From Aspirations to Decisions: A Biographical Study on Factors Influencing Postgraduate Students' Choices of HEI in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The study uses a qualitative biographical approach to investigate the factors influencing postgraduate students' choice of Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Malaysia. The purpose of the study is to determine the factors that students consider on selecting universities, the factors that impact their choices, the significance of prior learning experiences, and opinions regarding the caliber of education. Two postgraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) who represented both local and international viewpoints participated in in-depth, unstructured interviews to gather data. By sharing their individual stories, the participants with previous work experience offered insights into their way of decision making. Emerging themes from the interviews were found using the thematic analysis method. The results show that there are 6 main factors that influence university choice: 1) the institutional environment, which includes Islamic and multicultural values; 2) the course offerings and academic flexibility; 3) opinions about quality of education; 4) accessibility, which includes being close to family; 5) recommendations and role models, which include peers and mentors; 6) individual motivations for learning and self-improvement. The significance of an encouraging academic community, hands on learning experiences, and the global exposure was emphasized by the participants. Personal circumstances also surfaced as special considerations, such as cultural compatibility and the availability of familiar foods. The study concludes that a variety of institutional and personal factors impacted by social, academic, and cultural contexts influence students' university choices. In order to draw in and keep diverse postgraduate cohorts, this study emphasizes the importance of matching marketing tactics and academic offerings with students' needs. To offer more comprehensive insights into the decision-making processes of postgraduate students in various educational contexts, future studies should increase the sample size and look into other factors like the impact of socio-economic status, gender, and geographic location.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution (HEI), University Selection Criteria, Biographical Study, Decision-making Factors

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important element in life to be able to achieve future goals. University is a major stage to develop one's capacity, interests, and needs associated with making career choices. Jolianis (2019) mentioned that interest is the ability to have a feeling of liking and connection in something or activity that is desired. One of a student's critical essential life decisions is deciding on their institutional choice because it has a direct impact on several phases of life and determines how satisfied one will be with the future employment as well as how far they will advance and develop professionally (Alyamani & Morsi, 2022).

Making the incorrect choice, on the other hand, can have two serious repercussions: either the student must start over and be able to manage the time delay involved, or they must altogether drop out of school, which can have severe repercussions (Areces & Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2022). While selecting a university, specific elements must be considered, and many other aspects also play a role. The primary determinant of a person's decision about a university is either that person or their environment (Jatisidi & Vera, 2021).

According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025), between 1990 and 2010, there has been a tenfold increase in master's and PhD enrolment. Therefore, this study will investigate the students' selection criteria of higher learning institutions as to what factors are involved when choosing a promising institution.

Today's students face various problems related to misunderstandings and errors in university selection. In the current 21st century, marked by the "4.0 Revolution," it is evident that technology is developing quickly, and there is increased rivalry, particularly in the workplace. On the other hand, many students feel lost because they are unsure of their talents and interests (Dela & Wijaya, 2022). Family, friends, course availability, university reputation, distance from home, and employment prospects were identified as variables influencing students' choice of institution. However, in the digital age, the relative importance of these components may have shifted, and electronic word of mouth was previously disregarded (Wut et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to determine the reasonings for choosing a university, especially among those with work experience with the following research questions determining the direction of this study:

1. What are the key characteristics influencing students' selection of universities?

2. What factors lead postgraduate students to choose a particular institution for furthering their higher education studies?

3. How do students' previous educational experiences influence their choice of university?

4. What are students' perceptions of the quality of education at their chosen university?

Although various researchers have conducted numerous studies to identify the factors affecting the students in choosing HEIs in Malaysia, studies focusing specifically on factors influencing the postgraduate students' choice of HEIs are still very limited. Studying these factors is very imperative as it can enable better strategic actions to be taken by the authorities such as the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), education departments, schools, and HEIs to increase the number of students furthering their studies after school or college. The findings of this study could also help the school personnel, HEI administrators, as well as parents and future graduates themselves to make better informed decisions which suits their personalities, goals, and talents. Thus, this study is carried out to investigate the factors that influence postgraduate students' choices of HEIs particularly in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are over 300 higher learning institutions available in Malaysia. The decision to attend college is a significant process influenced by numerous internal and external factors. As an increasing number of students are pursuing higher education, many more students are making the commitment to further their studies. These students are faced with numerous challenges. Both internal and external factors influence the decision-making process. Overcoming such obstacles is critical for students to persevere from enrolment through graduation. The decision to pursue higher education is a complex topic of study with multiple factors to consider.

Numerous studies demonstrate the factors that influence students' decisions. As such, in United Kingdom, personal interest in the study program, enrolment rates, city location of the university, campus appearance, reputation and perception of quality, resources and facilities are the determining factors, according to students (Heathcote et al., 2020). Moreover, research on choice factors shows that the factor of choosing a university is personal interest in the field of study; entry rates; appeal of city or region of institute; particularly in how it may relate to present living requirements; appeal of institute itself; with relation to hands-on experience of site visits; reputation and any perception of quality; resources and facilities especially for the more specialist provision (sport, sciences, arts, et cetera.) (Heathcote et al., 2020).

In Asian countries like Vietnam, job opportunities, admission counselling and university reputation are the three main factors for choosing a university (Hai et al., 2023). Future job prospects, teaching quality, staff expertise and course content are factors in choosing universities in Vietnam (Le, et al., 2020). In Indonesia, students consider the university's reputation as a main deciding factor when choosing a university; however, career prospects are the most critical factor (Le, et al., 2022). Therefore, the selection of a university is mainly

influenced by its service quality, brand image, and reputation (Haniya & Said, 2022). These studies correspond to the fact that university selection is inextricably influenced by employment prospects (Peck, 2020).

