Recruitment Challenges for International Schools in Malaysia

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Abstract

There is a critical need for international schools to attract and retain quality teaching staff to ensure the quality of learning for the students and maintain their competitiveness within a dynamic market. This paper reports the findings of a study that investigates teacher recruitment challenges in international schools in Malaysia. A series of semi-structured interviews involving four management personnel from a sample of international schools revealed six recruitment challenges and five solutions highlighted by the participants to respond to these challenges. Such identification of the challenges and solutions would enable administrators to plan for the talent pipeline of their institutions and prepare for unknown disruptions that might occur in the future. This study offered empirical proof of the administration's difficulties during the hiring process and their solutions. Researchers and human resource managers or practitioners facing comparable recruitment challenges can apply these solutions to entice the top candidates.

Keywords: Recruitment, International school, Administrators, Challenges, Solution

INTRODUCTION

In the past, international schools were exclusive to children of expatriates and diplomats working in Malaysia. Today, these international schools host more domestic students than international students, driven by the parent's desire for their children to master international syllabi and language through these schools (Bunnell, 2022). Currently, the country hosts 199 international schools, with over 60 percent located in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. As such, there is a critical need for international schools to attract and retain quality teaching staff to ensure the quality of learning for the students and maintain their competitiveness within a dynamic market (Muthiah et al., 2021).

Issue related to retention in the organization always begins with recruitment. Failure to recruit and retain quality teachers will significantly lose the school stakeholders. Recruitment is the first step to avoid mistakes in taking people in who may not suit the organization's culture and may adversely affect employee labour relations (Sutanto & Kurniawan, 2016). However, Cox (2012) addressed a few issues in international school teachers' recruitment, such as limited recruiting resources, challenges for schools to distinguish themselves from competitors, school location, and school leaders who lack the skill to conduct recruiting based on international teachers' perspective. Unfortunately, there is limited research to explore school administrators' challenges in the international school context.

This paper reports the findings of a study that investigates teacher recruitment practices of international schools in Malaysia. The hassles international schools face in attracting and retaining teachers and particular interventions to be introduced for moving forward are of interest within the context of this paper. By improving the teacher recruitment process at international schools, school administrators can ensure the long-term sustainability of their institutions across a range of sectors: student recruitment, student performance, school reputation, and the overall business performance of their schools, among others.

BACKGROUND

Teacher mobility occurs in international schools because individual teachers are driven to move about due to intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Hayden & Thompson, 2011; Reid & Collins, 2013; Savvy, 2015). Intrinsically, they are keen to learn more about education, see how students in other countries learn, explore different methods, and gain teaching experience (Reid, 2014). They are also motivated to travel worldwide and achieve experience in teaching in a different educational context while travelling (Hayden & Thompson, 2011). These intrinsic factors led to a recurring need by international school administrators to replenish the constant outflow of teachers (Savvy, 2015). Bickmore et al. (2017) noted that lifestyle and quality of life are the primary considerations for many teachers in selecting the location of their schools. Therefore, these teachers will carefully choose sites to fulfil their travelling and lifestyle needs (Reid & Collins, 2013).

As we know, retention should begin with recruitment. Thus, it is essential to identify the recruitment challenges, too. Samwel (2018) found that some of the recruitment challenges faced by small and medium industries, such as using old and ineffective recruitment and selection methods, a lack of good recruitment and selection plans, undefined job descriptions and selection criteria, and the inability to integrate new technologies in recruitment practices. Given the challenges, international school administrators must scrutinize the recruitment of teachers in a comprehensive lifecycle overview. Salient factors that attract applicants to the selection process must be identified alongside intrinsic and extrinsic factors that retain them in the profession for the medium-to-long term. Such identification would enable administrators to plan for the talent pipeline of their institutions and prepare for unknown disruptions that might occur in the future. Additionally, school leaders and board members should be aware of and willing to invest resources in reducing barriers to entry and the capital required to enhance teacher satisfaction with their jobs, such as continuous professional development and career progression opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate recruitment challenges that international school administrators face. The researchers adopted an online communication-based semi-structured interview technique to collect data to explore the school administrators' perspectives, feelings, and experiences in teacher recruitment (Mohajan, 2018). The researchers asked open-ended questions below to allow the participants to express themselves on the research topic freely.

i. What are the challenges that you face when drafting the recruitment plan?
ii. What are the challenges that you face during the recruitment process?
iii. What are the challenges that you faced when selecting the right fit people?
iv. How do you solve the challenges you face?
v. What are the changes have been made after the challenges?

