

Exploring the Experiences of International Students Living in Malaysia

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Abstract

Retaining international students has been a significant concern for higher education institutions globally. This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of eight students from conflict zones who are studying at an International University in Malaysia. The objectives of this research paper are as follows: (i) To what extent faculty use effective teaching? (ii) To what extent does a university provide effective and efficient administration? (iii) What are the psychological and health care services offered by the university? (iv) To what extent dominant university culture and environment are Islamic? This study employed a qualitative study design using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that during the COVID-19 lockdown, students lacked guidance and mentorship, and the support services provided by the university were not effective. While students perceived that the faculty represented Islamic values, some academic staff lacked competency, and some administrative staff had low employee efficiency, leading to a perception that they do not represent Islamic values.

Keywords: Student Retention, Qualitative Study, Conflict War-Zone Countries.

Introduction

Retaining international students, specifically those from war zones, brings enormous significance. International students play a vital role for universities because they help make the campus diverse. Their presence contributes to a vibrant academic community and it helps everyone learn about different cultures and makes the learning environment more welcoming and inclusive for everyone. The retention of international students has significant economic implications. These students often pay higher tuition fees than domestic students, that contributes to the university's financial sustainability. According to Riaño et al (2018) asserted that the mobility of international students has resulted in a wide range of advantages for various stakeholders. International students are considered valuable assets that can significantly contribute to the economic growth of the host country. Therefore, studying the experiences of international students from conflict- war countries is particularly important due to their unique challenges and vulnerabilities because their countries are affected by conflicts or political instability, resulting in interrupted education, trauma, and limited access to resources. Examine their specific needs is crucial to provide the necessary support for their academic success and overall well-being in their new educational setting.

Malaysia has established itself as a prominent destination for higher education in Southeast Asia, with 127,583 international students enrolling in 2019. However, this falls short of the country's ambitious goal of reaching 200,000 International students by 2020. In addition, the number of international students enrolling in Malaysian universities has been declining year after year. This trend is concerning for Malaysian higher education institutions as it may reflect the quality of services provided to international students, and their commitment to engaging and supporting them throughout their studies. It is crucial for Malaysian universities to address the challenges and obstacles that are deterring international students from choosing Malaysia as their preferred destination for higher education. By enhancing the quality of education and support services, as well as promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity, Malaysian higher education institutions can attract and retain more international students, thereby contributing to the country's overall development and competitiveness in the global education landscape.

According to the Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia (2013), the number of overseas students enrolling in Malaysian higher education institutions has declined, particularly from Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Maldives, and Cambodia. This phenomenon is often attributed to various obstacles, such as financial constraints, language and communication barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in adapting to Malaysian culture. Mohamed (2020) found that international students encounter language and communication challenges when interacting with locals and speaking with lecturers. The locals' limited proficiency in English poses significant challenges for international students when performing everyday tasks such as ordering food or buying groceries. Additionally, international students face numerous obstacles and barriers during their study periods, leading to a decline in their mental health and their ability to cope with adjustments and challenges, as well as to assimilate into Malaysian society. These challenges include high expectations, autonomy, new responsibilities, and difficulty making new friends (Cleary et al., 2011). Furthermore, research has also shown that the decline in overseas student enrollment in Malaysian higher education institutions may also be due to increasing competition from other countries. Neighboring countries such as Singapore and Thailand have made significant investments in their higher

education systems and are offering more attractive scholarships and study opportunities to international students. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further disrupted the international student market, with many students opting to study online or delaying their plans to study abroad due to travel restrictions and safety concerns. As such, Malaysian higher education institutions may need to reassess their strategies for attracting and retaining international students in light of these challenges.

International student retention in Malaysia has become a critical issue for higher education institutions in Malaysia. Despite efforts to attract and enroll international students, retention rates remain relatively low, with many students leaving their programs before completion. This phenomenon not only affects the individual students but also has significant implications for the institutions and the host country's higher education system.

