

What Makes International Students Choose Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions? A Meta-Analysis 2007-2019

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Abstract--- *The selection of a particular higher education institutions is an important matter that may shape not just the life and accomplishment of students' careers, but also their families. The aim of the current study is to investigate the factors that influence the students' choice of Malaysian higher education institutions through reviewing previous literature. A meta-analysis was conducted on several previous studies to figure out the factors that influence students in making a decision on their choice. Previous studies were retrieved from ERIC, Science Direct, Research Gate, Springer link, and EBSCO with a focus on the Malaysian context. The results showed that students give high consideration to facilities, learning environment, education quality, reputations and location when making a choice to study at higher education institutions. The results of this study may provide valuable information for Malaysian higher education institutions on the criteria they are required to focus on to attract international students to study in their institutions.*

Keywords--- *International Students, College Choice, Higher Education, Pull-Factor, Influential Factor, Learning Environment, Meta-Analysis.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The international trade in higher education services changed drastically during the post Second World War (Jones, 2014). The changing of macroeconomic environment has transformed traditional host countries of international students into a global export industry. The higher education sector moved from being subsidized education to a major foreign exchange earner (Parker, 2012). As a result of increased demand for higher education in traditional host countries (for example US, UK, Canada, France, Holland, and Australia) and increased cost of studying internationally, the benefits of transforming the higher education sector into a global export industry also increased. This resulted in a trend towards twinning arrangements between the universities from traditional host countries and local education institutions from source countries. This change in scenario now allows international students to acquire local education in the source countries (Ancheh, Krishnan, & Nurtjahja, 2007).

The rising costs of higher education overseas, the rising demands for higher education, and the increasing numbers of private colleges, played an important role in changing the status of higher education in Malaysia from being one of the traditional suppliers of international students to becoming one of a regional centre of educational excellence (Li, Said, Jopri & Yusof, 2017; Zain, Aspah, Abdullah, & Ebrahimi, 2017). The transformation of the country's higher education sector coupled with the strong campus leadership in managing change and challenges of

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internationalization allowed it to become a global export industry (Said, Ahmad, Mustaffa, & Ghani, 2015; Tan, 2002). At this stage, the landscape of higher education sector experienced paramount change. Countries with major sources of international students now became competitors to traditional host countries. However, the emergence of new providers of higher education services changed the competitively and scape, to the extent that many higher education institutions in Malaysia have now adopted some business strategies to market their products and attract both national and international students (Said, Ahmad, Yusof, & Jusoh, 2015). Thus, the current understanding of the factors influencing students' preferences in selecting higher education institutions would need to be reviewed.

According to Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007), students' evaluation of higher education can be defined as "the various dimensions, features or benefits of the institutions that the potential students will evaluate in selecting their choice of institution" (p. 8). The evaluation of higher education from the students' perspective was found to be multidimensional, reliable, and stable, as well as strongly related with the instructors and not affected by factors that may diminish the quality of the evaluation (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis, & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 230). The choice of the evaluation criteria made by the students is usually derived by certain factors, and despite the minor differences among students, it is safe to say that these choices usually fall under broad criteria. That said, the study of Erskine, Chuang, and Finlayson (2016) concluded that students' decision to apply for a university is affected by the university ranking and brand recognition. The study of Dao and Thorpe (2016) showed that the quality of the facilities and services is the main determinant of the students' choice. They also noted that the programme duration, and the number of majors within the programme, as well as the study fees are also important factors that affect their choice. The study of Rahman and Islam (2016) explained the motives that lay behind the underlying factors. The study showed that the students' aim for obtaining diversified knowledge will certainly lead them to search for higher education institutions whether at the local or at the international level in their attempt to decide on an institution that provides them with solid academic knowledge, and allows them to express new experiences and interacts with other cultures. Thus, selecting a particular higher learning institution is an important matter that may shape not just the students' lives and accomplishment of their careers, but also those of their families.