The sample of this study consisted of school administrators who were directly involved in human resource management practices. The sample was selected purposively based on four criteria: 1) school administrators from one of the international schools in Malaysia; 2) school administrators involved in the HRM process; 3) school administrators work closely with the teachers, and 4) school

administrators who work in international school at least five years. The researchers began the data collection process by identifying potential participants through LinkedIn, the social network site (SNS) for professionals and job seekers. A total of four participants from two international schools participated in the data collection process. Participant 1(P1) is a male head of the school who holds a doctoral degree, Participant 2 (P2) is a female secondary principal with a master's degree, and Participant 3 (P3) is a female primary principal with a doctoral degree. Lastly, Participant 4 (P4) is a male human resource director with a master's degree.

Once willing participants were identified, interviews were conducted on the Zoom teleconferencing platform, lasting between 1 to 1.5 hours. All but one participant consented to the recording of interview sessions. Each interview session was transcribed to minimize recall bias, and the transcripts were shared with participants for verification. In addition, the researchers reviewed the supplementary documents such as job advertisement, recruitment procedure, and recruitment policy alongside the transcripts to complement the information provided throughout the interview sessions.

The data analysis process began when all participants verified the transcripts shared. Each transcript underwent multiple readings, which aided in familiarising the content and sentiment presented by the participants. The NVivo software generated themes and subthemes throughout the coding process. The following two research questions were established for the study:

i: What challenges do international school administrators face in recruiting teachers for their institutions?
ii.   How might the administrators respond to the identified recruitment challenges?

RESULTS

Challenges in Recruitment of International School Teachers

The participants highlighted a total of six themes regarding the challenges faced by the school administrators. Each of them is briefly presented as follows:

i) Faster and better offers from competitors

Evidence suggests that job seekers decide based on earlier offers (Becker et al., 2010). Schools compete with other schools in time and resources at each stage of the hiring process, and they may lose their preferred candidates if they do not act fast in securing their preferred candidates (Moynihan et al., 2003). The following participants observed such competition:

> "Recruitment can be hurt because people are interviewing across, and you want time to think, you want time to do reference checks, but then another school might reach out and grab them. It could be a very tiring process because ... I had so many interviews, and I get really excited about a candidate. And then they decide not to come, and it's like you put so much time and energy into the recruitment process. So excited about somebody. And then they just decide for it" (P3)

Other factors also affect jobseeker decisions, such as spousal benefits and compensation packages receivable (Bustamam et al., 2014; Terera & Hlanganipai, 2014). The following responses underscored this observation:

> "We can't find a job for the spouse, or maybe some other school offers them, you know, big money benefits that we don't offer, so those are the main reasons why we've had turned out" (P1)

> "Or they might offer a little bit more money, you know, 'cause every school has different criteria for salaries, and there's only so much you can do if you're, you know, 'cause depending on the school, like I was in a corporation there, so we were limited the amount of salary we could give" (P3)

ii) Insufficient turnaround time

The participants also observed that their recruitment efforts were not commensurate with the return expected regarding the shortlisted candidates' acceptance rate. Often, the agencies encounter difficulties sourcing candidates with suitable qualifications within a short period. Additionally, candidates often feel pressured by the short decision time given to make their decision. The following participant elaborated on this observation:

> *'Hiring fairs weren't productive…. candidates under a lot of pressure to decide within 24 hours… The other problem was the agency that ran this group. They would contact the teacher every year and say, 'Hey, are you looking for a new job?' Because they get a commission every time the teacher… hire.' (P1)*

iii) Restrictive government policy

Effective 1 January 2021, the Department of Labour mandates employers to advertise job vacancies for 30 days on a local job search portal called "MYFutureJobs" before opening the positions for foreign hires. This ensures that Malaysians are on an equal playing field as their foreign counterparts in a highly competitive job market, particularly throughout post-COVID recovery. The following participant elaborated on this observation:

> *'Government is asking us to hire, for example, they will say like for this 'Can you hire a local instead of a foreigner?' sometimes they do that too because they want to make sure you have equal opportunities' (P2)*

