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## FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO STUDY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN UNIVERSITIES: A CASE STUDY ON MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** The international trade in higher education services changed drastically as the changing macroeconomic environment has transformed traditional host countries of international students into a global export industry. The current study aimed to pinpoint the most influential factors that affect international students' decision to study in Malaysian universities. The focus of the study was directed towards the factors stated in previous studies from the year 2007-2018 from students' perspective. The study applied a meta-analysis to investigate these influential factors on 14 previous research papers. The findings indicated that (a) cost of education is the key factor that affects international students' choice decision of university in Malaysia; (b) learning environment plays a highly influential factor enticing students to study in Malaysia; (c) quality education and facility shape international students' mind of choice decision; and (d) decision influencer, programs offered, and academic reputation have a significant influence on students' choice decision of university. In general, the study revealed that international students enrolled in Malaysian universities to pursue high quality education in well-recognized universities to develop the required capacities and to acquire high qualifications to be competitive individuals in the labor market.

**Keywords:** International students, Malaysian higher education institution, pull-factors

## INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector moved from being subsidized education to a major foreign exchange earner. Students' evaluation criteria of higher education institutions are "the various dimensions, features or benefits of the institutions that the potential students evaluate in selecting their choice of institution" (Ancheh *et.al.*, 2007, p. 8). Students decision of the evaluative criteria is driven by many different factors. Rahman and Islam (2016) analyzed the motives behind the underlying factors that inspire students to search for diversified knowledge that lead them to look for higher learning institutions that can provide them with the profound academic knowledge, enable them to deal with different people and to experience new attitudes, permit them to get to know different cultures, allow them to be exposed to new concepts and methods, and provide them opportunity to exchange values, etc. Thus, selecting appropriate higher learning institution is considered of great importance, since it may determine not just the life and accomplishment of students' careers, but also their families.



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Before enrolling in a university, students give attention to many different factors, including the difficulty of applying, the quality of research, the qualification of the staff, the amount of fees, and availability of suitable courses (Keling *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, the status and position of the higher education institution and its reflections influence students' choice (Migin *et al.*, 2015). Fernandez (2010) concluded that students pursue higher education to improve their job prospects and to obtain the required knowledge and experience. He determined four dimensions in selecting higher education institutions. These dimensions are students' reason for pursuing higher education, the influential factors on selection a university, the type of university (public or private), and the sources of information they use. One of the most preferred sources of information that students in this era uses is the internet (Fernandez, 2010). Padlee *et al.* (2010) and Morris (2011) stated that rankings and mass media, friends, parents, other students, teachers, and counselors may also be valuable factors to students' choice and serve as sources of information in addition to campus visits.

Using a sample of Asian international students that reside in Melbourne-Australia, Gomes (2014) revealed that those students consider themselves foreigners who are pursuing education in foreign country. They have their social networks that are presented by their fellow international students. In most cases, their relationships are restricted to their home nation as well as other Asian nationalities. The importance of social networks for Asian international students is represented by the community that supports them while living a transient life in foreign nation.

Bagharun (2004) analyzed the selection criteria of public higher education institutions in Malaysia by international students. He identified five factors, that is, (1) reputation and value of education, (2) program structure, (3) facilities and resources, (4) choice influencers, and (5) customer orientation. It is important to understand how some underlying factors shape the decisions for higher education institutions to effectively make the necessary changes to attract more students nationally and internationally.

This research used a meta-analysis approach of the criteria for selecting and factors influencing international students' choice of higher education institutions in Malaysia. The meta-analysis approach was employed to make use of separate studies and synthesize its results and conclusions, convert the variety of statistics into a common metric, and thus reach some conclusions about the factors influencing international students' choice of higher education institutions in Malaysia. Since this study is primarily interested in establishing a comprehensive view of the way that international students make their decision to study in Malaysia, this study focused on reviewing recent studies of the international students' selection criteria and influential factors for Malaysia only. This study limits its review to empirical studies to reflect what researchers have observed rather than what scholars have proposed.

