Challenges in Advancing Internationalization of Student Mobility (ISM) in Malaysian Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of students is fundamental for education worldwide, promoting cross- cultural exchange and driving economic development. Malaysia, with initiatives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025, seeks to position itself as a leading education hub in Southeast Asia. However, significant challenges hinder the country's capacity to attract and retain international students. This study explores the barriers to advancing internationalization of student mobility in Malaysia. Using secondary data sources, incorporating insights from scholarly articles, policy documents, and statistical reports. Findings indicate challenges such as language barriers, complex administrative procedures, cultural adaptations, academic integration, and insufficient institutional resources are significant barriers. Offering recommendations for government and policymakers to simplify administrative processes, improve language support, and promote inclusive campus environments. Providing essential perspectives to enhance Malaysia's status as a global education centre, while also deepening the academic experience and facilitating global knowledge sharing.

Keywords: barrier, higher education, internationalization, student mobility, Malaysia,

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of student mobility (ISM) is crucial for advancing higher education, promoting the sharing of knowledge, skills, and cultural perspectives across various countries. Characterized by the relocation of students to engage in educational programs outside their home countries (Knight, 2014). ISM has witnessed remarkable growth, with the number of international students exceeded 6 million in 2022, in contrast to just over 2 million in 2000 (Singh, 2024). Motivated by global connectivity, the quest for varied educational experiences, and a growing focus on international qualifications to enhance employment prospects worldwide (Brooks & Waters, 2022). Moreover, Malaysia is evolving as a notable education centre, effectively attracting international students through well-planned initiatives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025. Malaysia being home to over 86,000 international students, showcases its unique advantages such as affordability, rich cultural diversity, and a strategic position close to key regions like the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Abdullah, Wan, & Sirat, 2022). Aside from this, using English as the primary language of instruction in many Malaysian universities enhances its attraction to students from Asia and other areas who do not speak English as their first language (Glass & Cruz, 2023).

Despite the significant benefits, Malaysia faces substantial obstacles in its pursuit of attracting 250,000 international students by 2025. Systemic issues, such as complex visa processes and insufficient academic resources, diminish the country's attraction (Yang & Tian, 2023). Cultural barriers, including language variations and integration difficulties, amplify the challenges faced by international students, while financial constraints and strict regulations further impede accessibility and retention (Xu, 2023). These challenges, however, highlight a pressing need for Malaysia to reevaluate its ISM strategies to remain competitive within the dynamic multifaceted global education landscape.

Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that the existing literature on ISM often adopts a Western-centric perspective, overlooking the unique dynamics found in non-Western educational contexts like Malaysia. For instance, prior studies by Arah, Ogbu, & Okeke, (2008); Ratchatakulpat, Yongyingprasert, & Wadeecharoen, (2018); and Kankhuni, & Ngwira, (2019) predominantly focus on well-known destinations such as the United States, the

United Kingdom, and Australia, neglecting the increasing importance of developing centres in Asia (Ali, Zhou, Hussain, Nair, & Ragavan, 2016). This gap hinders the understanding of how countries like Malaysia navigate deep-rooted challenges while striving to position themselves as pioneers in the sphere of global education. Hence, this study addresses these drawbacks by exploring the different challenges to ISM in Malaysia, evaluating their impact on the country's educational and economic objectives, and proposing targeted strategies to overcome these challenges. Thus, provides a comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's ISM ecosystem, contributing to the global dialogue on higher education and emphasizing the impact of emerging economies on international student mobility. Furthermore, the findings offer essential insights for decision-makers, institutions, and international collaborators, underscoring the significance of ISM initiatives in a rapidly evolving global academic environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background- The Push-Pull Theory in Higher Education

The internationalization of student mobility (ISM) is an emerging occurrence shaped by a multifaceted interaction of various motivating and attractive factors that affect students' choices to seek higher education in foreign countries. The push-pull theory, first introduced by Pawar, & Chanda, (2024), offers a solid foundation for comprehending these motivations. The theory suggests that the internalization of students is shaped by various push factors present in their home countries and pull factors found in the countries they wish to move to. Meanwhile, the Push factors refer to unfavourable conditions or limitations in the home country that compel students to seek opportunities elsewhere. Factors may include political instability, restricted access to quality education, economic difficulties, and safety issues (Hu, Wotipka, & Wen, 2016; Bempechat, & Shernoff, 2012). For example, individuals from nations with less advanced higher education systems frequently seek opportunities to pursue their studies overseas to engage with specialized academic programs and improved learning environments (Fakunle, 2019).

On the other hand, pull factors signify the appealing characteristics of destination countries that entice students to choose them. These encompass opportunities for superior education, esteemed institutions, reasonable living expenses, rich cultural diversity, and favourable career opportunities after graduation (Zhang, & Zhou, 2018; Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016). Countries known for their exceptional educational standards and robust support frameworks for international learners are especially attractive. Moreover, in Malaysia, the attractive factors are clear in its reasonable tuition costs, instruction in English, diverse cultural settings, and advantageous geographic location. Nevertheless, these benefits are impeded by significant obstacles, including stringent immigration regulations, language challenges, and insufficient infrastructure (Abdullah et al., 2022; Glass & Cruz, 2023). Thus, the interplay of various influences ultimately shapes Malaysia's effectiveness in drawing in and keeping international students.