Based on the above remark, despite the good intentions, such a move did not bode well among the participants due to increased processing time and workload. They had to widen their search across more job portals and screen more applications from various sources. Coupled with the time limitations mentioned previously, they believed they were at a greater risk of recruiting candidates that did not fit their institutional needs.

iv) Geographical location of a school

School location affects a candidate's final decision to accept an offer, as they may want to relocate to a school close to the city centre (Zinyemba, 2014). In addition, nearby services, such as a shopping mall, will signal the school's attractiveness for post-school activities. The following responses illustrated this observation:

> *"If the teacher is 20 or 25 years old, and looking for some… bars or dance clubs to go to the weekend… they thought there would be things to do in the evenings and weekends near to the campus, so many of them are leave" (P1)*

> *"One of the bigger challenges is because of our location… small, only a few Chinese shops, makan [food] shops only. No mall…Most of our staff… half-hour drive" (P4)*

Based on the above comment, lifestyle attractions, such as access to food and entertainment outlets, affect an international school's viability as an excellent workplace.

v) Additional complications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic

The participants were unanimous in their observation that the global COVID-19 pandemic affected the recruitment of expatriate teachers. A sample response is as follows:

> *"COVID brought in a lot more challenges for recruitment in international schools just because of quarantine. Expatriates tend to go international or to go to different places… there are the challenges of getting a visa" (P3)*

Based on this response, prospective candidates also had to risk travel restrictions, additional costs associated with quarantine and vaccination, and an already complicated documentation process. This limits the pool of potential candidates applying to the vacancy, narrowing the position's final list of candidates.

Before the pandemic, recruitment of teachers was done conventionally through a mixture of online and offline job advertisements, followed by face-to-face interviews and calls with the candidates. During the pandemic, the participants had to pivot online to maintain the continuity of recruitment processes rapidly, and the administrators experienced difficulties adjusting to the sudden change. The following comments illustrated this observation:

> *"Using the Zoom…is very distance…Very difficult to gauge how you are…You lose that personal experience" (P4)*

> *"Or you could hire somebody, and they talked really well in their interview. When they get there, and you're like, oh, that's not what they said in their interview, and they're not" (P3)*

Based on the comments above, the participants doubted the online recruitment processes. In addition, they perceived that online interviews through technology-mediated tools such as Zoom, Skype, and Google did not provide the same "feel" as traditionally.

vi) Time consuming

Most of the participants' feedback was that the recruitment process was lengthy because it took a few months to complete. One of the participants reflected on the recruitment timeframe in his school:

> *"End of the contract year, around November, we asked for everyone's intent to come back for the next year. So, they need to let us know by December because by December, we post our hiring needs… start getting a group of candidates going in October, and usually, most of our hiring happens closer to December, and then we try to finish by January… spend about an hour with the candidate on the first round, and then we shortlist to a few, and then we might spend another hour talking with them." (P1)*

> *'November will start our manpower planning. Then, go for the recruitment process. In December, we will start to advertise the vacancy.' (P4)*

Recruitment is time-consuming and must be conducted properly to avoid wasting time and resources. Recruiters need to take time to understand the candidates and carefully select the finalized list to ensure they are fit for the school ecosystem and academic culture.

Institutional Response to Challenges

The participants highlighted five themes related to institutional responses to the challenges. Each of them is briefly presented as follows.

i) Advanced planning before the new school term

One participant explained his strategy to initiate recruitment as early as possible. He explained:

> *'We start advertising and screening candidates in October because that's when we talk to our teachers about 'Will you be coming back? Are you gonna retire? Are you going to go to another school? What are you going to do?'. So we start getting a group of candidates going in October, and usually, most of our hiring happens closer to December, and then we try to finish by January.' (P1)*

> *'At the end of the contract year, around November, we asked for everyone intent to come back for the next year. So, they need to let us know by December because, by December, we post our hiring needs' (P2)*

Based on this comment, the participant believed that by pushing the recruitment schedule forward by at least three months, his team would have sufficient time to estimate the number of vacancies to be filled. This action led to better gap time in attracting more potential candidates to the emptiness.

ii) Address the information gap in recruitment

In many cases, compensation may not be the only factor candidates consider before accepting the job. According to Turban et al. (1995), applicants' perceptions of the job, organizational attributes, and recruitment practices influence job acceptance. As such, school administrators must be creative in conducting the recruitment process. For example, one participant used stories of staff comments on social media to help candidates learn more about the working environment.

