

Dropout Tendency in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of International Students in Malaysia
(Kecenderungan Keciciran Dalam Pendidikan Tinggi: Satu Kajian Kualitatif Pelajar Antarabangsa di Malaysia)

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ABSTRAK

Dropout is an unending issue and a worldwide concern. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the potential factors of dropout tendencies for international students in one public university in Malaysia. Twelve international undergraduate students from different majors were interviewed to understand their learning experiences, adaptation process and intentionality to dropout. The data were collected primarily through a focus group and a structured interview, then analysed using NVivo. The findings revealed six themes: (i) financial difficulties, (ii) lack of cultural understanding, (iii) language ability, (iv) self-adjustment, (v) university engagement, (vi) accommodation, and services. These themes were predominantly associated with three specific areas of Tinto's Theory: academic problem, failure to integrate socially, and commitment to students and universities. Knowing about the causes of the students leaving the institution may help the university move from theory into action. The information will assist the university and college to look into institutional practices to enhance engagement, develop effective policies and programmes, and then invest in a better facility and staff development to increase student retention at the higher education.

Keywords: international students, dropout, university, tinto's theory, higher education

ABSTRACT

Keciciran adalah isu yang tidak berkesudahan dan menjadi kebimbangan di seluruh dunia. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk melihat potensi kecenderungan keciciran pelajar antarabangsa di salah sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. Dua belas pelajar sarjana antarabangsa dari pelbagai jurusan telah ditemuramah untuk memahami pengalaman pembelajaran mereka, proses penyesuaian dan keterlibatan dalam isu keciciran. Data dikumpulkan melalui kumpulan fokus dan temu bual berstruktur; kemudian dianalisis menggunakan NVivo. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan enam tema: (i) masalah kewangan, (ii) kurang pemahaman mengenai budaya, (iii) keupayaan bahasa, (iv) penyesuaian diri, (v) penglibatan universiti, (vi) penginapan, dan perkhidmatan. Tema-tema ini kebanyakannya dikaitkan dengan tiga sapek dalam Teori Tinto: masalah akademik, kegagalan untuk mengintegrasikan sosial, dan komitmen kepada pelajar dan universiti. Mengetahui tentang punca-punca pelajar meninggalkan institusi boleh membantu universiti bergerak dari teori ke dalam bentuk tindakan. Maklumat ini akan membantu universiti dan kolej untuk melihat amalan institusi untuk meningkatkan penglibatan, membangunkan dasar dan program yang berkesan, dan kemudian melabur dalam pembangunan kemudahan dan kakitangan yang lebih baik untuk meningkatkan pengekalan pelajar international di pusat pengajian tinggi.

Kata kunci: pelajar antarabangsa, keciciran, universiti, teori tinto, pendidikan tinggi

INTRODUCTION

University as a higher education institution plays a vital role in developing the intellectual aspects of a human being. Despite education purposes, the general aim of a university is to expand the knowledge among students in higher education, which makes the institution's role become more important in the world today. In the world of education, studying abroad is a growing fact due to significant broader knowledge acquired when being outside the country rather than studying in the home country (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig & Sabol, 2012). Looking at Malaysian higher education institutions, enrollment statistics among international students show an increment every year. For example, the number of international students in the Malaysian higher education institutions was reported to increase from 27766 in 2018 to 30341 in 2019 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). In line with the increasing numbers of student enrolment, every university needs to enhance their quality of teaching and learning, facilities and accommodation provided as a preparation to give the best services to their students.

However, there is a tendency for international students to leave the university without completing their studies; regardless, it was hard to find extensive exploration on the issue of international students' dropout (Norizan & Nooraini, 2020). The dropout among students in higher education was defined as an action of discontinuing study that was influenced by several reasons (Millon, Hossain, & Alam, 2018). That situation occurs when students decide to depart from the university before completing the academic requirements to graduate. Students will drop out of university if they feel unsatisfied with certain things, such as experiencing poor quality of services provided by host universities, failing to adapt to the new culture, having interpersonal relationship issues and dealing with personal problems (Norizan & Nooraini, 2020). When looking at the type of institution, public universities found higher dropout rates than private universities (Arce, Crespo & Miguez-Alvarez, 2015).