Interestingly, the push-pull framework highlights the importance of factors unique to each destination, including government policies and institutional strategies, in influencing ISM flows. Whereas, Western nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom depend on their academic reputation as a significant attraction, developing countries like Malaysia need to utilize cost-effectiveness and regional partnerships to stay competitive (Bustos-Orosa, & Symaco, 2024). Necessitating customized approaches that resonate with Malaysia's distinct socio-economic and cultural landscape.

Recently, the push-pull framework has evolved to embrace a multipolar perspective, acknowledging the emergence of new educational hubs in Asia, like Malaysia, as competitors to traditional Western sites. Xu (2023) presents a perspective focused on a multipolar structure, highlighting the need for non-Western countries such as Malaysia, China, and South Korea, to modify their strategies to leverage their unique strengths and tackle difficult challenges. However, this viewpoint enhances the theoretical structure by incorporating emerging trends in mobility, shaped by regional influences and the changing preferences of students who move internationally. Conclusively, the push-pull theory provides a thorough framework for examining ISM, especially in developing educational centres such as Malaysia. By comprehending the driving forces and

challenges encountered by international students, stakeholders can create targeted strategies to tackle systemic barriers and enhance Malaysia's position in the global higher education arena (Jafar, & Legusov, 2021).

Global Trends in Internationalization of Student Mobility

Recently, the internationalization of higher education has resulted in a notable rise in the number of students pursuing educational opportunities overseas. As reported by Antoninis, Alcott, Al Hadheri, April, Fouad Barakat, Barrios Rivera, & Weill, (2023) the number of students studying abroad exceeded 6 million in 2022, marking a significant increase from slightly more than 2 million in 2000. Influenced by various factors such as the need for varied educational opportunities, the availability of specialized programs absent in home countries, and the perceived benefits of international qualifications in the global labour market (Xu, 2023; Brooks & Waters, 2022). Whereas, Glass & Cruz, (2023), and Ali, et al. (2016) believe that countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia continue to be prominent destinations; nonetheless, emerging hubs in Asia, including Malaysia, China, and South Korea, are contesting established supremacy, providing attractive costs and distinctive cultural experiences

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a temporary shift in ISM patterns, leading to the emergence of online learning as a viable alternative (Onileowo, Muharam, & Ramliy, 2022). Whereas, the recovery after the pandemic has underscored the strength and lasting attraction of physical mobility, leading to the development of hybrid models that enhance conventional student exchanges (Yang & Tian, 2023). Further, the transition towards a multipolar environment in international relations highlights the increasing significance of regional educational centres, as non-Western nations enhance their abilities to draw in global talent (Xu, 2023).

Based on this, the advantages of ISM reach far beyond personal growth. According to Alsharari, (2018), international students enhance the cultural landscape, drive economic development, and elevate the global standing of higher education systems in host countries. Emphasizing the strategic policies of the Malaysian government aimed at establishing the country as a regional education hub, highlighting the transformative potential of ISM. Malaysian institutions draw students from various backgrounds, promoting cross-cultural exchange and equipping graduates to thrive in a globalized workforce (Ali, et al., Hussain, Nair, & Ragavan, 2016; Abdullah, et al., 2022). International students play a crucial role in the economy by contributing through their tuition fees, living expenses, and associated costs. Glass & Cruz, (2023) revealed that the global market for higher education exports exceeds $300 billion each year, with Malaysia increasingly securing a significant portion due to its cost-effective and high-quality educational programs. As a result, the presence of international students enriches campus diversity, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration among different cultures. Although the clear advantages are evident, various obstacles hinder the advancement of ISM in Malaysia. Abdullah, et al. (2022) highlight that insufficient intercultural competence among faculty and staff poses a significant barrier, frequently resulting in misunderstandings and inadequate support for international students.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate support services, including orientation programs and mental health resources specifically designed for international students, impacts the overall experience and retention rates. Including Financial limitations that significantly impact Malaysia's competitiveness relative to other regions that provide scholarships or subsidized education (Onileowo, Muharam, & Ramily, 2022; Shahijan, Rezaei, & Preece, 2016). Consequently, Steagall, Falk, Gallo, & Porter, (2021) noted that a persisting challenge is the necessity for improved cooperation with global partners to optimize procedures like credit transfers, visa applications, and dual-degree programs. According to Xu, (2023), these collaborations are essential for enhancing Malaysia's attractiveness in a competitive ISM environment. Antoninis, et al. (2023); and Yang & Tian, (2023) highlight the necessity of tackling these obstacles to secure sustainable development in ISM and upholding Malaysia's goal of establishing itself as a leading educational centre in Asia. Teichler, (2017) affirmed that ISM is an evolving and crucial component of global higher education, providing reciprocal advantages to both students and host nations. Surprisingly, Malaysia has shown notable advancement, yet ongoing barriers necessitate focused approaches to maintain its development in this area. By tackling these challenges, Malaysia can strengthen its status as a premier choice for international students, in harmony with global trends and the evolving dynamics in ISM (Urban, & Palmer, 2014).

