

# My Life at Malaysian Public University: Satisfaction and Challenges of International Learners

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences and overall satisfaction of international students studying at a higher learning institution in Sabah, Malaysia. It provides an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing international students' satisfaction and the challenges they face, including socioeconomic and environmental conditions, as well as personal and institutional factors. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes semi-structured interviews with twenty-five international students to examine their educational activities, social interactions, administrative experiences, and living environments. This approach provides a deeper insight into the complex realities of studying abroad, highlighting key issues such as language barriers, social integration, academic workload, and the effectiveness of administrative support. The findings identified 11 themes, grouped into two main categories: socioeconomic and environmental factors, and individual-level considerations. In summary, international students face numerous challenges that impact their academic and social well-being. Language difficulties often hinder communication and learning, while limited social connections and difficulties with cultural adaptation contribute to their sense of isolation. Additionally, administrative inefficiencies and academic pressures further complicate their experience. Based on these findings, the study recommends targeted interventions, including enhanced language learning support, improved administrative efficiency, and initiatives to promote inclusivity and cross-cultural engagement on campus. By identifying and systematically explaining the factors that shape international students' satisfaction, this research contributes valuable insights to the body of knowledge on international student experiences in higher education. The results are particularly relevant to educational institutions seeking to enhance student support systems, improve service delivery, and foster a more inclusive academic and social environment for international learners.

**Keywords:** International students, satisfaction, social and academic challenges

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## INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of higher education, the influx of international students into academic institutions has marked a significant global trend, fostering cultural diversity and enriching academic environments (Marginson, 2012). The higher learning institution in Sabah, set against the stunning backdrop of Malaysia's natural beauty, has become a popular choice for students from around the world (UMS, Annual Report, 2021). Despite the increasing number of students enrolled at higher learning institutions in Sabah, a comprehensive exploration of the nuanced experiences and satisfaction levels of these students remains notably scarce.

The allure of higher learning institutions in Sabah for international students is multifaceted, encompassing affordability, proximity to home countries, the beauty of campus environments, and perceived safety (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). However, across academia, social life, administration, and daily life, the intricate tapestry of challenges and fulfilling experiences encountered by these students remains underexplored. While various studies have explored the broader landscape of international student experiences across diverse educational settings, a notable gap remains regarding the satisfaction levels and comprehensive experiences of international students at a higher education institution in Sabah. Despite their significant presence within the institution, no empirical

investigation has systematically examined the depth of their satisfaction, the challenges they face, or the areas of contentment. This study is therefore an essential endeavor to fill the void in academic scholarship.

The present study aims to bridge this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of the multifaceted experiences of international students in higher education institutions in Sabah. Through in-depth interviews and careful analysis of their narratives, this research seeks to unearth the nuances of their academic journey, their integration into the social fabric, administrative encounters, adaptation to living conditions, utilization of university resources, and overall satisfaction levels within the context of a higher learning institution in Sabah.

Understanding these dimensions is pivotal not only in comprehending the challenges faced by international students but also in formulating strategies and initiatives that promote a more inclusive and supportive environment at higher learning institutions in Sabah. By shedding light on these experiences, this study aims to answer two research questions:

1. To explore the satisfaction level of international students in terms of their learning, living, and support experience
2. To investigate the challenges that they encounter.

The findings would provide actionable insights to enhance the holistic experience of international students, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a vibrant, diverse, and thriving academic community at a higher learning institution in Sabah.

## BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Student satisfaction is defined as a student's positive assessment of diverse educational outcomes and experiences (Oliver & DeSARBO, 1989). It encompasses attitudes formed through evaluations of educational experiences, facilities, and services (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2017). Satisfaction also involves the perceived value of learning experiences (Thurmond et al, 2002), with satisfaction increasing when various forms of interactivity are incorporated. Extensive literature underscores the positive correlation between satisfaction, student engagement, and academic performance (Elshami et al., 2021; Meyer, 2014; Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2017). In this context, student satisfaction is multifaceted, encompassing factors like faculty, institution, individual learner elements, interaction/communication, course elements, and the learning environment (Abuhassna et al., 2020). Student satisfaction is associated with positive educational outcomes, such as academic achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy, whereas lower satisfaction levels can lead to academic burnout, failure, and psychological challenges (Atalayin et al., 2015; Jamshidi et al., 2017; Rahmatpour et al., 2021).

