

The implementation of industrial training in tertiary education in Malaysia: Objectives, realisations and outputs in the case of foreign language students

Régis Machart¹

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Abstract The large range of jobs that Malaysian undergraduates of foreign languages are often employed in after completion of their studies (education, tourism, banking, business, management, etc.) is not necessarily related to their major field of study. This situation often makes it difficult for lecturers to develop a comprehensive professional training for their benefit. In the early 2010s, unemployment rates of Malaysian undergraduates were increasing, although the job market was quite flexible. In order to improve students' employability, Malaysian universities decided to restructure their curricula. Industrial training, or *Latihan Industri* (LI), became a new mandatory requirement for all future undergraduates of the new programmes from 2011. LI aims to match students' academic training with the needs of the private sector. However, most companies were not prepared to accept the first influx of trainees from all types of programmes (sciences, social sciences or the humanities) in 2014. Consequently, many students could not find an appropriate LI position in the field they were studying, and were placed in positions for which they were poorly prepared. At the end of their LI, students had to submit a logbook of their activities as well as provide a final report in which they were asked to evaluate their experiences. A content analysis of these reports from four foreign language students who did their LI in different sectors (finance, education, industry and retail) provides interesting insights into the different skills required by Malaysian employers, irrespective of their sector of activity. The analysis of the reports raises the question of the adequacy of the academic training of foreign

Régis Machart—Deceased.

✉ Régis Machart
joseph.goh@monash.edu

¹ Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

language students for the Malaysian job market, and the transferability of their acquired language skills to their new work environment.

Keywords higher education · industrial training · foreign language · Malaysia

Résumé Formation industrielle supérieure en Malaisie : objectifs, réalisations et résultats chez les étudiants en langues étrangères – La vaste gamme de débouchés que trouvent la majorité des étudiants malaisiens en langues étrangères après leurs études (enseignement, tourisme, banque, commerce, gestion, etc.) n'est pas obligatoirement liée à leur discipline principale. Ce fait rend souvent difficile aux professeurs la conception d'une formation professionnelle intégrale dans leur intérêt. Au début des années 2010, les taux de chômage des diplômés malaisiens étaient en hausse, alors que le marché du travail était assez flexible. Afin d'améliorer l'employabilité des étudiants, les universités malaisiennes ont décidé de restructurer leurs programmes. La formation industrielle dite *Latihan Industri* (LI) a été dotée à partir de 2011 d'une nouvelle exigence impérative pour tous les futurs étudiants des nouveaux programmes : faire concorder la formation universitaire aux besoins du secteur privé. La plupart des sociétés n'était cependant pas préparée à accueillir en 2014 la première vague de débutants issus de tous les types de programmes (sciences, sciences sociales et sciences humaines). De nombreux étudiants sortants n'ont donc pu trouver un emploi correspondant au domaine de leurs études, et ont été recrutés à des postes pour lesquels ils étaient peu préparés. À la fin de leur formation, les étudiants doivent soumettre un journal de leurs activités ainsi qu'un rapport final comportant une évaluation personnelle de leurs expériences. Une analyse de contenu des rapports de quatre étudiants en langues étrangères ayant accompli leur cursus dans divers secteurs (finance, enseignement, industrie et commerce de détail) livre des aperçus intéressants sur les diverses compétences exigées par les employeurs malaisiens, indépendamment du secteur d'activité. L'analyse de ces rapports soulève la question de l'adéquation de la formation universitaire en langues étrangères au marché du travail malaisien, et de la transférabilité de l'acquis linguistique de ces étudiants à leur nouvel environnement professionnel.

Introduction

During the period 2005–2009, the unemployment rate for young Malaysians aged between 15 and 24 years was 10.2%, and their employment opportunities declined even further in the subsequent years. The percentage of jobless youths rose to 11.1% between 2010 and 2014 (World Bank 2015). By comparison, during the same time span, the average unemployment rate nationwide remained relatively stable, reaching approximately 3.1% of the population (ILO 2015). Young Malaysians were thus facing three-and-a-half times more risk of being unemployed than the population as a whole. Recent graduates were subject to this unfavourable evolution as well (Ismail 2011; Hanapi and Nordin 2014). At the same time, many job offers in the private sector remained unfilled over that period, and as many as 153,000

openings were vacant in July 2012, mainly because the job seekers' skills did not match the needs of the labour market (ILO 2012).

The adequacy of university students' academic training for meeting the expectations of the job market was thus questioned. In order to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of recent graduates' higher education qualifications and to make them more attractive for the private job market, Malaysian universities implemented a compulsory component of *latihan industri* [industrial training] or LI in 2011 for tertiary education students. This LI mirrored the professional exposure which prospective schoolteachers graduating in educational studies were already experiencing in schools, or future medical officers and health practitioners were undertaking in hospitals. Its aim was to bridge theoretical academic training with the "reality" and the needs of the workplace.