In addition, a study done in Nigeria, South Africa found that personal interest greatly influenced students' decisions, followed by parental influence, university reputation, university ranking and fees (Adefulu et al., 2020). In Zambia, the main factors in choosing a university are teaching quality, fees, course availability, facilities, and employability (Kayombo & Carter, 2019). In general, graduate employment opportunities are a factor that is always proven in every study.

On top of that, a study done in the Middle East shows future career expectations and the quality and popularity of university programs are essential factors influencing student choices such as in Turkey (İlgan et al., 2018). In Kyrgyzstan, the primary determinants impacting the selection of universities are economic considerations, the quality of education and the expertise of academic staff (Najimudinova et al., 2022).

Hence, this research will help understand the topic of study under the Malaysia context to help universities market their institutions and establish a unique difference to highlight their strengths and give the students a reason to choose a university. A useful way to understand these recruitment markets is to have a clear perspective of the choice and decision-making process that students use to select a university. Therefore, it is important for the universities to understand ways to attract students and how to market themselves.

Based on the literature mentioned above, we can conclude that the motivating factors for students in choosing a university may have some similarities and differences thus the role of marketing in student recruitment is increasingly becoming important. There are several factors that influence students' choice of higher institutions. Studies have shown that this issue has been regarded as a crucial part in higher education. From the discussion, it can be concluded that the solution to the issue lies on the hands of the students as participants of the topic. In the case of this study, crystal clear perspective behind the criteria postgraduate students looks for when choosing to enrol a particular institution is needed. This study approach therefore is aimed to explore the nature of the decision-making process of higher education especially in the postgraduate student choice context.

METHODOLOGY

The process of choosing a HEI is intricate and impacted by a combination of institutional, social, and personal factors. The complex role that individual experiences, social cultural influences, and retroactive memories influence on students' decisions has received less attention meanwhile there is extensive research on academic rankings, curriculum offerings, and an institutional reputation. Additionally, adjusting to multicultural settings and balancing their cultural identities with academic expectations are two specific difficulties faced by international students. The need for a thorough investigation into the ways in which these factors influence university choices is highlighted by these gaps. This study intends to bridge the gap between conventional measures of institutional quality and the lived experience of individuals by tackling these problems and offering a thorough understanding of the factors influencing students' decision-making process. In order to draw in and keep diverse student populations while creating environments that satisfy their academic and socio-cultural needs, policymakers and educational institutions must take these insights into consideration.

This study used a biographical perspective to examine students' perceptions of college selection based on their life stories and experiences. The research examined the perspectives of both local and international graduate students. A biographical approach provided a dynamic field for understanding individuals' evolving experiences, priorities, and interpretations of their past, present, and future (Pac-Salas, 2023). This method has been particularly valuable in illuminating the challenges and transitions that individuals face when moving between social contexts, which have become increasingly expected and necessary in modern societies (Muñiz & Rubilar, 2022). The strength of this approach lay in its ability to capture the nuanced complexity of individual lives and the impact of various events on that life (Chojnacka, 2022).

Purposive random sampling technique was used to select study participants, allowing researchers to focus on individuals who met specific requirements. The sample included local and international postgraduate students with previous professional experience aged 25 to 35 years. This approach ensured that participants were selected

based on their background, which was in line with the suggestion for obtaining reliable and relevant qualitative data (Bhardwaj, 2019). Open questions in unstructured interviews were used to collect data. The purpose of this method was to create a calm and comfortable atmosphere that would encourage participants to provide open and thorough answers. As unstructured interviews are flexible, it was possible to tailor the discussion to each interviewee's different personal narratives and perspectives. This approach is supported by qualitative research principles that emphasize participants' experiences (Chauhan, 2019; Bhalla, Bahar, & Kanapathy, 2023).

To build rapport and obtain important pipeline information, interviews began with a brief introduction outlining the purpose and scope of the study. The first phase made everyone feel comfortable and made it easier for them to share their important life experiences that influence their decision making. The interviewer avoided intervening until the participant indicated the report was completed and emphasized active listening during the narrative portion of the interview. According to Taskin (2021), these methods are consistent with best practices for promoting authenticity and trust in qualitative research. Following the storytelling portion the interviewer asked additional questions to obtain further information about specific narrative aspects that were relevant to the research.

After deliberation period, "how" questions were asked to learn more about participants' motivations and thoughts. Following methodological approaches to qualitative research, this phase structure allowed participants a comprehensive insight into their experiences (Naeem et al., 2023). With participants' permission, audio recordings were made during a 20–30-minute interview session. To ensure precision and accuracy and reliability, the recordings are then transcribed by qualified transcription services. This careful data processing strategy consists of suggestions to improve accuracy and reporting (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

A pilot study was conducted with the student from public university from Malaysia. This initial analysis allowed the researchers to identify the shortcomings of the interview tool and make the necessary adjustments to increase its effectiveness. The pilot study was also crucial to consider possible timing issues that might arise during the main study and to limit the scope of the interview. Researchers adapted the probing questions to ensure greater relevance and depth in the subsequent interviews based on the insight gained from this exercise. According to Bhalla, Bahar, and Kanapathy (2023), pilot studies are widely considered an essential phase of qualitative research because they allow for iterative refinement and guaranteed the validity and reliability of research instruments.

