

Factors Influencing International Students' Choice to Study at Malaysian Private Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The decision of international students to pursue private HEIs in Malaysia is examined in this study. It attempts to investigate the relationship between the programmes offered, the tuition price, an institution's recognition and reputation, and the choice made by international students to enroll in Malaysian private higher education institutions (HEIs). This paper aims to identify the determining elements while choosing to attend Malaysian private HEIs, and the push-pull theory was applied. Through an online survey, a total of 110 respondents were gathered. The findings of Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a substantial association between the programme offered, the cost of education, the reputation and recognition of institutions, and the choice of international students to study in Malaysian private HEIs. The findings of this study can be valuable to policymakers, educators, and higher education institutions in Malaysia, as they provide insights into the factors that influence international students' choice to enroll at private HEIs. The results may also be useful for marketing and recruitment strategies to attract more international students to Malaysian private HEIs. Recommendations for HEIs are provided based on the findings.

Contribution/Originality: Many past studies examined factors influencing international students' choices prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sheds some light on the influencing factors post pandemic in early 2022. The results reveal that there is no significant difference in the factors being examined in this study that influence their decision to choose Malaysia as their study destination.

1. Introduction

Many industries, including higher education, have benefited from internationalisation. In order to increase access to higher education and strive to become a hub for international education, the Malaysian government has liberalised higher education. In contrast to 1962, when there was only one public university, the University of Malaya, and two private

colleges, there are now 20 public universities, 36 polytechnics, 105 community colleges, and 434 private HEIs ([Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023](#)) in this sector.

There are many types of private providers which include university status, college university, colleges, and international branch campuses. The institutes with university status award their home-grown degree programmes, and University colleges can also provide degree programmes in specific disciplines. Both university colleges and colleges are permitted to operate international programmes like twinning and franchising with foreign institutions, primarily those from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States ([Richards & Ismail, 2013](#)).

The delivery of postsecondary education was significantly influenced by private higher education institutions (HEIs). There are 1.2 million students enrolled in higher education as of 2021, with public universities hosting 49% (589,879), private HEI hosting 43%, and polytechnics and community colleges accounting for the remaining 8% ([Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022](#)). With over 400 private HEIs, these institutions enrolled 58,063 international students, or 60% of total enrollment, in 2021 ([Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022](#)). Data, however, indicates that fewer international students attended these institutions before the COVID-19 outbreak. The number of international students enrolled at private HEIs was significantly dropped from 92,415 in 2018 to 59,013 in 2019 ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019](#); [Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2020](#)). The pandemic has worsened the enrolment to 58,063 in 2021 ([Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022](#)). Financial difficulties and the intense competition these institutions face throughout the nation contribute to this effect ([Hunter, 2020](#)).

With a goal of 250,000 international students by 2025 and 335,000 by 2030, Malaysia has set an ambitious goal to grow its global market and create a centre for international education ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020](#)). More than half of the international students attend private higher education institutions ([World Bank, 2022](#)). Through student tuition and living costs, private HEIs have helped the Malaysian economy to expand ([Ministry of Higher Education, 2020](#)). By meeting the goal, private HEIs are anticipated to contribute RM 25.7 billion to GDP and economic growth in 2025 and RM 33.5 billion in 2030 as a result of the increase in the number of international students studying in the nation ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020](#)).

Malaysia is gaining a reputation for offering high-quality educational opportunities. Malaysian universities have improved in a few university rating leagues. For instance, the University of Malaya ranked 301-350 in THE World University Rankings 2022 and 65th in the QS World University Rankings in 2022. In the same year, several private universities began to appear in the ranking table, including Universiti Teknologi Petronas (ranked 361), Taylor's University (ranked 284), and UCSI University (ranked 284). In the QS World University Rankings 2021, Malaysian university programmes placed sixth overall in Asia and fifth in terms of the number of universities listed ([Krishnan, 2022](#)).

Beyond university rankings, Malaysia is a secure and peaceful nation. Malaysia was ranked 20th among the world's most peaceful countries in 2017 by the Institute for Economics & Peace, demonstrating that it is safe for international students to pursue their academic goals here. Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, has been named one of the most affordable cities for international students to pursue higher education. In light of this, Malaysia's living and educational costs are relatively reasonable compared to other nations ([Menan, 2022](#)). Due to this, Malaysia is now a popular study destination for students from abroad.