Student retention has become an increasingly important issue for universities, particularly for international students. The terms student persistence and retention are often used interchangeably in literature, but they have different connotations. Student persistence relates to the student's desire to complete their studies until graduation, while student retention refers to a university's ability to retain and support students from enrollment to graduation. In the context of international student retention, factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of support services can significantly affect a student's academic and social integration, leading to low academic performance and, ultimately, dropout. According to research (DeBerard et al., 2004; Ryan & Glenn, 2002), low academic performance is one of the primary factors leading to student dropout, highlighting the need for universities to address the academic and social needs of their international students to improve retention rates. Extensive research has been conducted to understand the factors that influence student retention in higher education. Studies have identified personal and societal variables, as well as institutional practices, as key factors that impact retention rates and academic performance. Specifically, academic preparation, experience and achievement, institutional expectations and dedication, academic and social compatibility, as well as financial and support systems from family and university services have been identified as elements that affect student retention (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Johnes, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Moortgat, 1997; Berger and Braxton, 1998). However, despite extensive research, there is no universal definition of retention. Manyanga, Sithole, and Hanson (2017) define retention as a university characteristic where students remain enrolled and re-enroll until graduation, while Hagedorn (2005) defines retention as the percentage of students who complete their first year of study at a university and continue enrollment in their second year at the same university.

At the core of international student retention lies the concept of student persistence, which can be understood as the longitudinal process of students staying enrolled and completing their studies at university. To shed light on this complex issue, Tinto (1987, 1993) adopted Van Gennep's (1960) three-stage model of human movement - separation, transition, and incorporation - to explain the process of student persistence in college. Tinto (1993) argues that in the first stage, students "separate" themselves from their previous communities, which enables their adoption to new norms and behaviors. In the next stage, students "transition" to the final stage of assimilation within their new community. Lastly, in the third stage, students integrate and assimilate into the new society during their college time. Tinto (1993) also developed an Institutional Departure Model to explain retention,

which claims that the more integrated a person is, the more likely they are to stay in college. However, Tinto also found that students struggle to integrate academically and socially, as well as govern their learning processes (e.g., goal setting, planning, monitoring, and time management; Richardson et al., 2012). Thus, understanding the complex process of student persistence and integration is essential for addressing the issue of international student retention in universities.

It is essential for universities to recruit and retain lecturers who have both subject expertise and strong teaching skills. Lecturers who can support and motivate students to achieve their academic goals are also necessary for effective teaching. Effective teaching is one of the most critical factors that can influence international students' retention in higher education. According to Paul Temple (2018), effective teaching in higher education refers to a teacher's ability to improve students' learning outcomes and prepare them for high-level cognitive processes during learning. This concept depends on the teacher's attitude, philosophy, and subject matter competence, along with their capability to adapt to various educational challenges and manage the classroom environment to promote learning (Talip et al., 2022). Alongside teaching, lecturers' responsibilities include providing assistance to students and adapting to various educational challenges. A lecturer's ability to support students and adapt to changing circumstances is vital to promote international students' retention in higher education (Talip et al., 2022). Moreover, effective teaching plays a crucial role in shaping the university's image, and the image of the institution can affect student retention (Gray & Balmer, 1998). Thus, the institution's success and survival depend on its image, and effective teaching is an integral part of shaping the university's image. Therefore, universities must recruit and retain lecturers who possess strong teaching skills and subject expertise to promote student retention, especially for international students who may face additional challenges such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, and financial burden (Thomas, 2002). By ensuring that international students receive effective teaching, universities can contribute to their academic success and improve their retention rates, which is essential for the university's survival and success.

Financial issues are among the major factors that contribute to the decision of international students to discontinue their studies at universities. The high tuition fees of universities, particularly for students coming from conflict zones, can create significant obstacles to their academic progress. Moreover, university administrators may be unaware of the financial challenges that international students face, which only exacerbates the issue. Herzog (2005) emphasized that lack of financial support, such as the absence of financial aid and low family socioeconomic status, directly affects a student's decision to continue their studies. Additionally, the image of the institution is another factor that affects student retention. University ranking, quality of teaching, academic staff, facilities, and reviews from alumni, such as employment opportunities after graduation, can significantly impact a university's reputation. As Gray & Balmer (1998) noted, a university's survival and prosperity depend on its good image. Thus, it is crucial to improve student retention for the sake of a university's survival. Many international students from conflict zones may not have had the chance to consider potential universities or destinations due to survival being their primary focus. Therefore, it is incumbent upon institutions to retain these students to ensure that they can continue their studies (Flores & Piana, 2000; Laredo, 2007).

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for multiple stakeholders within the higher education ecosystem. Firstly, universities and academic faculty can benefit from gaining insights into effective teaching practices tailored to the needs of international students from conflict zones. Understanding how to adapt instructional methods and create inclusive learning environments will enhance student engagement, satisfaction, and academic success.