Thematic analysis is the method used to examine the interview transcription. This method involves methodically finding, classifying, and analyzing data patterns. The task was similar to the categorical content method described by Lieblich and colleagues (1998), which involves breaking down the story and identifying passages or individual words that fall into predetermined groups throughout the text. Organizing data into coherent themes for more thorough interpretation is at the core of traditional thematic analysis techniques comparable to this approach.

In order to obtain a broad understanding of the content, the researchers immerse themselves in the data before beginning the analysis. They went ahead and quoted the transcription methodically locating pertinent passages and giving them codes to identify them. Within each theme, this process involves initial coding, recoding, and topic categorization. After the topics were arranged, the researchers went over each group's text and conducted a thorough descriptive analysis of the material. Following the development, representation, and interpretation of the findings, the results were validated. And this approach is consistent with the best practices in qualitative analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), who highlight the importance of iterative review and robust thematic coding.

Several tactics were used to guarantee the studies' credibility. All of the interview data was verbatim transcribed in the original language after being tape recorded. Respondents' validation was then applied to the transcriptions. Participants were given access to the complete transcription as well as synopsis of the results during this process to ensure that the researchers interpretation appropriately represented their viewpoints. Member checking is a well-established technique for improving the reliability and validity of qualitative research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Since biographical studies are extremely personal, researchers recognized that participants may experience

conflicting feelings when reviewing past decisions. According to the ethical research practices, pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality: "Lisa" for the local student and "Imani" for the international student (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Beyond merely gathering data, researchers used a "double vision" approach to examine the ways in which participants' experiences and their processes of meaning-making differed and were similar (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Being in the same academic community and postgraduate students gave us insights and facilitated our relationship building. We engaged in reflexivity, deliberately using our experiences to ensure objectivity while improving understanding (Berger, 2013; Crewell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results of this investigation offer significant understanding of the elements impacting postgraduate students' choice of Malaysian HEI. Six major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, illustrating the intricate interactions between institutional, cultural, and personal factors that influence students' choices. These themes draw attention to both the more fundamental reasons associated with academic goals, cultural fitness, and personal development as well as the more pragmatic ones, like course offerings and accessibility. It provided a nuanced understanding of the decision-making process by highlighting the distinct viewpoints of domestic and international students.

Major Themes

Several recurrent themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data, which summarize the elements influencing postgraduate students' choices of universities. The choices made by the students are influenced by a variety of factors, including institutional features, cultural influences, and individual motivations. After examining the participants' stories, six main themes surfaced that provided a more thorough comprehension of the complex factors that went into their decision-making process. These themes offer a thorough framework for examining students' selection criteria for universities that fit with their objectives and values while navigating the opportunities and challenges.
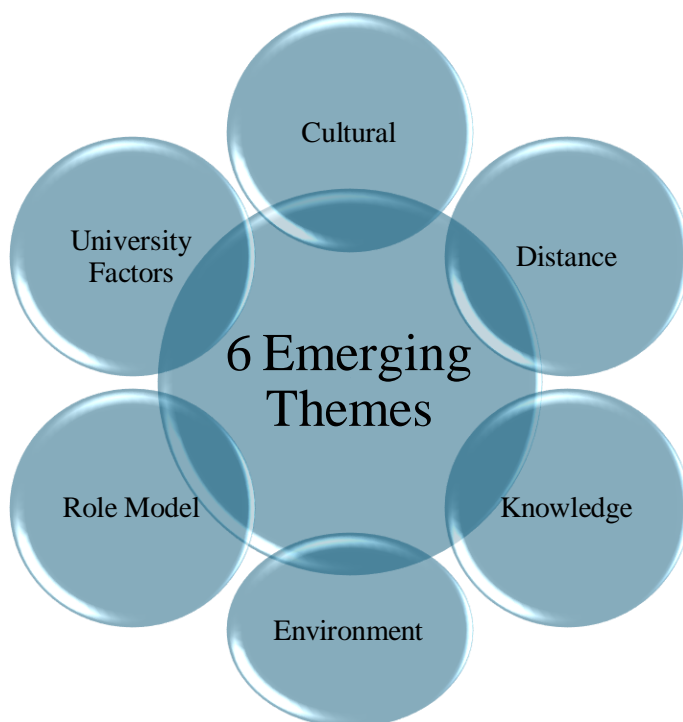
Source: Major Themes-Factors Influencing University Selection Criteria

The following elaboration pertains to the explanation of findings of the six major themes that have been deduced from the in-depth interview. First and foremost, two research questions were answered: 1) What are the key characteristics influencing students' selection of universities? and 2) what factors lead postgraduate students to choose a particular institution for furthering their higher education studies?

1st Theme: Culture

Culture emerged as a significant theme influencing students' selection of higher education institutions. For many students, the cultural environment of university plays a critical role in shaping their decisions, particularly in terms of diversity, inclusivity and cultural compatibility.

Participants in the study emphasize their preference for institutions within a multicultural environment that fosters interaction among students from various backgrounds. For instance, one participant highlighted their desire to study in a setting that was not dominated by a single ethnic group but instead offered a mix of cultures. This preference is stemmed from the expectation of gaining exposure to diverse perspectives and having enriching experience similar to studying in a multicultural country like Australia.

As for international students, cultural familiarity and comfort also influence their decisions. The availability of food similar to their home country or alignment with their religious and cultural practices, for example an Islamic environment, make them feel more connected and at ease. These factors contributed to creating a sense of belonging, which is essential for students adjusting to a new academic and social environment.

