

# The Decisive Factors of International Students from Africa, Asia and Middle East in choosing Malaysia

Chen Tien Li<sup>1</sup>, Siek Hwee Ling<sup>2\*</sup>,

<sup>1,2</sup> Graduate Institute of Design, National Taipei University of Technology, Taiwan R.O.C

\*Email Address of Contact Author: [perlinesiek@gmail.com](mailto:perlinesiek@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This research study investigates the factors that influence the international students from Africa, Asia and Middle East in choosing Malaysia to pursue their basic degree. In-depth interviews with industry expertise were employed to develop the questionnaire followed by a survey questionnaire for quantitative data to interpret the survey findings. The stratified sampling was narrowed down to Nigerian students from Africa, China students from Asia and Iranian students from Middle East.

This research could provide a reference for higher education providers to determine the approach in future development in recruiting students; from the outcome of the survey analysis, the Private funded Higher Education Institution can continuous provide good or even better services to Nigerian students so that the number can continue to grow. Foreign university's program will continue to attract China students with details and proper information. For Iranian students, images and facilities of the institutions are critical. This research can also serve as a reference for future studies on international students in pursuing their post graduate programme.

**Keywords:** International Students, Private Higher Education Providers, Malaysia.

## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is known worldwide as a progressive and moderate Islamic country. In the mid 1980s, the higher education was liberalized and opened to the private sector involvement. It was motivated by the need in increasing the number of enrolment at the tertiary level due to global recession which parents were unable to send their children abroad and the constraint of ethnic quota system to non-Malay in admission to public institution of higher learning and to become more responsive to changing labour market needs (Tan, 2009).

The Malaysia government has vigorously embarked towards in achieving the objective of making the country a regional educational hub under the Ninth Malaysia Plan<sup>1</sup>. This action has included the implementation of a quality assurance system by established a statutory body – Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) set up under the Malaysian Qualification Act 2007<sup>2</sup> to implement the Malaysia Qualification Framework (MQF<sup>3</sup>) as a basis for quality

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Malaysia Speech 2006

<sup>2</sup> Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 is replacing the National Accreditation Board Act 1996 which has been repealed (Education Act 1996)

<sup>3</sup> The following is the point of reference of MQF establishment and development:

MQF is the benchmarked against the main qualifications frameworks worldwide such as those of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Europe..MQF facilitates communication with the various frameworks and higher education systems of major countries worldwide.

assurance of higher education towards all public and private higher education institutions. A total number of 218 institutes including public and private are International students.(Table 1).

Table 1: Tertiary Institutions with international students

No.	Category of Tertiary Institutions with international students	Number of Tertiary Institutions	Number of international students enrolment
1	Public-funded Universities (inclusive of online-distance learning)	21	24,218
2	Private-funded Universities offering home-grown degree programmes	23	13,483
3	Branches of Private-funded Universities offering home-grown degree programmes	24	2,376
4	Private-funded University Colleges	21	16,295
5	Foreign University Branch Campuses <sup>4</sup>	5	3,730
6	Private-funded Colleges offering transnational programmes: “2+1” <sup>5</sup> , “2+2” <sup>6</sup> foreign twinning degree and “3+0” <sup>7</sup> degree programmes	124 <sup>8</sup>	<b>26,821</b>
	Total	218	86,923

SOURCE: Retrieved from Statistics of Higher Education Malaysia 2010, pp98, 132-133

## 1.1 International Students Market

Today, the economy of Malaysia was the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest economy in South East Asia and Malaysia is also the world’s largest Islamic banking and financial centre. After 911 as the tension between USA & Middle East has raised, the numbers of students from Middle East excluded Israel<sup>9</sup>, such as: Islamic Republic of Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Palestinian Territory, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Turkey, Syrian Arab Republic, Egypt and United Arab Emirates had outgrowth from a total number of 2,170 in year 2003, to 26,283 in year 2010.

