

Exploring the Needs and Expectations of International Students towards The National University of Malaysia (UKM)  
*(Kajian Terhadap Keperluan dan Jangkaan Pelajar Antarabangsa di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM))*

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates main reasons for choosing The National University of Malaysia (UKM) by international students and their needs and expectations toward the University. The study also shows the obstacles faced by those students and their satisfaction towards UKM. A total of 108 questionnaires were distributed in the main campus to the respondents who came from ten different countries. The main reasons for choosing UKM were its high ranking, reasonable tuition fees, faculty, programmes, and lecturers respectively. The results revealed that the main obstacles faced international students were tough visa procedures, improper hostels, social isolation and discrimination, and bureaucracy. Both the facilities and services of UKM and the studying approach have met the expectations satisfaction of international students. Yet, both social relationship and participation in activities and living conditions in UKM hostels have disappointed international students and did not meet their satisfaction. This study suggested that UKM should establish counselling unit and organise regular meetings to listen to the problems and suggestions of those students. Volunteer and pre-enrolment activities should be organised to introduce the Malaysian culture and gather international students with their local peer. Moreover, international students should be provided upon their arrival to UKM by hostels that combine proper conditions of living at a reasonable price.

Keywords: international students, expectations, needs, satisfaction, internationalisation.

ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini memperlihatkan faktor utama pelajar antarabangsa memilih Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) untuk menyambung pembelajaran mereka. Pada masa yang sama, kajian ini juga memfokuskan kepada jangkaan mereka terhadap Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Selain itu, kajian ini juga melihat kepada halangan-halangan yang di dihadapi oleh pelajar antarabangsa dan tahap kepuasan mereka terhadap UKM. Sebanyak 108 soal selidik telah diedarkan di kampus utama kepada responden yang berasal dari sepuluh negara yang berbeza. Hasil kajian mendapati pelajar antarabangsa memilih UKM disebabkan oleh kedudukan tertinggi (high ranking) universiti, yuran pengajian yang berpatutan, fakulti, program pengajian dan pensyarah masing-masing. Halangan-halangan yang di hadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar antarabangsa pula adalah seperti prosedur mendapatkan visa yang sukar, masalah asrama, pengasingan sosial dan diskriminasi serta birokrasi. Namun, pengkaji mendapati kemudahan dan perkhidmatan UKM di samping pendekatan pembelajaran memenuhi tahap kepuasan dan jangkaan pelajar antarabangsa. Walau bagaimanapun, hubungan sosial dan penyertaan dalam aktiviti dan keadaan hidup di asrama mengecewakan segelintir pelajar antarabangsa dan tidak memenuhi tahap kepuasan mereka. Kajian ini turut mendapati UKM perlu menubuhkan unit kaunseling dan mengadakan mesyuarat tetap untuk mendengar masalah dan cadangan para pelajar ini. Aktiviti sukarela dan pra-pendaftaran juga perlu dianjurkan untuk memperkenalkan budaya Malaysia. Pada masa yang sama, aktiviti sebegini dapat mengumpul pelajar antarabangsa dengan rakan sebaya dalam kalangan warga tempatan. Lebih-lebih lagi acara-acara ini perlu diadakan seawal ketibaan mereka di hostel masing-masing di samping harga yang berpatutan.*

*Kata kunci: Pelajar Antarabangsa, jangkaan, tahap kepuasan, keperluan, pengantarabangsaan.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the interest in international students became a phenomenon especially for academic, cultural, economic, and political reasons (Chen 2007). The phenomenon of internationalisation of higher education by crossing the international boundaries by students is not new. Promoting and consolidating this phenomenon was a reflection and response to globalisation (Anderson 2001). The recruitment of international students has essential significance for several educational institutions (Krishnan & Vrcelj 2009).

In order to serve the international students who came from different geographical regions by the best ways and provide them by their expected needs, this study aimed to identify their different needs and expectations toward UKM. This study also aimed to identify the difficulties and obstacles faced by those students and examined their satisfaction towards the university.