Secondly, administrators and university management will gain valuable insights into improving the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative services provided to international students. This knowledge can inform the development of streamlined processes, responsive support systems, and better communication channels, contributing to an enhanced student experience and higher retention rates.

Thirdly, the findings of this study can guide universities in developing and strengthening psychological and healthcare services for international students. Recognizing the unique mental health challenges faced by students from conflict zones and tailoring support services accordingly will contribute to their overall well-being and academic persistence. Lastly, the study's focus on the extent to which the dominant university culture and environment align with Islamic values is crucial for promoting a sense of belonging and cultural compatibility among international students from conflict zones. This understanding can inform strategies for creating an inclusive campus culture that respects and accommodates diverse religious and cultural identities.

By addressing these key aspects, this study aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for universities to better support and retain international students from conflict zones, ultimately enhancing their educational experiences and contributing to their long-term success.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's theory of student departure and Milem and Berger's Student Persistence model have been extensively studied to determine the factors that influence students' decision to remain in higher education institutions. Tinto posits that students' integration into the social and academic structures of the institution determines their sense of belonging and commitment. Academic integration is affected by academic goals, while social integration is influenced by engagements with the university social system, such as peer-group and faculty contacts. Personal characteristics, such as personality, race, gender, family history, and pre-university academic experience, also play a role in the decision to stay or leave. Milem and Berger's Student Persistence model further highlights the cycle of behavior and attitudes that determine a student's academic and social integration level. Positive experiences, such as involvement with faculty, lecturer peers' leisure activities, and institutional and peer support, contribute to institutional commitment, while negative experiences lead to lower levels of integration.

These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that influence students' retention in higher education institutions. The dimensions used as a conceptual framework for this study include institutional experience, which includes academic performance, relationships with instructors and admin staff, extracurricular activities, and peer interactions, and integration, which includes academic and social integration. By understanding these dimensions, universities can identify the factors that affect student retention and develop interventions to improve student experiences and

increase retention rates. Ultimately, this will lead to better outcomes for students and the institution.

- Institutional experience
- Integration

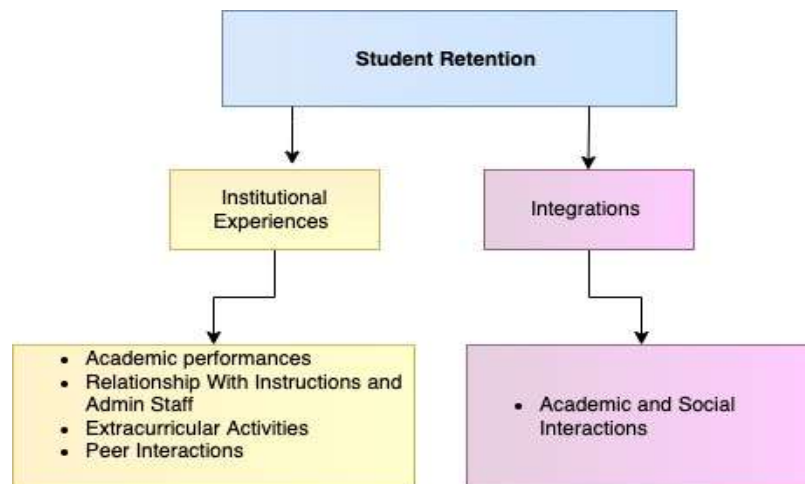


Fig 1. The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Method

A qualitative case study was used in this investigation. According to Yin (2013), a case study design should have three qualitative research components: described, provided, and explained for a better understanding of the study's phenomenon. Yin also divided case studies into three types: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. An explanatory case study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to not only describe the event under investigation but also construct a hypothesis describing the basic relationship. An exploratory case study also reveals whether a phenomenon has been explained and clarified by current theory (Yin, 2013), and it serves as a foundation for future research projects.

A descriptive case study (Yin, 2013) describes a specific phenomenon in depth without making any related predictions. It is very crucial to understand the types of research questions raised, and if the how and why of the questions are understood, a favorable research method could be implemented (Ahmad & Ismail, 2017). Therefore, the researcher used a descriptive case study because the goal of the study was to examine the lives of international students coming from conflict zone countries studying in Malaysia, without making any predictions or identifying any relationships.

This study employed a qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and explore, in their own words, the experiences of international students studying at an International University in Malaysia. To gain rich information from the participants and better understand their life stories and experiences of studying and living in Malaysia. According to Ryan and his colleagues (2009), the one-to-one interview is a better method of understanding people's perceptions, beliefs, understandings their experiences of the phenomenon.

