completely franchised degree) programme.

Prior to coming here, Lee says he was excited about the college's new campus in Rawang. He learnt via the Internet that it was located not far from the town centre.

"Though it (the new campus) is near, it is still inconvenient for students who do not have transport. Those who do not want to eat at the college canteen have to walk about 20 minutes to the nearest restaurant.

"If we miss the shuttle service leaving from the old campus in Kuala Lumpur for Rawang, we have to fork out RM42 for taxi fare," he says.

As a result, many students have no choice but to shift from their present accommodation in Jalan Klang Lama to a place near the new campus.

Stamford College student Paul Wong (not his real name) has also questioned the motive behind his college's decision to extend the three-month intensive English course in which he is currently enrolled.

"Before enrolment, the agent told me I had to pay only RM1,500 for the three-month course at Stamford. But after classes started, we were informed that the course was extended to six months and that we had to pay RMS,000 for it.

"I had wanted to leave a few days later as I was not satisfied with the standard of English, especially the spoken part, demonstrated by the lecturers," he says, adding the standard of the English programme was similar to that in China.

"The college should teach us professional English that will be of use to us in our studies later," adds Wong.

The colleges' response

Explaining his college's rationale, Stamford's executive-director of studies U.K. Menon says the six-month intensive English programme was designed by a group of specialists and tested in

a Chinese Independent school to achieve better language proficiency among international students.

He says the present three-month programme was initially targeted to Malaysian students who have a basic command of the English language and that only provides students 25 contact hours per week with teachers.

The six-month programme is necessary for some international students who can hardly converse in English, says Menon.

"The new programme will give students 100 hours contact hours per week with the teachers where areas such as spoken English, Listening and writing will be emphasised. Students will also be taught computer application skills.

"Students who have shown language proficiency or possess required qualifications such as the ToEFL or IELTS will be admitted to the full programme.

"If they improve within the months, we will place them in the regular programme and transfer the remaining fees to the new programme," says Menon, adding that students who had joined before September would not have been informed of the changes as it was only made later. This is Stamford's first batch of Chinese students.

Some local colleges feel complaints are unfounded for they are doing their best to provide an education for international students. They claim it is beyond their control if agents operating in China overcharge students or make false claims.

Just as the Chinese students rely on a third party to get information about an institution, Malaysian colleges do likewise when recruiting students, says Lawrence Chow, chief operating officer of Kolej Aman.

"This means an agent will come and talk to you, and you will then give him a set of rules to follow. The agent will receive a commission when a student registers with the college.

"But this system can easily be abused. At times, we do not know what the agents tell the student who only find things to be different after coming here."

Chow adds that students should investigate a programme thoroughly before making a decision.

Though the college has yet to get approval to run the 3+0 programme, he says students can still earn a foreign degree via a graduate diploma programme.

Menon says the college has issued letters to 10 promoters in China to provide information to students.

"We don't receive any money from the promoter but we do charge students fees when they register. What the promoter charges students for providing information is beyond our control," he says.

He adds the college also informs international students including those from China, who are enrolled in the twinning programme that they are responsible for their own visas to study another country.

"But many are planning to do the entire programme here."

Menon says the college has to receive any formal complaints

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