International student figure an important number of the students population of UKM. Considering their different needs and expectations in comparison with their local peers is important issue that benefit the university. Understanding and assessing the needs and expectations of those international students allows the university to provide them by these needs which improve their satisfaction towards the university. Thus, encourage more international students to be enrolled in UKM.

This study is beneficial to both international students and the university especially when they employ their efforts to achieve mutual utility and interchangeability. Furthermore, the study has a significant endeavour in promoting the merits of UKM and the good study environment which might increase the number of intake international students. Moreover, by understanding the needs and expectations of the international students at UKM and benefits of quality education, this study might improve the reputation of the university compared with other competitor universities. Additionally, the current study is helpful for UKM to identify its weakness thus it improve its performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

International students are the sojourners from other countries who stay temporarily in one country for tertiary study (Lewthwaite 1996). International students are the individuals who were born outside their

countries where they pursue their education. Making globally engaged communities requires from the leaders of education emphasising the value of having diverse experiences of students including international students. Those students have main contribution to the internationalisation of the communities of campus, and their meaningful and active engagement makes the institutions of higher education to become truly global or international (Urban & Palmer 2014).

The globalisation of the sector of higher education comes through the mobility of students and institutions (Min et al. 2012). In Malaysia, increasing the linguistic composition and the ethnic diversity of the students' population is the widest indicator for globalisation of education in the Malaysian universities (Hamzah 2009).

Since 1981, the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has sought transforming the country into educational, economic, and political hub of Southeast Asia. Promoting the Asian identity by the Malaysian government was as a trial to counterbalance traditional alignment of Malaysia with the West. The ambitious target of Malaysian Government to attract international students shows the country as becoming a higher education regional hub. Those international students are the non-citizens and resident of Malaysia (Middlehurst & Woodfield 2004).

Currently, the number of international students in Malaysia is close to 100,000 students which figure two per cent of the population of the international students worldwide (Education Malaysia Global Services 2019). As many other countries in the world, the market of international students became increasingly significant to Malaysia. Hence, the Malaysian Government committed to offer quality education in learning and teaching (Slethaug & Manjula 2012).

Recruiting international students is essential for educational institutions for the diversity of those institutions and for generating income from the fees (Krishnan & Vrcelj 2009). There is a significant financial and cultural contribution by international students to higher education. Those students can facilitate developing the intercultural competencies and help the communities of the campus to internationalisation of competencies (Urban & Palmer 2014).

The increase moving by international students to other countries for education is accompanied by other interests including social and cultural experiences and career opportunities. The education sector has a significant contribution to the national economy of countries, and it is a key area of the interest of educational institutions which create large employment number. Hence, special attention is required to be paid

by educational institutions to international students since large amounts of money are spent by them in pursuing their education (Min, Khoon & Tan, 2012).

Previous studies (East, 2001; Hanaysha et al. 2011; Petruzzellis et al. 2006) considered students as customers. The higher education in Australia is urged to work more commercially, and the students in these change times are identified as customers. There is strong competition between universities to enrol international students and the service quality is promised by the marketing of these universities. Currently, it is expected from universities to change to meet the needs of international students especially by defining them as customers who have their own perceptions and expectations of service quality (East 2001).

During the development of segments of the market, the different motives of international students should be taken into account of higher education programmes marketers. The development of suitable programmes of educational service should meet each segment expectations (Min et al. 2012).

In Malaysia, the quality of higher education is a significant indicator of national competitiveness which comes through public satisfaction on the service provided and set of excellent learning process. The higher education institutions should continuously build, maintain, and acquire stronger relationships with their students to remain competitive. In these institutions, assessing students' satisfaction is significant in determining the quality of service. For students, as customers, exceeding the expected service provided makes them more satisfied (Hanaysha et al. 2011).

The satisfaction of customers depends on fitting the service to their expectations, and they become very satisfied if that goes beyond their expectations, or completely satisfied when receiving more than their expectations. Assessing the satisfaction of students is the foundation of a competitive strategy that should be undertaken by every university to reach high ranking and gain preferences by their prospective customers. The services provided by universities became essential for the students' choice and success of their course (Petruzzellis et al. 2006).