Sampling

The participants for this study must meet the following requirements: (a) they must be international students studying at an International University; (b) they must be currently residing in Malaysia; and (c) they must be from countries that are or have been involved in war zones. In this study, subjects were selected through purposeful sampling. Purposive sampling, according to Cooper and Schindler (2003), allows researchers to select individuals based on their distinct qualities, experiences, attitudes, or views. This process was used to select international students coming from conflict-zone countries studying in Malaysia. A qualitative case study, by nature, is relatively small in sample size, and therefore, for this study, eight international students were required and interviewed.

Table. 1

Respondents Biographic Profile

Participates	Gender	Country	Postgraduate/ Undergraduate
1	Male	Kenya	Postgraduate
2	Male	Syria	Undergraduate
3	Male	Yemen	Undergraduate
4	Male	Yemen	Undergraduate
5	Female	Yemen	Undergraduate
6	Female	Bangladesh	Postgraduate
7	Male	Algeria	Postgraduate
8	Female	Syria	Postgraduate

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007), data analysis for the case study technique, “involves procedures similar to those found in other qualitative methodologies, such as data management, reading, describing, categorizing, interpreting, and visualizing” (p. 156) In this study, data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data gathering by describing, then organizing and classifying the data into themes. Specifically, the research used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns, themes, and concepts within the data and interpreting their meaning in relation to the research question or objectives.

According to Bryman (2012), thematic analysis helps better understand a phenomenon. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a fundamental approach to qualitative data analysis and that it is a method that can be applied across a wide range of epistemologies and phenomena. It's a method for "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing" and reporting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the stages of quality data analysis, the first step the researchers first familiarize themselves with the transcripts. The second step in the analysis is to organize and review the raw data set in order to generate the main ideas. The third step is to come up with themes and sub-themes. To sum up, the researchers used the above citations in analyzing the data.

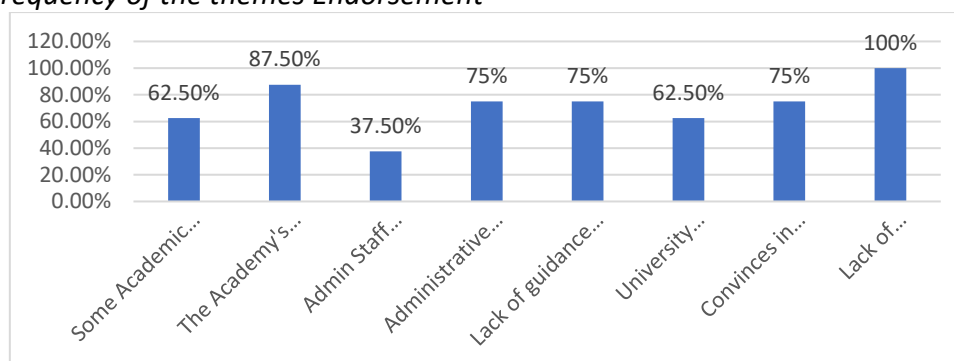
In a qualitative study, generating the major ideas and approving the themes is not an easy task. The inter-reliability check, which adds rigor to the data, can improve the credibility of developing and approving themes for a specific phenomenon. A satisfactory quality rate is defined as 90% or more agreement on the themes' consistency (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited by Ahamd, 2017). As a result, the researchers chose two specialists in the field of study

to ensure the findings' reliability. Initially, 8 themes were generated. All 8 generated themes were agreed upon by Rater 1, resulting in a 100% agreement rating. However, rater (2) agreed with just 7 of the 8 themes, resulting in a 96.9% agreement rate. The combined average of both raters is 98.5%. This indicates that the themes were generated objectively based on data collection.

Results

The findings of this study were divided into 8 themes. The themes that emerged from this research were helpful in answering the objectives of the study. As a result, each theme's meaning is addressed in the findings, along with illustrated statements from the participants. The frequency of each theme is depicted in Chart 1.

Chart.1 frequency of the themes Endorsement



Research Question 1: *To what extent do academic staff use effective teaching? The findings are categorized into two main themes*

- A. Some Academic staff lack competence
- B. The Academy's faculty represents Islamic values

A) Some Academic Staff Lack Competency

All the participants were able to give their understanding of *academic staff using effective teaching and learning*. Most of the participants stated that some academic staff are lacking in competency, and that was the first theme that emerged for the first research questions. In the teaching area, competencies mostly revolve around students' involvement in learning and teaching to make lessons for the day meaningful. Furthermore, competencies refer to the skills, knowledge, and behaviors exhibited by individuals in their work. Academic staff need to integrate all these elements to ensure competency is a top priority and they own it.