In the context of international students, prior research has explored a wide range of determinants that significantly impact their satisfaction levels throughout their educational journeys. This investigation begins with the pivotal considerations students undertake during the crucial phase of selecting their educational destination. Arambewela and Hall (2009) relate the socio-economic and environmental factors to the choice of a country as a study destination, while individual-level factors relate to the choice of the university. Notably, environmental factors, such as the perceived safety and security of the chosen location, have a substantial influence on international students' overall satisfaction (Wang & Tseng, 2011). The assurance of a secure environment significantly contributes to their sense of well-being and comfort, fundamentally shaping their trajectory of satisfaction.

Moreover, social factors, such as the appeal and alignment of the local lifestyle with their expectations and cultural preferences, also emerge as critical determinants of satisfaction among international students (Finn & Darmody, 2016). The resonance between the host country's lifestyle offerings and students' anticipated experiences significantly impacts their overall satisfaction. Whether the environment fosters cultural inclusivity, provides opportunities for social engagement, and aligns with personal values, all of these factors significantly contribute to their satisfaction levels.

Furthermore, at the individual level, the quality of the institution's education is a cornerstone in determining international students' satisfaction. High-quality education, encompassing comprehensive academic resources, adept faculty, and a rigorous yet engaging curriculum, profoundly influences overall satisfaction (Wang & Tseng, 2011). The academic experience is a pivotal aspect of their international educational journey, and a fulfilling academic environment significantly enhances their satisfaction levels, as supported by the findings of Wang and Tseng (2011) and Finn and Darmody (2016).

However, the various factors affecting satisfaction expand beyond these initial considerations. In the university environment, numerous intricate factors contribute significantly to international students' overall satisfaction. Institutional management practices, encompassing administrative efficiency and support systems, significantly impact their experiences (Sam, 2001). Moreover, the quality of social connections established within the university community and the availability of supportive networks play crucial roles in determining their satisfaction levels (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Additionally, the competence and effectiveness of lecturers, along with the physical environment, including campus infrastructure and amenities, are paramount in shaping the overall experiences and contentment of international students (Asare-Nuamah, 2017).

Various studies on international students have been conducted in different countries. The study by Beloucif et al. (2018) examined the relationship between the expectations of international postgraduate students enrolled in a UK business school and the subsequent impact of these expectations on their overall satisfaction with the educational experience. The findings showed that students' satisfaction levels were intricately tied to their initial anticipations upon entering the educational institution. These anticipations encompassed various facets, including word of mouth and recommendations from peers or acquaintances, which significantly influenced their perceptions of the educational environment. Moreover, the students' beliefs regarding the credibility, teaching prowess, and accessibility of facilities within the academic setting played a significant role in shaping their satisfaction trajectories.

Conversely, the research by Tamaoka et al. (2003) provides a comprehensive examination of the determinants of satisfaction among international students at Japanese universities. This study emphasises the fundamental significance of academic and social integration, illuminating the multifaceted nature of factors contributing to international students' satisfaction levels in Japanese academic environments. Employing factor and discriminant analyses, the study meticulously dissects various influential components. These factors include the suitability and relevance of the curriculum, the progression and quality of research endeavours, the presence and support of close friendships or social networks, successful adaptation to the host culture, and the engagement in part-time employment. Each of these facets was found to exert a discernible influence on international students' overall satisfaction at Japanese universities. This in-depth examination offers a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced aspects that significantly influence the satisfaction levels of international students within the unique academic and social environment of Japanese higher education institutions.

Satisfaction among international students is a complex combination of diverse socioeconomic, environmental, and individual-level factors, including preconceptions, institutional environment, social integration, academic quality, and cultural adaptation. Understanding and addressing these multifaceted elements remain imperative in enhancing the educational experiences and satisfaction levels of international students in diverse educational settings. These elements collectively shape their experiences and significantly affect their overall satisfaction.