International students are expecting from universities to respond to their needs, the quality of the teaching, improve their skills and language, experience about their host culture, and mix with their local peers (East, 2001).

However, students who came from very different geographical locations and cultural backgrounds have varied expectations and respond to the educational experience (Dalglish 2005). There are many reasons behind the difference in expectations,

needs, and motivations of international and local students (Krishnan & Vrcelj 2009). The experience of international students in higher education is significantly different from each other. Additionally, the experience of international students is different from domestic students. The expectations of these students came from educational practices in their countries (Dalglish 2005).

Significant differences were found between the perceptions of international and local students. Most of the international students have an expectation to be taken care of by their host institutions and communities, and understand the needs of these students by these institutions. The gap in the expectations between international and local students was on services offered by the educational institutions. Since international students are paying higher tuition fees than the other local peers they may expect more than the local students (Sherry et al. 2004).

In Malaysia, having mentoring programmes and offices is helpful to meet and understand the needs of international students including the culture of care or emotional and social support. Those offices are helpful to solve the perceived weakness by those students towards the administrative support by the universities. Taking care of and being friendly with international students is an expectation that was stressed by many of them (Slethaug & Manjula 2012).

Feeling that the host community and university are helping the international students in their adoption with the new linguistic, academic, and social environments have implications. These implications are helpful for the adjustment and development of international students, their universities, and the personnel who work for students such as the staff of international student office, counsellors, and other academic and administrative (Lewthwaite 1996).

Creating an environment that allows having opportunities for interactions between international and domestic students is a vital aspect of the participation of international students as cultural resources. The cultural events in the campus are valuable and it is important to create meaningful opportunities to all potential participants in such events. Undoubtedly, reciprocal cultural learning has several advantages for both domestic and international students and this meaningful cross-cultural interaction should receive support from the institutions of higher education. The institutions of higher education should create a structure to facilitate the interactions between domestic and international students (Urban & Palmer 2014).

Significant research discussed the struggles faced by international students during their sojourn in other countries such as the United States, the United

Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc. (Urban & Palmer 2014). The international students are facing several problems such as culture shock, cross-cultural relationships, social isolation, financial difficulties, immigration laws, anxiety, depression, stress, and situations or conditions in home countries. These problems make the life of international students as a nightmare. Social isolation is one of the main problems faced by international students whose interpersonal interactions and communal living come naturally in their cultures. International students have to become acquainted with the norms of their host society and to discover the way to fit into it and attend their educational needs at the same time (Sarkodie -Mensah 1998).

The most obstacles faced by international students were frustration, high level of stress, being loneliness, mismatch of culture, lack of competence of intercultural communicative, and irritation with some aspects and lack of integration with their host culture (Lewthwaite 1996). International students experience difficulties in adjustment and adoption with their new environments such as cultural shock due to having different cultural beliefs and values. Hence, they struggle to develop new friendships and with the local people and blending in their new environment (Elturki et al. 2019).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed quantitative analysis through survey method with qualitative interpretation to collect the data. Purposive sampling was employed in this study by distributing the questionnaires to the international students at UKM. The data collection was in two weeks period in the main campus of UKM and distributing the questionnaire was via face to face interaction. The data analysis included descriptive statistics.

The questionnaire included four main sections, namely demographics, factors influencing choosing UKM, obstacles faced by international students, and needs and expectations of international students. The questionnaire used 4-point Likert scales (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Excluding the neutral option was to avoid the indifferent option and to get strait answers from the respondents.

## RESULTS

The first section in the questionnaire was the demographic characteristics of the participated respondents. A total of 108 international students were surveyed in this study. The questionnaire contained

the demographic information of the respondents including gender, country of origin, highest educational achievement, material status, age, and religion. Out of the total number of the respondents, male students figured 77%, while female students figured 23%. Those respondents came from 10 different countries especially Middle East countries including China, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Nigeria, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

In terms of highest educational achievement, a total of 48% of respondents achieved bachelor degree, followed by 29% for those who achieved Masters Degree. Then those who achieved high school shaped 17%, and finally those who achieved diploma shaped 6% of the whole respondents.