When the interviewers asked, "*Are the lecturers qualified and competent enough to teach their courses?*" to the informants, most participants reported that some lecturers are not very competent enough to teach their courses because most of the explanations focus on Power Point reading and not very much discussion related to the topic. The following responses from the informants reflect the concept:

- a. *Most of them, for example math class is a lively class where the teacher is supposed to be explaining the formulas giving examples on the board, filling the board and, and erasing writing it again. But if you're going to teach me math's through the slides, then of course, that's an indication that you are not competent enough.* (Respondent 1)

- b. *I have math with one teacher. she's explained... But I didn't understand. When I take the other professors. I understand immediately. Because the way of teaching. (Respondent 3)*
- c. *I mean, there is still some lectures, they just come to read the lecture, the slide the slides...and if there is no question, they are happy... Even some lectures, they don't ask the students whether you understand or not (Respondent 4)*
- d. *I would say that there are cases where the teachers, they don't know their subject, a lot, they just focus on PowerPoint slides.They read from the slides, and, you know, I prefer more explanation. And then there's also cases where they know that topic I think but maybe they don't know how to teach.(Respondent 5)*
- e. *Yes they are qualified but many lack the proper training to teach and many are not successful enough to make the student grasp the knowledge disseminated in the class as they lack in proper teaching strategies and methods. (Respondent 8)*

B) The Academy's Faculty Represents Islamic Values

The study participants also shared their views on “*The Academy's faculty represents Islamic values*” Islamic values and morals are one of the most significant parts of a Muslim's life. Every Muslim country and its institutions are primarily focused on instructing and disciplining the younger generation to instill in them the best manners and personal attributes that Islam offers. This can be obtained in schools and universities, and if academic staff don't exhibit Islamic values, of course, that would lead to a major issue in the Islamic world.

The goal of Islamic values is to instill conscience in the Ummah and to guide and direct humans to become good human beings and to leave little room for misguidance and dishonesty in this world. Thus, anyone who understands the true significance of Islam as guidance and as a worthy and necessary for every Muslim person. According to the participants in this study, academic staff represent Islamic values in terms of their lessons; they always relate to Islamic values and principles, and that is what Islam is about. The informants quoted,

- a. *Yes, the academic stuff. They're trying also the best to showcase Islamic values in class trying to relate any issue with Islam giving relevant examples from our heritage...They conduct themselves in an Islamic manner, ethically, so, yes, the academy staff, they are more Islamic, can say. (Respondent 1)*
- b. *For my lectures, yes, I can say like, most of them, they treat me with justice, and they were nice to be deal with. And that's what Islam is implying. (Respondent 6)*

Research Question 2: To what extent does the university provide effective and efficient administration?

The findings are categorized into two main themes:

- A. Admin Staff have low employee efficiency
- B. Administrative staff does not represent Islamic values

A) Admin Staff have Low Employee Efficiency

Participants were able to give their perspective on how *administration staff* could provide effective and *efficient administration services* to students. *The majority of the participants expressed concern about the low employee efficiency of administration staff when it comes to service delivery.*

For instance, the 8th informant highlighted that service delivery often involves miscommunication and delays in adhering to procedures, difficulties in retrieving certain

forms, and administrative staff who lack proper knowledge and understanding of their job responsibilities. While these discrepancies may seem minor at first, they can quickly escalate into bigger issues if left unaddressed. The informant also stated that the university they are studying offices have no coordination and lack of communication.

- a. *There is a lack of communication between various offices inside university, they are not well connected. There were a lot of instances where I had to go to one administrative ABC office and they just reply, "you have to go to that XYZ office", but when I go to XYZ, they ask me to "go back to ABC office. (Respondent 8)*
- b. *Mostly with administrative offices. Immigration Visa unit and security personnel are the most common problematic units where most of my friends got treated very badly till, they were in tears. (Respondent 8)*
- c. *Visa unit, we are wishing that it will be more efficient and more effective from the way they are today, we are also hoping that they are going to entertain the student's problem better in a mature manner in a student friendly environment. (Respondent 1)*