The findings suggest that universities promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity are more attractive to students who value these attributes. A rich cultural environment not only meets students' academic needs but also supports their personal growth by offering unique social and cultural experiences.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 1: Culture	
Lisa	"I figured UIA because why it is international university so I thought it will be a multi-culture place so it will be because I want that I don't want university with all Malay and Chinese and little bit Indian, you now, I don't know I want it to be I want it to be a new experience similar to Australia where it is multi-cultured"
Imani	"I really wanted to have Bangladeshi food and we could not find any food anywhere. So, he told me that you can come to the canteen of ours and we can have some food. And I was like okay. So, we went to (café) Ali the canteen and had some Somalian food which I thought was Bangladeshi which was very close to Bangladeshi food and I was impressed with the university a university which has Bangladeshi food in it, I must study here… good food… to get the food…"

2nd Theme: Distance

Distance emerged as a significant theme in influencing students' decision making when selecting a university. For many, proximity to family, ease of access, and the mode of study (face-to-face or distance learning) were critical factors in their choice.

Participants expressed that being close to family provided emotional and psychological support during stressful academic periods. One participant emphasized the importance of having a family nearby for encouragement and comfort, especially during holidays or challenging times. This "safety net" of familial support was seen as vital for maintaining their well-being while pursuing postgraduate studies.

Additionally, the preference for face-to-face learning over distance education was prominent. Students highlighted the value of direct interaction with the lecturers and peers, which is often missing in distance learning environments. They appreciated the ability to build connections, shared experiences with classmates, and receive immediate guidance from instructors. The collaborative atmosphere of on campus learning was seen as a motivator that enhanced their educational journey.

Overall, the theme of distance underscores the importance of physical and emotional accessibility for students. Universities located closer to students' homes or offering strong support system for those living far from their families are better positioned to attract students seeking a balance academic and personal life.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 2: Distance	
Lisa	"…glad that I did my master in here because I realize that one of my friend she told me she did her master… you need a lot of family… hugs and kisses from your family… on holiday you go to your mom… your family near to you… in the stressful period, having lots of niece and nephew… close with my sister… my brother, so I feel like that family connection while doing master is really important because it is kind of safety net… have your family near to you…"
Imani	"…I choose face-to-face course that's because when I was doing DELTA, I realized that the gap between the teachers and the students is huge when you do a distance course and there are not lot of people who are with you. So, like you don't have friends or companions but, in a face, -to face course (…) you get lots of friends who are on the same boat… and there would be teachers who you can go to and tell or nag about what to or ask help from so that's why face-to-face course and not a distance course." "…. I realized that the gap between the teachers and the students is huge when you do a distance course and there are not a lot of people who are with you. So, like you don't have friends or companions but in a face-to-face- course umm… you get lots of friends who are on the same boat who would be rush you at same time and happy at the same time and there would be teachers who you can go to and tell or nag about what to or ask help from so that's why face-to-face course and not a distance course."

3rd Theme: Knowledge

The pursuit of knowledge emerged as a key theme influencing students' decision to select A particular university for their postgraduate studies. Participants highlighted the desire to enhance their academic and professional competencies as a primary motivator for furthering their education.

Students expressed strong inclination to choose institutions that offer programs aligned with their career aspirations and areas where they felt the need for improvement. For example, one participant shared that despite having Professional experience and certifications, they realized gaps in their knowledge and sought to address these through a structured master's program. This decision was fueled by their ambition to gain deeper insights and expertise in their field.

Another participant emphasized the role of academic progression, stating that their undergraduate experience had motivated them to pursue further studies to improve their qualifications and professional standing. They viewed a master's degree as a way to refine their skills, enhance their teaching abilities, and gain recognition in their chosen field.

The theme also highlighted the importance of universities offering well-structured programs, relevant coursework, and access to knowledgeable faculty members. Students sought an institution where they believed they could gain practical, high quality learning experiences that would translate into their career success.

Overall, the theme of knowledge reflects students' aspiration for self-improvement and lifelong learning. Universities that emphasize academic excellence, practical application, and opportunities for intellectual growth are more likely to attract students who prioritize gaining expertise and advancing their careers.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 3: Knowledge	
Lisa	"And ummmm...the reason I chose masters is because...it will give me a lot of knowledge and I

	could or you could tell me that why didn't I study at home."
Imani	"…wanna be a teacher… I realize that I should be just studying about teacher… studied in bachelors of education which is in ELT... After that once I was done, I realized that the universities in Bangladesh are not that good and I wanted to do something else. I wanted to add some extra professional courses and then I did Cambridge CELTA which is under the Cambridge University and its own examination and I did that for a month which was an intensive course. And I did it in Bangladesh from British Council and after that I went to Indonesia the next year and did another Cambridge dissimilation course which is known as CELTYL… I actually did start something else which is known as DELTA and I did my orientation in Malaysia… I just finished a part of it but I didn't finish the whole thing and it was becoming very difficult for me so I thought I need to gain some more knowledge… that is the reason I choose IIUM it's not about my work experience, for DELTA I need more knowledge" "…since my degree I know that I want to do my master… I want to enhance myself I want to improve myself (…) because I feel like in the course of 2 years of teaching, I feel really stupid, (…) I learn I studied this but I couldn't apply it so I feel like I am something missing in me so I felt like I have to do my master to improve myself. So, I feel like UIA is the best…"

4th Theme: Environment

The academic and social environment of the university emerged as a crucial factor influencing students' decision when selecting institution for postgraduate studies. Participants highlighted that a conducive and supportive environment played a significant role in their educational experience and overall satisfaction.

For some students, the Islamic environment of the university was a major attraction. One participant appreciated how the university's values aligned with their own, making it easier to gain their family support and feel comfortable studying in a familiar culture cultural and religious setting. This alignment between personal beliefs and institutional ethos created a sense of belonging, which was particularly important for international students adapting to a new country.