While certain university programmes have an obvious connection with different areas of the private sector, such as production (e.g. engineering or chemistry) or goods and services (e.g. hospitality or accounting), the relationship between the private sector and the humanities (e.g. history or languages) may not be as obvious to many. However, as we will see, the main criticism directed at higher education in terms of the employability of recent graduates was not based on the inadequacy of academic content of the students' training. Instead, it pointed to the students' lack of interdisciplinary soft skills, which would be relevant for their potential employers.

This article reviews the circumstances which led to the implementation of compulsory industrial training or LI in Malaysia in 2011, and links it to the global context of "massification" of higher education (Altbach et al. 2009, p. iv). In addition, it discusses how a particular category of university students in Malaysia, i.e. foreign language specialists, adjusted to this workplace experience. This discussion is based on an analysis of the reports which four of them submitted at the end of their respective internships. This analysis provides crucial highlights on the pitfalls and the strengths of such experiences for students whom some may consider as ill-prepared for the private sector.

Massification of higher education, job market requirements and the challenges of academia

The global expansion of higher education (see e.g. Akkari 2014) and its "massification" (Altbach et al. 2009, p. iv) has generated the emergence of numerous qualified graduates who enter a job market which was not necessarily prepared for them. While in many countries worldwide, public universities opened their doors to more applicants, they faced the concurrent emergence of private higher education institutions which sought to multiply the number of undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates, and thus compete with the public universities. Consequently, instead of being in great demand, undergraduates suddenly found themselves facing redundancy. This occurred for example in the Maghreb (Mazzella 2014) and the Gulf countries (Akkari 2014), but also in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Poland, Thailand and Turkey, where "semi-elite private universities may compete with a set of good but not top-tier public universities" (Altbach et al. 2009, p. 84).

The increasing global competition between universities to produce marketable graduates is reflected in the role played by academic rankings (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007) and reinforced by studies on the expected salaries for university graduates (see e.g. Moneystepper 2014), or in the comparisons of “added values” which an academic institution offers to its students (see e.g. Stromboni 2014).

This situation has been particularly obvious in countries which did not have a strong academic tradition such as Malaysia. The first university of the Malayan Peninsula was founded in 1949 in Singapore (then a British Straits Settlement),¹ and when the City-State left the newly created Federation of Malaya in 1965, the university relocated to Kuala Lumpur (Welch 2011a). Higher education in Malaysia was at first very much influenced by the Anglosphere (Welch 2011a, p. 55), and curricula derived from British higher education (Subramani and Kempner 2002, p. 235). However, the local offerings were for a long time inadequate, and Malaysian students left *en masse* to study in overseas institutions. The Middle East, in particular Egypt, was a preferred destination for religious studies (Welch 2012), whereas China/Taiwan and India enrolled Malaysians of ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities who could not find a place in public institutions (Subramani and Kempner 2002, p. 234). Yet, English-speaking countries (Australia, UK, Ireland, USA) always remained as the preferred destination countries attracting Malaysian international students from all ethnic origins (Machart and Dervin 2014).

The opening of foreign universities’ overseas branch campuses (Monash, Curtin, Nottingham, Swinburne) in the Malaysian Federation in the 1980s (Welch 2011b), and the development of private local universities (University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Taylor’s University, Sunway University, Multimedia University, Lim Kok Wing University, etc.) and university colleges (SEGI College, KDU University College, etc.) were supposed to absorb the national demand for Malaysian higher education. The aim of these private institutions was also to attract international students in order to develop the country into an EduHub (Knight 2011; Machart and Dervin 2014), able to compete with more established destinations such as Australia, for whom incoming students made a significant contribution to the national gross domestic product (GDP) (Song and McCarthy 2016). Yet, the flow of Malaysians studying abroad did not abate. In 2012, Malaysia ranked eighth on the international scale as a country of origin for international students (UIS 2015).

Consequently, private higher institutions competed with the public institutions to attract both local and international students. In 2010, 80,600 Malaysian nationals graduated at Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD levels from private institutions, in contrast with 108,300 at public varsities. The imbalance was even higher for the international students’ intake of Malaysian universities: 64,700 foreigners were enrolled in private institutions compared to 24,200 in public varsities (MoHE 2011). This diversification of higher education opportunities for Malaysians (in public or private varsities, at home or overseas) produced a sharp increase of qualified youths

¹ *Editor’s note:* Following the Napoleonic wars (1803–1815), the Malay archipelago in Southeast Asia was divided into British and Dutch territories by a treaty in 1824. After a period of administration by the East India Company, the British territories were made a crown colony in 1867. Situated on the Strait of Malacca, the Straits Settlements, which were dissolved in 1946, comprised four trade centres, Penang, Singapore, Malacca and Labuan.

whom the job market was no longer able to absorb. The number of undergraduates was surpassing local needs, and youth unemployment was globally on the rise, although many positions remained vacant because those graduating did not have the required skills.