B) Administrative Staff Does Not Represent Islamic Values

Participants commonly reported that "Administrative Staff Does Not Represent Islamic Values." This is particularly concerning given that Islamic values and morals are an integral part of a Muslim's life. According to Halstead (2007), Islamic morality can be categorized into three areas: the shari'ah's rules, obligations, and responsibilities; the values and manners associated with good upbringing; and the personal character traits that a Muslim is expected to demonstrate in daily life. According to the participants for example, the 1st informant reported that his friend was not treated well at the Postgraduate Office (PG). Additionally, the 6th informant shared that she experienced racism between international and Malay students and was even mistreated and told to leave the office by the administrative staff. While the 8th informant noted that some staff do treat students according to Islamic values, there are others who are unhelpful towards students. The following responses from the informants reflect the concept:

- a. *So, every time he (friend) go to PG office to do something related to Academy things, he will not be treated in a good manner...you are going to encounter several offices and several challenges, you reach an office, the administrator there doesn't reply, the salam, he or she is miscommunication. (Respondent 1)*
- b. *There is racism in terms of internationals and Malays... for example, once in frowning at you, is not entertaining you nicely. Sometimes there is*
- c. *office, and I wouldn't say the new secretary was treating us in a bad way. And then she told us, like she wanted us to go out of the office. So, she went outside of the office and told us like, you can now go out and like. Was actually shocked. Yeah, we had to go out because we were like expelled from the office. (Respondent 6)*
- d. *Well, I can't generalise the whole as either positive or negative. There are staffs who really wish to make your life easy according to principles of Islam, but there are many who are just on their own terms, and it doesn't help. (Respondent 8)*

Research Question 3: What are Psychological and health care services offered by the university? *The findings are categorized into two main themes*

- A. Lack of guidance and mentorship for student during the lockdown
- B. University support services are not effective.

A) Lack of Guidance and Mentorship for Student During the Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on numerous sectors, including education. To address the effects of COVID-19 on higher education, institutions have attempted to leverage technology to provide online classes, in order to maintain educational continuity despite lockdown measures. Due to a lack of knowledge and time, many universities struggled to deliver lessons, instruction, and assignments. Examinations were also impeded, which affected the pupils' learning processes (De Giusti, 2020)

Based on the participants' responses, it appears that there was a lack of support and guidance for students during the lockdown period that lasted more than two years. Students who lived on campus felt that the university did not provide enough counselling and support, resulting in mental health issues such as stress. The 8th informant mentioned that the university restrictions had a negative impact on students' well-being. While the 4th informant shared his experience of being scolded by a security guard during his jogging routine, telling him to go to his room and, if he didn't like it, to return to his home country.

- a. *Currently when the students are being under the lockdown for a couple of months now, of course, students get stressed there. They don't have any way to express their stress so and the university unfortunately, they did not try their best to entertain this issue of stress or mental awareness. (Respondent 1)*
- b. *During the MCO I mean, students is going to be crazy. One time I went to jogging. Security shouted at me go back home, go back your room. I tell him, I don't like to stay home. I am alone. He said no. Go back or go outside from the country? I felt upset. They don't care. I mean, we international students here are nothing. (Respondent 4)*
- c. *We are going through the pandemic and due to the university senseless restrictions which are pushing more students in to depression. And it's really harming students more than anyone can guess. (Respondent 8)*

B) University Support Service Are Not Effective

Effective student support services are crucial for academic success. A lack of such services can have significant consequences for both the university and its students.

The term "student services" refers to the divisions or departments in higher education that provide services and assistance to students. Its goal is to ensure students' growth and development throughout their academic careers (NASPA, 2012, as cited in Ciobanu, 2013). The interviewees in this study expressed their dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of support services provided by the university. One of the interviewees (3rd informant) shared an incident where he was not allowed to enter the clinic because he forgot his student card, highlighting the inefficiency of support services. Another interviewee (6th informant) pointed out that university authorities do not treat students on study leave as regular students, and as a result, they are unable to enjoy student facilities.

- a. *Now if I were to give advice to another student, if they want to come here, to school, I will not give him any because the service here is not supportive.*
- b. *If you face any problem, then we go to the clinic, if you don't have your metric card, they will not accept you to go there. (Respondent 3)*
- c. *Sometimes admins don't seem to know what they're doing, sometimes they might tell us something that is wrong, you know., they should be more informed. (Respondent 5)*
- d. *I don't want to generalize about the whole support system as either good or bad. But I've seen and gone through some negatives. One common example, the security is biased to international students. (Respondent 8)*

Research Question 4: To what extent dominant university culture and environment are Islamic?