In the light of that, Arce et al. (2015) further explained that among the main reasons for the student's dropout are economic problems, university environment, educators and adaptation difficulties for international students. Surprisingly, the findings of the study above were quite similar to recent studies conducted in Malaysian public universities where international students may experience academic and psychological adjustment problems (Lashari, Kaur & Rosna Awang Hashim, 2018), financial hardship, accommodation, social and personal difficulties

(Mustaffa & Illias, 2013). Therefore, this study attempts to investigate why international students tend to leave university. This study is critical because, to the best knowledge of researchers, only a few studies regarding international student dropouts have been done in Malaysia for the past ten years. Hence, this study is crucial to explore the issues of dropout among international students in Malaysia, which could prevent the students from leaving the university. This study's strengths included the in-depth analysis of international students' experiences using a qualitative approach. It is also to predict the reasons for dropping out by the students in the higher institution in Malaysia. The specific objective of this study is (a) to explore the possible aspects that contribute to the tendency to drop out among international students in Malaysia and (b) to identify the dominant aspect that contributes to the tendency to drop out among international students in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the universities' main roles is to equip a nation with a knowledgeable workforce in the near future. In particular, current undergraduate students should be the main focus of the nation as it usually consists of young people from 18 to 25 years old. Suppose a nation could capitalize every individual in this group of ages so that they can graduate and acquire a suitable job in the future. In that case, it is a contribution to the nation itself. However, this is not the case, as some of them will drop out of the university programme due to various reasons; financial issues, adaptation, adjustment and social difficulties. In many textbooks and journals, Tinto's Theory is one popular theory that is much related to the sources of student departure or dropout from university. Specifically, Tinto's Theory focuses on higher education dropouts regarding academic attainment, social integration and students' attainment (Tinto, 1975). There are three main reasons students drop out: academic problems, failure to integrate socially and university, and students' commitment. For this article, this theory was chosen as it mainly describes why students leave the institutions. The researchers see the relevance behind this theory that could be potentially related to the issues of international student dropouts in Malaysia. It may help the researchers to discuss the findings of the study.

Academic Problems

Academic problem is one of the main reasons for

students' dropout. The most common reason is university dismissal for failing to get good grades (Norton, 2019). Note that there are also some cases where students change from one academic program to another academic program. In the context of international students, the main reason students drop out of the academic programme is failing to achieve standard academic practice in a particular country (Norton, 2019). For example, plagiarism might not exist when students study in their home country, but sometimes it does when they study abroad (Simpson, 2016). In addition, one covariate that affects students' academic problems is that the teaching method is totally different when being abroad compared to their home country. As a result, students feel demotivated due to failure to adapt to the current teaching and learning process, which results in poor academic performance (Unruh, 2015). For non-English students, failing to express their ideas in English, either verbally or in writing, is also a common reason for dropping out of the undergraduate study (Mohd Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Mousavi & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2011).

The same condition also occurs in non-English countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and Germany, where English is not the first language, either in university or daily life (Modarresi & Javan, 2018; Jung & Kim, 2018). Many non-English Asian countries have become the global economic leader, which drives students from western countries to visit and study in Asia. However, as many subjects in Asian universities are being taught in the native language, some western students, if not most of them, simply drop out of their studies and use the opportunity to become English teachers in those countries, as it is more rewarding compared to completing their study (Martin, 2004).

Wang and Zhou (2021) investigated about experience of learning and living of the international students who dropped out from the academic program. The international students decided to drop out from academic due to academic failure that was related to low learning motivation, lack of time management and self-regulation, and insufficient academic and social integration. Also, it was highlighted in the study that mostly the international students were having academic barriers associated with academic skills such as lack of language proficiency, writing skills and communication to the faculty members. Of course, these academic issues will lead to the failure to complete the program.

Failure to Integrate Socially

Another main factor for international students to drop out is when they fail to adapt socially to the local

community. Most of the students are facing difficulties in adapting to the taste of local food, local cultures, moral values, religions, particularly language, which most locals tend to speak in their native language, or English in their own accent, eventually hindering international students from blending into the local community (Mahmud, Salleh, Rahman & Mohd Ishak, 2010; Khairi & Richards, 2010). This situation indirectly establishes a social boundary where students will only be comfortable within their own circle and not be able to go out and adapt to the local society. Previous studies have also shown that peers' attachment during university life contributed to greater levels of adjustment as well as an attachment to their university. However, failure to have a good relationship with peers pushes the students to fail in adjusting to their university life (Maunder, 2017).

In regards to the fail to adapt socially with people on campus, Li and Zizzi (2018) did a study about international students' friendship development and the social aspect of physical activity. The study found that international students may encounter both language and cultural barriers in their social interactions with local students. The study suggests that engagement in physical activities and peer-to-peer social behaviours interaction will help them cope with new environment. Also, the study stated that the multicultural friendship can be developed and strengthened by engaging in these physical activities between local and international students.