## METHOD

The research philosophy underlying this study is epistemological, as it examines knowledge through people's subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014). An appropriate research design, utilizing a qualitative case study, was chosen to address all the research questions. A case study design is considered the best approach for a thorough investigation, as it allows exploration of international students' experiences at higher education institutions in Sabah. Furthermore, all participants shared a unifying factor: they all had a direct or indirect connection to the research questions and the subject being studied, and they all came from the same university. Later, a narrative analysis was employed to delve deeply into the personal stories and experiences of these students, offering insights into their academic, social, administrative, and living experiences within the higher learning institution in the context of Sabah's environment.

A purposive sample of 25 international students, comprising 15 postgraduates and 10 undergraduates, was selected from diverse countries, including China, Indonesia, Korea, and Brunei. Among the undergraduates, 14 were male and 11 were female, with ages ranging from 21 to 22 years. The postgraduates, on the other hand, were aged between 23 and 28 years. The undergraduates were in their second or third year of study and had been in Sabah for three to four years, whereas the postgraduates had resided in Sabah for one to two years. This selection aimed to ensure diverse representation across nationalities, academic disciplines, and length of stay at the university. This diversity is essential for capturing a broad range of experiences and perspectives, thus enriching the study's findings. Although the sample size is small and not randomly selected, which limits the generalizability of the results, the study reached data saturation with the 25 participants, providing valuable insights that addressed the research objectives. Table 1 below summarizes the participants' demographics.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted from April to July 2023. The interviews were conducted either in English or Mandarin, depending on the country of origin. They were either face-to-face on campus or via selected online platforms, such as Webex or Google Meet. The chosen time frame, during the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic session, facilitated easy access to international students.

Each interview lasted between thirty and forty minutes and was designed to encourage participants to share their stories and experiences freely. The questions focused on exploring participants' academic journeys, social interactions, administrative experiences, and overall satisfaction with their studies at higher learning institutions in Sabah. This format enabled detailed responses, thereby enriching the collected data. The flexibility of this approach enabled the interviewer to adapt and introduce new questions as participants' answers progressed. Additionally, interview effectiveness improved with each session as the interviewer refined questions over time to better align with the research objectives (Miranda et al., 2023; Othman et al., 2022).

**Table 1:** Participants' Demographics

Students	Number	Ages	Year in university	No. of Years in Sabah
Postgraduates	15	23-28 years old	-	1-2
Undergraduates	10	21 – 22 years old	2 <sup>nd</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> year	3-4
Male	14			
Female	11			

Once the interviews are conducted, the narrative analysis begins with their transcription. Each interview was transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate capture of participants' voices. The researchers then immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain familiarity with the depth and breadth of the narratives. The narrative analysis was carried out by identifying narrative sections within the transcripts. This involves pinpointing and extracting parts of the interviews where students narrate their experiences at higher learning institutions in Sabah in a storytelling format. The focus was on understanding how these narratives are structured and the content they encompass.

The next step was initial open coding, where the researchers labelled the key concepts, themes, and patterns emerging from the narratives. This coding process was instrumental in identifying recurring themes significant to students' experiences, such as academic challenges, social integration, administrative support, and cultural adaptation. The researchers then analyzed the structure of these narratives. This includes examining elements such as plot development, the characters involved (e.g., fellow students, faculty, and administrative staff), and the narratives' settings (e.g., academic departments and social gatherings). The aim here was to understand how these elements interact and contribute to students' overall experiences.

Narrative interpretation is a critical phase in which researchers delve into the meanings students ascribe to their experiences. This interpretive process involves analyzing how the students perceive their institution, the academic and social fabric of higher learning institutions in Sabah, the challenges they face, their coping strategies, and their overall satisfaction with their university life. Additionally, the narratives are then contextualized within broader socio-cultural and institutional frameworks. This process helped understand how external factors, such as cultural norms, university policies, and the local community, influence the experiences of international students at higher education institutions in Sabah. To ensure the researchers had a consistent understanding of the participants' statements, the narrative analysis findings were shared with the participants for verification.