Barriers In Non-Western Contexts

The internationalization of students has transformed the environment of higher education, offering individuals opportunities for cultural exchange, improved learning experiences, and global career prospects (De Wit, & Altbach, 2021). However, non-Western countries face significant challenges that affect their ability to attract and retain international students. Despite the growing interest in studying abroad, students from non-Western countries often encounter major barriers related to language proficiency, administrative issues, and adapting to new cultural environments (De Wit, & Deca, 2020).

Language barriers become particularly apparent when English is the main medium of instruction in host countries. While the prevalent use of English in higher education serves as an attractive incentive, non-native speakers face considerable challenges in fulfilling both academic and social expectations. This could lead to reduced academic success and feelings of isolation (Glass & Cruz, 2022). Meanwhile, students from non-Western countries often come from educational systems that prioritize different language skills and teaching methods, which can create difficulties in adjusting to the academic standards of institutions that function in English (Goodwin, & Mbah, 2019). Addressing this issue requires enhanced language support services and tailored pre-arrival training programs designed for different proficiency levels. Abdullah, et al. (2022) emphasize that administrative inefficiencies, such as complex visa application processes and inconsistent institutional policies, contribute to the difficulties encountered by international students. Whereas, in countries like Malaysia, the lack of clarity and inconsistencies in administrative procedures intensify these challenges, coupled with an unclear standard for credit transfers, lengthy visa processing times, and gaps in communication between institutions and government entities resulting in frustration and may deter prospective students. Thus, improving administrative procedures and establishing centralized, transparent systems are crucial for increasing student satisfaction and retention (Onileowo, 2024; Elugbaju, Okeke, & Alabi, 2024).

Adapting to various cultures presents a significant challenge for international students in non-Western environments. Noor, & Leong, (2013) opined that while countries like Malaysia flourish because of their rich cultural diversity, the path to integration can pose difficulties for students unfamiliar with local customs and social norms. These challenges become notably more complex when faculty and staff do not receive proper training in cultural sensitivity, or when orientation programs fail to adequately prepare students for their experiences in the host country. However, the effects of cultural shock, social isolation, and discrimination may severely impact students' well-being and academic performance. Thus, thorough orientation initiatives, mentorship programs, and cross-cultural training for both students and faculty can greatly improve the development of an inclusive environment.

Moreover, studies by Sahin, (2018); Dimmock, (2020), and Pedro, Subosa, Rivas, & Valverde, (2019) have largely focused on the experiences of students in Western countries, leading to a significant gap in understanding the difficulties faced by individuals in educational institutions outside the West. Addressing this gap is essential for crafting targeted strategies that can support emerging education centres, like Malaysia, in enhancing their attraction and competitiveness in the global higher education arena. Hence, future research can focus on the distinct socio-political, economic, and cultural environments of non-Western nations to propose relevant and impactful solutions.

Malaysia's Educational Policy Landscape

Malaysia's aspiration to position itself as a regional hub for education is reflected in its strategic initiatives, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 and the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020. These policies aim to elevate the global reputation of the nation's education system by attracting a greater number of international students, improving the quality of academic programs, and fostering partnerships between Malaysian institutions and foreign universities (Antoninis et al., 2023). However, while these initiatives have facilitated significant advancements in Malaysia's ability to attract students, there remain certain areas that necessitate improvement for sustainable development.

Moreover, Amaghouss, & Zouine, (2022) posit that the focus of these policies on boosting enrolment figures has, at times, eclipsed the significance of quality and inclusivity. The existing frameworks have failed to adequately tackle administrative inefficiencies, the necessity for thorough student support services, or the creation of inclusive campus environments. Abdullah et al. (2022) emphasize that these deficiencies could obstruct Malaysia's goals of establishing itself as a premier education hub. Hence, it is crucial to tackle these gaps to ensure that Malaysia not only attracts students but also retains them and aids in their successful integration and academic success.

To accomplish this, Malaysia's policies should redirect their emphasis toward implementing specific initiatives that improve the quality of the student experience. This involves optimizing visa processes, enhancing language support initiatives, investing in modern academic facilities, and fostering cultural understanding and inclusivity (Knight, 2014). Harmonizing these policies with global standards and addressing the requirements of international students can enhance Malaysia's standing in a progressively competitive multipolar ISM environment. As a result, these strategic modifications will assist Malaysia in achieving its objective of welcoming 250,000 international students by 2025, while also promoting enduring sustainability and advancement in the global higher education environment (Wan, & Abdullah, 2021).

Institutional Barriers To Malaysian Higher Education

Malaysia has engaged in proactive efforts to establish itself as a prominent regional hub for international education. Notwithstanding these endeavours, institutional barriers continue to impede the advancement and efficacy of the Internationalisation of Student Mobility (ISM). This review examines three significant challenges within this field: university policies and administrative procedures, the restricted availability of internationalized curricula and programs, and capacity-related issues concerning facilities, housing, and student support services.

University Policies And Administrative Procedures

The policies and administrative procedures within Malaysian higher education frequently present considerable obstacles to the mobility of international students. As highlighted by Abdullah et al. (2022) and Wilkins, (2016) the prolonged duration of visa processing, the inconsistency of transparent communication channels, and the variability of policies across institutions frequently lead to frustration among international students, thereby hindering their capacity to effectively navigate administrative systems. Studies indicate that although Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education has advanced in the simplification of regulations, the execution at the institutional level continues to exhibit inconsistencies, resulting in frustration among students (Antoninis et al., 2023).