According to the material status, the majority of respondents were married with 69% and the single students figured 29%, and just 2% having other material status. A total of 50 % of respondents aged between 24-29 years old, followed by 30% for those between 30-35 years old. Then the respondents between 18-23years old figured 20%. A total of 93% of the respondents were Muslim, and another 7% were non-Muslim.

The second section in the questionnaire was the factors influencing the choice of international students for UKM prior their enrolment. The source of information was one of these factors. Figure 1 presents information sources. A total of 53% of respondents got their information about UKM from their friends, followed by 22% who know from their family members or parents. Then those who know from the news portals, UKM alumni, and lecturers or teachers figured 11%, 9%, and 5% respectively.

There were other factors that influenced the choice of international students to pursue their study in UKM. Figure 2 shows the factors influence choosing UKM. Among these factors, the ranking or reputation of UKM figured the highest percent with 46% of respondents.

The reasonable price of the tuition fee was the second highest factor that influenced the choice of international students with 31% of respondents. Then the faculty, programmes or specialisations offered, and lecturers figured 11%, 8%, and 4% of the respondents respectively.

The third section in the questionnaire was about the obstacles faced by international students in UKM. The measurement of needs and expectations of international students were based on the four-point scales: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, and (4) Strongly Agree. Four items were mentioned by the respondents who were international students as their main obstacles in UKM. Table 1 is a descriptive analysis to these obstacles. The agreement level by respondents