The combination of the different factors mentioned above (increasing number of university graduates, their unemployment rate, and competition among higher institutions) prompted Malaysian public universities to revise their curricula to better adapt to the needs of the private sector. Although there had been insufficient qualified human resources for a long time, recent university graduates still did not meet the needs of the private sector (Hanapi and Nordin 2014; Ismail et al. 2011). They were criticised for their lack of proficiency in English,² of leadership and technical skills (Ismail 2011) or more comprehensively, the absence of managerial skills, their ineptitude at solving problems, their deficient communication, a lack of leadership, creativity, critical thinking, and generally poor or inadequate personal attitudes (not pro-active, lack of self-confidence, weak in interactions) (Malhi 2009). Newspaper articles and scientific contributions converged in reaching the conclusion that higher institutions were the “source of all evil”, and that a serious restructuring of curricula was needed. Universities had suddenly become responsible for bridging the hiatus between higher education and industry. Previously, this task had been left to companies which had no other choice than to accommodate the relatively few graduates they could hire.

This depreciation of recent graduates’ value affected not only Malaysia, but soon became a global trend. In emerging countries such as Morocco or Tunisia, recent graduates had traditionally been absorbed by the public sector, but the hiring possibilities of governmental bodies were saturated and university leavers spilled over into the private sector (Mazzella 2014). In Malaysia, universities produced enough manpower for the public sector even if their training was not deemed fully satisfactory (Woo 2013). Nevertheless, the different policy adjustments pointed to one particular direction: recent graduates had to fit the private sector. Universities adopted a quality certification first conceived for the private sector, a global norm set by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (see e.g. Sadiq Sohail et al. 2003). This accreditation was meant to reassure corporations of the quality of a product – in this case the higher education delivered – and the newly implemented curricula stressed the development of, for example, entrepreneurship skills.³

² *Editor’s note:* Malaysia’s population is composed of several ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, Indian and others, resulting in a multitude of spoken languages. While the official language is standardised Malay, and English is a recognised second language, many other languages are used in daily life, especially Tamil and several varieties of Chinese, but also a number of creole languages, local tribal languages etc. The language of instruction in most national schools is Malay, but there are some schools which operate in Chinese or Tamil, with English being taught as a compulsory subject in all schools. The “Upholding Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthening English Language” policy, which was introduced in 2009, promotes bilingualism, aiming to improve students’ proficiency in English. The policy includes a “Dual Language Programme (DLP)” and a “Highly Immersive Programme (HIP)” (MoE 2016, pp. 63, 66).

³ *Editor’s note:* This refers to ISO norm 9002, a certification entitled “Model for quality assurance in production, installation, and servicing” which was last revised in 1994. It has since been replaced by a number of other ISO norms. For more information, see ISO (2009).

In order to attract students, higher institutions now needed to offer the best marketable programme. The objectives of higher institutions shifted from an education based on *savoir* or “academic knowledge” to the development of *savoir-faire*; that is *competences* or “broad skills”. As Ronald Barnett describes it, they switched from developing an “academic competence” to a focus on “operational competence” to cater to the needs of the private sector (Barnett 1994). A revolution occurred which relegated traditional academic knowledge and hard skills to limbo (Volle 2014); that is modifying the essence of academic training itself and substantially changing the goals of academia (Song and McCarthy 2016) to cater to the needs of the private sector which emphasised practical skills.

Foreign language students and the teaching of (intercultural) communication

The teaching of foreign languages was reintroduced in Malaysia in the 1980s in secondary schools, and in the late 1990s at university level (Lim and Machart 2013). To this day, only two Malaysian universities offer a complete BA programme in foreign languages: Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) (Riget 2014, p. 94). The aim of the implementation of foreign language education was to counterbalance the omnipresence of English-speaking economic partners and develop new markets for the Malaysian industry (Ruhanas 2012). It targeted an integration of recent graduates into the private sector in an overt manner.

A British career advice website called Prospects lists the three main occupations which are attainable with a foreign language degree: translator, language teacher, and interpreter (AGCAS 2015). Three out of nine professions cited by a similar French website are directly connected to the public sector: language teacher, French-as-a-foreign-language teacher, and translator for the public sector (L'étudiant, n.d.). In Malaysia however, the BA in foreign languages (e.g. French or German) was conceived for students who are not expected to join the public sector. Language teachers who are going to work in governmental schools are trained in a teacher's college and are not graduates of these two institutions (UM and UPM) (Riget 2014; Machart and Lim 2014), although some undergraduates from these two programmes have become language instructors in private institutions. Indeed, UPM language students have often opted for studying a minor subject which had strong connections with the industry in the hope to be more marketable after graduation: hospitality, communication, economy or more recently human resource management. Both programmes (UM and UPM) included courses of French for specific purposes, such as French for tourism in their major component, but the lack of practical training was seen as hindering recent graduates' entry into the job market.