To ensure research integrity, the study follows strict ethical guidelines. This includes obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the confidentiality of the responses. These ethical considerations are crucial for establishing trust with participants and encouraging them to share their narratives openly and candidly.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The research identified 11 recurring themes: five addressing the first research question (students' satisfaction level) and six addressing the second research question (students' challenges).

**Research Question 1:** Satisfaction level of international students in terms of their learning, living, and support experience.

From the data analysis, the five (5) themes that addressed the first research question are: Cost-Effective Education, Agents' Recommendations, Academic Encounters, University Facilities and Resources, and Location & Campus Appeal.

**Theme 1a: Cost-Effective Education**

One of the primary reasons students prefer higher learning institutions in Sabah is the affordability of the universities. This factor played a pivotal role, attracting students seeking cost-effective educational options. A student from China shared the following:

*"I know it from some event at school that hooked us up with a programme from other countries. You get to choose where you want to go, and I have selected a few places like the United States, Canada, and Asian countries. I have considered Malaysia because it is cheaper and there is a higher population of Chinese, so there are fewer differences in culture."*

**Theme 2a: Agents' Recommendation**

Personal preferences did not solely influence the decision-making process for many students. External influences, such as guidance from agents specializing in educational placements or recommendations from family members, also shaped some students' choices. These external inputs played a supplementary role, offering insights or recommendations that influenced the students' decisions when choosing a higher learning institution in Sabah as their educational destination. Another student from China illustrated this, as follows:

*"... an agent to come to our school, our China school. Then, he tells us something about University XXX. Because here, actually, he is promoting a lot of the universities based in Malaysia, but University XXX is one of them."*

**Theme 3a: Academic Encounters**

The students shared diverse experiences regarding their academic journeys. They highlighted a blend of positive and negative experiences with both lecturers and teaching techniques. The quality of education has been acknowledged, with students appreciating the institution's high academic standards and the content delivered. There are also instances where teaching techniques have been praised, especially by lecturers who are willing to explain concepts in depth or encourage students to engage in independent research. Furthermore, some lecturers have been noted for their responsiveness and supportiveness, offering guidance and addressing queries, which enhances the learning experience. Students from other countries commented:

*"...some lecturers will say you can search the internet, others may explain to you how to do this and how to do it, and some may be lecturers who are not responsible for one subject, but for many."*

*"I think I've met many kinds of teachers, and some of them are busy and won't reply to your messages. You may have to send them two or three times before they reply to you. However, at least they replied, and I appreciate it."*

**Theme 4a: University Facilities and Resources**

The findings indicate that the availability and quality of university facilities, including libraries and online resources, received mixed reviews. Some students appreciated these resources for academic purposes, while others suggested ways to improve them. For example:

*"Yeah, it was useful, and I used it a lot. Often a lot of literature, I think I use more expertise now. For example, today, uh... maybe the school library does not have the literature needed, you can use Google Scholar to search."*

Meanwhile, opinions on campus infrastructure, such as sports and recreational centres, were generally positive. Students appreciated the maintenance of these facilities and the opportunities they provided for leisure and physical activities, as shown below:

*"I think public universities, as compared to private universities, have less access to resources, but it is not too big of an issue since we can use Sci-Hub."*

*"They have a good place to play sports, but they should have a swimming pool too."*

### **Theme 5a: Location & Campus Appeal**

Moreover, its geographical proximity to their home countries, notably China, held significant appeal, facilitating easier access and potential familiarity with the region. Students were drawn to higher learning institutions in Sabah for more than just its affordability and proximity; its captivating campus environment, with its aesthetically pleasing setting, emerged as a compelling factor. Safety considerations further underscored the attractiveness of higher learning institutions in Sabah, with students prioritizing secure and conducive learning environments, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

*"...at that time, University XXX is more attractive for me because it has particularly good scenery, it is well known as the most beautiful university in Southeast Asia."*

### **Research Question 2: The challenges faced by international students**

Six (6) themes emerged from the data analysis to address the second research question. They are: Academic Encounters, Enrolment Process, Social Integration and Cultural Adaptation, Visa-Related Administrative Procedures, Lifestyle Adjustments, University Facilities and Resources.