Despite these drawbacks, Malaysia encountered fierce competition in the market for international student mobility. Singapore, Korea, and China are some of the education hubs in the Asian continent with which Malaysia competes to attract international students (Chong, 2019). In order to maintain its competitiveness, Malaysia must look at factors that affect international students' choice to study in Malaysia. This paper examines the factors that influence international students' decisions to enroll in private higher education programmes in Malaysia. The findings of this study can be valuable to policymakers, educators, and higher education institutions in Malaysia, as they provide insights into the factors that influence international students' choice to enroll at private HEIs. The results may also be useful for marketing and recruitment strategies aimed at attracting more international students to Malaysian private HEIs.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Push and Pull Theory

The push-pull hypothesis helps to explain why international students choose to study abroad rather than in their home country. Past research have carried out numerous studies to determine the push and pull factors that influence the mobility of international students. Findings show that international students are encouraged to leave their home country due to push factors relating to home country's challenges. These include inadequate study facilities, family circumstances, a lack of financial aid, unemployment, slow economic growth, and subpar educational institutions in their home country. Meanwhile, the host country has pull factors that entice international students to study at host country rather than in their home country. The majority of international students are drawn to the host country because of its high standard of education, study facilities, recognition of the country, reputation, economic growth, cost of living, high employment rate, and good pay, as well as the variety of programmes it offers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

2.2. International Students' Choice

For international students, the decision to pursue higher education abroad is a multistep process influenced by various push and pull factors. According to some researchers, push factors such as limited opportunities in their home country due to high tuition fees or a lack of programmes motivate international students to study abroad. Pull factors, on the other hand, such as the reputation of the host country's institutions, tuition fees, and programmes offered, can entice international students to pursue their studies abroad (Teah, 2019). Many researchers have discovered that the cost of tuition fees, programme offerings, and the reputation of institutions in the host country are pertinent factors attracting international students to study abroad. Migin et al. (2015) discovered, for example, that these factors played a significant role in international students' decision to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

2.3. Programme offered

Various factors influence international students' decision to pursue higher education. These include the type of programme offered, the quality of the programme, the structure of the courses, and the length of study. The curriculum and the course offerings are significant factors that impact the decision of international students to study in Malaysian universities, according to Avery and Hoxby (2004) study. Yet, some experts think the most

critical factor influencing whether international students decide to continue their studies abroad is the programme's quality. Also, numerous studies have revealed that these students examine various factors, including the programme's offerings, quality, structure, and level of recognition, and whether the programme is recognized locally and worldwide (Munisamy et al., 2014).

Migin et al. (2015) conducted another study that emphasised the significance of the programme and course offerings. The researcher concluded that international students are more likely to study abroad if the programme of interest is unavailable in their home country. Similarly, Chong and Amli Hazlin (2014) state that programme offerings are one of the driving forces behind the international student movement. Chong and Amli Hazlin (2013) found in a separate study that Saudi Arabia does not offer engineering programmes to female students. As a result, Saudi women leave their home country to pursue their education in countries where the programme is available.

According to Zainurin (2011) empirical findings, the programme and courses offered by the institutions are the primary considerations for international students before enrolling in the university. Previous research has found a relationship between the programmes offered and the choice of international students. Hence, the proposed hypothesis is as follows:

H1: There is a significant relationship between the programme offered and international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

2.4. Cost of Education

The primary factor influencing international students' decision to study at Malaysian HEIs is the cost of education, which includes tuition and living expenses. Maringe (2006), Ivy (2008), Oliveira and Soares (2016), and Zainurin (2011) have all conducted extensive research on this factor. Maringe (2006), Ivy (2008), Shuai and Lang (2017) argue that tuition costs influence international students' decisions to study abroad because high tuition fees can be a significant financial burden for some families. According to Oliveira and Soares (2016), scholarships can benefit international students studying in another country.

According to Teah's (2019) research, roughly 90% of international students in Malaysia are financially supported by their parents. Malaysia is an appealing destination for these students due to its lower cost of education and living expenses. According to Migin et al. (2015), Malaysia is one of the most affordable education and living expenditures compared to other study destination countries. Furthermore, according to Zainurin (2011) empirical findings, tuition fees are the second-most important factor international students consider before enrolling in a university. Thus, the proposed hypothesis is the following:

H2: There is a significant relationship between the cost of education and international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs

2.5. Reputation and Recognition of Institutions

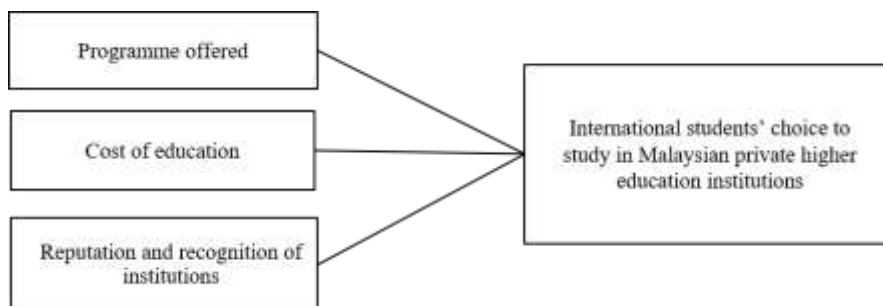
While considering studying abroad, international students frequently emphasize an institution's reputation and prestige. Many researchers, including Cubillo et al. (2006),

Migin et al. (2015), and Munisamy et al. (2014) have weighed in on the significance of this factor. Cubillo et al. (2006) discovered that an institution's reputation substantially impacts international students' decisions to enroll in higher education. Migin et al. (2015) suggested that international students are extremely discerning when choosing a university and that a renowned and well-known college can boost career chances and lead to higher-paying positions. The empirical findings of Munisamy et al. (2014) revealed that reputation and recognition were ranked as the most influential factors in international students' decisions to study abroad. These researchers propose rankings, accomplishments, and international acclaim should determine an institution's reputation and recognition. This is especially important given the abundance of private higher education options available to international students. Reputation and recognition are essential considerations for international students who wish to study abroad. As such, the following is the suggested hypothesis:

H3: There is a significant relationship between reputation and recognition of institution and international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

Based on the above literature review, the following theoretical framework was developed as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



3. Method

Convenience sampling was used to collect survey responses from international students studying at Malaysian private HEIs. An online survey was distributed to students from the four types of institutions: private universities, private university colleges, private colleges, and international campus branches. A total of 110 responses were collected for analysis, and Cronbach's alpha and Pearson's correlation analysis were used to analyze the data collected from the survey.

3.1. Survey Instrument

The scales measuring the independent and dependent variables were adapted from past research; refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement Scale

| Item no. | Measurement items | Sources adapted from |
|------------------------|---|----------------------|
| Program offered | | |
| 1. | The program offered by my institution is recognized globally. | |

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2. The program offered by my institution is recognized by prospective employers.
 3. The program offered by my institution provides a better career prospect after graduating. Migin et al. (2015)
 4. My institution provides the opportunity for me to pursue a postgraduate program.

Cost of education

1. The cost of the program offered at my university is reasonable.
2. The cost of accommodation at my university is affordable.
3. The cost of living at my university is considered low. Migin et al. (2015)
4. The method of payment system at my university is convenient.

Reputations and recognition of an institutions

1. My university offers high-quality and standard programmes.
2. My university has obtained great achievements.
3. My university has a higher quality of education compared to other institutions. Migin et al. (2015)
4. My university has a reputable image.

International students' choice

1. Private higher education institutions in Malaysia are globally recognized.
 2. Private higher education institutions in Malaysia have academic linkage with other educational institutions. Teah (2019)
 3. Graduating from private higher education institutions in Malaysia has a higher employability rate.
 4. Private higher education institutions in Malaysia have a broad program offering.
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4. Results of the findings

As shown in [Table 2](#), this study included 76 (69.1%) males and 34 (30.9%) females out of 110 respondents. In this study, 45 (40.9%) of respondents are between the ages of 18 and 21, while 42 (38.2%) are between the ages of 22 and 25.

Table 2: Demographic of Respondents

| Characteristics | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 76 | 69.1 |
| | Female | 34 | 30.9 |
| | Total | 110 | 100 |
| Age | 18-21 | 45 | 40.9 |
| | 22-25 | 42 | 38.2 |
| | 26-30 | 14 | 12.7 |
| | 31 and above | 9 | 8.2 |
| | Total | 110 | 100 |
| Year of Study | First-year | 32 | 29.1 |
| | Second-year | 34 | 30.9 |
| | Third-year | 28 | 25.5 |
| | Fourth-year | 5 | 4.5 |
| | Others | 11 | 9.9 |
| | Total | 110 | 99.9 |

| | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| Types of the HEIs | Private university | 94 | 85.5 |
| | Private university college | 14 | 12.7 |
| | Private college | 1 | 0.9 |
| | International campus branch | 1 | 0.9 |
| | Total | 110 | 100 |
| Level of study | Foundation | 11 | 10 |
| | Diploma | 13 | 11.8 |
| | Degree | 70 | 63.6 |
| | Master | 14 | 12.7 |
| | PhD | 2 | 1.8 |
| Field of study | Total | 110 | 100 |
| | Engineering | 50 | 45.5 |
| | Science, Mathematics, and Computing | 40 | 36.3 |
| | Social Sciences, Business, and Law | 17 | 15.4 |
| | Health and Welfare | 1 | 0.9 |
| | Arts and Humanities | 1 | 0.9 |
| | Others | 1 | 0.9 |
| Total | 110 | 99.9 | |