Foreign language programmes are directly related to communication skills; a rich academic literature addresses the question of intercultural competence for foreign languages students (e.g. Lo Bianco et al. 1999; Byram et al. 2002; Sercu 2006). However, lecturers from different fields are not always aware of ways of developing intercultural skills, and their conceptual approach sometimes appears contradictory (Dervin and Tournebise 2013). Postmodern interculturalists (e.g. Holliday 2010;

Dervin 2012, 2015; Machart and Lim 2013) insist on taking into consideration the context of interaction. As such, any systematic approach to intercultural competence such as the one developed in certain software programmes may be counterproductive, as it frames individuals according to cultural representations (Zotzman 2015). A preparation for interactions which does not take into consideration the interlocutor, or does so artificially, as exemplified in the communication test developed by Swee-Heng Chan et al. (2014) in the Malaysian context, may provide a certain insight but it cannot guarantee the efficiency of communication at the workplace which is dependent on the interlocutor's encounter with "real-life" situations.

Moving beyond Michael Byram's (1997) "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC),⁴ Fred Dervin developed the "proteophilic competence" (PC)⁵ approach. PC implies that intercultural communication is dependent on the context. It includes three components (two cognitive and one behavioural): (1) *savoir-faire I*: taking into consideration the individual's diversity and complexity; (2) *savoir-faire II*: analysing the discourses of identification of all interlocutors (including *my own*); and (3) *savoir-être/réagir*: "controlling one's emotions/behaviours" (Dervin 2006, p. 128). In the case of foreign languages courses in Malaysia, both trends can be found among researchers. For example, Patricia Nora Riget and Jean Sévery (2013) are prone to a cultural approach which associates language and culture with the old "methodological nationalism" (Dervin 2013), in opposition to the findings of Sin Zi Chin (2013), as well as my own, published elsewhere (Machart and Chin 2014; Machart and Azzouz 2016), which conclude that developing a fluid approach to interactions is the sole way to facilitate intercultural interactions and communication in real-life situations. The way students are trained to communicate effectively with diverse interlocutors thus differs greatly, depending on their lecturer's epistemological positioning.

The main divergence between both approaches lies in the fact that intercultural skills are seen as ever-changing and context-dependent instead of being approached as static (Bauman 2001) knowledge to be acquired. This approach appears more in line with the needs of the private sector, because of its stress on the diversity of potential interactions. It also insists on the interlocutors' personal involvement in any interaction, such as the ones which are going to be narrated by participants in their final report. In theory, PC can be taught, but the success of intercultural competence is difficult to evaluate because it is always context-dependent (Dervin and Machart 2016). In other words, students can be deemed interculturally competent in certain situations (with certain interlocutors, in a given environment at a particular time) and perceived as incompetent in other contexts.

⁴ ICC comprises five components (*savoirs*): (1) intercultural attitudes or *savoir être*; (2) knowledge or *savoir*; (3) interaction skills or *savoir apprendre/faire*; (4) cognitive skills or *savoir comprendre*; and (5) intercultural awareness or *savoir s'engager* (Byram 1997, pp. 50–53)

⁵ *Editor's note*: Latin *proteo* = form-changing + *philos* (from ancient Greek *philos*) = loving. In plain English, *proteophilic competence* thus means the appreciation of diversity (Dervin 2006).

Revamping foreign language curricula

The first batch of students to begin their studies after the major curriculum restructure, which introduced the compulsory LI requirement, enrolled in their respective universities within the academic year of 2011–2012. When the curricula were revamped, the duration of study for the BA degree was extended by one semester, and students from the BA programme in foreign languages had their degree studies extended to 3.5 years (7 semesters). This change enabled a revision of course contents and it also gave programmes a greater emphasis on their relationship to the workplace. Between semesters 6 and 7, students of foreign languages are required to leave the university premises for industrial training in the private sector (which excludes schools, as they are reserved for students graduating in education). Students are responsible for finding a company which will accept them for eight weeks. For the first time in 2014, final year students competed to find a company which was willing to take them during the July–August inter-semester break. At the end of this period, students had to submit a report in which they described and evaluated their experiences in the working environment so that their industrial training could be validated.

These reports were the first formalised feedback lecturers received from students on their training. Was it in line with expectations of the private sector as reported in newspapers (sense of initiative, communication skills, etc.)? Did the industrial training help students adjust to the needs of the private sector; that is improving communication and technical skills? Or was LI merely a requirement of the new curriculum which had no effect on students' work attitudes?