Moreover, the absence of effective coordination among different governmental bodies and academic institutions intensifies these challenges. Administrative inefficiencies in domains such as credit transfers and the recognition of qualifications serve to further dissuade prospective international students (Amaghouss, & Zouine, 2022). Ghasemy, Hussin, Megat Daud, Md Nor, Ghavifekr, & Kenayathulla (2018) argued that these procedural challenges significantly affect the reputation of Malaysian institutions and contribute to the decline of enrolled international students, who frequently perceive a lack of support in navigating through bureaucratic systems. For instance, institutions in nations such as Singapore and South Korea have adopted exemplary practices, including centralized administrative systems, which Malaysia might consider emulating to rectify its existing deficiencies (Thun, 2018).

Limited Availability Of Internationalized Curricula And Programs

The constrained internationalization of curricula within Malaysian higher education diminishes its attractiveness to students who are globally mobile. While there has been some advancement in providing English-medium instruction and collaborative degree programs, numerous courses continue to be entrenched in local contexts and do not adequately address global competencies (Glass & Cruz, 2022). According to Antoninis et al. (2023) in terms of intensifying competition within global higher education, Malaysia's position is undermined by the absence of culturally inclusive and internationally pertinent curricula, particularly when compared with other emerging educational hubs such as Singapore and China.

Brooks and Waters (2022) highlighted that the lack of internationally standardized curricula diminishes Malaysia's competitiveness among Western and other Asian educational centres, including Singapore and South Korea. Although certain institutions have endeavoured to implement dual-degree programs and English-medium instruction, these initiatives frequently exhibit superficiality, thereby constraining their attractiveness to students seeking global mobility (Glass & Cruz, 2022). Consequently, a curriculum that is internationalized and integrates global perspectives, cross-cultural learning opportunities, and multidisciplinary approaches significantly enhances a nation's attraction to international students (Xu, 2023). Thus, enhancing partnerships with international institutions and committing to curriculum reform is essential for aligning Malaysian higher education programs with global standards (Yang & Tian, 2023).

Capacity Issues: Facilities, Housing, And Student Support Services

The swift increase in the enrolment of international students in Malaysia has surpassed the establishment of sufficient infrastructure and support services. According to Abdullah et al. (2022) inadequate classroom facilities, obsolete laboratories, and disoriented libraries impede the educational experience for both domestic and international students. However, the absence of affordable and high-quality on-campus housing compels numerous international students to seek out costly or inadequate private accommodations, resulting in both cultural and financial exclusion (Antoninis, et al., 2023).

Additionally, the provision of student support services, encompassing orientation programs, language support, mental health resources, and academic counselling, frequently remains inadequately developed. Antoninis, et al., (2023) and Yang & Tian, (2023) emphasize the essential function of these services in promoting international student satisfaction and retention. Nonetheless, Malaysian institutions frequently exhibit deficiencies in both financial and human resources, which hampers their ability to deliver comprehensive support. Whereby, the deficiency in this area leads to challenges in academic integration, cultural adaptation, and the general welfare of international students (Yang & Tian, 2023). As a result, Malaysian institutions may face the risk of alienating international students and jeopardizing their credibility within the global education marketplace in the absence of substantial investments in these domains,

Integrated Solutions

Despite Malaysia's notable advancements in drawing international students, institutional barriers persist as a significant obstacle to realizing its ambition of emerging as a premier global education hub (Lee, & Shutler, 2024). Addressing these institutional barriers inefficiencies in administrative procedures, the expansion of internationalized curricula, and the resolution of capacity issues necessitates coordinated efforts across multiple levels. Malaysia has the potential to enhance its reputation within the competitive framework of global higher education. Whereby the implementation of these measures is poised to enhance the attraction of international students while simultaneously fostering their academic success and integration, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of Malaysia's higher education sector.

Cultural And Social Barriers

Malaysia's higher education sector has experienced a rise in the enrolment of international students, attributed to its diverse cultural landscape and advantageous geographical position.

Nonetheless, obstacles rooted in culture and society continue to pose considerable challenges. This review examines essential aspects of these challenges, concentrating on integration challenges, attitudes and biases among local students and faculty, and the importance of cultural awareness in promoting inclusivity.

Integration Challenges Faced By International Students

International students in Malaysia frequently encounter challenges when trying to blend into local communities, with cultural shock and language barriers standing out as significant hurdles. Students often experience a sense of disorientation and solitude when they come face to face with new societal norms, values, and ways of life

(Yang & Tian, 2023). For instance, international students hailing from Western nations might find it challenging to adjust to Malaysia's communal culture and customs, including restrictions on food and social hierarchies (Abdullah, Wan, & Sirat, 2022). It is noteworthy that international students encounter difficulties in adjusting to the cultural norms of Malaysia, which frequently contrast sharply with their own. Thus, the lack of adequate orientation and cultural integration programs intensifies these challenges. Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, (2024) indicate that international students view the cultural aspects of the host country as a crucial factor in their decision-making process regarding whether to remain or depart. When individuals experience a sense of belonging and can appreciate a diverse cultural landscape, they are more inclined to remain in the host nation. Tang, & Zhang, (2023) noted that international students held favourable views of Japanese culture before their arrival for studies and that cultural adaptability correlates positively with the intention of graduates to migrate (Li, Xue, Wei, & Guo, 2023).