### **Theme 1b: Academic Encounters**

A significant hurdle for many students is the language barrier, particularly in classes conducted predominantly in Malay, which poses challenges for those who are not proficient in the language. Although these students have requested that English be used during lectures, the lecturers comply briefly before reverting to Malay. Additionally, international students are frequently asked to attend special sessions scheduled by the lecturers, yet these classes are often cancelled. Despite assurances that classes would be conducted in English upon their arrival at a higher learning institution in Sabah, this commitment has not been upheld. This issue is highly significant to the students, and there is a strong call for the management of a higher learning institution in Sabah to address this matter with greater seriousness. The following illustrates the comments made by several students on this issue:

*"There is one lecturer called Dr. ABC, who uses 100% Malay language in class, so I did not attend a single class of his because I have a special class, and I asked if he could conduct the class in English, but he rejected me. Then I asked if there's any special class for me, but also said no. So, I asked him if I could skip the class, but he told me that I could not. I then told him that one of my special classes clashes with his class, and finally, he said ok. I only attended his class twice in 3 years, and I have to study all that on my own. I took the test and got a B+. Another class is the Social Work class by Dr. DEF and Dr. GHI, which I requested be conducted in English, as I do not understand the Malay language. Dr. GHI agreed, but Dr. DEF did not."*

*"... we went back to him again for a special class, but he was missing with all sorts of reasons like meetings and programs. One time, we finally got to meet him. However, he asked, "What are you coming for?", in which I replied, "We are coming for special class.". He replied, " You should make an appointment first.". I thought we have already set the date for the special class, but he told us he was busy on that day and asked us to come back another time."*

*"We will encounter, but it is not as much... but sometimes the teacher in the class, he may not speak clearly in English, he will begin to speak Malay language, and I will not understand what he says."*

Throughout their academic journey, international students face several obstacles, including language barriers with lecturers and peers, as well as challenges in forming groups for assignments. There is no systematic monitoring of how lecturers design and administer their courses. Universities must develop a platform to capture and understand the diverse challenges international students face throughout their academic tenure. Moreover, the international office must take on a central role in overseeing the progress of international students from their first day at the university until their graduation. This involves regular interactions with international students, providing them opportunities to express grievances and dissatisfaction related to their academic experiences, such as issues with lectures and classroom management, as illustrated below:

*"...like a lot of local students, they just wouldn't want to accept China's students, so there's no way. Just like me with my situation this semester, my friend and I took a class, and then the teacher let us find our own group. Then a group needs 5 people, including me and my friend, to form a group together. No matter if we, two people, want to join other groups, they will refuse. When other people join our group and see us, two Chinese students, they immediately quit the group. So then, we couldn't find the group at all. However, then, in this class, for example, if you have 50 people in this class, and the teacher asks for 10 groups, then we would end up in groups, but then, the 3 people who ended up in groups with us were not doing the homework, and also, they didn't reply to messages, so there was no way, because we didn't have the right to choose others, and others wouldn't choose us as well."*

### **Theme 2b: Enrolment Process**

Another considerable challenge is the enrolment process for international students, especially those starting in February. This cohort faces a confusing academic cycle that starts in the second semester and follows a non-traditional sequence, complicating course selection because there are no prerequisites for advanced classes. This disorganized sequence disrupts the usual academic structure and necessitates adjustments to accommodate the educational needs of these students. Those entering the February intake often encounter a pattern in which they start in the 2nd semester and then revert to the 1st semester, creating an ongoing cycle. This departure from the usual academic structure poses challenges for students, as the courses offered in the second semester are typically more advanced compared to those in earlier semesters. Consequently, some students are compelled to forgo specific advanced courses because prerequisite courses are unavailable. The international office must communicate this concern to the academic department and urge collaborative efforts to resolve it. The following is shared by one of the international students:

*"University XXX has two different intakes, namely the February intake and the September intake. If you are from the September intake, you are on the normal semester cycle. However, for me, I am from the February intake, so my first semester's classes are actually the classes from the second semester. So, I had to skip my first semester and start from the second semester. The order is: 2,1,4,3,6,5. ....Yes, so I think this is also an issue. I think the university needs to make some adjustments to have some similar classes in that semester."*