Commitment

For the purpose of this study, the commitment was divided into two perspectives: from the university and the students. Usually, it is not an issue for students' commitment to fulfilling the academic requirements and complying with the university rules and regulations during undergraduate study. However, the most common problem international students have to deal with is a financial commitment. For instance, Han et al. (2013) found that over 40% of the Chinese international students surveyed at Harvard University believed that their academic performances were significantly associated with financial support. Tangibly, there are huge fees charged to the international compared to local students, specifically in the universities in developed countries. It is a massive burden to the students to commit financially until the end of their studies and thus, opting out to leave the university without completing their studies (Baker & Montalto, 2019).

On the other hand, the university's commitment to students leaves them to wonder about themselves.

Questions are lingering regarding the safety and security of the facilities, bureaucracy issues and incompetence of university staff in serving the students. There are cases involving students as victims of sexual harassment committed by the faculty members. This problem is identified as one of the main reasons why students are urged to drop out of their studies (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, 2018).

Ravichandran Ammigan (2019) did a study about the salient factors that influence future applicants on international students to enrol in one particular university. It turns out that there was a strong positive correlation between students' satisfaction and their recommendation to future students. In other words, the more likely they were to encourage future applicants to apply to their institution, the more students would come to the university. Findings also found that each dimension of satisfaction (arrival, learning, living, and support services) positively influenced recommendation, and mostly are associated with university environments like social facilities and university accommodations. These issues were always reported in their recommendation to other students. The learning experience, particularly with respect to curriculum design and teaching, and physical library was reported to be the most impactful to the enrolment rate. This is a strong commitment by university and staffs to enhance the facilities and services to make sure that students are pleasant while in the university, and of course, it may help student retention (Shah, Mahadevan & Cheng, 2022)

Besides, there is also a report of the university's staff being rude to the students. It is believed that most of the reports came from students coming from developing countries. Studying abroad exposed these students to the racism that caused them to develop hesitancy to adapt to the social norms and, therefore, drop out of the academic program (Banks & Dohy, 2019). It is an open secret that international students decide to withdraw from their study program due to the lack of meaningful learning experiences, or in this case, the worst learning experiences ever.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design aiming to identify the potential factors of dropout among international students. Qualitative research is designed to help researchers gain in depth comprehension of the phenomena by listing the point of information, discover the situation and develop holistic understanding on the problem (Corbin & Strauss, 2019). For this study,

the researchers use consensual qualitative research (CQR) steps to gather the data from the participants. According to Hill, Thompson and Williams (1997), the data were collected via interviews which include open-ended questions. In sampling procedure, the study employed a criterion-based sampling method where the researchers decided to form the focus groups based on the participants' nationality in order to understand the whole experience of the international students that related to the tendency of the dropout in higher education.

Participants

A total number of twelve (12) international students were selected for the interview, and they had a record of withdrawing from one public university. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old, four were male, and eight were female. All participants were undergraduate students from various majors; four were business studies, three were computing studies, and five were social science studies. The participants were identified as international students from two countries, China (n=6) and Indonesia (n=6), in one particular university in Malaysia. The students from both countries were selected for the study as they represented a larger number of international students who are currently enrolled in the year 2019 (Statista, 2019). It also represents Southeast Asia students who prefer Malaysia as a destination to further their education. All demographic information about the participants of the study is listed in Table 1.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

For the study's recruitment, the researchers identified the potential participants by contacting an international student society to seek volunteers for the group interviews. The criteria for recruitment of the participants were undergraduate international students either from China or Indonesia, able to communicate in the English language, enrolled in the current semester, and obtained full-time status as a student in the university. These selection criteria were chosen because of the highest enrolment of the students from these countries in universities in Malaysia (Statista, 2019). Therefore, the dropout rates were also highest among the students from these countries (Norizan & Nooraini, 2020). All selected students were divided into two focused groups and assigned according to their countries which were China and Indonesia. Before the focus group discussion took place, each student was given an informed consent

TABLE 1. List of Participants

	Country of Origin	Field of study	Age	Years of study	Gender
1	China (Z)	Business	23	2	M
2	China (S)	Computing	22	3	F
3	China (T)	Social Sciences	21	2	F
4	China (H)	Social Sciences	23	2	F
5	China (B)	Computing	22	3	M
6	China (V)	Business	23	3	F
7	Indonesia (A)	Business	21	2	M
8	Indonesia (P)	Computing	22	2	F
9	Indonesia (J)	Social Sciences	23	1	F
10	Indonesia (D)	Social Sciences	24	1	M
11	Indonesia (M)	Business	21	2	F
12	Indonesia (Q)	Social Sciences	22	1	F

form which consisted of permission to record the session, duration of the interview and confidentiality of the information for the interview. Participants also have a right to withdraw from the group. During the focus group session, the researcher led the discussion by asking the interview questions to all the participants and letting the participants discuss the topics.