Furthermore, obstacles in communication intensify these integration difficulties, especially for students whose primary language is not English or Malay. Even with the widespread use of English as the medium of instruction, learners often face challenges in both academic discourse and social engagement (Glass & Cruz, 2022). These barriers impede involvement in group discussions, extracurricular activities, and everyday interactions, restricting international students' capacity to forge significant connections with peers and faculty. However, the choice of international students to either return to their home country or remain after finishing their studies is shaped by numerous factors, including socio-cultural elements. Lu, & Everson Härkälä, (2024) noted that Language barriers present a considerable challenge, as students might face difficulties securing employment in nations where their native language is not spoken. For instance, in Finland, the job market predominantly operates in Swedish and Finnish, despite the availability of numerous courses in English.

Consequently, additional significant elements encompass cultural adaptability and global experience, as individuals with greater exposure to international environments tend to have a higher likelihood of remaining (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2024). At the same time, students in Europe tend to embrace migration more readily, thanks to initiatives such as Erasmus that promote mobility (Staniscia, Deravignone, González-Martín, & Pumares, 2021). Emphasizing that the presence of a stable, professional job significantly influences students' choices to remain, yet the scarcity of networking opportunities in the job market can hinder their ability to secure employment, ultimately prompting them to go back home (Barrionuevo Bonini, 2021). Additionally, the failure to build social connections may also contribute to students' decisions to leave the host country (Ndomo, Bontenbal, & Lillie, 2023). Although nations such as Australia promote welcoming migration policies and embrace cultural diversity, the process of social integration remains a challenge for international students, especially those hailing from (China Xu, 2022). Meanwhile, various socio-cultural factors, including language barriers, cultural adaptability, networking prospects, social resources, and social cohesion, can greatly affect the choices of international students regarding their departure from the host nation and their return to their homeland. Hence, policymakers and institutions take these factors into account when developing policies and programs aimed at retaining international students in the host country.

Domestic Perceptions And Stereotypes Among Students And Faculty

The views and assumptions held by local students and faculty can greatly shape the experiences of international students. Studies indicate that local students may occasionally view their international counterparts as rivals for resources or opportunities, leading to feelings of resentment or hesitance in interacting with them (Neeley, 2013; Xu, 2023). Moreover, preconceived notions regarding specific nationalities or areas can foster bias or exclusion, intensifying the sense of isolation among international students. Faculty members might unintentionally hold biases that influence their interactions with international students. Such biases may emerge in the interactions within the classroom, the assessment processes, and the availability of mentorship, leading to unfair educational settings (Brooks & Waters, 2022). Thus, the absence of intercultural training for faculty exacerbates these challenges, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive reforms to enhance awareness and foster inclusivity.

Importance Of Cultural Sensitivity In Fostering Inclusivity

Understanding cultural nuances is essential for breaking down social and cultural barriers faced by international students. Organizations that emphasize cultural awareness through their policies, training, and support services foster more inclusive settings that benefit both international and domestic students (Antoninis et al., 2023). Understanding and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds is essential, along with an active effort to dismantle biases and stereotypes. Initiatives that promote interactions across cultures, like mentorship programs and intercultural workshops, can greatly enhance integration and alleviate tensions. Training faculty in cultural sensitivity fosters supportive academic environments that ensure international students feel valued and included (Luong, Tran, Nguyen, Tran, Dang, & Vu, 2024). Illustrations from prominent international organizations highlight the success of these initiatives in fostering inclusive and varied campus environments (Glass & Cruz, 2022). Obstacles rooted in culture and society, such as difficulties in integration, prevailing stereotypes, and insufficient cultural awareness, persistently hinder the experiences of international students in Malaysia. Overcoming these obstacles necessitates a holistic strategy that includes policy changes, focused support services, and the proactive fostering of intercultural understanding. By cultivating inclusive environments, Malaysian higher education institutions can more effectively assist international students and elevate their global standing (Xiaotong, Aziz, Hamzah, Yue, & Changli, 2024).

Economic And Financial Barriers

Economic and financial obstacles greatly influence the involvement and experiences of international students in Malaysia. Although the country is more affordable than Western destinations, financial obstacles continue to hinder its ability to fully emerge as a global centre for higher education. This study reviewed three essential aspects of these obstacles: High tuition costs and living expenses, restricted availability of scholarships and funding options, and the influence of economic inequalities among originating countries on student movement.

High Tuition Fees And Cost Of Living For International Students

For numerous international students, the expenses associated with tuition and the cost of living in Malaysia continue to be significant issues. Although Malaysia provides education at a lower cost than nations such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, the financial strain remains considerable for students hailing from low- and middle-income countries (Gomez, Cheong, & Wong, 2021). In Malaysian universities, international students typically face tuition fees that exceed those of domestic students, highlighting the increasing commercialization of higher education (Abdullah et al., 2022). The increasing expenses associated with urban living, particularly in areas housing most universities, intensify the financial burden beyond just tuition fees. Costs associated with lodging, travel, and medical care, coupled with variations in currency value, especially put students from countries with less robust currencies at a disadvantage (Gomez, Cheong, & Wong, 2021). Wilson, Hastings, Morris, Ramia, & Mitchell, (2023) show that financial pressures frequently result in part-time employment, which, because of visa limitations, can disrupt students' academic responsibilities.