For a student to enrol in a particular higher education institution, he/she has to consider numerous factors related to that institution including location, reputation and excellence, academic curriculum, facilities, tuition fees, financial aid, work opportunities, and affiliation with other institutions (Keling, Krishnan & Nurtjahja, 2007; Li et al., 2017; Tantivorakulchai, 2015). Out of these factors, LeBlanc and Nguyen (1999) found that the cost of the study in terms of quality is the most influential factor. Yusof et al. (2008) noted that availability of the required programme is a very important attribute. Ford, Joseph and Joseph (1999) found that the time required to complete a programme in terms of cost and academic excellence is a criterion of choice of the university. Other studies found that students expect an offer of financial assistance before enrolling in a university (Douglas, Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2015; Yusof et al., 2008). In addition to financial assistance, affordable fees are also expected by some students (Ismail, 2009; Massey & Burrow, 2012). Maringe (2006) added the flexibility of fee instalments and availability of monetary guide have huge impact on students' choice of higher education institutions.

Studies indicated that students considered many factors before enrolling in a university. These factors include the difficulty of applying, the quality of research, the qualification of the staff, the amount of tuition fees, and the

availability of suitable courses (Keling et al., 2007). Fernandez (2010) reported that students pursue higher education to improve their job prospects and to gain knowledge and experience. Fernandez (2010) determined four dimensions in selecting higher education institutions: reasons for pursuing higher education, influential factors on selection of a university, type of university (public or private), and sources of information the students used. A preferable source of information for students to use in this era is internet (Fernandez, 2010). Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun (2010) and Morris (2011) stated that rankings and mass media, friends, parents, other students, teachers, and counsellors may also be valuable to students' choice and serve as sources of information in addition to campus visits. Additionally, the status and position of the higher education institution and its reflections may also influence students' choice (Migin, Falahat, Yajid&Khatibi, 2015).

Sidin, Hussin and Tan (2003) examined the selection criteria of both public and private higher education institutions and identified five factors: (1) personal, (2) academic quality and facilities, (3) socialization, (4) campus, and (5) financial assistance. Baharun (2004) analysed the selection criteria for public higher education institutions and identified the following five factors: (1) reputation and value of education, (2) programme structure, (3) facilities and resources, (4) choice influencers, and (5) customer orientation. Ancheh et al. (2007) listed 24 variables to identify the evaluation criteria for the selection of private universities and colleges in Malaysia. They found that quality of the institution, and recognition and reputation of the institution dimension were the biggest determinants. Keling et al. (2007) found that the most influential factor that students evaluated in selecting their choice of the institutions is the reputation of the institution. Ismail (2009) indicated that students' satisfaction with the college choice depend on their satisfaction with the information they received regarding academic recognition.

It is important to understand how some underlying factors shape the decisions that students make in order for higher education institutions to effectively make the necessary changes to attract more students nationally and internationally. This research employed a meta-analysis approach of the criteria for selecting higher learning institutions and factors influencing international students' choice of higher education institutions in Malaysia. A meta-analysis allows us 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. This study is primarily interested in establishing a comprehensive view of the way that international students make their decisions to study in Malaysia. This study focused on reviewing recent studies of the international students' selection criteria and influential factors in Malaysia only. This study limited its review to empirical studies to reflect on what researchers have observed rather than to what scholars propose.

II. METHODOLOGY

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 includes: ERIC, Science Direct, Research Gate, Springer link, and EBSCO. (2) Articles published in journals interested in higher education studies, especially in 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. (4) Hand search for empirical studies concerning this topic, which was done via a check on the references cited in relevant articles. The systematic search was conducted using various groups of keywords such as higher education selection, international students, influential factors, college choice, college selection, postgraduate studies, evaluation criteria, higher education selection criteria, and college choice decision.

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

1. Data: only relevant articles published during or after the year 2007 were selected in order to provide up-to-date representation of recent studies.
2. Independent variable: The independent variables of interest were factors that were 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 the international students of 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 reported at least three different pull factors that influence international students' choice decision ranked in order of the most influential to the least influential.
6. Location: The search was limited to studies conducted on Malaysian higher education institutions.