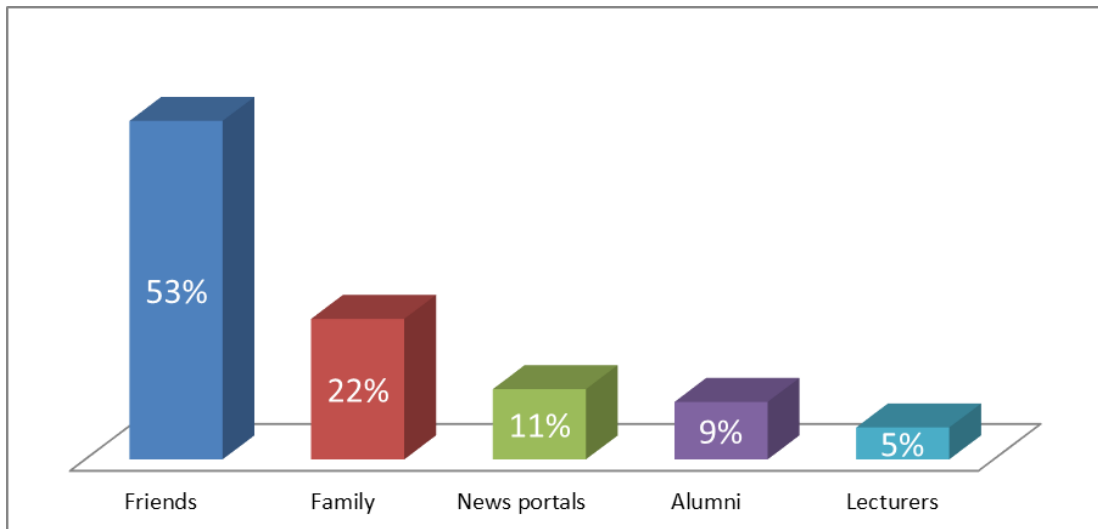


FIGURE 1. Sources of information about UKM

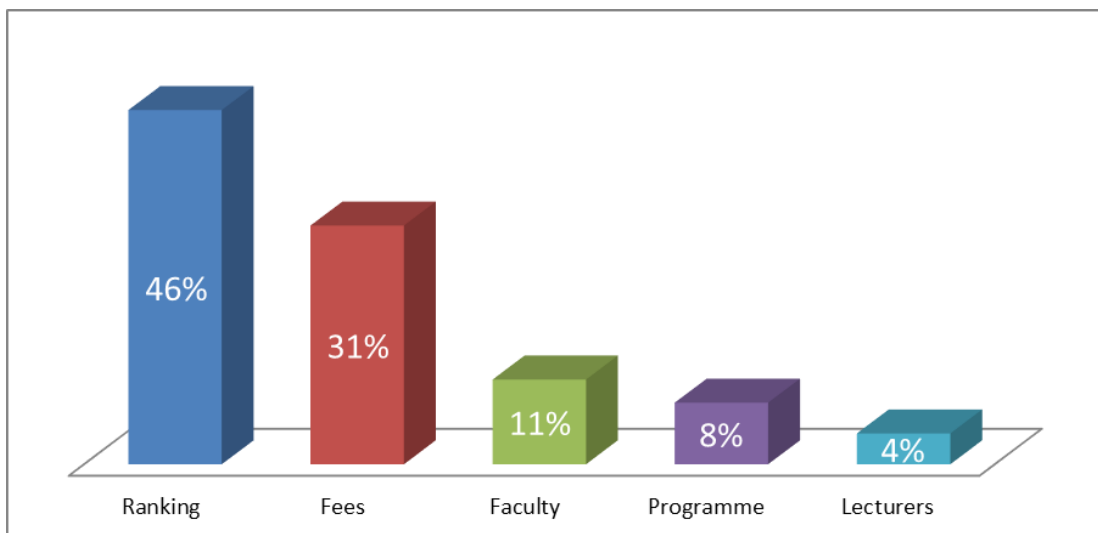


FIGURE 2. Factors influence choosing UKM

contained both “agree” and “strongly agree”. The total agreement level on all the statements was 80%.

The highest agreement per cent by respondents regarding obstacles was about the immigrations and visa procedures with 85%. The second highest agreement by respondents was 81% on the improper conditions of hostels. The third highest agreement was 78%; the respondents agreed that they have faced social isolation and discrimination. The agreement level for the last obstacle faced by those students was 59% regarding the bureaucracy and unpunctuality of procedures.

However, this section included comments by the respondents who have elaborated on the above mentioned four obstacles to give depth responses. First, the complicated and tough visa procedures included the pre-arrival visa/ Visa with Reference (VDR) which takes too long time and many procedures to be issued.

Additionally, processing the visa through Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) makes the process much more expensive and time-consuming than before.

Second, the improper conditions of hostels included the breakdown of many facilities in the hostels and not renovating them despite the several reports done by students. Moreover, the hostels not clean enough which led to the existence of insects and rodents. Additionally, the fees for the only proper hostel “Ibu Zain” are much higher than the market value and the other rooms outside the campus. Also, international students were unable to get rooms in the hostels in their enrolment day and they were informed that hostels are full.

Third, the social isolation and discrimination issue was through not accepting the international students by their local peers since their local peers

have their own group which sometimes depends on their ethnic. Additionally, those students faced cultural shock due to the cultural differences between their own countries and Malaysia.

Fourth, the bureaucracy and unpunctuality of procedures included taking a long time in processing

the applications of students which might take weeks to be settled and exceeding the deadline which given by UKM staff. Moreover, in case of absence of the person of charge for specific application there is no alternative employee to settle it and the students need to wait for a long time.

TABLE 1. Obstacles faced by international students in UKM

Items	SD	D	A	SA
Tough immigrations and visa procedures	2%	13%	57%	28%
Improper conditions of hostels	2%	17%	53%	28%
Discrimination and social isolation	3%	19%	47%	31%
Bureaucracy and unpunctuality of procedures	5%	16%	40%	19%
Total	3%	17%	52%	28%

The fourth section in the questionnaire focused on the needs and expectations of international students in UKM. The international students were given four statements and asked about their agreement level. The statements aimed to show how those students perceived their needs and expectations towards UKM.

Table 2 shows the needs and expectations of international students. The total agreement level by those students was 53%. The highest agreement by international students was 84% that the facilities, services, and resources offered by UKM met their expectations. The second highest agreement was 74% that the study approach is clear and comprehensive.

The third highest agreement was 31% that the social relationship and participation in activities met the expectations of those students. Finally, the lowest agreement level was 22% on the living conditions in the hostels of UKM.