Interview Questions

In addition to that, the interview questions were developed upon the concept of Tinto's Theory. This theory focuses on the reasons why students tend to withdraw from their study, whether there is permanent, temporary or opting out to enrol in other courses. Specifically, there were four interview questions given to the participants as follows:

- i. i. How do you feel so far studying in this university?
- ii. ii. Could you describe the most difficult time you have experienced in this university?
- iii. iii. What are the potential factors that may cause you to leave this university?
- iv. iv. What are your suggestions to the university to prevent the students from leaving the university?

Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences pertaining to their challenges and tendency to drop out of the university. Each focus group session lasted between 30-40 minutes. The sessions were conducted in the English language.

Data Analysis

Next, the data from the interview session were analysed using NVivo software. NVivo software enables researchers to analyse the qualitative data (Zamawe, 2015). In this study, interview data from each group were transcribed into word format before exporting into NVivo software. As the first step, the transcript of the interview session from the word format was transferred into NVivo software in order to set up the nodes/themes. In the next stage, NVivo software analysed all the transcripts and then moved to the coding process to extract the specific nodes/themes. The data were analysed using an inductive method to investigate the core idea, reanalysing the data (cross-analysis) by the research team and then categorising them according to the possible themes. In this process, the core category or emerging themes were identified by a framework from Corbin and Strauss (2015), which follows certain criteria: (a) the idea has relationships between all the other categories, (b) the idea frequently appears in the data, (c) the idea is logical and consistent with the data, (d) the idea can lead to future studies, (e) the idea has explanatory power to the research topic. In the CQR's methodology, it is important that the emerging themes developed will reach a consensus among the researchers (1997). Thus, the research team agreed upon all categories developed from the data.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From the data analysis, the results revealed several themes emerging from the coding process. There were financial difficulties, language ability, lack of cultural understanding, self-adjustment, and university engagement and accommodation and services (in figure 1). The results highlighted international students' concerns and personal struggles encountered during the semester while studying in Malaysia. All themes pointed out are well supported by verbatim evidence. As illustrated in Table 1 above, alphabetical letters are also included to represent the identity of the participants of this study. In the result section, all themes were organized and spelt out as below:

Financial Difficulties

In regard to the interview, most of the participants expressed the issue of financial difficulties, which could lead to a lack of focus on academics. They hassled on certain aspects such as tuition fees, cost of living, and family obligations. For instance, H from China has struggled with financial issues since the onset of the study. She asserted that the monetary issue to survive was one of the factors that led her to drop out of university. According to the participants, most international students are self-financed or totally dependent on parental support. H admitted that there are a lot of international students here without a scholarship, and then most of them face a hardship living in this country. It is followed by the least opportunity to work on campus for international students. According to the student, being an undergraduate student is far different from Postgraduates students. They would have many opportunities to work on research grants and apply for Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) positions on campus.

“Sometimes, I had financial difficulties while living here as a student. I think we are undergraduate students who are less fortunate than the Postgraduate students who are able to work on campus. I found it hard for myself to focus more on my academics while having financial problems. I really feel pressure.”

Similarly, A from Indonesia shared financial difficulties as a reason to drop out from the university. He expressed that he struggles to pay tuition fees, health fees and costs of living due to high Malaysian currency. A explained:

“My life here is a bit of a challenge, I've

been struggling financially since I was in my first year at this university, I find it hard, especially on tuition fees, health fees, and cost of living. Even though we are a neighbour of Malaysia, we are really struggling to live and balance between the currency. Our resources (money) are mainly from our country and government. We received only a small amount and stipend because we're dealing with a high currency.”

In order to overcome this issue, S suggested the university to provide more scholarships and job opportunities on campus for international students. These opportunities may help them to cope with financial difficulties during their stay in Malaysia.

“I think if the university provided a more opportunity job on campus for undergraduate international students over campus and potential scholarships, it will be more helpful for us here.”