Research methods

This article is based on the final reports of four students who were registered in the same programme (foreign languages) in the same institution. It focuses on the expectations generated by LI and the potential development of the students' communication and technical skills. The contents of the reports were thematically coded using pre-established categories in order to answer the research questions: company's expectations, trainee's expectations, communication, and developing skills.

This methodology clearly has some limitations. One requirement was that the student reports should be written in French if they were majoring in this language (or German for students of German, etc.).⁶ A total of 25 students completed their final report on their LI and within this group, the scope of companies they applied to was very diverse. For example, the students in this sample applied for placements in a private university, in a factory, in administration and in a financial institution. In other words, they tried their luck wherever it was possible in order to fulfil the programme requirements. Moreover, participants were at no point required to explain how and why they selected the company which they were going to be

⁶ All student quotations were translated into English by the author.

Table 1 Participants' job description and field of activity

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Job description</i>	<i>Field of activity</i>
Sam	Promoter	Retail
Lin	Administration	Education
Tan	Human resource	Industry/Production
Soon	Assistant	Finance

attached to for eight weeks. Due to time constraints, only four of the 25 reports were analysed in detail for this article.

More than ten years' experience of teaching final year students from the same institution have made it obvious that until they find a job, very few students have a clear idea of their job prospects after graduation. In order to help them to anticipate their entry into the job market, they are asked regularly what kind of employment they are thinking of undertaking and where they would like to work after graduation. These questions elicit similar answers every year: *I have no idea* or *I will see*. Sometimes, students exclude a field and claim for example that they do not want to teach, but this does not mean at all that the students will reject a teaching position if they are offered one, or that they will refrain from looking for such a position at a later stage. Moreover, recent graduates from the foreign language programmes often change jobs in the first few years of their working life, switching, for example, from banking, tourism or teaching to administrative positions where knowledge of foreign languages is not an essential requirement. The four reports selected here thus provide only a glimpse into a student's experiences at a particular time, and do not reflect their future career.

These four students were selected because they undertook their industrial training in four different companies which represented four different fields of activity: retail, education, production and finance (see Table 1). Their experiences are not completely representative of what all trainees might endure, as each company has its own context, regulations and staff (some would say "culture"). Nonetheless by selecting reports of the training accomplished in different sectors of activity, it is possible to glean a more general picture of the difficulties encountered.

The four students whose reports have been selected were pursuing their studies in one of the two universities which offer a foreign language programme in Malaysia. These two universities are public universities located in the surroundings of the capital. Both institutions are generic universities offering a large variety of degrees. They are among the five public universities to be awarded research university status in 2010 based on their number of publications (Evers et al. 2010). Before joining a university, prospective students in Malaysia formulate a list of their preferences (field of study and institution) and after graduating in foreign languages, all students apply for a diversity of programmes which are not necessarily related to their studies (that is business, foreign languages, music, etc.).

The *latihan industri* [industrial training] as a new panacea?

Before venturing into the analysis of these four students' experiences, I need to provide a reminder here that they belonged to the first batch of students who had to go through an industrial training. For the first time in the history of Malaysia, the industry had to incorporate a large number of undergraduate students. University students of all programmes had to compete with each other for this eight-week work experience in order to find a placement. Some of them only found an opening a few days before the mandated commencement date. Fortunately, all foreign language students from this university⁷ were successful in securing a placement.

Companies were not always prepared to train this new influx of manpower and did not know what tasks to assign them. For example, Lin (a female student) did her LI in the administrative department of an educational institution. Her main tasks during the eight weeks were to plan for a special event and to interview a student in French. Although the first task mobilised her organisational skills, she questions the soundness of the second assignment which, she considers, is not connected to the rationale of LI itself:

Lin: because this is the first time the institution accepted trainees, my supervisor was not used to assigning us tasks. She did not know what to let us do. Some of the tasks which I was assigned to made me feel that *I was not really in a work situation* [...] They were not contributing to the institution [emphasis added].

Lin has the impression that she wasted her time although she wanted to learn more and had a pro-active attitude. Despite being a brilliant student, her skills could not be completely used by the institution. Soon, another female student, has a similar impression that she was underemployed:

Soon: Because we were the first batch of trainees, *we did not have much work to do*. Most employees had their own work to do and they were too busy [to guide us]. Companies *should prepare some projects for trainees* so that they can learn. It would also ease the company's burden [emphasis added].

Referring to the situation in France, Dominique Glaymann (2015) notes that industrial training has been presented as a panacea for recent graduates' employment in the private sector; that this is the best way to integrate them into the workplace. However, the diversity of contexts requires a necessary evaluation of the procedure, as the placements do not always benefit the students. As LI is a requirement for graduation, students in Malaysia are willing to accept placements which do not equip them effectively for their future employment. If Lin has the impression of being largely underemployed, Soon recognises that her situation evolved during the training and that she was eventually assigned meaningful tasks. Conversely, Tan (a male student) was overloaded with various tasks. The most balanced situation was Sam's, as the training agreement she made with the company defined the conditions of her interventions:

⁷ Editor's note: The author is referring to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in Serdang, Malaysia.