### **Theme 3b: Social Integration and Cultural Adaptation**

The research findings indicate that international students faced difficulties in social integration and cultural adaptation. They often faced challenges in social integration, felt like outsiders, and encountered obstacles in forming substantial connections with local students, as shown below:

*"No, he is from PQR faculty. He uses 70% Malay language and 30% English in his class. Sometimes he will make a joke in class, the whole class will laugh at it, but I do not get it, so I stood there like a fool. Feels like being isolated."*

The adaptation process was particularly hindered by cultural disparities and language barriers, especially regarding *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay), which affected their adjustment to the local environment. The concern centres on students' feelings of isolation and powerlessness, as they perceive their main issues are being overlooked and not addressed or resolved. The following excerpts illustrate this issue:

*"I think the biggest difference is the use of language. At University XXX, the primary language used is Malay, while at University XYZ, it's English. This is one of the main problems I have encountered at University XXX. The method of communication is a problem. At University XXX, some of the lecturers use the Malay language to conduct their classes, so I must study all that by myself."*

*"I submitted feedback for this issue regarding the language. I gathered signatures from other international students and submitted the report to the program head. I received no news even after 1 week, so I went back to him and asked. However, he told me that he had discussed the issue with Prof. XXX. He asked us to refer to the slides given and if there are any other questions, he will arrange a class after week 14 to answer them. It basically means we must gather our questions for the whole semester and ask him in one single class. It's just nonsense. Then I gave up trying anymore."*

**Theme 4b: Visa-Related Administrative Procedures**

Administrative staff at higher learning institutions in Sabah were typically viewed favorably by international students. They were commonly characterized as supportive, courteous, and adept at addressing concerns. However, in certain situations, students encountered delays in receiving responses, particularly those related to visa processing. Multiple students reported challenges and setbacks during this procedure, leading to inconveniences and increased stress. This underscored the necessity for more efficient and improved visa services tailored to the needs of international students, as exemplified by the following comments:

*"I had a problem with my visa when I first came. It was the time when we were told that it was probably, erm, how to say, let me think first. It was due to arrive in July and August. However, because our whole class had visa issues, we arrived in October. Then, for the language classes, we normally need to study for 5 months, but we study within 3 months."*

*"...from my own experience and from an academic standpoint, I can only give 1 point to the university's management because there are several issues with it."*

**Theme 5b: Lifestyle Adjustments**

The findings also indicate that international students faced challenges adapting to local food, with some expressing concerns about its pricing and availability on campus. Adjusting to the new living conditions, including the climate and cultural norms, was also a significant part of their experience. Regarding housing and transportation, the findings are mixed: some people found comfortable accommodations, while others faced difficulties. Transportation services, both on- and off-campus, were also a concern for some students, affecting their mobility and overall experience. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

*"One Borneo, 1st floor, supermarket's food is not very fresh. Secondly, the price of food had gone up; the meat and fruit were not particularly good either. I had very bad gastroenteritis at the time, and most of the time, in order to...And most of the classes at that time were in the middle of the day, sometimes, I guess, for a long time, maybe eating KFC, Burger King, and all of that four or five times a week. So really, those weren't that much of a craving, but there was no way around it."*

*"I bought a bike and I decided to bike to school. .... because I had just come to the university, didn't have much experience, I was 17 years old, and then the first day I went to the class, as uphill was too up to go to the Assembly Hall.....because the slope was too steep, too high, so I couldn't lift it up, I had to push the bike."*

*"Yes, they clean it .. but some place looks old.... my faculty too.. looks old"*

**Theme 6b: University Facilities and Resources**

Different opinions arose regarding the university's support services for disseminating information. Some students found the website and portals helpful, while others encountered difficulties, particularly due to language barriers with Malay language signboards and notifications. The predominant use of the Malay language in departmental announcements led to misunderstandings among international students, resulting in incidents such as attending classes on public holidays. Rectifying these issues is crucial for the management of higher learning institutions in Sabah, aligning with their strategic plan to attract more international students, as shown below:

*"They will use the Malay language to communicate. Sometimes during the public holidays, everyone will know that it's a public holiday, but I went to class regardless and found out there's something wrong."*

