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Lessons Learned from the Disruption of Dental Training of Malaysian Students Studying in Egypt During the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT

Background: Political crisis and worsening security situation in Egypt in late 2013 resulted in Malaysian students who were pursuing their dental education in Egypt being recalled home to Malaysia. The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia took steps to integrate these students into public and private universities in Malaysia. Methods: We used a questionnaire and informal interviews to learn from students returning from Egypt about their experiences transitioning from dental schools in Egypt to Malaysia. Results: We discuss the challenges students faced with regards to credit transfer, pastoral care, the differences in the curriculum between the dental faculties of the two nations, and the financial implications of this disruption of their training. Discussion: We live in a fragile world where similar political situations will surely arise again. The approaches used by the Malaysian government and the lessons learned from these students may help others. The perspectives of these students may help educators reintegrate expatriate students who are displaced by political instability back into the education system of their own countries.

Keywords: Dental education, Egypt, Malaysia, political turmoil

Background

Students consider various factors when choosing a particular university to pursue their professional education.¹ The curriculum, school reputation, personal connections, safety, security, location and quality of the facilities are some of the factors that influence medical and dental students’ choice of schools. In some circumstances, a country’s safety and security situation can become particularly important.¹,²

Egypt is home to a total of 30 public and private universities offering dentistry as a course to domestic and international students.³ Egypt is a hub for international students pursuing higher education because of affordable tuition costs, a low cost of living, relaxed entry requirements into dental schools, the accessibility of favorable loans from host countries, assurance of a quality education, and a favorable social environment.⁴ Even though Arabic is the official language in Egypt, the fact that English is widely understood and spoken is another advantage for international students. Students from many countries, including Malaysia, have pursued dental education in Egypt in recent years.⁴

Egypt faced political unrest following the Arab spring in 2013 that saw the dissolution of a democratically elected
government. Approximately 3,000 students from Malaysia were pursuing higher education in various degree programs in Egypt during this period of political crisis. The suddenly deteriorating internal security situation created panic among these students and their families. In the interests of safety, the Malaysian Government recalled its students from Egypt. Bringing students home from strife-torn Egypt was successful, but it led to other challenges. The students needed to be rehabilitated and integrated into the Malaysian education system and universities. We will be referring in this paper to the dental students who returned from Egypt and are currently pursuing their education in Malaysian Universities as “students returning from Egypt.”

To reintegrate these students into Malaysian private and public universities, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education opted to use credit transfer programmes. A committee to reintegrate students returning from Egypt was constituted with representatives from the Ministry and from public and private universities to devise the credit transfer mechanism. Formal deliberations with expert input led the Malaysian Government to offer a unique, one-time opportunity to affected students that allowed them to continue their degree work in Malaysian Universities. Dental faculties in Malaysia’s various universities follow their own curriculum. The Committee therefore authorized universities to enroll these students and devise an appropriate credit transfer approach to account for the differences between their unique curriculum and those of Egyptian universities. The curricular differences were many. For example, the subject of oral pathology is typically covered in the third curricular year in Malaysian universities, whereas oral pathology is taught in the second year in Egyptian universities. Subjects pertaining to medicine (general pathology, microbiology, pharmacology, genetics, anatomy, physiology) are typically completed in the first year in Egyptian Universities, whereas they extend into the second year in Malaysian universities. Based on the differences in entry requirements and in the structure and length of the course and their university and Egyptian schools, individual universities created their own credit transfer rules. Some universities decided that students returning from Egypt would have to step back two years in their training, whereas other universities had students repeat just one year. Many students accepted the offer to repeat one year as an acceptable way to be able to continue their dental education in a Malaysian university. We observed that picking up dental education in Malaysia for students who began their education in Egypt created challenges for some. To better understand the changes in the educational environment that students faced, we gathered information through a questionnaire and informal interviews from 15 students who returned from Egypt and were currently studying at one of three Malaysian universities. We report here the experiences and challenges of these students during the period they were transitioning to the Malaysian dental education system. Students were asked about the social, cultural and financial implications of changing the setting of their dental education. Their observations [Table 1] may help guide the global community of dental educators and administrators whose country’s students studying abroad are similarly affected. We address below the various issues that students’ responses spoke to.

### Challenges of Changing One’s Studying Environment

Twinning programmes wherein there is a formal link between a given university in a developed country and an institution in a developing country to foster mutual collaboration at many levels including exchanging students are not uncommon for Malaysian universities. Students who participate in twinning programs that have them undergo part of their training at the sister university have willingly enrolled in these programs and are aware of an impending change in their studying environment and have sufficient time to mentally, financially and otherwise prepare themselves for the change. In twinning programmes, students often eagerly look forward to the change in their study setting.