Students also valued universities that provided positive and encouraging academic atmosphere. Factors such as the flexibility of timetables, the accessibility of faculty members, and an interactive student-centered approach to learning were seen as key indicators of a supportive environment. Participants describe the importance of having approachable professors and engaging learning experiences, which fostered motivation and confidence.

Furthermore, the presence of multicultural campus environment enriches students experience by offering opportunities to interact with peers from various cultural and educational backgrounds. This exposure to different perspectives and lifestyles was seen as an invaluable part of their academic journey, broadening their horizons and enhancing their interpersonal skills.

In short, the theme of environment underscores the significance of both academic and social settings in shaping students' decisions. Universities that foster inclusivity, cultural diversity, and their supportive learning culture are better positioned to attract and retain postgraduate students.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 4: Environment	
Lisa	"Two my seniors are studying were studying here so I ask around and then they said that it is quite okay and it is flexible you know the time table is flexible and they said that the study environment is encouraging and fun…"
Imani	"…environment here ummm (…) I am Muslim and I liked the fact that it's a Muslim university …reason why I chose IIUM and not any other institute. ummm…I am married and it was really

helpful for my husband to understand…in an Islamic environment... it was easier for me to convince him and my family… plus it is an international university so even though I am saying that the ranking doesn't matter but in Malaysia it is one of the best universities so why not. it could have been a better choice."

5th Theme: Role Model

The influence of role models emerged as a significant theme shaping students' decision to pursue postgraduate studies and select their preferred universities. Participants highlighted how individuals they admired such as mentors, teachers, family members, or peers played a crucial role in motivating and guiding them during their decision-making process.

One participant emphasized the impact of a former employer who had created an innovative educational environment focused on developing practical skills rather than merely excelling in exams. This mentor inspired the participant to value education that fosters critical thinking and communication skills, ultimately influencing their choice of university.

Another participant credited their parents, both educators themselves, for instilling in them a passion for teaching and a commitment to lifelong learning. This foundational influence shaped their aspiration to excel academically and pursue further education in their field.

Peers and seniors also played an influential role. Participants often sought advice from friends or colleagues who had previously studied at their chosen institutions. Positive testimonials about the university's programs, faculty, and campus environment were key factors in their decisions.

The role models in the participants' lives not only provided inspiration but also practical insights and encouragement. Their guidance helps students align their academic and career goals with the opportunities offered by their selected institutions.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 5: Role Model	
Lisa	"…I actually love my boss at that time because (mmmm) I really respect him because he (pause) he is American educated but he (he; repetition) is forward thinking person as in he solve a problem (aaaa) with (with; repetition) a mainstream education so he got out of the system and (aaaa) and he (he; repetition) create his own curriculum and he create his own school where I taught and (and; repetition) he felt (he felt; repetition) like Malaysian education became too exam oriented that he felt like he (pause) soon need some sort of extracurricular in term of English…"
Imani	"ummmm...pause ...role model...pause....I think my teachers. all my teachers in my life…I think I always had one teacher every time I went to any university or did anything...err umm everywhere I had one person who use to inspire me to become what I am today and the main factor is actually my parents they are both teachers so I am from a teaching family and I didn't have any other choice."

6th Theme: University Factors

Institutional characteristics and offerings emerged as a pivotal theme influencing student selection of higher education institutions. Participants identified specific university related factors that played a crucial role in shaping their decisions, emphasizing the importance of both academic and non-academic attributes.

One of the primary factors mentioned was the availability of specific academic programs and courses aligned

with students' professional aspirations. The flexibility of timetables and the reputation of the university for offering quality education were also highlighted as key considerations. Students appreciated institutions that provide programs tailored to their needs, such as hands-on learning opportunities and specialized fields of study.

The quality and diversity of the faculty were another significant factor. Participants value universities with highly qualified lecturers, particularly those with international backgrounds, as they believed this professor would bring global perspectives and expertise into the classroom.

Additionally, institutional reputation, rankings, and international recognition were critical in shaping students' perceptions. Universities perceived as prestigious or offering competitive advantages in the job market were more appealing.

Non-academic factors also influence decision making. For instance, participants appreciated universities that fostered a supportive campus environment, accessible facilities, and in multicultural setting. Factors like grading policies and manageable academic workloads were noted as important for ensuring a balanced and fulfilling student experience.

As a conclusion, the theme of university factors underscores the importance of academic quality, institutional reputation, and campus environment and attracting postgraduate students. University that emphasizes these attributes and tailor their offerings to meet diverse student needs are more likely to appeal to prospective students.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 6: University Factors	
Lisa	"I also look at the lecturers…are they good, am I (…) good to be burden with lot of assignment or (…) are they famous are the exam marking strict."
	"…I figured UIA (IIUM) because why it is international university so I thought it will be a multi-culture place… a new experience similar to Australia where it is multi-culture. And it offers (mmmmm) offers (mmm) courses that I want…"
	"…I feel like UIA is the best (…) it is quite okay and it is flexible you know the time table is flexible…"
Imani	"Well according to my experience I know there loads of teaching techniques that can be used but in IIUM we do a lot of lecture-based studies which is mostly the same thing in a lot of universities except for the British universities that we have so can't really complain...can't really complain. umm…. there is scope of improvement but it's alright. I am really happy with the teachers that we have here because they are from international background…"
	"...and plus, it is an international university so even though I am saying that the ranking doesn't matter but in Malaysia it is one of the best universities so why not...yeah…so I didn't...I didn't...I don't think that it could have been better...it could have been a better choice. IIUM is good yeah."
	"…I actually did start something else which is known as DELTA and I did my orientation in Malaysia… I just finished a part of it but I didn't finish the whole thing and it was becoming very difficult for me so I thought I need to gain some more knowledge… that is the reason I choose IIUM it's not about my work experience, for DELTA I need more knowledge"