*"I do not know if it was announced in the Malay language, because I do not speak or read Malay."*

*"Yes, but I think the signboards are not the main issue here because eventually we will get used to the ways. Instead, it is the announcements that matter most because those are lengthy, and translations could be misinterpreted."*



## DISCUSSION

This study identified eleven prevalent and recurring themes. Five themes address student satisfaction, the first research question, which primarily align with motivational and institutional factors—such as cost-effective education, campus appeal, academic encounters, agents' recommendations, and university resources. Affordability of education significantly contributes to student satisfaction, as it provides access to quality education at a reasonable cost. The appealing campus environment, characterized by its beauty and safety, also enhances student satisfaction. Recommendations from educational agents and family members provide reassurance, positively influencing students' decisions and satisfaction with their choice of institution. Moreover, the quality of academic encounters, including high academic standards and responsive lecturers, supports student satisfaction by fostering a supportive and enriching learning environment.

In addressing research question two, the study highlights six themes: linguistic barriers, challenges to social integration, administrative inefficiencies, substandard living conditions, visa-related administrative procedures, and lifestyle adjustments. Linguistic barriers, particularly the predominance of Malay in academic settings, significantly hinder students' academic progress and social interactions, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration.

Social integration challenges, compounded by cultural differences and insufficient support, make it difficult to form meaningful connections with local students. Administrative inefficiencies, such as delayed visa processing and unclear communication, further intensify students' struggles, leaving them feeling abandoned and unsupported. Additionally, substandard living conditions, including inadequate housing and limited access to quality food, negatively impact students' daily experiences and well-being. The complexity of visa-related administrative procedures and the need to adjust to a new cultural and environmental context present a significant hurdle for international students.

The eleven themes that answered the two research questions are further categorised into two main groups. First, the socioeconomic and environmental factors; second, the selection of an educational institution based on individual-level considerations. Socioeconomic and environmental factors encompass affordability, location, campus appeal, external influences in their decision-making, social integration and cultural adaptation, visa-related administrative procedures, and lifestyle adjustments. On the other hand, selecting an educational institution is generally based on individual-level factors, such as a student's personal motivations, preferences, and perceptions. These include academic reputation and quality, course and career alignment, cost-benefit evaluation, campus facilities and environment, personal interest and motivation, social and cultural fit, and institutional image and marketing. The two groups provide an interpretive framework for understanding the empirical insights gathered, while the eleven themes emerged empirically from the students' narratives. Altogether, these factors highlight how individual goals, values, and perceptions influence one's choice of educational institution.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study of international students at a Malaysian public university in Sabah provides a broad snapshot of their experiences, highlighting both the positive aspects and the difficulties they face. Despite its much-acclaimed success story of cost-effectiveness, beautiful architecture, and access to technological resources, the university faces significant challenges, including language barriers to learning, loneliness, adaptation to the environment, bureaucratic procedures, and accommodation standards. Most of these challenges, although not exclusive to this institution, are crucial in shaping the internationals' overall satisfaction and experience. They are also central to this university's global appeal and educational reputation.

This study highlights both the satisfaction and challenges faced by international students, revealing the complex interplay between various socioeconomic, environmental, and individual factors. By addressing these interconnected themes through targeted interventions and comprehensive support programs, the university can enhance international students' academic and social experiences, thereby strengthening its global reputation and appeal.

## LIMITATION OF STUDY

It is acknowledged that the analysis is based on narratives and includes subjective elements. The findings in this study are subject to various biases stemming from the researchers' perceptions. Since the study is confined only to higher learning institutions in Sabah, the generalization remains limited. Nevertheless, it is believed that applying the narrative analysis approach will yield detailed and comprehensive findings about the lives of

international students in higher education institutions in Sabah, thereby enhancing understanding of their experiences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE STUDY

While the study effectively identifies key themes related to satisfaction and challenges, a more detailed exploration of their interconnectedness and broader implications would enhance the findings. Examining the relationship between administrative inefficiencies and social integration challenges could reveal how bureaucratic hurdles might hinder social connections. Additionally, highlighting the impact of lifestyle adjustments on both academic performance and social integration would provide a more comprehensive view of the student experience. Integrating these interconnected aspects can illustrate how addressing one challenge could potentially alleviate others. Hence, the study suggests that robust English-language support programs, combined with consistent English use in classrooms, could help mitigate linguistic barriers. Furthermore, streamlining administrative processes, improving visa services, and implementing a digital feedback system are crucial steps to address administrative inefficiencies. Enhancing living conditions, diversifying food options, and conducting regular satisfaction surveys are also important measures that could significantly improve international students' overall well-being and satisfaction.