> *'Go to Facebook... see our staff say about... we have posted 4 or 5 videos about what the staff said about the school. We call it 'staff interviews'....' (P4)*

Another participant tried to make the interview a great experience for the potential candidates by providing all the information the candidates would like to know and building a good relationship in the interview process.

> *'Having about two to three meetings with a potential candidate... by the time you are finished with that, there is a good relationship, and some process has been built, and they're probably not going to turn you down'. (P1)*

By building the candidates' familiarity with the organization as early as possible, organizations can establish better confirmation rates with their potential hires (Harold et al., 2016). It also facilitates the candidates to make better decisions regarding cultural fit and job fit with the organization.

iii) Offer better relocation packages

Candidates tend to agree to a job offer if the organization offers attractive relocation packages, such as a travelling allowance (Poti et al., 2014) and housing incentives (Heeralal, 2014). The following participant elaborated on this observation:

> *'For foreign hires, we should have housing [allocation]. We have a residential building, and it is a furnished apartment, normally three bedrooms. And then there's everything else within that. So, your electricity, your Wi-Fi... so everything comes with everything.' (P2)*

> *'(We) provide housing' (P4)*

Based on the above comment, free accommodation for the teachers and their dependents, including utility coverages, is much welcomed by shortlisted candidates as part of their employment contract with the organization.

iv) Embrace the inevitability of online recruitment

Even though participants were not accustomed to a fully online recruitment process, they accepted the approach's popularity. They expressed optimism that they could reap benefits from the experience in the long term. One participant was quoted as saying:

> *'I think doing online recruiting, where you have a longer time to look at the candidates, they are not under pressure, you know, they have maybe a month of choosing between different offers that are coming their way' (P1)*

> *'We don't have to then go and get references and do that extra step because they're (online recruitment system) already within the person's profile. Uh...which does help' (P3)*

Based on the above comments, it is highly likely that the participants will continue to use online tools and platforms to recruit teachers for their schools, even as the country transitions into the endemic phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

v) Manage recruitment plan systematically

A systematic recruitment plan is crucial in attracting, identifying, and securing high-quality candidates. The first step of the recruitment plan is to identify a pool of candidates to be shortlisted for available positions. The candidates can come internally (from existing teachers at the school) or externally (sourced through agents and job portals, among others). This study indicated that they rely on internal and external sources for candidates. However, they prioritized internal sources rather than external sources:

> *'We have a website that we use for our faculty and staff, and that's where we communicate with everyone, and so any hiring that we do, we open it up first to our current employees, and then we open it outside.' (P2)*

According to the participants, internal-focused sourcing at the early stages of teacher recruitment is more cost-effective with a higher conversion rate because they are more familiar with the school culture and can adapt faster than externally sourced candidates. Moreover, employees can also recommend friends or acquaintances interested in the vacancy. That said, the candidates obtained through internal-focused sourcing are small. Therefore, when internal processes failed to identify suitable candidates, the schools would then rely on online methods to attract external candidates:

> *'We use Jobstreet to post both the local and the international teacher job [advertisements] there. And then we use ISS (online recruiting platform)'. (P1)*

Participants indicated that an effective recruitment advertisement is crucial. It is the first gateway for candidates to obtain information about the job or organization (Barber & Roehling, 1993), consequently attracting potential candidates to apply for a position. These include job scope and highlights, salary range, compensation and benefits, career level, required qualification, years of experience, and applicable application process. Furthermore, they enable applications to obtain a clearer picture of the offer position (Opatha, 2009). In addition, job seekers would first look at compensation and benefits, then at job scope and highlights when scanning a job posting (Maurer, 2018).

The next process is forming a selection panel to select the right person for the job, which comprises school administrators and senior teachers working closely with the new hire. They are responsible for conducting interviews and shortlisting candidates for the position, which aims to provide varying perspectives on the candidates selected and minimize bias. For example, one participant explained as follows:

> *'The panel review will usually be three people. It would be the hiring manager, department head, and principal. So, once the three people have reviewed, they either decide to interview or not based on the task. So, we must have at least two people to interview in order to qualify the person in the shortlisting phase… The manager will send the invitation to the candidates. There will be a one-on-one interview with the line manager and HOD together with a panel… So, there is a classroom session and then progress onto the 1st-panel interview. Then, if they get through the 1st interview, they have to get through the interview with me and the principal. After the interview, we will have a watch-up meeting which means we will discuss the candidates.' (P4)*

Based on the above response, person-fit factors are crucial in selecting teachers for the schools. Multiple interviewers would provide differing perspectives, leading to a better selection of candidates at the end of the recruitment process. Although the process is done at established companies, participants alluded to compatibility between the new hire and direct reports to ensure their schools take in teachers with the right fit.