Language Ability

Most international students were concerned about their language ability when studying in Malaysia. International students need to demonstrate their levels of competency in order to enrol and graduate. This concern is completely related to academic performance and communication competency with instructors. Even though the international students went to the English preparation class prior to Malaysia, they still faced the problem of becoming competent and proficient as English users. According to them, the majority of students had a problem with writing components rather than speaking components. It means they are able to converse but struggling to write up. These reasons may create difficulty in completing the assignment and sitting for the final exams. According to Z from China, the faculty members used the English language as a tool for teaching and learning in the classroom. Even though most international students took IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as A Foreign Language) as competency tests to prepare themselves for courses, they still struggled to pass the test and communicate well in the university environment. In addition, most of the teaching materials, textbooks and assignments are all in the English language. Z stated:

“We are aware that we have an issue with English Language Proficiency, especially in a writing piece. Majority of the assignments

and textbooks are in English. Sometimes I've spent a lot of time understanding reading the textbooks and writing assignments for the class."

Undoubtedly, it has led the students to uncompleted assignments and less participation in the class, which may affect their academic performance during the final exams. B mentioned that he encountered a similar problem as his language ability is below expected levels.

"I remember during my first year, I struggled in my final exams. I could not understand many questions in the papers. Also, I wrote my answer in the wrong papers (due to misinterpretation of instructions). I could not recall what I've read for the exam. I was pressured. I guess it was a language issue."

However, D from Indonesia argued that he has no problem speaking and writing in English as his country uses English to communicate. However, he agreed that sometimes he struggles to understand local accents and tones. Fortunately, he faced no issue interacting with local students as both Indonesia and Malaysia spoke Bahasa as a medium of communication.

"I'm from Jakarta, and I like English very well. I had no problem with English as a medium of learning in the classroom. In my home country, we mostly use English in everyday life, even though we have some languages we speak at the same time."

Similarly, V has no issue speaking Bahasa as a communication medium on campus. She could use Bahasa to ask questions to the instructors in the classrooms. She agreed that Bahasa is a language that she communicates daily in everyday life. She feels really comfortable speaking Bahasa and further uses it while in Malaysia.

"It was easy for me. I could speak Bahasa to communicate with local students and lecturers. I will ask questions in Bahasa when I do not understand certain concepts."

On the other hand, international students from China were urged to learn Bahasa to engage with local students in the university and community around. They admitted that the language required more time to master and develop proficiency. V revealed that it was not easy to learn Bahasa, and he still strives to learn it today.

"I found it was fun to learn Bahasa with people all over the campus, however, it was

hard for us when they speak really fast with one particular accent. Usually, I'd make an effort to ask them back on what they're saying."

Lack of Cultural Understanding

According to the participant, some international students may have an issue with cultural understanding (beliefs and attitudes). They found it hard to understand certain occasions in Malaysia as it is different from their home country. From the interview, T from China revealed that the frequency of holidays and celebrations in Malaysia was an uneasy factor for them. Thus, the students faced difficulty finding faculty members for consultations and visiting the department and services on campus. According to T, public holidays and celebrations are new to them as their country has less than five days of public holidays per year. It was seen as a major concern since the international students are obligated to complete their studies in a certain period of time due to the cost of living and visa status.

"I note that Malaysia will have so many public holidays and day breaks for celebrations. As a matter of fact, sometimes it was really difficult to set consultation hours with professors and get services which are available on campus."

In addition to that, most Malaysian universities require all students to wear proper attire on campus, especially during class hours. All rules and regulations are illustrated in the university's code of ethics, and students have to obey the rules abided by the university. Nevertheless, some international students are unaware that this code of conduct is a part of university policy where students are trained to be well-dressed during their studies before entering the labour force. However, this regulation has become uneasy for certain international students who prefer less formal attire for everyday classes on campus. B shared this issue since he always feels uncomfortable wearing office attire every day. He found it difficult to fit into this new culture as it was totally different from the expected culture of the college environment in their home country. It was completely beyond his expectations. B explained:

"When I was here, the university ethics allowed only some kinds of dress code. It's like office dresses. This is completely different from our culture at the college, where it is less formal and more kind of relaxing, no specific dress you need to go to

the classes.”

On the other hand, all participants from Indonesia confessed that they could easily understand the culture and practices in Malaysia since both countries share similar cultures, practices and languages. Also, they do not have problems having Malaysian foods since they also have the same dishes as Malaysian but with different names. For instance, a favourite breakfast meal in Malaysia is known as ‘*nasi lemak*’, while in Indonesia, it is known as ‘*nasi uduk*’. This kind of similarity helps the Indonesian students reconcile with their life in Malaysia.