Sam: As a trainee, I signed a training agreement with the company which guaranteed fixed working hours, number of hours to work, salary, etc.

Sam's company, which was located in France, anticipated welcoming a trainee because LI had been operating in France for some time and trainees usually benefit from contractual protection. Sam's case is, thus, not unusual from a French perspective. However, in the Malaysian context, companies had to adjust to the new initiative and they were often not prepared. LI appeared to be more of a requirement of universities than a request from many stakeholders of the private sector. Some of them did react positively, but others failed to do so. Yet, Glaymann's (2015) plea for an evaluation of the system in France indicates that the more established existence of LI in a given context does not guarantee its effectiveness.

We also have to bear in mind that these reports were sent by participants to their lecturers. Students were aware of the task they had to undertake, and knew that they had to "display" some critical thinking. This means that what we are analysing here are narratives produced by individuals which may, or may not, reflect how different actors (company's employees, administration, person in charge of the trainee, etc.) perceived how LI functioned.

Generating (un)realistic expectations

The discourses of these undergraduates demonstrate the students' dissatisfaction with their university education and the fact that their studies did not assist them in gaining employment in the private sector. This had been the reason for the introduction of the compulsory LI into the curriculum: only work experience would enable recent graduates to secure a job. Students formulate their dissatisfaction with their academic studies in terms of *lack*:

Tan: I had to learn a lot of things which would be *a precious work experience* for the future [...] I thought that what I learned in university would help me for my work, but from the first day, the manager told me that my task was not only resource management, it was complex and difficult, and *I had a lot of things to learn* [emphasis added].

Sam: One of the weaknesses of industrial training was *my lack of work experience*. This training just before my graduation was for me an opportunity to assist me in finding a job as a recent graduate, to be assigned a first task [emphasis added].

When entering the job market, students are faced with a *tabula rasa*, despite their academic training. Higher education does not seem to provide them with the practical skills they think they will need:

Soon: My training was in [Name of Company] which offers financial services. It is very different from my studies [in foreign languages] but it is good for me to learn something which *cannot be learnt in university*. My tasks and projects were very different from what I studied [at university]. I really had to start from scratch [emphasis added].

Thus, the students' LI experience helped them to gain a better understanding of the realities and expectations of the job market and the fact that beginning in a new position requires a steep learning curve.

Within the university setting, academic education is perceived as an end in itself. After graduating, a student is "supposed to know", and when she/he does not, her/his university education is blamed. Instead of being seen as always changing, as a *knowledge-in-becoming*, education is seen as a finite package, which ends with graduation. However, education, and higher education is systematically evolving and needs to be seen as a basis upon which the private sector can build to integrate their new staff. This is time-consuming, but this is what the private sector has done in the past. Moreover, higher education is not able to adapt to *all* companies, which are themselves always evolving in response to new developments and changing economic and social contexts.

The discourse puts even more pressure on recent graduates/students. As they are unsuitable for the company due to a "lack of work experience" (which is indeed understandable), they have to lower their expectations (demands, salary, etc.). Even if some of them do have prior experience in the private sector, it is not considered valuable:

Tan: *My previous experience* was promoter, merchandiser, cashier and restaurant junior supervisor. However, it was not useful for me for this training as I was not more flexible [...] During my training, I learned a lot of things that *books don't teach us*. There were a lot of tasks which I could not perform correctly [emphasis added].

Following the theory of PC, one cannot overgeneralise about the students' experiences in LI. What really counts is what this particular company needs for a particular position, that is the PC context, to which of course the university cannot respond, as we will see shortly. However, instead of considering their LI as a specific experience in a given context, students tend to overgeneralise it and, as a result, be highly critical of their academic training (and of what "books teach") because of problems they faced during their industrial attachment. They do not realise that their success or failure is associated with their working environment, and that a different company may bring a more (or less) beneficial experience.

Thus, university education alone is not enough, but previous experience in and of itself is also insufficient. Students need better preparation for their LI, so that they can understand that in the private sector each company has different goals and expectations, and that they need to be able to draw on the generic skills learnt during their university studies and understand that they will be on a steep learning curve, depending on the PC context. Understanding the limitations of academic study and the complex variety of working in the private sector will assist students to have more realistic expectations of their LI experience.