The findings are categorized into two main themes

- A. Convinces in performing prayers.
- B. Lack of implementation of Islamic rules and regulations

A) Convenient in Performing Prayers

Participants stated that, in terms of praying, the university is a very convenient venue to perform daily prayers, they also stated that the lecturers were allowing them to perform the prayer during the lessons, participants also, highlighted that even when they are late, the lecturers understand they are due to prayer. The following are the responses of the informants to the concept

- a. *We can pray and then join the class and most of the lectures, they accept that 5 to 10 minutes for prayers, it is okay. So generally, yes, there is convenience in terms of prayers. (Respondent 1)*
- b. *When its Azan, during class, lecture will stop us. And they say, okay, let's keep silence for a while.... if you want to go to perform Salah, okay, let's go and perform it. So, each building, especially like our Kulliyah education, has the musolla so we can perform it. (Respondent 2)*
- c. *I would say there is convenience, the teachers, usually understand that we need to pray (Respondent 5)*

B) Lack of implementation of Islamic rules and regulations

The participants in the study frequently commented that rules and regulations exist but are not effectively enforced by students and staff. The lack of implementation was a common concern, as highlighted by the majority of participants who shared their experience with the way administrative staff treat students. They stated that the staff do not show the proper respect towards the students.

The significance of ethics and its role in individual and societal development is emphasized heavily in Islam. Many Qur'anic verses and hadiths highlight the importance of ethical behavior. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad said, "The best of you are those who have the best morals and character." (Al-Bukhari, 6029). This teaching highlights the significance of ethics and the responsibility of individuals to behave ethically.

- a. *Yes, it is based on Islamic principles but then who, apply it? It depends So, it's like are they applied or not applied. (Respondent 6)*
- b. *Yes, it's written in the "university code of ethics" with its mission and vision formulated during the establishment of the university. But unfortunately, very few are practiced both by staffs and students. (Respondent 8)*
- c. *The rules I think there is no Islamic. For example, between the officers and students. Some of them they didn't respect us because we are international. (Respondent 3)*
- d. *The rules are okay but to apply these rules is not Islamic. They need to be like Western countries to apply all the system. Visa unit they don't know what means Islamic. (Respondent 4)*
- e. *The administration staff I think they don't have any relations with the Islamic ethics. That means they don't take care and they don't think they must practice this ethics. (Respondent 7)*

Discussion

The study aims to investigate the retention of students from warzone areas who are enrolled at an International University in Malaysia. Based on Teto's model of "Student Departure" and Milem and Berger's (1997) model of "Student Persistence." Institutional experiences, interactions that include faculty and administrators' relationships, extracurricular activities, peer interactions, and academic and social integration are indicators and factors of student retention. However, the study reveals that faculty who hold Islamic values and the convenience of performing prayers also positively influence student retention. In contrast, academic staff who lack competence, and administrative staff who lack efficiency or fail to implement Islamic rules and regulations, have a negative impact on student retention. Milem and Berger's (1997) research shows that negative experiences on campus tend to lead to less integration, whereas students with positive experiences are more likely to contribute and give back to the community.

The study found that many students believed that support services provided by the university were ineffective. One participant was denied access to the clinic because he had forgotten his student ID card and stated that he would not recommend the university to new students seeking to study in Malaysia. Another source indicated that university administration does not treat students who are on study leave as enrolled students, while several students expressed disappointment with the lack of guidance and counseling during lockdown periods. Despite these challenges, students relied on their faith to cope with their difficulties, seeking solace and support through prayer and entrusting everything to Allah. The research revealed that volunteer programs at the university were rated as minimal. Participants highlighted the need for the university to develop more volunteer programs and educate students about the benefits of volunteering. On the other hand, the university is an excellent place for performing daily prayers, as professors allow students to leave class for prayer, and each faculty has a designated place for prayer. However, many students and staff do not adhere to the established Islamic rules and regulations.

These experiences of the participants fit well with the Student Persistence Model as it highlights various factors and indicators that can impact student retention. The study identifies institutional experiences, interactions that include faculty and administrators' relationships, extracurricular activities, peer interactions, and academic and social integration as indicators and factors of student retention. The study also highlights the positive influence of faculty who hold Islamic values and the convenience of performing prayers on student retention. Conversely, academic staff who lack competence, and administrative staff who lack efficiency or fail to implement Islamic rules and regulations, have a negative impact on student retention.