Restricted Access to Scholarships, Financial Aid, And Funding Opportunities

One major obstacle faced by international students in Malaysia is the scarcity of scholarships and financial assistance. While Malaysia has launched initiatives like the Malaysia International Scholarship (MIS) to draw in global talent, these efforts still fall short of fulfilling the demand (Hoo, Zainal, & Chai, 2014; Ali et al., 2016). Many scholarships focus on merit or specific areas of study, which creates a disparity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those engaged in less emphasized fields. Private and institutional scholarships often prioritize domestic students, which limits the opportunities available for international candidates. This disparity poses significant obstacles for students hailing from developing nations who depend on external financial support to pursue higher education overseas (Rambe, & Moeti, 2017). Enhancing financial aid initiatives and cultivating collaborations with global organizations may effectively address this disparity and improve Malaysia's appeal as a study destination (Amzat, Najimdeen, Walters, Yusuf, & Padilla-Valdez, 2023).

Economic Inequalities Among Originating Countries On Student Mobility

The economic variations among source countries significantly affect the movement of international students to Malaysia. Students hailing from affluent nations frequently enjoy enhanced access to financial means, allowing them to select from a broader array of educational destinations, such as Malaysia (Brooks & Waters, 2022). On the other hand, students hailing from low-income nations encounter considerable financial obstacles, which restrict their ability to move freely and foster an unequal dependence on assistance and affordable educational options. The disparity in economic resources significantly influences the makeup of international student groups, as more affluent areas tend to lead in enrolment figures. This disparity weakens the variety within the international student community, an essential element for promoting global skills and cultural interactions (Smit, 2012). To tackle this challenge, it is essential to implement focused outreach and funding efforts aimed at underrepresented areas, especially in Africa and South Asia, where there is a significant, yet unfulfilled, demand for accessible education (Jacob, Neubauer, & 2018).

Moreover, Economic and financial obstacles, such as high tuition costs, restricted financial assistance, and inequalities among originating countries, present considerable difficulties for international student mobility in Malaysia (Hoo, Zainal, & Chai, 2014). To address these challenges, Malaysian higher education institutions and policymakers need to implement a comprehensive strategy. Programs must encompass subsidized tuition, broaden scholarship opportunities, and improve financial assistance specifically designed for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Also, promoting global partnerships to support scholarships and developing creative funding strategies could address economic inequalities and enhance the inclusivity and competitiveness of higher education in Malaysia (Wan, & Abdullah, 2021).

Policy And Regulatory Barriers

The frameworks of policy and regulation are essential in influencing the patterns of international student movement. In Malaysia, these frameworks shape the recruitment and retention of international students, as well as their overall experience within the country. This section explores three significant challenges related to policy and regulation: visa and immigration limitations, government policies impacting recruitment, and the absence of efficient procedures for work permits and post-study opportunities.

Visa And Immigration Restrictions Specific To Malaysia

The attraction of Malaysia as a study destination is greatly shaped by its visa and immigration policies. International students frequently encounter intricate, lengthy, and variable visa application procedures, which pose obstacles to their entry (Johnson, 2018). Obstacles consist of ambiguous documentation criteria, extended processing durations, and challenges in manoeuvring through regulatory structures that differ among states and institutions. Malaysia enforces limitations on the work rights of international students while they are pursuing their studies. Compared to certain countries that permit students to engage in part-time employment, Malaysia's regulations are notably stricter, thereby restricting avenues for achieving financial independence (Cheong, & Narayanan, 2021). This limitation diminishes Malaysia's attractiveness as a study destination and imposes further financial strain on students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Hoo, Zainal, & Chai, 2014).

Governmental Policies Influencing International Student Recruitment

Malaysia's strategic initiatives, including the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020, are designed to elevate the nation's status as a prominent centre for global education. Nonetheless, discrepancies and changes in government focus have posed difficulties for sustained international student recruitment (Khanal, & Gaulee, 2019). For instance, although certain initiatives aim to boost the enrolment of students from particular areas like the Middle East and Southeast Asia, there exists a lack of coherence between these policies and the ability of institutions to address the varied requirements of international students (Nieveen, & Plomp, 2018). Furthermore, policies frequently emphasize quantity rather than quality, resulting in insufficient support systems for students and a decline in the overall academic experience (Brooks & Waters, 2022). While policy documents advocate for international partnerships, their implementation often falls short of expectations. This gap obstructs

the recruitment of top-tier students and constrains Malaysia's ability to compete with other favored study destinations, including Australia, Singapore, and the UK (Abdullah, Wan, & Sirat, 2022).

Lack Of Streamlined Processes For Student Work Permits And Post-Study Opportunities

One of the essential aspects where Malaysia falls short compared to global competitors is in offering transparent avenues for international students to acquire work experience both during and after their academic pursuits. Securing work permits for part-time positions presents challenges, and the availability of post-study employment options is constrained by stringent immigration regulations (Crumley-Effinger, 2024). Contrary to nations like Canada and Australia which promote post-study employment with clear visa extensions and work permits, Malaysia's approach is disjointed. This constraint deters international students from considering Malaysia as a feasible long-term option for career advancement. Moreover, the absence of post-study opportunities diminishes the return on investment for students, with many perceiving their education in Malaysia as providing limited prospects for economic growth in comparison to other nations (Cheong, Hill, Fernandez-Chung, & Leong, 2016).