In response to these concerns, a list of ten (10) broad recommendations is provided, focusing on various aspects of international students' academic experiences. Firstly, developing a strong support program in English as a second language is mandatory. In addition to supporting students in their academic pursuits, this program must help them become socially involved. The university should ensure that all classes are conducted in English to minimize language barriers and enhance international students' learning. Further, implementing language exchange programs can enhance cultural awareness and cooperation between the two groups of students—foreign and domestic. This initiative should be complemented by formative assessments that periodically determine language proficiency to support appropriate language use in learning environments. Additionally, other feedback processes should facilitate the use of language in teaching and learning settings.

Another important aspect that cannot be overlooked is ensuring that the various administrative processes are made efficient. This includes enhancing the efficiency of visa granting and updating administrative policies and requirements on a timely basis to address the needs and concerns of international students. Implementing a robust, comprehensive online feedback system is crucial for promptly collecting students' feedback and grievances and providing appropriate responses to the relevant authorities. It is essential to periodically assess these processes to ensure that all students receive appropriate administrative service delivery, thereby increasing student satisfaction.

Elevating the quality of life in hostels and other residential areas on campus is also a core component of the agenda. Satisfaction surveys can be conducted periodically to capture students' feelings about their living conditions or status, providing feedback that can help improve campus accommodations and facilities. Expanding food choices to include a wider variety of international food preferences would significantly enhance the students' daily experience on campus. These actions, which enhance a student's quality of life, also positively affect the university's image, competitiveness, and financial sustainability.

Lastly, it is essential to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives. This entails monitoring activity flows and language program outcomes, measuring the effectiveness of management activities, and fine-tuning planning initiatives using feedback and evaluation tools. Such measures ensure that the university's approaches are positive, appropriate, and relevant to the changing complexion of the international student population.

By adopting these recommendations, the higher learning institutions in Sabah can significantly improve the learning experience of international students. These improvements will not only enhance the university's academic status but also contribute to cultural and ethnic representation in the country. Thus, by becoming more internationally focused and academically competitive, the university will advance the interests of the entire university community and strengthen its position in the global higher education landscape.

## IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

As a result, the research findings have significant implications for enhancing the experiences of international students at Malaysian public universities in Sabah and other institutions. It emphasises the need for English-language support programs that can benefit students academically and socially. English should be used

persistently in classrooms, and internationalisation programs should be implemented to enhance interaction and assimilation. The lack of organisation and structure must be rectified through procedure rationalization, updating procedures, enhancing visa services, and implementing an online feedback management system for international students.

The study also highlights the need to enhance accommodation quality, including providing a variety of meals, and to improve the quality of the physical infrastructure. The effectiveness of these initiatives should also be periodically reviewed and assessed to improve students' experience. By addressing the aforementioned problems, the university can enhance its global image and improve students' learning experiences. Promoting a culture of diversity will enhance the cultural aspect of the university and society as a whole. These changes are crucial to the university's strategic development and will improve academic performance, social integration, managerial effectiveness, and the overall quality of life for international students. The study also highlights the need to enhance accommodation quality, including offering a variety of meals and improving the physical infrastructure.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed equally to the research process, which involved designing and implementing the research, analysing the results, and writing the manuscript.

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## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT to improve the language. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently and without any financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the work reported in this manuscript.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the research was conducted with complete transparency. All data, methods, and materials used in this study are accurately reported and available upon request. The authors ensure that the research findings are presented without any fabrication, falsification, or inappropriate data manipulation. Additionally, any deviations from the original research plan have been clearly explained and justified within the paper.

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