Self-Adjustment

In the interview, Q mentioned experiencing homesickness because of living far away from her family. She always contacts her family through social media and WhatsApp.

“When I’m here, I’ve experienced homesickness for a while, I feel lucky that I’ll be able to get in touch with social media and WhatsApp to my family in my home country. I’d say the internet access here is great for international students.”

Furthermore, Q strived to develop positive thinking so that she could focus and attend to the learning.

On the other hand, the group asserted that the ineffective transportation and distance to the airport were the main concern for international students. They feel that these are necessary facilities to look over by universities for international students. In Malaysia, international students truly cherished a variety of foods, and they enjoyed most of them. However, they could not tolerate sweet and spicy foods. S said that she could not eat Malaysian spicy foods and still made an adjustment to local cultures and foodies. She suggests the university play a role in introducing a cultural immersion event specially designed for them to participate in the future.

“In Malaysia, it’s really good to have a variety of foods, however, most of the food here is hot and spicy, and too sweet. Sometimes we couldn’t eat them. We need to be selective and choose whatever we like, like myself, I have to prepare my own meals that suit my taste buds.”

Moreover, S added that she experienced a problem when she had to be in the group for classroom activities. Commonly, she will find other international students to team up and form a group.

“In the classroom, sometimes, I found it was difficult to team up with other local students, especially in the group activity. I always tend to find other international students to form the group. So far, I’m okay with it, but I think I need to mingle with locals as well.”

University Engagement

All respondents asserted that the university’s engagement with international students was one of their concerns, especially when dealing with administrative staff. Sometimes, the staff were unfriendly and lacked communication skills. Some of the participants claimed that some of the staff often use inappropriate words without taking the sensitivity of other cultures. However, they agreed that some staff were accommodating and kind to them.

“I had one experience of the staff treating me badly where he uses inappropriate words to me. I feel mad about it. He’s not supposed to say that to me or even to other people. I think this is a personal issue in which the act does not represent the organization.”

Accommodation and Services

All participants agreed that they experienced accommodation and services issues at the university. The university does not provide sufficient accommodations, adequate public transportation to the nearest town and good services at the medical centre. Z stated that the university where he studies now is located far from town. However, he feels all facilities and accommodation are up to satisfactory levels. Also, another participant agreed that she has to adjust to the environment where forests surround the universities. Z shared:

“Even though I’ve been in Malaysia for almost 2 years, I’m still struggling with the weather here. Since our campus is surrounded by forest, I feel good. But animals like monkeys could enter my room and steal my belongings. I hope the university and residential staffs would do something about it.”

Regarding the facility in a residential hall, H stated that the facility at the university needed an improvement to cater to the international students’ needs. For instance, H explained that the Chinese prefer to shower using a

water heater daily, and they believe it is a traditional way to keep them healthy in everyday life. She used to take hot water for showers daily, but the facility at the dormitory was limited.

“In my home country, we used to get good facilities in our dormitory, we get shower with hot water every day. Even though this is like a small thing, I hope it’ll fill up the needs of students from China”

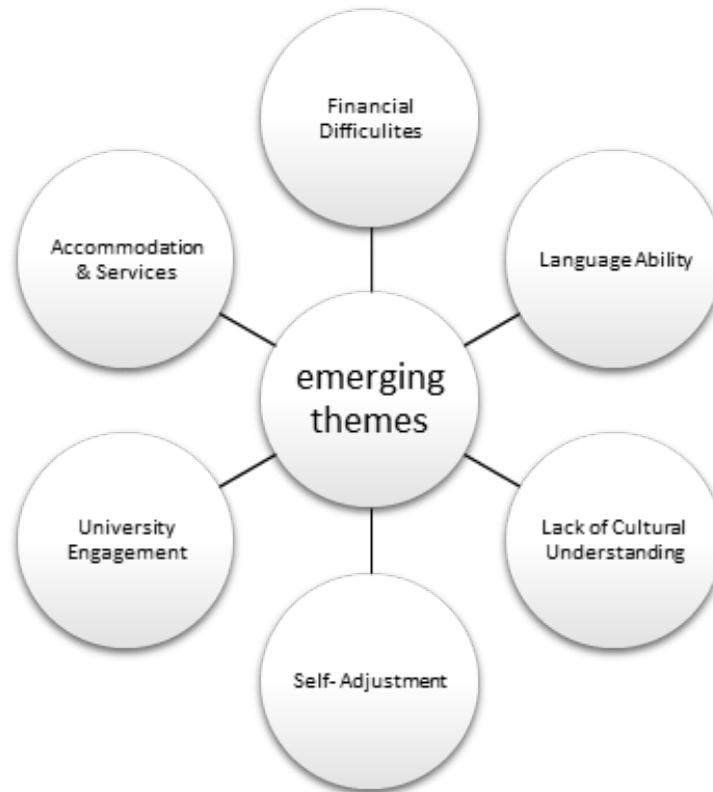


FIGURE 1. Emerging Themes - potential factors of dropout tendencies for international students in Malaysia Higher Education