## METHODOLOGY

### Literature Search

To perform this meta-analysis, relevant empirical studies were thoroughly collected from the publicly available literature. A digital copy of the literature was collected from one of the following sources and search tools: (1) Online Research Databases which include ERIC, Science Direct, Research Gate, Springer link, and EBSCO; (2) Articles published in journals interested in higher education studies, especially Malaysia or Asia such as International Journal of Asian Social Science, Malaysian Management Review, Higher Education Studies, International Journal of Business and Social Science and others; (3) Google Scholar search engine; and (4) Hand search for empirical studies concerning this topic, this was done during a check on the references cited in relevant articles. The systematic search was conducted using a various group of keywords such as Malaysia higher education, international students, college choice, selection criteria, influencing factors, study in Malaysia, evaluative criteria, higher education, choice decision, and decision making.

### Selection criteria

Several criteria were determined to decide which articles will be included in this meta-analysis.

1. *Data*: relevant articles published during or after the year 2007 were selected. The year 2007 was selected as a springboard for the search of the literature in order to provide an up-to-date representation sample of recent studies.
2. *Independent variable*: The independent variables of interest were factors that directly associated with the international students' selection criteria of their higher education institutions in Malaysia.
3. *Dependent variables*: The dependent variable of interest was the choice decision made by international students for higher education institutions in Malaysia.
4. *Independence*: Studies included were independent of each other so as not to inflate the results of a particular study.
5. *Data included*: Studies included must have reported at least three different pull factors that influence international students' choice decision in order of the most influential.
6. *Location*: The search was limited to studies conducted on Malaysian higher education institutions.

### Study Characteristics

The data recorded in this study included the following data stated in the selected studies: (1) List of studied pull factors, (2) 1st priority pull factor, (3) 2nd priority pull factor, (4) 3rd priority pull factor, (5) other important factor(s), (6) students' country origin, (7) students' study level, (8) instrument, and (9) research design.



## Statistical Procedures

This study depends on repetition of pull factors as a statistical procedure to determine the most effective factors on students' choice decision, a comparison between the results of the selected studies was conducted, and conclusions were drawn from this comparison.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 14 previous studies met the criteria for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Table 1 indicates the list of selected studies. The table also includes the students' study level, instrument used, research design employed, Malaysian states involved, and the universities listed. The 14 studies include at least 81 private higher education institution, and 6 public higher education institutions, in at least 8 different states. The study also includes undergraduate and postgraduate students. Although the number of studies included in each meta-analysis is small, the conclusions are based on a wide range of different institutions in different states, and a large number of individual cases.

**Table 1** General Information

Author(s)	Year	Students Study level	Instrument	Research Design	Malaysian State	University
Archeh, Krishnan and Nertjahja	2007	UGs	Large-scale quantitative survey	Quantitative	Several states, not clearly specified	81 Malaysian private HEIs
Rahman and Ismail	2016	PGs	Interviews	Qualitative (case study)	Kuala Lumpur	International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM)
Baruan, Awang and Palle	2011	N/S	Questionnaire	Factor analysis (descriptive statistics and correlation methods)	Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, Ipoh, Cyberjaya and Melaka	Six Malaysian private HEIs
Zhang and Chen	2012	N/S	Questionnaire	Cross-sectional survey	Klang Valley in Selangor	SEGi University College, HELP University, KDU University College and Limkokwing University





Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar	2013	UGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative survey	Several states, not clearly specified	Seventeen HEIs
Mein, Falaht, Yaid and Khatibi	2015	UGs	Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics and correlation	Klang Valley in Selangor	Five private HEIs
Yee and Mokhtar	2014	UGs	A semi-structured interview	Qualitative	Not Specified	Not Specified
Ebak, Nor and Mamon	2015	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics and correlation	Kuala Lumpur	Different private institutions located in Kuala Lumpur
Dahari and Anduh	2011	PGs	A direct survey	AHP Analytic hierarchy process	Gombak, Selangor	International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah	2017	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative	Perlis	Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)
Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad	2009	UGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative survey	Several states, not clearly specified	Five HEIs
Zeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain	2013	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative	Selangor	Two private universities in Selangor
Yusuf, Ismail and Jilani	2016	N/S	Questionnaire	Quantitative	Not Specified	Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)
Yee, Yean and Jilani	2018	N/S	A semi-structured interview	Qualitative	Klang Valley in Selangor	Private HEIs

Note: UGs= Undergraduates, PGs= Postgraduates, N/S = Not Specified

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- Further analysis of the selected studies revealed that a number of factors are more influential than others on student's choice decision of university. In the following



analysis, only the top three most influential factors in each study were considered. The following section shows these factors and the studies that discussed it:

#### 1. Cost of Education

The factor “Cost of Education” held the first position in these factors and was repeated 9 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Rahman and Islam (2016), Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015), Yee and Mokhtar (2014), Dahari and Abduh (2011), Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017), Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007), Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009), Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013), Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018).

#### 2. Learning Environment

The factor “Learning Environment” held the second position in these factors and was repeated 6 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007); Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011); Zhang and Chen (2012); Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009); Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018); and Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016)

#### 3. Quality of Education

The factor “Quality of Education” held the third position in these factors and was repeated 5 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Rahman and Islam (2016); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Yee and Mokhtar (2014); Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016)

#### 4. Facility Provided

The factor “Facility Provided” held the third position in these factors and was repeated 5 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated:

Studies
Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Zhang and Chen (2012); Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Dahari and Abduh (2011)



#### 5. Decision Influencer

The factor “Decision Influencer” held the fourth position in these factors and was repeated 3 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated:

Studies
Basiharun, Awang and Padlee (2011); Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013)

#### 6. Programs Offered

The factor “Programs Offered” also held the fourth position in these factors and was repeated 3 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Dahari and Abduh (2011); Zhang and Chen (2012)

#### 7. Academic Reputation

The factor “Academic Reputation” also held the fourth position in these factors and was repeated 3 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Yee and Mokhtar (2014); Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015); Yee, Yean and Jit-Yi (2018).

#### Future Job Prospects

The factor “Future Job Prospects” held the fifth position in these factors and was repeated 2 times in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Studies
Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013); Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007).

#### Location

The factor “Location” held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated:

Study
Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015)



#### 10. Peaceful Country

The factor “Peaceful Country” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Study
Roshman and Islam (2016)

#### 11. Culture

The factor “Culture” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Study
Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011)

#### 12. Emotional Support:

The factor “Emotional Support” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Study
Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim & Saad (2009)

#### 13. Emotional Support

The factor “Emotional Support” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Study
Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009)

#### 14. Better Understanding of Global Issues

The factor “Better Understanding of Global Issues” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated.

Study
Zeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013)

#### 15. University Service

The factor “University Service” also held the sixth position in these factors and was repeated one time in the selected studies. The following table shows the researchers who conducted the studies in which this factor was repeated:







Study
Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016)

As for the factors repetition disregarding its position between the most influential factors, the results were as follow:

#### 1. Cost of Education

This factor held the first position among the other factors and was repeated 12 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Rahman and Islam (2016); Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015); Yee and Mokhtar (2014); Dahari and Abduh (2011); Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007); Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011); Zhang and Chen (2012); Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018)

#### 2. Facility Provided

This factor held the second position among the other factors and was repeated 6 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Zhang and Chen (2012); Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Dahari and Abduh (2011); Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015)

#### 3. Learning Environment

This factor held the second position among the other factors and was repeated 6 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007); Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011); Zhang and Chen (2012); Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009); Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018); Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016).

#### 4. Programs Offered

This factor held the third position among the other factors and was repeated 5 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Dahari and Abduh (2011); Zhang and Chen (2012); Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015); Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013).