Connections between university studies, developing professional skills and providing proper guidance

Besides communication skills, students developed professional *savoir faire* relevant to the concept of PC in relation to their sector of activity, that is to the context. For instance, Soon mentions planning and organising, research (she had to search for information and understand about investments), observation, and analytical skills. When she thinks of how she applied what she learned in university, Soon relates the following:

Soon: I can only think about non-technical skills. For example, teamwork. It is not always about collaborating with colleagues, but also displaying leadership skills if needed.

Soon did her LI in a field of activity (finance), which is completely different to her field of study (foreign languages). Thus, it is not surprising that she was not able to make use of her abilities to speak a foreign language (her hard skills), but the generic skills of “operational competence” (Barnett 1994) (“teamwork”, “leadership skills”) she acquired during her higher education proved to be useful. Soon had developed academic knowledge *and* broad skills. A similar situation exists for Sam:

Sam: [My minor] is in management. I learnt a lot from a theoretical perspective in my academic reading, but it is not possible to apply everything in daily life. As a result, the industrial training was for me the best way to become familiar with the private sector, as well as management [...] The company I was working for was situated in [Name of Department Store]. I had to follow the policies of both companies [the hiring company and the department store]. [...] This was not easy. The store had more than 2000 employees and it used high tech tools for their management procedures [...] I have progressed a lot in terms of planning and managing stocks.

Sam’s industrial training matched her major (foreign languages) and her minor (management). Her academic training was thus useful for her and her LI was very helpful. She is aware that the theoretical knowledge she possesses is quite general (not everything can be “applied”) and that it needs to be adapted to her work environment (“the managing rules of both companies”). She was able to do so because she received proper guidance and assistance not only from her supervisor, but also from her colleagues whom she cites regularly throughout her report. The work environment, in particular the supervisor and/or the colleagues, seem to be the gateway through which the integration of undergraduate occurs and the lack of such support leads to an unsatisfactory experience. Soon’s evaluation of her position within the company confirms this:

Soon: I was afraid to disturb and I rarely left my office during the first few weeks. I would have been more efficient if I had gone out [from the start] and [asked for help] [...] With time, I learned to give a more confident impression [...] I managed to do all my tasks on time.

Trainees need to be taken for who they are: they have received theoretical academic education and have been taught certain broad skills. When they go for LI, they have not yet graduated, and even if they have, their knowledge is still in construction. When they join a specific company, they need to receive proper guidance on the company's procedures. Sam frequently refers to the guidance she received:

Sam [after a description of the tasks]: My supervisor told me that it was the way the company manages their stock [...] I had to go through general training on the department store. This training was delivered to all employees. They taught us some sales techniques, but also about the history of the store, how the store is organised, telephone numbers of all departments, etc.

In her case, the involvement of all interlocutors (supervisor, colleagues, and the company) helped her to go through a smooth integration. Lin, on the other hand, is doubtful about the output of her training because her supervisor was "experimenting". Soon managed to improve when she changed her attitude and sought help from her colleagues. Tan's experience is characteristic of another scenario:

Tan: We were only two staff in the human resource department. It was not possible for us to manage to complete everything on time. [Tan stipulates that an employee with the same function was going to start working after he finished his training].

The common practice of hiring trainees to replace full-time staff increased significantly in countries like France, which in response to this problem promulgated a law in 2014 to limit the private sector's excesses (Le Monde 2014). Trainees are not meant to be "fully operational"; they should not become cheap or even free manpower in order to execute the tasks which an employee is supposed to accomplish. They have to be guided and trained. Tan's moderately positive evaluation reflects this misunderstanding: [Tan is] "willing to learn, but need[s] to learn more." This, in itself, justifies a fully positive evaluation, as it matches the goals of LI, and testifies to Tan's positive attitudes. In contrast, Soon noted that

Few agencies would hire a student for only two months. [...] The company can be reluctant to give trainees important tasks... I believe that important projects and tasks need to be assigned to fully-hired, paid staff, and trainees need a real mentor to help them improve.

Students' perceptions of intercultural issues during LI

Interestingly, students did not emphasise intercultural relations during their LI, with the exception of Sam. Lim, Tan and Soon did their LI in Malaysia, where intercultural communication occurs on a daily basis due to the highly diverse context of the country in terms of ethnicities and languages. Moreover, if we move beyond essentialised categories to include "diverse diversities", that is gender, social status, age, education etc. (Dervin et al. 2013), each interaction needs to be

considered as intercultural. These three students, however, did not elaborate on interactions with colleagues or other interlocutors, as if only communication in a different (that is foreign) context was worth mentioning. Yet, interacting with colleagues is a skill students need to acquire in any private sector. Sam relates how she addressed her peers and superior during her LI:

Sam: The work environment and the company's culture were for me completely different [...] we called each other by our first name, whatever the hierarchical position of the interlocutor was.