Malaysia government had aggressively set up education promotion offices in four countries including China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Dubai. In 2008 UNESCO Global Education Digest, it reported that Malaysia was approximate 2% shares of international students market whereas the recent edition (first edition in 2011) of the Statistics of Higher Education Malaysia 2010 reported that the total number of international students has reaches 86,923 in total. (Table 2)

Table 2: The statistic of International students enrolled into Malaysia’s institutions (2003 to 2010)

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Public funded tertiary education Providers	5,239	5,735	6,622	7,941	14,324	18,485	22,456	24,218
Private funded tertiary education providers	<b>25,158</b>	<b>25,939</b>	<b>33,903</b>	<b>36,449</b>	<b>33,604</b>	<b>50,679</b>	<b>58,294</b>	<b>62,705</b>
Total numbers of International students from 167 countries	30,397	31,674	40,525	44,390	47,928	69,164	80,750	86,923

<sup>4</sup>They are: Monash University (Australia), Curtin University of Technology (Australia), Swinburne University of Technology (Australia), The University of Nottingham(UK) and Newcastle University (UK).

<sup>5</sup> 2+1 Twining programme referring to: 2 years in Malaysia and 1 year at the overseas host university.

<sup>6</sup> 2+2 Twining programe referring to: 2 years in Malaysia and 2 years at the overseas host university

<sup>7</sup> 3+0 referring to: The entire foreign university degree programme is taught in Malaysia

<sup>8</sup> Private higher education institutions with additional license and approval from the Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia( Immigration Department) to be allowed to enroll international students.

<sup>9</sup> Malaysia has never recognised the state of Israel and has no diplomatic ties with the state

## 1.2 Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs)

All Malaysia Public Universities and public institutions are government funded whereas Malaysia's PHEI are non government aided; they are fully-funded by the private sector as essence business entities however Malaysia Public funded Universities and PHEIs become a parallel system to the local public higher education sector.

In order to endure in the competitive market, PHEIs had developed Collaboration arrangement with western countries, mainly from UK and Australia universities to offer '2+1', '2+2' twining programmes and '3+0' degree program<sup>10</sup> since in early 90's whereas in recent years, private Universities and private University colleges had started home-grown degree programmes<sup>11</sup>.

With the country's tropical climate, comprises different ethnic groups, religious similarities with the region and likewise English language is the primary medium of instruction in PHEIs is in a better position to attract foreign students. (Refer to Table 2).

Further study into the circulation of these international students, the biggest numbers among all the categories stated in table 3 showed that these intentional students opt for full fee paying to private funded institutions in pursuing their Bachelor Degree is the greatest, which is 28,350 equal to 45.2% of the total population of international students in 2010. (Table 3)

Table 3: Distribution of International students in different levels of learning

Distribution of international students in different level of learning	PHD	Master	Post Graduate Diploma	Bachelor	Advance Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	Professional	Others	Total
Public-funded Institutions	7,558	8,138	174	7,170	N.A.	17	N.A.	12	1,155	24,214
Private-funded Institutions	677	3,813	N.A.	<b>28,350</b>	70	8,692	21,017	86	N.A.	62,705

SOURCE: Statistics of Higher Education Malaysia 2010, pp 98- 99 & 142-143

## 2. Research Methodology

This research study investigates the factors that influence the international students in choosing Malaysia for further studying. The research presents the data collection from literature review from journals, articles, newspaper, government statistic reports and industry analysis.

In-depth interviews with industry expertise were employed to develop the questionnaire

<sup>10</sup> May refer to footnote 5, 6 & 7

<sup>11</sup> Private Universities or Private University College confer their own degree qualification to students who have completed their studies, the only difference is that a university- college is a specialist university focusing on certain disciplines of study with lower student enrolment capacity.

according to the specific contexts of this study and followed by a survey questionnaire for quantitative data to interpret the survey findings and preliminarily descriptive analyzed.

While conducting this unstructured in-depth interview no pre-research literature reviews was done before conducting, in order to unduly affect the results that emerge from the data (Glaser 1978, 1998) because my own identity with eighteen years of experiences as a PHEIs provider in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia make it possible and accessible to important distinction context which could be fit into my particular research topic and data.