The situation was quite different for students that were suddenly and unexpectedly forced to transfer their training

### Table 1: Survey responses from students returning from Egypt to Malaysia to complete their dental education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question number</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>The curriculum for dentistry in Malaysia is the same as in Egypt</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>Addition of Mata Pelajaran Umum subjects have been an added burden</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>The “minus one” policy for admission allows repetition of a certain subjects already studied and evaluated in Egypt</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>There are new subjects in the respective years in my institution as compared to the same years in Egypt</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>The integrated system of learning of the various “early clinical phase and clinical phase” subjects in Malaysia has been an enhancing experience</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>The repetition of certain practicals/simulation and additional patient work has reinforced the skills that will be needed during practice of dentistry</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>A few of the reasons to study dentistry in Egypt were the availability of scholarships to pursue higher education in a favorable social environment along with less stringent entry requirement</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>Safety, security and an assured professional education were the primary reasons to accept the offer for transfer from Egypt to Malaysia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>The mentor-mentee system was very helpful for me to settle down and adjust to the new curriculum</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
<td>I am quite content that the objectives of my transfer in regards to the successful completion of dentistry in Malaysia is progressing well</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from Egypt to Malaysia. Students and their parents were not prepared mentally, emotionally and financially. The disruption was rough, and caused uncertainty and worry.

**Differences in Curriculum between Universities of the Two Nations**

Most students we surveyed found the curriculum for dentistry in Malaysia dissimilar from that in Egypt. In Malaysia, students pursuing a bachelor's in any field are required to learn Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU) subjects. In Malaysia, MPU subjects are taught to promote nation building through consolidating and broadening students' knowledge about Malaysia. These studies also seek to enhance the acquisition, mastery and application of humanities skills. Malaysian students are obligated to attend 80% of MPU classes offered in the curriculum and pass these subjects before completing their degrees. Dental students generally are stressed with busy schedules, demanding learning environments, and the need to learn both clinical and patient management skills. Two-thirds of the students who returned to Malaysia to complete their degrees felt that MPU subjects added burden to their studies.

In Egypt, dental teaching is imparted within departments and by subjects, whereas Malaysia dental universities follow a more integrated curriculum. Students we surveyed unanimously agreed that integrated educational approach in Malaysian universities enhanced their experiences as learners. Students also felt that repetition of certain practicals and simulations, and the additional patient contact of the Malaysian dental curriculum had reinforced skills that they would need in practicing dentistry.

**Credit Transfer**

Many students felt that the "parallel minus one" policy allowed them to repeat certain subjects they had already learned and had been evaluated on in Egypt. The Ministry of Higher Education's Committee had authorized universities to choose their own curriculum transfer approach. None of the students had enrolled in universities that offered the "parallel minus two policy." Students were satisfied with the "parallel minus one policy," which they felt required useful repetition of some courses and subjects they had studied in Egypt, and also provided training in new subjects.

The University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine in Philadelphia, USA, has a unique course known as Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS) wherein international dentists directly enter the third year of a four year dental curriculum. This allows international students to complete dental training in an accredited school in United States, thereby allowing them to be licensed and practice in the USA. Students have come from many parts of the world with political and social unrest, including four dentists who migrated from the war-torn Iraq, and students from South Africa during Apartheid. The experience of the PASS Program has taught that in times of political and social unrest, students can migrate to safer nations to complete their professional education.

**Financial Implications for the Students**

Students who returned to Malaysia to complete their education agreed that they originally chose to study dentistry in Egypt because of the favorable social environment, the availability of scholarships, lower tuition fees, lower living costs and less stringent entry requirements. Dental education can be expensive and tuition costs in Malaysia are nearly four times that in Egypt, where living expenses are also lower. Fifty-three percent of the Malaysian students training in Egypt were receiving government support through scholarships and loans, and they were somewhat shielded from the increase in tuition and fees on returning to Malaysia. The other 47% were self-funded and bore the full large and abrupt increase in the costs for their education on returning home.

**Safety and Security**

Concerns for safety and security were important in the decisions made by students, with their parents' input, to return to Malaysia. These young people, two-thirds of whom were women, had learned about and perhaps witnessed episodes of violence.

**Support for the Displaced Students**

All three Malaysian universities in which we surveyed students have a mentor-mentee system, in which students meet with a member of the teaching staff one hour each week. In their meetings with mentors, mentees discuss their week's goals and anticipated challenges, and can raise any current problems and discuss solutions. Mentors can identify students struggling in their academics or personally, who can be referred for pastoral care or to the Dean of the Faculty. The students we surveyed who had returned from Egypt found that the mentor-mentee system of their new Malaysian schools helped them adjust to the new learning environment. Students transferring to new learning environments will inevitably encounter obstacles, and mechanisms for students to get faculty help can be important. A formal mentoring system can give students a feeling of security.

Happily, most students we surveyed felt that their transfer to Malaysia and current degree work were going well.
Conclusion

War and political instability have repercussions in many areas of society. The news media focus on the violence, destruction and loss of life, whereas problems in education get little attention. We live in a fragile and fragmented world, and, sadly, political strife is inevitable. The Malaysian Government’s approach to reintegrating its citizens studying dentistry in Egypt when violence erupted there, has lessons for students of other fields and from other countries that may some day have their education disrupted by geopolitical and other crisis situations. The goal should be for all students to be able to complete their education where the environment is stable and they are safe.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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