Aligning with the biographical approach adopted in this study, research question three (How do students' previous educational experiences influence their choice of university?) was addressed through the descriptive analysis of each participant's choices, as derived from their interview responses. This method, rooted in narrative inquiry, emphasizes capturing participants' lived experiences and decision-making processes in their own words, providing rich, contextualized insights (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Students past educational experiences shape their decisions when selecting a university for postgraduate studies. these experiences highlight gaps in knowledge, inspire academic aspirations, and set expectations for higher

education.

Some participants realized the need to bridge theoretical and practical knowledge gaps from their undergraduate studies, motivating them to pursue advanced degrees. Others, influenced by previous international education, sought universities offering multicultural environments to foster both academic and personal growth.

Negative experiences, such as rigid curriculums or limited teaching methods, drove students to choose institutions known for flexibility and innovation. Additionally, prior certifications and professional courses shaped their interests and encouraged further specialization.

Therefore, past experiences guide students in evaluating universities that align with their goals, emphasizing the importance of institutions catering to diverse academic backgrounds and aspirations.

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Theme 6: University Factors	
Lisa "it was since my degree I know that I want to do my master"	One who feels that university is the natural next step is that going to university is seen as an anticipated, predictable, linear next step. However, when it comes to the specific university, "it took me about 2 years to actually think" and thus "rather than waiting for opportunities to go to overseas", actions were made among which "I was browsing through Internet" thus figured that "UIA because why it is international university" "where I want it to be a new experience" but at the same time wanting the experience to be of her previous degree studies; "similar to Australia where it is multi-culture"
Imani "it was becoming very difficult for me, so I thought I need to gain some more knowledge"	One who describes the multiple, sometimes divergent, motives and factors that influenced the decisions, but ultimately highlighted that it is her choice of higher learning. Having had numerous of English Language teaching certificates, and currently "I actually did start something else which is known as DELTA". However, due to not being able to finish it, "I just finished a part of it but I didn't finish the whole thing" and thus planning to opt for a Master's program; "that is the reason I choose IIUM" among many other influential factors such as food, and her significant other as "I am married and it was really helpful for my husband to understand" as "an Islamic environment…convinced him".

Final research question (What are students' perceptions of the quality of education at their chosen university?) unravels students' perception of the quality of education at their chosen higher institution which varies based on their prior educational experiences. The findings related to the final research question are summarized in the table below:

Narrative Representation from the Transcript

Initial Coding Framework	Interview Transcript
Education System	". It's very…very strict but it's for our own good so yeah that's another reason why I chose IIUM and not any other institute…" "…If you talk about the education system… not bad it could be better...it could be better but it's not that bad..." "…we do a lot of lecture-based studies which is mostly the same thing in a lot of universities except for the British universities that we have so can't really complain…" "…the educational system here (...) it's more summative although it's going towards formative but it's more summative. So it still has final exams midterms

	and stuff like that which is in my opinion which is not a good thing…"
Experience	"…more than I expected...new experience similar to Australia where it is multi-culture…"
	"…it was an adventure…"
	"…really good experience."
	"…I feel like UIA is the best."
	"…encouraging and fun…"
	"…professor's help and the lecturer who make me feel (..) that research not big thing…I love that this one class, you know I am actually really scared of mathematic especially numbers… but the lecturer said that no it is okay…"
	"…I am really happy with the teachers that we have here…The teachers are respected by the students here and umm there is a big difference between the teachers and ummm the students. Like there is a big... not difference…there is a big gap between the teachers and the students…I am not saying that they are not friendly but they need to be friends…"

The table above highlights that student perception of the quality of education, and it shows even higher institutions are shaped by their prior educational experiences. This is connected to the broader concept of the education system and student's past experiences influencing their expectations and evaluation of academic quality.

Students who have been exposed to diverse teaching methods, resources and institutional environments in their previous education are likely to form specific expectations for their higher education experience. These past experiences play a significant role in how they assess the quality of education at a new institution, leading to varying perceptions among students. Their views may differ depending on the nature of their previous learning environments, which in turn affects their satisfaction, engagement, and overall academic experience at the new institution.

This relationship underscores the importance of the education system in not only delivering academic content but also shaping students' expectations and perceptions of educational quality, influencing their academic journey and level of satisfaction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The decision-making process for selecting an HEI is inherently complex, influenced by multiple factors. Students' choices often vary based on their individual university experiences, academic backgrounds, and prior work histories. This study, which utilized in-depth interviews to explore students' backgrounds and past experiences, revealed that students did not identify specific personal characteristics as primary determinants in their selection of process. Instead, they highlighted diverse and contrasting factors that guided their decisions. The findings suggested that institutional selection was shaped more by external influences and contextual factors than intrinsic traits.