Three key informants (Wellington, 2000) were invited separately for this face-to-face interview (see Table 4). The selection was based on their expertise and years of experience in recruiting international students, they are willing to share their perspectives.

## 2.1 In-depth Interviews

Table 4: In-depth interview of three key informants

No.	Key informants	Methods	Contents	Remarks
1	Mr. B	In-depth interview	Their present marketing recruiting strategies and doubts about international students	With 20 years of working experience as International Business Director of a New Zealand University. He travelled to most of the Asia countries to assign agents and recruit international students at least twice a year.
2	Dr. C	In-depth interview	Their present marketing recruiting strategies and doubts about international students in choosing Malaysia	With 14 years of experience as Chief Executive Officer cum Academic Director of a Malaysia PHEIs. The owner of aPHEIs in Kuala Lumpur. He worked with numbers of student recruitment agents in various countries and he had 8 full time international marketing staff to handle recruitment issues.
3	Mr. T	In-depth interview	Their present marketing recruiting strategies and doubts about international students in choosing Malaysia	With 11 years of practical experience as a International Marketing Senior Executive of a Malaysia PHEIs in Selangor.

The inputs of these three informants for the questions in the survey were summarized in the theoretical model:

- What motivated these international students to choose Malaysia as their educational destination?
- What “In Country” policies are espoused to influence country destination choice?
- How did these students learn about their Institution and country of choice?
- Did cost influence the decision making?
- Public funded Institutes vs. PHEIs offering Overseas Programmes, is there evidence that suggests one is ranked higher than the other?
- Are there different expectations from students studying undergraduate than those studying in post graduate programmes?
- After having experienced the education (Minimum one semester) has the educational experience measured up to expectations?

## 2.2 Stratified Purposive Sampling

This study was narrowed down to regions with at least at a minimum enrolment of 500 or above in PHEIs out of the 167 countries which listed in the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) statistics from 2003 to 2010. They are: Africa, Asia and Middle East. In 2010 statistic report, the numbers for these three regions stand at 23.6%, 38% and 24% respectively to the total number of international students of 62,705 (100%) in PHEIs.

For Africa, 7 out of 59 countries had fulfilled the requirement of 500 and above; for Asia, a total of 12 out of 26 Asia countries were selected and another 7 were sorted out from 15 Middle East countries. (See table 5). The highest number of enrolments from Africa is Nigeria, it was at 35.8%; for Asia is China, it was at 33.5% and for Middle East it is Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran), it was at 46.8%.

This stratified purposive sampling was targeted to conduct at the second key informant's PHEIs. The Nigerian students, Chinese students and Iranian students accounted the largest portion of their total international student's numbers in their transnational programmes. These programmes were taught fully in English and are approved by Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education. It is a University programmes from Europe that follows the ECOLE system; accredited by the American Academy of Financial Management (AAFMM) and American Academy of Project Management (AAPM).

Table 5: PHEIs Statistic of Africa, Asia and Middle East regions from year 2003 to 2010