DISCUSSION

The themes highlighted in the semi-structured interviews in this study corroborate articles found in the existing literature. Most of the past studies identified a competitive job market (King & Vaiman, 2019; Tomcikova et al., 2021), recruiter's workload and time-consuming when a greater number of candidates appeared for the job (Cohen, 2019; Mishra et al., 2021), restrictive government policy that challenges employee hiring process (Phelan, 2020), insufficient recruitment turnaround time (Tumasjan et al., 2020), and recruitment difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic (Joshi et al., 2020; Kalogiannidis, 2021) as the recruiters' challenges and they are aligned with the finding of this study. Yet, academics disregard the school's location since most previous studies have focused on the public school environment, where teachers have little say in site choices. The most significant point to highlight was that participants realized the importance of rethinking the overall recruitment process to address the shortcomings of traditional recruitment techniques, particularly process effectiveness and talent accessibility (Karimi et al., 2019).

Even though factors such as school location and border control procedures are beyond the control of the administrators, there are factors that international school administrators could address to improve the efficiency of the recruitment process. Wajiga and Ndaghu (2017) reported two considerations for staffing planning that can be used in redesigning the overall recruitment process for international school teachers. They are 1) external factors that are uncertain due to political and social economics and 2) internal factors derived from the ability of related stakeholders such as teachers, vice principals, and heads of departments to provide inputs to principal and human resource personnel. Human resource personnel have little control over external factors, yet they can control internal factors within their reach. Based on the findings of this study, three actions are recommended. First, they could support the incoming teachers by providing better relocation packages to alleviate the anxiety of moving to a new workplace (Manap et al., 2017). They could also allow incoming teachers to work from a remote location until it is safe to travel across borders to reduce travelling risks (Hotle et al., 2020). Finally, the administrators could make quality information, particularly about the school and job requirements of their institutions, accessible online to build stronger employer brand and employee engagement as well as allow the job seekers to match with their value, as observed in Tong et al. (2022) study. In other words, by deliberately establishing good relations with their prospective hires at the early stages of the recruitment process, employers can develop a stronger sense of belonging with the shortlisted candidates, subsequently raising the conversion rate of their schools (Kumari et al., 2020).

Based on this study's findings, hiring managers must reassess their current practices in the following five aspects. First, they should keep themselves up to date with the latest developments relating to government regulations on employment to anticipate issues and delays throughout the recruitment process. Next, they should consider integrating offline recruitment practices with online platforms, mainly through social media, to reach out to passive talents who are not actively looking for employment (Muduli & Trivedi, 2020). Third, schools should also invest in or set up an e-recruitment portal/system to facilitate, which enhances access to more applicants and improves the efficiency of the recruitment process (Vashisthaa et al., 2021). Fourth, they should put in place mechanisms to ensure that recruitment processes that are done online are secure and protect their applicants' privacy and personal information. Finally, they should also be aware of how job searchers conduct their employment searches. For instance, prospective applicants will check school websites and social media platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook to learn about job openings. They will also look for information outside of what is provided on school websites, like employee reviews on internet employment boards.

CONCLUSION

This study looked into the difficulties faced by administrators of international schools in bringing on new teachers and recommended ways to overcome those difficulties. This study offered empirical proof of the administration's difficulties during the hiring process and their solutions. Researchers and human resource managers or practitioners facing comparable recruitment challenges can apply these solutions to entice the top candidates. The study's findings contribute to a growing literature on talent acquisition

at international schools by providing empirical evidence on existing challenges faced at a sample of international schools in Malaysia.

The following limitation of this study is duly acknowledged. Findings are presented solely on the insights of a small sample of participants and are not representative of Malaysia's overall international school population. Further investigations with a greater sample size and a more diverse representation from different geographical regions of the country are needed to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the challenges discussed in this paper.

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