Both participants emphasized these points during their interviews, illustrating the variability in their decision-making processes. These findings align with research suggest that educational decisions are often shaped by a combination of external opportunities and personal experiences rather than fixed individual characteristics (Berger, 2015; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Deducing from the responses of both participants as they mentioned that:

"…I believe that education is based on you, if you (…) if you have to study on your own where ever you go so that really didn't matter to me I didn't care about what the ranking was how the teachers gonna teach me or anything because at the end of the day even if I had the best teacher, I have to study by myself (…)" (Imani)

"...they said I would I am they said I am they called me crazy for doing this but you know I think because if I know why I did it in the first place, I just want to improve myself," (Lisa)

The decision-making process for selecting a HEI was found to be influenced by various factors, with the level of importance attributed to specific reasons remaining relatively stable across different environments. Similar to recent studies, this research highlighted the significant role of the university environment in shaping students' decisions. Factors such as Islamic environment, multiculturalism, and international status of universities were particularly impactful in driving student preferences (Pinheiro et al., 2022).

Consistent with findings in the current literature, the present study categorized decision-making influences into two primary groups: university-related factors and personal factors. The university-related factors identified included 1) the university environment, 2) courses offered, 3) institutional ranking, 4) the quality of academic staff, 5) timetable flexibility, and 6) grading and assessment systems. Evidently, participant interviews revealed that these six factors were key determinants influencing their selection of HEIs. Such results align with ongoing research that underscores the importance of institutional characteristics and their role in attracting students (Pham & Nguyen, 2020; Alenezi, 2022).

As highlighted earlier, the university environment emerged as the most influential factor in students' decision-making process. Additionally, the presence of a multicultural environment within the university provided students with exposure to diverse perspective, enriching their academic and social experiences. This aspect was particularly valued by the students seeking broader worldview during higher education journey. Moreover, students expressed that a university's ranking played a significant role in their choice, perceiving higher-ranked institutions as offering superior academic quality, global recognition, and better career prospects. These findings align with the recent research emphasizing the importance of institutional reputation and diversity in attracting students (Pham & Nguyen, 2020; Pinheiro et al., 2022). As mentioned by Imani and later found similar transcript by Lisa as quoted:

"...environment here ummm (…) I am Muslim and I liked the fact that it's a Muslim university ...reason why I chose IIUM and not any other institute. ummm...I am married and it was really helpful for my husband to understand...in an Islamic environment... it was easier for me to convince him and my family... plus it is an international university so even though I am saying that the ranking doesn't matter but in Malaysia it is one of the best universities so why not. it could have been a better choice." (Imani)

"I also look at the lecturers...are they good, am I (…) good to be burden with lot of assignment or (…) are they famous are the exam marking strict." (Lisa)

"...I figured UIA (IIUM) because why it is international university so I thought it will be a multi-culture place... a new experience similar to Australia where it is multi-culture. And it offers (mmmmm) offers (mmm) courses that I want…" (Imani)

"...I feel like UIA is the best (…) it is quite okay and it is flexible you know the time table is flexible...study environment is encouraging and fun…" (Lisa)

The findings of this study corroborated recent literature emphasizing that the courses offered at universities play a pivotal role in influencing students' decision-making process. This aligns with the results of prior studies, which identified university characteristics as critical components in guiding students' choices (Slim et al., 2018; Munro et al., 2023). Additionally, the study highlighted the significance of college efforts, such as program quality and institutional support, in aiding students in their selection of HEIs (Munro et al., 2023).

Based on the data gathered through participant interviews, the academic background and characteristics of lecturers were identified as vital factors. Students expressed a preference for institutions with international faculty, citing the diversity of experiences and teaching methodologies as major draws. This finding supports the research that emphasizes the role of faculty competence and cultural diversity in embracing the appeal and perceived quality of educational institutions (Kamesyworo & Sriwiyanti, 2023; Surya, 2020). As quoted from Lisa's transcript:

"I am really happy with the teachers that we have here because they are from international background…"

Personal factors were identified as the second significant influence on the students' decision-making when selecting a HEI. These included proximity to the institution, food preferences, personal role models, peer influences, and previous educational experiences. The findings of this study align with recent research that highlights personal motivations such as the desire for career advancement and self-improvement, often guide students in their educational choices (Shenkoys & Kim, 2023).

Participants expressed that selecting a university perceived as enhancing their future career prospects was a primary motivator. Additionally, many students indicated that their prior educational experience left them feeling inadequately prepared, driving their desire to acquire new knowledge and improve their competencies for future opportunities. This is consistent with findings by Abdul Rahman et al. (2022), which emphasises the importance of aligning personal goals with institutional offerings to facilitate academic growth and career development. As quoted from Imani's transcript:

"…wanna be a teacher… I realize that I should be just studying about teacher… studied in bachelors of education which is in ELT... After that once I was done, I realized that the universities in Bangladesh are not that good and I wanted to do something else. I wanted to add some extra professional courses and then I did Cambridge CELTA which is under the Cambridge University and its own examination and I did that for a month which was an intensive course. And I did it in Bangladesh from British Council and after that I went to Indonesia the next year and did another Cambridge dissimilation course which is known as CELTYL… I actually did start something else which is known as DELTA and I did my orientation in Malaysia… I just finished a part of it but I didn't finish the whole thing and it was becoming very difficult for me so I thought I need to gain some more knowledge… that is the reason I choose IIUM it's not about my work experience, for DELTA I need more knowledge"

"…since my degree I know that I want to do my master… I want to enhance myself I want to improve myself (…) because I feel like in the course of 2 years of teaching, I feel really stupid, (…) I learn I studied this but I couldn't apply it so I feel like I am something missing in me so I felt like I have to do my master to improve myself. So, I feel like UIA is the best…"

Both participants expressed a preference for institutions that fit seamlessly into their daily routines. Interviews revealed that they avoided distance courses, citing concerns about the potential for diminished connections with lecturers, peers, and family. These social connections were identified as critical influences, significantly impacting their motivation and ability to pursue their studies. This aligns with recent research emphasizing the importance of proximity and social support in fostering academic engagement (Abdul Rahman et al., 2022). As quoted from the transcription:

"…glad that I did my master in here because I realize that one of my friend *she told me she did her master… you need a lot of family… hugs and kisses from your family… on holiday you go to your mom… your family near to you… in the stressful period, having lots of niece and nephew… close with my sister… my brother, so I feel like that family connection while doing master is really important because it is kind of safety net… have your family near to you…"* (Lisa)

"…I choose face-to-face course that's because when I was doing DELTA, I realized that the gap between the teachers and the students is huge when you do a distance course and there are not lot of people who are with you. So, like you don't have friends or companions but, in a face, -to face course (…) you get lots of friends who are on the same boat… and there would be teachers who you can go to and tell or nag about what to or ask help from so that's why face-to-face course and not a distance course." (Imani)

The study also unravelled another aspect of factors in decision-making process which was the availability of food options. The variety and inclusivity of food offerings acted as key determinant, with students being particularly drawn to institutions that catered to diverse cultural cuisines. In Malaysia, many universities provide an array of food choices, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, Western, and Middle Eastern dishes. This diversity not only enhance the appeal of these institutions but also provided international students with a sense of

familiarity by offering cuisine from their home countries.

Interviews revealed that students placed substantial importance on this factor, considering it a decisive element in their decision-making process. These findings align with research showing that access to diverse, convenient, and culturally relevant food options significantly enhances the student experience and can be a decisive factor in university selection (Powell et al., 2022; Fogolari et al., 2023). As quoted from Imani's transcript:

"I really wanted to have Bangladeshi food and we could not find any food anywhere. So, he told me that you can come to the canteen of ours and we can have some food. And I was like okay. So, we went to (café) Ali the canteen and had some Somalian food which I thought was Bangladeshi which was very close to Bangladeshi food and I was impressed with the university a university which has Bangladeshi food in it, I must study here… good food… to get the food…" (Imani)

The findings of this study underscored the critical role of personal role models, including friends, seniors, and family, in influencing students' decision-making regarding HEIs. These findings align with the recent literature, which emphasizes the significant impact of social networks and role models on decision-making processes (Marbach & Van Zanten , 2023).

Participants highlighted the influence of peers and family members, suggesting that the perceptions and advice from these groups played a pivotal role in shaping their educational choices. Similarly, research by Trivedi et al. (2021) identified peer influence as a key component, noting its ability to mediate critical decisions in higher education contexts.

Moreover, the concept of peer "quality" emerged as an essential factor in this study, reinforcing prior research findings that students often value the caliber of their social and academic networks when choosing an institution (Bengesai et al., 2023). The combination of guidance from role models and the supportive environment provided by peers contributed significantly to students' decision-making processes. As quoted from Imani's transcript:

"…my cousin was studying here…"

"…a friend of mine did his (…) master in Malaysia and he said it was quite okay and I think (…) why don't I just do my master here in Malaysia… I have senior here; two my seniors are studying here so I ask around and then they said that it is quite okay…" (Imani)

The study primarily addressed the "what" questions, focusing on the criteria students consider when choosing a university. While the research questions centered on the present-day choices, the answers were intertwined with participants past experiences. The findings revealed that participants drew on retrospective memories that held significant meaning in their identity and decision-making processes. This reflects the importance of integrating past and present experiences in understanding such choices (Hu, 2022; Hasan et al., 2023)

Participants discussed that their early educational and working experiences, along with socio-cultural influences, shaped their decisions. These factors not only influenced their current perspective but also highlighted the interplay between personal identity and external context in shaping their educational choices. Such findings align with research emphasizing the role of socio-cultural dynamics and retrospective meaning-making in decision-making (Crocetti et al., 2023; Duong et al., 2023).

In this study, both participants were found to be more alike than different in choosing a certain HEI. With regards to their choices, both participants believe that they are generally satisfied with their decision with regards to their perception of a quality education. The study showed that choosing a university is heavily impacted by individual characteristics, sociocultural dynamics, and recollections of past experiences rather than being determined only by conventional criteria like academic standing or course offerings. Several elements influenced students' choices, including the universities proximity to family, the variety of food options available, the presence of foreign faculty, and the influence of personal networks like peers and family. Investigating the interaction of institutional and personal factors in university selection, especially for students from diverse backgrounds, was the study's main goal. This objective was achieved by the findings, which revealed the importance of

multicultural environments, role models, and previous educational experiences. The findings highlight the complexity of the university selection process, where decision making is influenced by a combination of prior experiences and individual goals.

The problem statement is also addressed by these findings, which closes gaps in the literature on the influence of cultural and personal factors on university choices. This research showed the importance of social influence and human experiences in determining educational pathways, as compared to earlier studies that are mostly concentrated on academic performance metrics and institutional rankings. In the end, this research advances a more sophisticated comprehension of postgraduate students' decision-making process when it comes to the selection of HEIs. It provides insightful information that helps policymakers and educational institutions better customize their spaces and programs to draw in and serve a diverse student body, bringing institutional objectives in line with the needs and desire of potential students.

In conclusion, postgraduate students are actively looking for inspirations, they are curious beings with great imaginations and ambitions, hence strong exposure and experience give them a grounded basis for making decisions validated by their lived experiences. Whether it is hands-on through their own work experience and placements, second-hand via engagement with peers or role models and finally from their past experiences, exposure gives them confidence of relevance, from aspirations, to ensuring that they have made fully-informed decisions.

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