No	Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Africa</b>									
1	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>1,696</b>	<b>2,626</b>	<b>5,043</b>	<b>5,398</b>	<b>5,080</b>
2	Libya Arab Jamahiriya	163	139	202	109	149	1,153	2,831	2,805
3	Sudan	223	271	428	654	710	1,778	1,867	2,241
4	Botswana	160	160	206	517	1,489	2,348	1,938	1,909
5	Somalia	98	203	382	395	447	894	619	739
6	Tanzania, Unitd Rpc of	35	44	73	171	375	592	821	773
7	Kenya	204	276	400	568	677	729	679	634
Sub total		1,011	1,398	2,228	4,110	6,473	12,537	14,153	14,181
<b>Asia</b>									
1	<b>China</b>	<b>10,230</b>	<b>9,075</b>	<b>9,035</b>	<b>6,937</b>	<b>5,308</b>	<b>6,452</b>	<b>7,078</b>	<b>8,046</b>
2	Indonesia	4,138	4,799	5,362	5,691	5,454	5,896	6,099	6,119
3	Bangladesh	1,984	1,460	5,525	6,287	2,197	1,680	1,521	1,503
4	Korea	369	548	644	555	611	1,479	828	1,426
5	Pakistan	1,084	1,297	1,819	1,819	1,164	1,325	1,473	1,492
6	Thailand	406	475	501	480	429	661	870	939
7	Maldives	525	565	645	759	886	1,156	1,153	1,154
8	India	791	762	997	1,163	1,093	1,039	1,010	989
9	Sir Lanka	348	409	524	716	807	1,014	897	1,024
10	Singapore	290	339	291	297	324	426	344	355
11	Vietnam	350	399	529	642	569	588	532	583
12	Myanmar	409	445	504	503	400	315	318	339
Sub total		20,924	20,753	26,376	25,849	19,242	22,031	22,123	23,969
<b>Middle East</b>									
1	<b>Iran, Islamic Republic of</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>478</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>1,048</b>	<b>1,629</b>	<b>3,659</b>	<b>6,930</b>	<b>7,009</b>
2	Yemen	496	687	1,073	1,095	1,179	2,929	3,382	4,057
3	Saudi Arabia	128	206	287	460	749	2,236	1,675	1,584
4	Iraq	31	33	41	92	233	649	548	580
5	Kazakhstan	5	5	7	38	144	514	1,175	1,229
6	Jodan	17	37	43	42	59	162	164	196
7	Palestinian Territory	18	42	71	77	77	188	295	310
Sub total		949	1,488	2,263	2,852	4,070	10,337	14,169	14,965

SOURCE: Ministry of Higher Education, Statistics of Higher Education 2003~2010

## 2.3 Questionnaire Survey and Implementation

A total of 60 undergraduate participants (20 Nigerian students, 20 Chinese students and 20 Iranian students) were invited to partake in this questionnaire survey concerning their reasons in choosing Malaysia in this particular PHEIs.

Students from Nigeria, China and Iran were assembled in sessions according to their nations, a total of three sessions were scheduled. Each session will be conducted by an interviewer whom is the lecturer of these students; every participant was given multiple choices of questionnaire with a total of 20 questions. Before answering, the interviewers explained clearly that the purpose and procedure of the study. The interviewers met with these students face-to-face to make sure that the international students in the study would understand the questionnaire and feel comfortable with the English language. The duration of each session was approximately 20 minutes. Before the whole procedure take place, interviewers were brief clearly by researcher about the purpose and procedure as well as the expected methods of conducting.

## 2.4 Research Instrument

The questionnaire is design at closed-ended questions. It is an exploratory research to provide a better understanding as to how decisions and prioritization of choices are made. The focus of this research will be skewed towards a qualitative approach where the focus group study will elicit international student's perception, motive, languages and comfort levels towards the adaption of studying in Malaysia (See Table 6). 35% of the questions were answered on a five-point Likert-scale.

Table 6: The procedure of the questionnaire scheduling:

Pre Planning	Studying in Malaysia	Future Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reasons in choosing this country?</li> <li>▪ Perception of this country?</li> <li>▪ Get information about this country?</li> <li>▪ Widen your global prospective?</li> <li>▪ Immigration &amp; visa issue?</li> <li>▪ Public Vs Private?</li> <li>▪ Language/s ability?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reasons in choosing this institution?</li> <li>▪ If being rejected, your next choices?</li> <li>▪ Information on campus?</li> <li>▪ Website information matches actual situation?</li> <li>▪ Financial support?</li> <li>▪ Measured up to expectation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Internship in this country?</li> <li>▪ Primary &amp; immediate post-graduation plan?</li> <li>▪ Recommend home country's friends/classmate to come?</li> <li>▪ Being permanent residency is a factor?</li> </ul>

## 3. Research Results

All the 60 questionnaire respondents are undergraduate's students, the outcome was categorised according to the country of the respondents instead of gender; it had been classified as Nigeria Respondents, Chinese Respondents and Iranian Respondents as below:

### 3.1 Nigeria Respondents

80 percent out of 20 respondents from Nigeria are financially supported by family; the academic resources and quality in Malaysia were the main reasons which attracted them in choosing Malaysia as well as better opportunities for further study in other country after upon completing and one third of them got their information from private consultants. All Nigerian students had prepared themselves with at least 6 to 12 months of English language before coming; most of them (70 percent) agreed that studying in Malaysia gave them the opportunity to widen their global prospective. Malaysia to them was considering a safe place to stay yet (60 percent) these respondents from Nigeria did take immigration, student's visa issue into consideration and future opportunity for permanent residency (PR) into consideration when they were choosing their education destiny.

75 percent were attracted by the foreign university's programme offered by the PHEIs that they enrolled as the school did provides adequate information on campus life; half of them do persist in choosing foreign university's programme offered in Malaysia PHEIs if they were to be rejected in this application. After experienced the education, all the Nigerian students agreed it is measured up to their expectations; Nigerian students wish to have the opportunity of internship in Malaysia Company; they (60 percent) will recommend classmates and friends from their home country to further study in Malaysia.( Table 7 &10).

Table 7: Results of Nigerian Respondent

Total 60 Respondents	Questions- Studying in Malaysia	Number of respondents	%
20 Nigerian respondents	Financially supported by family	16/20	80%
	Academic resources and quality	16/20	80%
	Information from private consultants	7/20	35%
	Prepared with at least 6 to 12 month of English language	20/20	100%
	Malaysia a safe place to stay	7/20	35%
	Attracted by the foreign university's programme	15/20	75%
	Persist in choosing foreign university's programme offered in Malaysia	10/20	50%
	After experienced the education, it is measured up to their expectations	20/20	100%

### 3.2 Chinese Respondents

6 out of 20 (30 percent) were financially sponsored by China's government. 40 percent of respondents from China did refer to their China foreign control information network (Website: [www.jsj.edu.cn](http://www.jsj.edu.cn)) to identify which are the approved institutions which enable them to get the necessitate approval and endorsement by their home government upon completion of the study before coming to Malaysia. 80 percent of these students were concerned about the languages being used in classes; before coming to Malaysia almost all of them did not have Basic English ability; 50 percent of the respondents are fascinated that it is a multi races country whereas they were concerned about the student's visa and immigration issue. 60 percent ranked public institution is higher than private in term of global recognition.

50 percent of them responded that if their application were unable to be accepted by this PHEIs; they will still choosing Malaysia's as their destination for foreign university's programme. However after experienced the education, most respondents felt that the education was not measured up to their expectations as they had graded the information on campus life as well as on the institution' website do not matches the actual situation; they prefer not to recommend classmates or friends from home country to study in here; further opportunity as permanent residency is also not their priority yet taking immediate employment upon completion of their programme was their preliminarily arrangement.

It was reasonable to assume that in order to fulfil the expectation of Chinese students, abundant information reported about the actual situation of institution and campus life on the website is important and it is preferable to be bilingual- English and Chinese. (Table 8 & 10)

Table 8: Results of Chinese respondent

Total 60 Respondents	Questions - Studying in Malaysia	Number of respondents	%
20 Chinese respondents	financially sponsored by China's government	6/20	30%
	information refer from China foreign control information network	8/20	40%
	Concern about languages being used in classes	16/20	80%
	Did not have Basic English ability	20/20	100%
	Fascinated by the multi races	10/20	50%
	immigration, student's visa issue	10/20	50%
	Rank Public institution is higher than private global recognition	12/20	60%
	persist in choosing foreign university's programme offered in Malaysia	10/20	50%

### 3.3 Iranian Respondents

The reasons for 45 percent of Iranian respondents in choosing was due to the low tuition fee in Malaysia and better job opportunities once they return to their home country; 40 percent of respondents answered that they obtained the Malaysia's education information about the institution from private consultants furthermore they were attentive to the multi races of Malaysia. Most of them had prepared themselves with basic English before arriving but whether enrolling into public institutions or private institutions or whether it is a home-grown programme or foreign university's programme offered by PHEIs make no difference to the majority; Malaysia is a moderate Islamic country, Iranian do not require social visa to enter, immigration and student's visa will not be their main concerned. 65percent of Iranian students were financially supported by family or self- dependent.