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

III. RESULTS

A total of 14 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Table 1 indicates the list of selected studies including the level of study, instrument, research design, and universities. Twelve of these 14 studies included at least 81 private higher education institution, and 6 public higher education institutions. The study covered undergraduate (UGs) and postgraduate (PGs) students. Although the number of studies included in the meta-analysis is small, the conclusions derived are based on a wide range of different institutions and a large number of individual cases.

The analysis of the selected studies revealed that some factors are more influential than others on students' choice decision of university. In this following analysis, only the top three most influential factors in each study were considered. Table 2 indicates the factor, its repetition, and the studies that mentioned it to be significantly influential.

Table 1: General Information

Author(s)	Year	Students' Study level	Instrument	Research Design	University
Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja	2007	UGs	Large-scale quantitative survey	Quantitative	(81) private higher education institutions
Rahman and Islam	2016	PGs & HEs	interviews	Qualitative (case study)	International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM)
Baharun, Awang and Padlee	2011	HEs	Questionnaire	Factor analysis (descriptive statistics and correlation methods)	6 private higher education institutions
Zhang and Chen	2012	HEs	Questionnaire	Cross-sectional survey	SEGi University College, HELP University, KDU University College and Limkokwing University
Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar	2013	UGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative survey	17 higher education institutions
Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi	2015	UGs	Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics and correlation methods	5 private higher education institutions
Yee and Mokhtar	2014	UGs	A semi-structured interview	Qualitative	Not Specified
Edrak, Nor and Maamon	2015	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics and correlation methods	Different private higher education institutions located in Kuala Lumpur
Dahari and Abduh	2011	PGs	A direct survey	AHP Analytic hierarchy process	International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah	2017	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative	Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)
Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad	2009	Gs	Questionnaire	Quantitative survey	5 higher education institutions
Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain	2013	UGs & PGs	Questionnaire	Quantitative	2 private universities in Selangor
Foo, Ismail and Lim	2016	HEs	Questionnaire	Quantitative	University of Malaya (UM), Islamic International University of Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)
Yee, Yean and Jia Yi	2018	HEs	A semi-structured interview	Qualitative	private higher education institutions

Table 2: Number of Repetitions of Most Influential Factors Reported in Different Studies

Factor	Repetition	Studies
Cost of education	9	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).
Facility provided	5	Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017), Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013), Zhang and Chen (2012), Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015), Dahari and Abduh (2011)
Learning environment	6	Ancheh, Krishnan & Nurtjahja (2007), Baharun, Awang & Padlee (2011), Zhang & Chen (2012), Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim & Saad (2009), Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018), Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016)
Quality of education	5	Rahman and Islam (2016), Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013), Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015), Yee and Mokhtar (2014), Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016)
Decision influencer	3	Baharun, Awang & Padlee (2011), Yusuf, Ghazali & Abdullah (2017), Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir & Hussain (2013)
Programs offered	3	Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015), Dahari and Abduh (2011), Zhang and Chen (2012)
Academic reputation	3	Yee and Mokhtar (2014), Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015), Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018).
Future graduate job prospects	2	Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013), Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007).
Location	1	Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015)

As can be seen in Table 2, the factor “cost of education” is the most influential factor, 8 studies reported this to be one of the three most influential pull factors in students’ choice decision in both public and private higher education institutions. The factor “facilities provided” came as the second most influential pull factor in students’ choice decision both in public and private higher education institutions, with a repetition factor of 5 times. Quality of education and learning environment had the same repetition factor of 4 times. However, the factor “learning environment” was prioritized in more studies making it the third most influential factor.

The factors (1) decision influencer, (2) programs offered, (3) academic reputation, (4) future graduate job prospects, and (5) location came in as the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth positions as the most influential factors, respectively. It should be mentioned that other factors such as peaceful country, emotional support, and course requirements and other factors were also mentioned by the selected studies. However, these are not as influential as the previously mentioned factors.

Table 3 below reports the most repeated factors, the number of repetitions, and the studies that reported them as the most influential.