DISCUSSION

Past studies have shown that cost can be a burden to students (Kim & Kim, 2018). They need financial resources such as a part-time job or a scholarship to survive. Our universities have to consider the international students' financial problems seriously. Even though they cherish their learning and academic experiences as well as the services provided, if they have issues with the financial aspects, they are unable to continue their studies. This implies that those financial difficulties issues are very important to consider by the local universities to prevent these international students from dropping out. The universities may provide scholarships to international students according to their academic performance (Akanwa, 2015). On the other hand, the university may create more on-campus jobs available for undergraduate international students (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014). Moreover, the university also can provide financial adviser services for the

students to coach them in managing their financials wisely. Also, the university could establish a student financial aid program which aims to give financial help for students to pay their tuition fees and living expenses. The financial aid program is a common practice in higher education institutions where the university will offer immediate funds and financial resources for college students in need (Toutkoushian & Shafiq, 2010).

Besides financial issues, the international students also demand that the teaching quality of the lecturers be improved (Georg, 2009). Teaching quality needs to be improved in terms of the lecturer's capability or qualification and the implementation of the technology in teaching methods. In terms of knowledge sharing, there is a higher probability that the potential students prefer to study in a university consisting of many professors (Kim & Kim, 2018). To enhance the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, the universities need to cope with the current variety

of technologies and tools for improving the learning process (Laurillard, 2008). The use of technology and interactive tools has become a new approach that academicians can apply to enhance their quality of teaching. Tinto (2006) asserts that the effect of classroom practice on student learning and persistence may be a good investment for the future, which could move forward on faculty and staff development. Faculty pedagogy, delivery method, and assessments are major influencers for student retention (Khanal, 2021). It will be best if the institution encourages the faculty and staff to improve classroom competency in using technology-mediated approaches. The training and courses that are related to the use of technology for faculty and staff are warranted.

Regarding language ability among international students, the results showed that international students seek an effort to master English as a global language to achieve good academic performance since all the teaching elements, lectures, teaching materials, textbooks, and reference books are in English. Thus, all international students are encouraged to enhance their English Language Proficiency as it would predict good academic standings during their studies (Naeeni, Mahmud, Salleh, Amat, Maros & Morgan, 2015). Meanwhile, Mohd Faiz and Mohamed (2022) suggested that the English proficiency levels among academic staff are also needed to improvise to facilitate the international students at the university more effectively.

Moreover, the students can make extra efforts to comprehend the national language to communicate with local people there easily (Oi, Ohta, Shiba & Sano, 2022). In Malaysia, international students are expected to learn Bahasa Melayu. Regarding cultural understanding, through most of the observations, it is believed that Indonesian students could assimilate easily to Malaysian cultures compared to Chinese students since both citizens share more things in common. For example, foods, clothes, languages and words (Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia are mutually intelligible), and both countries are made up of Muslim people in the majority. According to previous studies pertaining to socio-cultural adjustments of Asian international students (Naeeni et al., 2015; Freeman, Nga & Matthews, 2017), the studies found that most international students from Asian Region; China, Indonesia, Thailand and West Asian Countries had experienced minor challenges and difficulties as they were practising most alike weather, cultures, lifestyle and communication. The results supported the Cultural Distance Theory (Babiker, Cox & Miller, 1980). Individuals who survive in a new environment may experience fewer struggles because the language,

family structure, religion, wealth, lifestyle and values are almost identical.