The second-year students have the highest participation rate, with 34 (30.9%), 32 (29.1%) in the first year, and 28 (25.5%) in the third year of the study. According to the results, the majority of international students attend 94 (85.5%) private universities and 14 (12.7%) private university colleges. Meanwhile, the majority of international students (63.6%) are pursuing a degree. According to the findings, the majority of international students (50%) are enrolled in engineering programmes, 40 (36.3%) in Science, Mathematics, and Computing, and 17 (15.4%) in Social Sciences, Business, and Law.

4.2. Cronbach Alpha

The reliability of the items used to measure the dependent and independent factors is examined using the Cronbach Alpha test, refer to [Table 3](#).

Table 3: Results of Reliability Test

| Variables | Number of item | Cronbach's alpha | Reliability |
|--|----------------|------------------|-------------|
| Programme offered | 4 | 0.793 | Acceptable |
| Cost of education | 4 | 0.786 | Acceptable |
| Reputation and recognition of an institution | 4 | 0.820 | Acceptable |
| International students' choice | 4 | 0.834 | Acceptable |

According to the results, the Cronbach alpha score, which measures the reliability of the independent variables for the programme offered, is 0.793, the cost of education is 0.786, and the reputation and recognition of institutions is 0.820. Finally, the Cronbach alpha score of 0.834 for the dependent variable, international students' choice. The Cronbach alpha values for the four variables are above 0.7, meaning they pass the reliability test at the required level.

4.3. Pearson Correlation Analysis

4.3.1. Programme Offered

Based on the result shown in Table 4, the Pearson correlation coefficients of the programme offered are 0.446. The programme positively correlates with the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. The significance level between the programme offered and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs is $p = .000$, which is statistically significant. Thus, H1 is supported because there is a significant relationship between the programme offered and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

Table 4: Results of Pearson Correlation

| | | Program Offered | Cost of Education | Reputation and recognition of an institution | International student's choice |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Program Offered | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .268** | .543** | .446** |
| | Sig. (2 tailed) | | .005 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 110 | 110 | 110 | 110 |
| Cost of education | Pearson Correlation | .268** | 1 | .485** | .336** |
| | Sig. (2 tailed) | .005 | | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 110 | 110 | 110 | 110 |
| Reputation and recognition of an institution | Pearson Correlation | .543** | .485** | 1 | .642** |
| | Sig. (2 tailed) | .000 | .000 | | .000 |
| | N | 110 | 110 | 110 | 110 |
| International student's choice | Pearson Correlation | .446** | .336** | .642** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2 tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 110 | 110 | 110 | 110 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed)

The three hypotheses are therefore supported by the above results; see Table 5. All three variables, programme offered, cost of education and reputation and recognition influence international students' choice to study at private Malaysian higher education institutions.

Table 5: Summary of Hypotheses

| Hypotheses | Relationship of the variables | Results |
|------------|--|-----------|
| H1 | There is a relationship between the programme offered and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. | Supported |
| H2 | There is a relationship between the cost of education and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. | Supported |

| | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| H3 | There is a relationship between the reputation and recognition of institutions of the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. | Supported |
|----|--|-----------|

4.3.2. Cost of Education

According to the findings in [Table 4](#), the Pearson correlation coefficient for the cost of education is 0.336. The cost of education has a weak positive correlation with international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. The significance between the cost of education and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs is $p = .000$, indicating a highly significant relationship. As a result, H2 is supported because it implies a significant relationship between education costs and international students' decision to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

4.3.3. Reputation and Recognition of Institution

As indicated in [Table 4](#) the Pearson Correlation coefficient's result on the institution's reputation and recognition is 0.642. The reputation and recognition of institutions have a strong positive correlation with international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs. The significance between the reputations and recognition of institutions and the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs is $p = .000$, which implies a highly significant relationship. As such, H3 is supported because there is a significant relationship between the reputation and recognition of an institution and international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