Additionally, the challenges posed by policy and regulatory frameworks, such as visa limitations, discrepancies in government recruitment strategies, and restricted work permit availability, greatly impede Malaysia's capacity to attract and keep international students. To tackle these challenges, it is essential to implement thorough reforms that streamline visa procedures, synchronize recruitment strategies with the capabilities of institutions, and create opportunities for employment after graduation (Jackson, Riebe, & Macau, 2022). By tackling these challenges, Malaysia can enhance its status as a global centre for higher education while cultivating a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere for international students.

Strategies For Addressing Barriers And Enhancing The Internationalization Of Student Mobility

Policy reforms are essential for overcoming barriers to international student mobility in Malaysia. The optimization of visa processes is crucial for minimizing bureaucratic inefficiencies that may discourage potential students. Furthermore, aligning employment laws and post-study opportunities with international best practices has the potential to enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in the global educational landscape. Likewise, enhanced language training programs both pre-arrival and on-campus are essential for addressing the linguistic challenges encountered by international students, thereby facilitating improved academic achievement and more effective social integration. Collaborative initiatives with training providers and the integration of language support within curricula can significantly improve these initiatives. Promoting cultural integration via customized orientation programs, mentorship initiatives, and events that reflect diversity can cultivate a more inclusive academic atmosphere while mitigating cultural shock and perceptions.

Institutional Investment In Infrastructure And Support Services Holds Equal Significance.

Addressing housing shortages, expanding access to facilities, and strengthening counselling and academic advising systems are essential measures to enhance the student experience. Meanwhile, digital innovations, including intuitive portals for administrative and academic resources, have the potential to enhance operational efficiency and foster engagement. Collectively, these reforms serve to alleviate the challenges encountered by international students while simultaneously enhancing Malaysia's position on the global stage as a centre for education. Through collaborative endeavours among policymakers, institutions, and stakeholders, Malaysia has the potential to establish a higher education ecosystem that is both inclusive and globally competitive, ultimately serving the interests of all constituents.

Policy Reforms And Administrative Efficiency

Improving visa processes and administrative protocols is crucial for diminishing obstacles to entry for international students. Governments and institutions need to implement centralized and transparent digital systems to facilitate the efficient management of visa applications, academic registrations, and student inquiries. Aligning work permits and post-study opportunities with international best practices will significantly boost

Malaysia's attractiveness as a destination for higher education. Implementing proactive training programs for administrative personnel focused on cultural competence and regulatory frameworks can facilitate seamless operations and cultivate a supportive environment.

Curriculum Internationalization And Academic Quality

The formulation of curricula that are aligned with international standards is essential for the recruitment of students from a variety of geographical backgrounds. Institutions must incorporate global perspectives within their course content, establish joint degree programs in collaboration with international universities, and foster research partnerships that transcend national boundaries. Thus, investing in faculty training and development to enhance teaching quality and cultural competence represents a crucial measure in the pursuit of academic excellence.

Comprehensive Language Support

Language barriers represent a considerable obstacle for numerous international students. Institutions must provide pre-arrival and continuous English language programs that are specifically designed to accommodate varying levels of proficiency. Whereas, the incorporation of language support within the academic framework, including writing centres and peer-assisted learning sessions, has the potential to enhance students' academic and social integration. It is of equal significance to provide training for administrative personnel in multilingual communication to enhance support for non-native English speakers.

Cultural Integration Initiatives

Promoting an inclusive campus culture is essential for improving the experience of international students. Institutions must establish orientation programs that offer comprehensive insights into local cultural norms and social practices. Moreover, Mentorship initiatives that connect international students with local peers or faculty members serve to bridge cultural gaps and foster mutual understanding. Thus, the recognition of cultural diversity through events and dialogue sessions serves to eliminate misconceptions and cultivate a sense of belonging within communities.

Enhanced Infrastructure And Support Systems

Investment in infrastructure, including affordable housing, accessible transportation, and advanced academic facilities, is essential for meeting the demands of an expanding international student demographic. Comprehensive support services, covering counselling, career guidance, and health services, should be specifically designed to address the distinct challenges encountered by international students. Likewise, the utilization of digital platforms to promote student engagement, gather feedback, and provide access to resources has the potential to significantly enhance the overall educational experience.