Regarding self-adjustment, universities may assign each new international student to peer mentors to assist them and help them adapt to a new environment (Thomson & Esses, 2016). For instance, peer mentors could help them connect with faculty, residential staff and local students to make academic and psychological adjustments. In addition to that, the peer mentors could guide the international students to find places and facilities at the university such as lecturing hall, residential office, local banks, international students' affairs office, shopping mart and other services. This may happen until the international students are ready to be independent and get familiar with the university areas. T

Vaccaro and Newman (2016) suggested that the students will develop a sense of belonging with other social identities and populations. Thus, the international students are consistently encouraged to build a good rapport with the local students and people (Cocks & Stokes, 2013). As a result, it is hoped that the international students will develop a feeling of belonging to the new place, making them decide to stay longer rather than leave the university in Malaysia. The students are encouraged to visit the counselling services for seeking psychological helps. In one study, Nasir and Mat Yusoff (2021) found that the more students went to counselling services, the less academic and social adjustment issues among international students, and the better they coped with adjustment issues. In addition, Institutional support has been a primary role and responsibility in creating a learning community that will uplift the students' motivation at the university (Muthukrishnan, Sidhu, Hoon, Narayanan & Fook, 2022). With respect to university engagement, the international students also speak up about the administrative staff who treated them badly while dealing with residential issues. The university may solve this problem by providing appropriate training for the staff at the front desk. The competency and multicultural skills training may allow administrative staff sufficient knowledge and awareness to avoid stereotypes and judgments toward international students (Malaklonlunthu & Sateyen, 2011). On the other hand, the students also must be well-prepared in terms of the country's educational system and cultural backgrounds before enrolling in university (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). To make an adjustment, they must learn to assimilate with socio-culture and subculture at the host university. The international students are encouraged to join cultural events at the university, which may help students to assimilate local cultures,

practices and values (Mustapha, Abdullah, Devarajoo, Ibrahim, Suid & Amirrudin, 2021).

In terms of quality of accommodation, the university needs to ensure that the services and accommodation for international students are sufficient and fulfil students' requirements. In other words, the university should provide facilities that meet the international students' needs. The residential office may conduct a survey or provide a feedback form to the students and obtain information regarding their needs and issues at the residential halls. The number of dropouts students could be reduced by attending to their needs and making them feel more comfortable studying in a particular institution (Abbas et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, the studies showed that the qualities of campus facilities such as social areas, residential halls (dormitories), classes, auditoriums and libraries are the most substantial factors to influence students' satisfaction and may affect positively on psychological and health among college students (Sullivan, 2018; Hanssen & Solvoll, 2015; Fisher, 2014). In sum, the students may feel energetic, motivated, relaxed and enjoy living and studying in the on-campus environment.

In addition, a comparison between a group of Chinese and Indonesian students is worth discussing since the study reported having similarities and differences for both countries, even though they are all Asian. As we looked further, it shows that Indonesian students are well adjusted and managed to survive compared to Chinese students in many aspects, especially adaptation and adjustment. This situation may occur because Malaysia and Indonesia are homogenized in terms of religion, history, collective culture and common ancestry (Jibran, 2018). For the study of international students in general, the similarities among Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia are worth notifying here as there were only fewer studies pertaining to Eastern countries rather than Western countries. In the US and Europe, the undergraduate's international decision to drop out is regarding the issues of finances, academics, English-language problems and the desire to attend an institution that is a better fit for them (Fisher, 2014). This fashion looked equivalent to the international students in Malaysia. However, we could look in-depth into the socio-culture perspective that describes people's beliefs, worldviews and ability to survive in the new environment. In Kommers and Pham (2016), the Western cultures hold an individualistic perspective where they are independent, competitive and emotionally detached from the family. On the other hand, Eastern people hold more interdependence and group harmony values. In becoming a regional

education hub in the years ahead, if Malaysia aspires to remain competitive and relevant, they must consider the nature of the struggles and the differences in terms of cultures that may help the university to fill the needs of the international students from Western and Eastern. It is hoped that this article will provide a wealth of information for all higher education institutions in Malaysia to avert the international students from dropping out of their studies.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this study revealed several factors that may cause a tendency for international students to drop out and leave the higher education institution in Malaysia. Notably, many international students' issues are related to the three major aspects of Tinto's Theory; academic problems, failure to integrate socially, and commitment of university and students themselves, especially international students from Asian countries such as China and Indonesia. Ultimately, this study has promoted an understanding of international students in Malaysia according to Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. According to the findings, the emerging themes from the data analysis have been proven to be well-suited to the Tinto Theory's major assumptions. The international students showed a dropout tendency by the issues of financial difficulties, language ability, self-adjustment, university engagement and accommodation and services. As we can see, these emerging themes have fallen into every three categories of Tinto's Theory which are (a) academic problem: language ability, (b) social integration: self-adjustment and cultural understanding, (c) commitment (students and university); financial difficulties, university engagement, and accommodation and services. Knowing about the causes of the students leaving the institution may help the university move from theory into action. The information will force the university and college to look into institutional practices that enhance engagement, develop effective policies and programmes, and then invest in a better facility and staff development to increase student retention.

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