5. Discussion

Programme and course structure offered could be one factor influencing the international students' choices to study at private HEIs. Thus, international students are likely to pursue their studies abroad if the programme they are interested in is not offered in their home country. In addition, the one offered abroad is well recognized in their home country. Most international students are more conscious of choosing the programme of study as they feel that the programmes offered by these institutions will provide better career prospects after graduation and the opportunity to further their studies at the same institution. According to the empirical research conducted by [Zainurin \(2011\)](#), the institution's programme and course offerings are the most important factors for international students before enrolling in a university. According to the results of the current studies, the programme has a moderately positive correlation with international students' decisions to study at Malaysian private HEIs, and H1 is supported. The results of the previous study by [Zainurin \(2011\)](#) and the current study confirm a correlation between the programme offered the international students' choice to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

Regarding international students studying abroad, the cost of education is an essential factor to consider. This cost includes tuition, university fees, and housing expenses, which can be difficult for families with average incomes. However, Malaysia offers a more affordable programme than other countries, and approximately 90% of international students receive financial assistance from their parents due to Malaysia's lower education and living expenses ([Teah, 2019](#)). Although the cost of education and living expenses may not concern parents, international students consider this factor when choosing a university. According to [Zainurin \(2011\)](#) empirical research, tuition fees are the second most important factor for international students when deciding which university to

attend. Furthermore, recent studies show a strong correlation between the cost of education and the decision of international students to study at Malaysian private higher education institutions (HEIs), supporting hypothesis H2. Previous research by [Zainurin \(2011\)](#), [Teah \(2019\)](#), and recent studies all confirm the link between education costs and international students' preference for Malaysian private HEIs.

The institution's reputation significantly impacts international students' decision to pursue higher education. International students value an institution's reputation and recognition because they believe graduating from a reputable institution will benefit their future employment prospects. [Munisamy et al. \(2014\)](#) study ranked an institution's reputation and recognition as the most critical factor influencing international students' decision to study abroad. Current research supports hypothesis H3 by confirming a strong positive correlation between an institution's reputation and recognition and the decision of international students to study at Malaysian private higher education institutions (HEIs). As a result, both current and previous research shows a strong relationship between an institution's reputation and recognition and the choice of international students to pursue higher education at Malaysian private HEIs. Among the three independent variables investigated, the results show that the reputation and recognition variable has the strongest relationship to international students' choice when selecting Malaysian private HEIs for their study.

6. Recommendation

The programmes offered by Malaysian private higher education institutions (HEIs) significantly impact international students' decision to enroll in them. As a result, HEIs must prioritise programme development and enhancement to meet prospective international students' needs and expectations. This can be accomplished by reviewing past enrolment data or feedback from recruitment agents to identify popular programmes sought by international students. HEIs should also develop customised recruitment strategies that highlight their distinct strengths and offerings and target specific groups of international students who may be particularly interested in these factors.

Furthermore, offering programmes that lead to better career opportunities can attract more international students. As a result, HEIs should consider developing additional programmes, such as skills training, to allow international students to learn new skills and provide courses that meet international standards. This will influence international students' choice of Malaysian private HEIs by providing better career opportunities.

Several strategies can be used to increase the attractiveness of Malaysian private HEIs to international students. Offering competitive tuition rates and scholarships is one such strategy. This is significant because tuition costs a significant amount of money and influences international students' decisions. Institutions that offer low tuition and scholarships, particularly to high-achieving students, may attract more international students and receive higher rankings. Furthermore, marketing strategies that highlight Malaysia or Kuala Lumpur as one of the most affordable cities to study abroad must be implemented. Because living expenses can account for a significant portion of the investment in studying abroad, promoting Malaysia as a low-cost study destination can increase its appeal to international students. Malaysian private HEIs can attract a diverse range of international students by offering competitive tuition rates, scholarships and promoting Malaysia as an affordable study destination.

The reputation and recognition of higher education institutions are critical factors in international students' decision-making process. These students frequently base their decisions on rankings, reputation, and recognition to determine whether or not an institution meets global standards. Hence, institutions should strive to improve their global university rankings, such as the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, to accomplish this. Promoting these rankings will assist in determining international students' decisions to study at Malaysian private HEIs.

Furthermore, building a strong brand image through effective marketing and branding strategies and consistently providing high-quality education and services can help private HEIs improve their reputation and recognition. Institutions may also consider collaborating with other institutions to improve rankings and increase access to international students.

By implementing the recommendations, Malaysian private HEIs can improve their rankings, gain a competitive edge in the global higher education market, and attract diverse international students. This will make them more attractive to international students and help them remain competitive in the global education market.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

At Universiti Tenaga Nasional, ethics committee approval is not required for data collection using the survey method as long as participant consent is obtained. Participation in the survey were entirely voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding this article's research, authorship, or publication.

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