Comments were attached to this section to give more elaboration and understanding on this issue. Most of the international students expressed their satisfaction from the services and facilities provided by UKM. The UKM library “Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang” was one of the most services that achieved the satisfaction of international students. The labs and study rooms in most of the faculties at UKM were another provided

TABLE 2. Needs and expectations international students in UKM

Items	SD	D	A	SA
UKM facilities, services, and resources meet expectations	5%	11%	63%	21%
Studying approach is clear and comprehensive	9%	17%	53%	21%
Social relationship and participation in activities are as expected	13%	56%	24%	7%
Living conditions (hostels) at UKM met my expectations	16%	62%	16%	6%
Total	11%	36%	39%	14%

service that achieved the satisfaction of those students. The online resources and internet services provided by UKM also were important issue for those students. Also, the international students expressed their satisfaction on the sport facilities of UKM which mostly met their expectations.

Finally, the Muslim respondents express their satisfaction from having the main mosque of UKM and the other prayer rooms in most of the faculties and

institutes.

The studying approach was another thing that achieved the high satisfaction of the international students in UKM. This issue included the curriculum as well as the materials suggested by the lecturers. Simplifying the things inside the classes was another important issue that achieved the satisfaction of international students.

However, the social relationship and

participation in the activities of UKM were mostly against the expectations of international students. This issue included the difficulties in dealing with local peers especially regarding the academic part such as group assignments and discussions. Also, the international students have the feeling of isolation from the local peers. The participation of international students in the university activities was not as their expectations. Those students expressed their disappointment from the lack of such activities which may occur once or twice a year.

Finally, the condition of hostels was mostly against the expectations of international students who have expressed their shock from that. Those students expected much better hostels during their stay in UKM. Most of the international students preferred to live outside the campus due to the better living conditions outside the campus of UKM.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore needs and expectations of international students towards UKM. This study also aimed to explore the reasons for choosing UKM to pursue their education and the obstacles faced by them. Recognising the needs of international students is more relevant now than it ever has been. Exploring the needs and expectation of international students is helpful to fulfil those needs, improve the weakness, and enhance the strength of UKM to attract more international students which benefits the university. An attention should be paid by the university regarding these issues.

Regardless the cultural diversity of international students, most of them choose the studying in UKM for the same or similar reasons including ranking, followed by the reasonable tuition fees, faculty reputation, programmes or specialisation, and finally the lecturers. Other reason that influenced their choice was the sources of information about UKM.

The main obstacles faced by international students were the tough visa procedures, improper hostels, social isolation and discrimination, and the bureaucracy. This study suggests that UKM should pay attention to these issues and try to understand the obstacles of international students by establishing counselling unit for them. Additionally, organising regular meetings with international students and listening to their problems and suggestions.

On the other hand, international students in UKM expected to have good facilities and services, good studying approach, good relationships and activities participation, and good living conditions. The results revealed that only the facilities and studying

approach have met the expectations of international students. Both social relationship and living condition have disappointed those students.

In order to attract more international students, the marketing of UKM might highlight strength of UKM in providing good services, having good study approach, reasonable tuition fees, and good ranking. At the same time, the management of UKM should pay more attention to improve the conditions of hostels or reducing the fees of "Ibu Zain" which is the most fitted for them. Temporary housing should be provided to international students upon their arrival to UKM who might did not find any housing unit to live. Most of those students complained about that they did not get rooms in the hostels during their enrolment day which was justified by the hostels management that they are full.

The management of UKM should have accessible and meaningful programmes to benefit the international students. UKM should take some actions regarding the issues of cultural shock, social isolation, and discrimination. The UKM might organise pre-enrolment activities or orientation day to introduce the Malaysian culture to the international students. These programmes should focus on some important issues such as cultural practices and pedagogy among incoming international students.

Volunteer activities gathering international students with their local peer are important to reduce the feeling of social isolation. These activities might reduce the gap between international and local students. Finally, the issue of feeling discriminated by international students might need some effort from UKM to organise other programmes to their own staff and local students about the openness to other cultures and how to deal with international students who came from totally varied cultures.

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