Once again, this skill is context-dependent. Sam did her LI in France and was communicating in French in the workplace, a language which marks social distance by the use of different pronouns (familiar *tu* versus polite *vous*) (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2014) and terms of address. The manner in which one addresses one's colleagues needs to be negotiated in every single context, and Sam could only use the first name to address her supervisor because this particular one gave her the permission to do so. In another French company, rules might have been completely different. Indeed, in comparison to the other students, Sam's environment appears to have been more balanced. Her personal linguistic abilities were valued: she helped her colleagues improve their English, and she became an interpreter for Chinese-, Malay- and English-speaking tourists at the department store where she worked:

Sam: As a student of French, I was hoping to improve my level of French. I was hoping to be able to speak like a native speaker. My training in a French company was for me an excellent opportunity to practice my French skills [...] some weeks later, my colleagues told me that my French had improved compared with when I started there. [...] I exchanged grammatical rules with my colleagues. Instead of speaking French, they spoke to me in English. We corrected each other when we made mistakes [...] Because I am Malaysian, I can speak English, Malay and Chinese. In the department store, many customers come from around the world and I was called upon to help translating from English, Malay or Chinese. I was able to develop my translation skills.

Sam's prior knowledge was a resource that the company and her colleagues found useful. She was the only one who did her LI in a field related to her academic training. As a result, Sam's report is much more enthusiastic than those of her fellow students. This does not mean that her communication skills are perfect, but Sam received directives from her supervisor on how to deal with customers:

Sam: From the first day, my supervisor taught me certain policies regarding communication with customers. The first one was to greet customers with "Bonjour Monsieur/ Madame" and to say "Good bye, have a nice day" when they are leaving. After greeting, we had to ask open questions like: "Can I help you?" or "Are you looking for something in particular?"

Her language skills were way above greetings and concluding interactions. Prior to leaving for France, Sam had already reached a B1 level (Level 3) of the Common European Framework of References for Languages, where these formulas belong to

an A1 level (Level 1).⁸ She did not learn anything new about communication strategies, but her supervisor took the time to remind her of these basic politeness rules, and Sam was aware of what she had to do. She received proper, essential guidance, which is necessary for PC.

Conclusion

When Malaysia introduced a compulsory industrial training for its graduating students, the goal was clearly to facilitate their future employment in the private sector. Higher education was perceived as a provider of qualified manpower which would meet the needs of companies and other non-governmental institutions. This also matched a neo-liberal vision whereby the private sector was the sole regulator of the higher education policy. However, because every company is different, it is almost impossible for institutions of higher education to predict the environment in which future undergraduates might be employed. Furthermore, companies are constantly evolving. As discussed earlier, teaching for the context, that is PC, is very challenging. Whilst in theory PC can be taught, in practice it is very difficult to evaluate. Students can succeed in one context, but may have problems in a different context, as is demonstrated in the case studies discussed here.

The first batch of students to undergo this new curriculum secured their placement in a company in 2014. Nevertheless, the private sector is often not prepared to support these graduates-to-be by helping them develop new skills or apply their knowledge to real work tasks. Similar to what happens in other countries in the world, the training offers were inconsistent: some companies offered proper training, some students were supervised on an *ad hoc* basis, others were almost left to themselves, and others still simply replaced a staff member without being paid.

Yet, the experience as such appears to be beneficial for students who will need to face the realities of the private sector after their graduation. They were also able to make use of their critical skills while writing the reports they had to submit to their institutions, although they were endorsing widespread discourses which opposed academic and industrial training. Generally, the reports of these four students reveal that they are suitable for the private sector and that they are willing to adapt to a working environment. Sam's response may appear relatively more positive because she did her LI in France, but we should not deduce that the national environment was the determining factor. A multiplicity of contexts exists there as well and Sam may not have got along with her colleagues and supervisor in another French company – in which case her report would not have been so positive. Trainees' insertion in the workplace can only become fruitful/productive if companies fulfil their obligation to support and mentor their new staff, independent of the context (activity, country) where LI takes place. Widespread criticisms which portray students as unfit for the private sector represent a certain form of discourse which

⁸ *Editor's note:* The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) describes foreign language proficiency at six regular and three plus levels: A1 and A2 (basic users), B1 and B2 (independent users), C1 and C2 (proficient users) and A2+, B1+, and B2+ (CoE 2011).

denigrates higher education, and finally gives the private sector even more power to impose its neo-liberal rules.

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The author

Régis Machart The late Régis Machart was a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra, Malaysia, and Adjunct Professor in Intercultural Communication and Education, University of Helsinki, Finland. He held a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Rouen (France) and his research interests included intercultural studies, cultural anthropology, academic mobility and construction of identity. He was editor-in-chief (with Fred Dervin and Julie Byrd Clark) of the *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education*. Machart co-edited two volumes on academic mobility and three other volumes on issues of identity, stereotypes and intercultural interactions. He will be sorely missed by his colleagues and of course his family.

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