#### 5. Decision Influencer

This factor held the third position among the other factors and was repeated 5 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below:

Studies
Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011); Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013); Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Zhang and Chen (2012)

#### 6. Quality of Education

This factor held the third position among the other factors and was repeated 5 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Rahman and Islam (2016); Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013); Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015); Yee and Mokhtar (2014); Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016).

#### 7. Academic Reputation

This factor held the fourth position among the other factors and was repeated 4 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Yee and Mokhtar (2014); Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015); Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013); Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018).

#### Location

This factor held the fifth position among the other factors and was repeated 3 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015); Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017); Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009)

#### Future Job Prospects

This factor held the sixth position among the other factors and was repeated 2 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.



Studies
Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013); Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007).

#### 1. Culture

This factor held the seventh position among the other factors and was repeated 3 times in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below:

Studies
Baharun, Awang and Padlee (2011), Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015), Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009)

#### 1. Peaceful Country

This factor held the eighth position among the other factors and was repeated only once in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Rahman and Islam (2016)

#### 1. Emotional Support

This factor held the eighth position among the other factors and was repeated only once in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Studies
Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009)

#### 1. Better Understanding of Global Issues

This factor also held the eighth position among the other factors and was repeated once only in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Study
Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013)

#### 1. University Services

This factor also held the eighth position among the other factors and was repeated once only in the studies selected for the analysis as shown in the table below.

Study
Wahid, Ismail and Lim (2016)

## DISCUSSION

The current study reviewed the extended literature that stated significantly influential factors on students' choice decision of Malaysian higher education institutions. The 21<sup>st</sup> century indeed witnessed a massive migration of students around the world. Students move from one country to another to have better chances of education. In the



past, most of the international students were financially supported by their governments through scholarship grants. However, nowadays most international students have to pay for their education abroad. The choice decision of selecting higher education institutions can be the most challenging processes an international student has to make because many factors influence this process.

The current study found that the factor "Cost of Education" is the most influential factor in students' choice decision of higher education. Students seek higher education to advance their future job prospects to earn more, yet higher education can be very expensive, thus limiting their choices of university. The second influential factor is "Learning Environment". This indicates that the key motivation that drives international students to choose a particular university in Malaysia is their desire to have a high-quality learning environment. The third influential factors are "Quality Education" and "Facility Provided". International students search for a university that offers all needed facilities for the students to achieve high quality education. Quality education means "that students can excel in their studies and obtain good results because of the availability of reputable academics to provide good teaching" (Ancheh, Krishnan & Nurtjahja, 2007, p. 8). The fourth influential factors are "Decision Influencer", "Programs Offered" and "Academic Reputation". These factors support the point made previously, that students desire to have quality education. It also shows that students wish to make the right decision because such a choice could affect them financially, emotionally, philosophically, or even ideologically for the rest of their life. The importance of these factors is to advance their chances of obtaining good jobs after graduation, which is also the fifth most influential factor.

On the other hand, the factor "Decision Influencer" shows that the students may be influenced by factors other than academic related. Students' choice may be altered by friend or a family member or other decision influencers. A student may choose a specific location in a country or a city that he/she has relatives, he or she may choose location based on its political status or cultural attractiveness.

The main purpose of this study was to highlight the significance of the group of pull factors that has an important impact on the choice decision of Malaysian universities on international students. The results of this study may provide valuable information on Southeast Asian universities on the criteria they are required to focus to attract international students to study in their institutions.

## CONCLUSION

International students seek to gain advanced higher education in international universities for many reasons including advancing their future job prospects and securing their financial position in the future. The present study discussed the influential factors in regard to international students' decisions in higher education. One of the main factors that influenced international students seeking education in foreign countries is the cost of education. The study found other factors that affect





international students' choice decision. These factors include facility provided, learning environment, and quality of education.

International students choose to enroll in higher education institutions in Malaysia for various reasons. These reasons include the pursuit of high-quality education in well-recognized universities, as well as being able to access quality education facilities that will eventually provide them with the needed knowledge, skills, and competencies to compete in the labor market.

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