Financial Accessibility And Scholarships

Institutions and governmental bodies must enhance their financial support mechanisms, including scholarships, financial aid, and student loan programs, with a particular focus on international students, to mitigate economic barriers. Moreover, collaborations with private entities and international organizations may facilitate the generation of supplementary funding avenues. Whereas, the clear and open distribution of information regarding financial support programs is essential for effectively engaging prospective students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Strategic Partnerships And Global Branding

The establishment of strategic partnerships with international universities, research institutions, and global organizations has the potential to significantly enhance academic mobility and fortify the reputation of Malaysia's higher education sector. Collaborative programs, including exchange opportunities, joint research

initiatives, and dual-degree pathways, provide significant benefits to both domestic and international students. Moreover, promoting Malaysia as a leading education centre through strategic campaigns and engagement in international education fairs has the potential to draw a wider and more varied student demographic. The implementation of these strategies necessitates a collaborative endeavour among governmental bodies, institutions of higher education, and private sector stakeholders. Through the rectification of administrative inefficiencies, the promotion of cultural inclusivity, the enhancement of academic quality, and the assurance of financial accessibility, Malaysia has the potential to fortify its standing as a formidable entity within the global academic arena. Whereas, the initiatives undertaken serve to enhance the educational experiences of international students while simultaneously improving local educational frameworks, thereby fostering the socio-economic development of the nation and its position within the global knowledge economy.

Implication Of The Study

This study investigates the challenges, to enhancing the internationalization of student mobility in Malaysian higher education, bearing significant implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and global stakeholders. The research highlights the complex obstacles spanning administrative shortcomings to cultural adjustments that impede Malaysia's ambitions to establish itself as a premier education centre. The results highlight the critical necessity for targeted actions to streamline administrative procedures, improve language assistance frameworks, and foster inclusive campus atmospheres. By tackling these challenges, Malaysia can enhance its attractiveness and competitiveness in the international education landscape. Additionally, nurturing a welcoming environment for international students will enhance Malaysia's cultural and academic diversity while also significantly impacting the country's economic development and international reputation. These insights hold significant value for other developing education centres encountering comparable challenges, providing a framework for leveraging their distinct advantages to improve ISM. Ultimately, the research highlights the necessity of embracing a more intricate, diverse viewpoint in upcoming studies on ISM, fostering a more inclusive comprehension of global educational interactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several strategic recommendations are proposed to improve the outcomes and experience of internationalization student mobility. It is essential to prioritize support for language proficiency by offering pre-arrival and on-campus English language courses specifically designed for international students. Moreover, administrative staff must participate in language training to promote effective communication and support, minimizing the chances of confusion and fostering a welcoming environment.

Secondly, it is essential to enhance administrative procedures by creating centralized and transparent systems for visa applications and academic registrations. Equipping administrative personnel to adeptly manage inquiries from international students will streamline processes and enhance overall satisfaction. Third, cultural integration programs play a vital role in promoting inclusivity. Thorough orientation initiatives should include cultural standards and social interactions, while mentorship programs that connect international students with local counterparts can foster significant relationships and facilitate the adjustment to campus life.

Ultimately, there is a pressing need for substantial improvement in institutional resources. Enhancing infrastructure, such as affordable student housing and accessible counselling services, is crucial for addressing the needs of an increasingly international student community. Furthermore, enhancing financial support for initiatives that promote global engagement, including scholarships, faculty development, and international collaborations, will bolster Malaysia's standing as a premier choice for higher education.

Future Research Direction

Future studies on the internationalization of student mobility in Malaysia should concentrate on bridging current gaps and recognizing new trends in this evolving area. An area of investigation is the enduring effects of Malaysia's international education policies on student satisfaction and professional trajectories. Comparative studies assessing Malaysia's performance alongside other regional education centres, like Singapore and

Australia, may yield important insights into effective strategies and potential areas for enhancement.

A key focus is the efficacy of support systems within institutions. Longitudinal studies monitoring the academic and social integration of international students would assist in pinpointing which initiatives, like mentorship programs and language training, yield the most significant effects. Furthermore, upcoming studies might explore the financial challenges encountered by students from economically disadvantaged nations, investigating the impact of scholarship initiatives and financial support on their choices and experiences.

The swift evolution of digital transformation necessitates a closer examination of how technology can better serve international students. Future studies could evaluate how digital tools, including AI-powered administrative systems and online language training platforms, influence the alleviation of obstacles. Finally, research should investigate the viewpoints of local students and faculty to grasp the impact of internationalization on campus culture and to suggest approaches that promote mutual respect and collaboration. These initiatives will together shape more inclusive and effective policies to support Malaysia's development as a global education centre.

CONCLUSION

The global movement of students is fundamentally important for Malaysia's growth and sustainability, as it serves as a key enabler of capabilities that will be essential for the country's future, where knowledge and global awareness will play a critical role. A diverse range of stakeholders is present, each with distinct objectives and expectations concerning ISM including students, academics, higher education institutions, policymakers, nations, and supranational organizations. As a result, the aspects of Higher education in Malaysia have become perplexing and politically charged. While accomplishments are clear, there are still aspects that require considerable enhancement. Therefore, implementing the previously mentioned recommendations into action to tackle the challenges of internationalization of student mobility in Malaysia necessitates collaborative efforts among policymakers, higher education institutions, and stakeholders.

By tackling language obstacles, streamlining administrative processes, overcoming cultural hurdles, and addressing resource constraints, Malaysia can foster a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for international students. The implementation of these reforms will significantly improve both the academic and personal journeys of students, while simultaneously reinforcing Malaysia's standing as a prominent centre for higher education, thereby aiding its sustained economic and social growth. Given that this study is conceptual, its reliance on secondary data hinders its ability to capture real-time changes and the individual experiences of international students. Future research should incorporate primary data collection techniques, such as surveys and interviews, to achieve a deeper insight into the experiences of international students in Malaysia.

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