The participants also highlight the importance of support services, guidance and counseling, and volunteer programs in promoting student retention. These factors are crucial for ensuring that students have positive experiences on campus, which, according to Milem and Berger's (1997) research, are more likely to contribute and give back to the community. It highlights the need for the university to improve support services, guidance and counseling, and volunteer programs to promote a more inclusive and welcoming campus environment and enhance the retention of international students.

According to David (1998), effective teaching and learning must be viewed and perceived from the same perspective as communication. The reason for this is that the teacher must communicate information to the learners. Competency encompasses a variety of personal attributes such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation, and enthusiasm and is a fundamental component in achieving work ideals. Competencies are the result of a lifelong process of improving one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Furthermore, according to Hattie (2010), teachers need to be impact evaluators according to the basic tenet of visible learning. Teachers should focus on 'reception' rather than 'transmission' (how they deliver their lessons) to determine how well students are learning. The study found that some academic staff lacked competence. The researchers recommend that the university provide academic training to the new academic staff to improve their skills and knowledge.

The participants emphasized the importance of effective teaching and learning, which is a crucial factor in promoting student retention. The model emphasizes the role of interactions between faculty and students as an indicator and factor of student retention. The paragraph highlights the importance of effective communication between teachers and learners, which is a vital aspect of promoting learning and retention. It also highlights the importance of competency, which is a fundamental component in achieving work ideals. Competencies such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation, and enthusiasm are critical for teachers to communicate information effectively to students and promote learning. Participants emphasize the need for teachers to be impact evaluators and focus on the reception of information rather than the transmission of information to determine how well students are learning. This aligns with the Student Persistence Model, which emphasizes the importance of academic and social integration as factors of student retention. However, we can identify a problem of some academic staff lacking competence thus the university provides academic training to new academic staff to improve their skills and knowledge.

Th informants highlighted the inefficiency of the administrative staff at the university, citing communication errors, delays in the system, missing forms, and inadequately informed staff as the main causes. Even minor issues can escalate into major problems due to these inefficiencies. Additionally, informants reported that administrative staff frequently ask visitors to return on another day, and there is a lack of coordination and communication among the various offices at the university. They also noted that offices tend to pass off problems to each other, resulting in delays in addressing the issues. Ultimately, the first office to receive the problem ends up handling it.

According to the informants, academic staff at the university embody Islamic values and morals by integrating them into their teaching, and many of them are respected by students for their devotion to Islam. However, the informant expressed disappointment with the administrative staff, stating that they do not represent Islamic values. They were accused of being unfair and unjust when approached for assistance, and their behavior did not align with the principles of compassion, respect, and fairness that are central to Islamic teachings. The informant also alleged the presence of racism between international and Malay students, with administrative staff treating international students poorly and, in some instances, asking them to leave the office. Such behavior is unacceptable and goes against the values that the university seeks to uphold. The university should take steps to address these issues and ensure that all staff members, whether academic or administrative, adhere to the principles of Islamic ethics and treat all students equally and with respect.

According to Tinto's theory of Student Departure, the inefficiencies in the administrative staff and lack of coordination and communication among different offices can cause problems to escalate, leading to dissatisfaction among students. This dissatisfaction can lead to students leaving the institution. Moreover, the presence of racism and discriminatory behavior towards international students by administrative staff can also contribute to their departure.

On the other hand, the importance of Islamic values and morals is highlighted as a factor that can positively impact student retention. The integration of Islamic values into teaching by academic staff is seen as a positive factor that can contribute to students feeling more connected to the institution. However, the lack of representation of Islamic values by administrative staff and their unfair and unjust behavior towards students, including international students, can contribute to their departure. Therefore, the university needs to ensure that all staff members, whether academic or administrative, adhere to Islamic ethical principles and treat all students equally and with respect to improve student retention.

Implication of the Study

Improving International student retention needs a lot of effective strategies. One way to achieve this would be to establish a dedicated international student support center that can provide assistance with issues such as accommodation, healthcare, and visa renewals. The university could also provide more guidance and counseling services, especially during difficult periods such as the COVID-19 lockdowns. Another approach could be to enhance the volunteer programs by involving international students and encouraging them to participate in community service activities, which can provide them with a sense of belonging and help them develop valuable skills. Additionally, the university could establish cultural exchange programs to promote cross-cultural understanding among students, which can help international students integrate better into the campus community.

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