The analysis of the selected studies revealed that some factors are more influential than others on students’ choice decision of university. In this following analysis, only the top three most influential factors in each study were considered. Table 2 indicates the factor, its repetition, and the studies that mentioned it to be significantly influential.

Table 3: The Influential Factors and its Number of Repetitions

Factor	Repetition	Studies
Cost of Education	12	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)
Facility Provided	6	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).
Programmes Offered	5	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).
Decision Influencer	5	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).
learning environment	6	Ancheh, Krishnan & Nurtjahja (2007), Baharun, Awang & Padlee (2011), Zhang & Chen (2012), Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim & Saad (2009), Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018), Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016).
Quality of Education	5	Rahman and Islam (2016), Ramalu, Abu Bakar and Nijar (2013), Edrak, Nor and Maamon (2015), Yee and Mokhtar (2014), Foo, Ismail and Lim (2016).
Academic Reputation	4	Yee and Mokhtar (2014), Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015), Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013), Yee, Yean and Jia Yi (2018).
Location	3	Migin, Falahat, Yajid and Khatibi (2015), Yusuf, Ghazali and Abdullah (2017), Dora, Ibrahim, Ramachandran, Kasim and Saad (2009)
Future Graduate Job Prospects	2	Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir and Hussain (2013), Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007).

As can be seen in Table 3, the factor “cost of education” is the most influential factor, where a total of 11 studies reported it as a significant pull factor in students’ choice decision both in public and private higher education institutions. The factor “facility provided” came as the second most influential pull factor in students’ choice decision both in public and private higher education institutions, as reported by 6 studies. The factors “programs offered” and “decision influencer” had the same number of repetition (5 times), however, the factor “programmes offered” had a higher priority in most of the studies making it the third most influential factor. The factors “learning environment”, “quality of education”, “academic reputation”, “location”, and “future graduate job prospects” came in fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth positions as the most influential factors. Table 4 illustrates a comparison between the orders of the factors between Tables 2 and 3. It is clear that the factors are in a very different order. Yet the two most influential factors “cost of education”, and “facility provided” are still categorized the same, which indicates the importance of these factors in students’ choice decision of higher education institutions.

Table 4: Comparison between Pulling Factors Priority in the Two Approaches

Factor	Order in Table (2)	Order in Table (3)
Cost of Education	1	1
Facility Provided	2	2
learning environment	3	5
Quality of Education	4	6
Decision Influencer	5	4
Programs Offered	6	3
Academic Reputation	7	7
Future Graduate Job Prospects	8	9
Location	9	8

IV. DISCUSSION

The current study reviewed the most influential factors on students' choice decision of Malaysian higher education institutions. The 21st 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 out of their own pocket for their education abroad. The choice decision of selecting particular higher education institutions can be a very challenging process for international students due to the many influential factors involved in this process.

The current study found that the factor “cost of education” is the most influential factor in students’ choice decision of higher education institutions. 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, third, and fourth most influential factors are “facility provided”, “learning environment”, and “quality of education”. This indicates that the key motivation that drives international students to choose a particular university in Malaysia is their desire to have quality education in well-recognized universities, that offer all needed facilities for the students to achieve 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 importance of these factors is to advance their chances of obtaining good jobs after graduation, which is also the 8th most influential factor. The factors “academic reputation” and “programmes offered” support the point made previously, that students desire to have quality education. Also, it 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.

On the other hand, the factors “decision influencer”, and “location” are the 5th and 9th most influential factors on students’ choice decision of higher education institution. These factors show that students may be influenced by non-academic factors. Students’ choice may be altered by a friend or a family member or other decision influencers. A student may choose a specific location in a country or a city where he/she has relatives, or he/she may choose a location based on its political status or cultural attractiveness.

The study highlighted the significance of the group of pull factors that influence international students’ choice decision of Malaysian universities. The results of this study may provide valuable information for Malaysian higher education institutions on the criteria they are required to focus on to attract students to study in their institutions.

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