The education experienced that they had gone through in this PHEIs they were contented (65percent). Most of them considered the information provided by in the Malaysia institution's website do not matches the actual situation. Due to this particular reason, the researcher met up with the principal of this PHEIs to further understanding about it, the researcher met up with the second key informant again to further understanding about it. *"The perception of Iranian students about Institution or University should be big campuses with big compound; some of them when they first arrived to our place (first day in Malaysia), they felt that it was not up to their expectation in term of campus size, they just walked off and insisted to transfer to other PHEIs in Malaysia"* *"In term of size, ours institution considered is medium in PHEIs"* he added. *"Let me quote you another example, Nigerian students and Chinese students they are willing to stay in the typical student's hostel but for Iranian students, they preferred staying in condominium with full amenities facilities."* he added, *"Unlike Chinese students, they knew what they want to achieve ( foreign university's degree), they will bear with it although they knew that comparing to their home country, our campus size is much smaller, even the number of students in a class. For China, it is at least 50 in a class, for PHEIs, the average is 20 to 25 in a class."*

However they did shared the same opinion with the rest of the respondents from Nigeria and China that studying in Malaysia do give them the opportunity in widening their global prospective; 45 percent of their immediate post- graduation plan are further study in other country. (Table 9 & 10)



Table 9: Results of Iranian Respondent

Total 60 Respondents	Questions - Studying in Malaysia	Number of respondents	%
20 Iranian respondents	low tuition fee and job opportunities once they return home country	9/20	45%
	Obtained information from Private consultants	8/20	40%
	Fascinated by the multi races	9/20	45%
	Basic English ability before coming Malaysia	15/20	75%
	No different between home-grown or foreign university's	13/20	65%
	Financially supported by family or self- dependent	13/20	65%
	Contented with the education experienced in Malaysia's institution	13/20	65%
	Immediate post- graduation plan are further study in other country	9/20	45%

Table 10: Means of the 60 respondents

	Questions- Studying in Malaysia	60 Respondents (Means)	20 Nigerian Respondents (Means)	20 Chinese Respondents (Means)	Iranian Respondents (Means)
60 respondents	Studying in Malaysia give them the opportunity to widen their global prospective?	3.37	<4.00	>3.25	>2.85
	Immigration & Student Visa issue taking into consideration when choosing Malaysia?	2.816	<3.75	<3.00	>2.75
	School provide sufficient information on campus life?	3.383	<3.60	>3.25	>3.05
	Do you hope to have a chance to take up internship in Malaysia's Company?	3.28	<3.30	<3.45	>3.10
	Would you recommend classmates and friends from your home country to study in Malaysia?	2.833	<3.50	>2.25	>2.75
	Information provided by the Institution's website match the actual situation?	3.716	<4.55	>3.55	>3.05
	Future opportunity for Permanent Residency (PR) of Malaysia is a factor in your destination choice?	2.45	<3.05	>1.75	<2.55

## 4. Conclusions

This exploratory study addresses the missing gap in current literature on international students in choosing Malaysia as their education destiny. For Nigerian students, from the outcome of the survey analysis, it showed and believed that the number of Nigerian students will be growing as long as all these PHEIs can continuously provide good or even better services to them. For Chinese students, it was reasonable to assume that in order to fulfil the expectation of Chinese students, abundant information reported in the website that meet their information needs in bilingual (Chinese and English) is important because presently most of the information is in English only and foreign university's program from western countries will continue to be their preferable choices. For Iranian, Malaysia served as a good platform for their basic degree and well prepared them for their future career however heavy investment to groom the images and facilities of the institutions become essential.

This study provides implication and references for future studies on what motivated the international students to pursue their post graduate programme in Malaysia.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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