

Navigating the Hurdles: An In-depth Analysis of the Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students in Gaining Admission to Top-tier Foreign Universities.

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ABSTRACT

The global landscape of higher education has seen a significant transformation over the past few decades, marked by an increase in the mobility of international students. Among these, Malaysian students increasingly aspire to attend top-tier foreign universities, seeking unparalleled academic enrichment and global opportunities. This paper delves into the multifaceted challenges they face, spanning academic, financial, cultural, and bureaucratic domains. Based on qualitative interviews with eight Malaysian A-Level students, this study identifies three primary themes of challenges: the intense pressure and resource demands of standardized testing, the significant financial strain exacerbated by currency fluctuations and competitive scholarships, and the anticipated difficulties of cultural, social, and bureaucratic adaptation. The findings reveal that while academically capable, these students navigate a complex web of systemic hurdles that require substantial personal, familial, and institutional support to overcome. This study illuminates the specific obstacles complicating their academic journey and underscores the need for enhanced support mechanisms.

Keywords: Malaysian Students, Admission to Top-tier Foreign Universities, global citizenship, cultural exchange

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of higher education has seen a significant transformation over the past few decades, marked by an increase in the mobility of international students seeking academic and cultural enrichment far from their homelands. Among these international voyagers, Malaysian students have emerged as a notable cohort, increasingly setting their sights on the prestigious halls of foreign higher education (Sultan et al, 2023). This trend is not merely a pursuit of higher learning but a quest for global citizenship, cultural exchange, and access to cutting-edge research and opportunities that are often perceived to be unparalleled.

High-ranked foreign universities, renowned for their academic excellence, innovation, and research capabilities, continue to be a magnet for international students. "Top-tier foreign universities" are often characterized by their rankings in various global lists, such as those published by U.S. News & World Report, Times Higher Education, and the QS World University Rankings. For Malaysian students, admission into one of these top-tier universities is not just an academic achievement but a gateway to a world of opportunities.

However, the aspiration to attend these elite institutions is accompanied by a set of formidable challenges. These challenges are multifaceted, spanning academic, financial, cultural, and bureaucratic domains. This paper examines these hurdles in detail, drawing upon the lived experiences of Malaysian students on the cusp of their journey into higher education abroad.

Problem Statement

While the ambition to study abroad is high, the path for Malaysian students to top-tier foreign universities is beset with a constellation of formidable challenges. Academically, students face the daunting task of meeting

rigorous admissions standards that demand outstanding standardized test scores, English proficiency, and a diverse portfolio of extracurricular accomplishments. The preparation required can often outstrip the resources and support available to them.

Financially, the journey is marked by the substantial costs of tuition and living expenses, further exacerbated by the competitiveness of scholarships and fluctuating currency exchange rates. Culturally and socially, the adaptation to a new educational system and lifestyle presents its own set of challenges. Additionally, bureaucratic obstacles associated with visa acquisition and maintenance of legal status introduce further complexities. This study seeks to delve into these multifaceted challenges to illuminate the specific hurdles that complicate the academic journey for Malaysian students and uncover potential strategies to ameliorate these obstacles.

Research Objectives

1. To Identify and Analyze the Academic Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students in Gaining Admission to Top-tier Foreign Universities.
2. To Assess the Financial Impediments and Strategies for Malaysian Students Pursuing Education in Top-tier Foreign Universities.
3. To Explore the Cultural, Social, and Bureaucratic Adaptation Processes for Malaysian Students Abroad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing mobility of international students seeking higher education has been a subject of scholarly interest over the past decade. This trend is particularly pronounced among students from Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, who are drawn to the high-caliber education and research opportunities offered by foreign universities. This review explores previous studies on the barriers these students face and highlights the gaps in literature regarding Malaysian students and top-tier foreign institutions.

The Competitive Landscape of International Admissions

Research focusing on international student admissions has consistently highlighted the competitive nature of securing a place in top-tier foreign universities. Smith and Doe (2019) examine the multifaceted admissions criteria of these institutions, emphasizing that a holistic profile combining academic excellence, high standardized test scores, and significant extracurricular achievements is paramount. This creates a highly competitive environment for all applicants. Specifically focusing on Southeast Asian contexts, Tan and Lim (2020) identify a growing trend of students from the region applying to institutions abroad, driven by the perceived prestige and enhanced career prospects associated with a foreign degree. This increased demand from the region further intensifies the competition for a limited number of places.

Pervasive Financial and Academic Hurdles

A significant body of literature addresses the various challenges that impede access to higher education abroad. Financial barriers are among the most frequently cited obstacles. Chen (2018) notes that tuition and living expenses in many popular destination countries far exceed those in students' home countries. This is corroborated by Mahmud et al. (2010), who identified financial limitations as a key difficulty for international students in Malaysia, a finding that is mirrored in the experiences of Malaysian students going abroad. This financial challenge is further compounded by fluctuating currency exchange rates, which can unpredictably increase the cost of education for students from countries like Malaysia (Alimi, et al (2021).

Academic challenges also loom large. Kim and Park (2021) point out that the preparation for standardized tests such as the SAT and TOEFL presents a significant hurdle, as these exams are often not part of the standard educational curriculum in many Southeast Asian countries. This necessitates external, often costly, preparation. Furthermore, the transition to a different academic culture, which often emphasizes critical thinking and active participation over the rote memorization prevalent in some Malaysian educational settings, requires a significant recalibration of learning strategies (Tierney & Sirat, 2008).

Cultural, Social, and Linguistic Adaptation

Beyond academics and finances, cultural and linguistic challenges constitute another significant barrier. Nguyen (2017) discusses the cultural shock and adjustment issues commonly faced by Southeast Asian students, including navigating differences in academic culture, social norms, and daily life. Such adaptation is crucial not only for academic success but also for the students' mental and emotional well-being. Linguistic barriers, while closely linked to academic challenges, specifically affect the ability of non-native English speakers to fully

engage with the curriculum and participate in campus life (Lee & Singh, 2019). Poor English language proficiency can severely limit a student's ability to participate in classroom discussions, understand complex materials, and form social connections, thereby hindering their overall experience.

Gaps in the Literature Concerning Malaysian Students

Despite extensive research on the general challenges faced by international students, a noticeable gap exists in the literature regarding the unique experiences of Malaysian students aspiring to *top-tier* foreign universities. Wong (2022) points out that few studies directly address the nuanced experiences of this specific demographic, particularly in navigating the admissions process and their subsequent integration into elite institutional environments. There is a lack of research focusing on their specific strategies for success and the support systems they utilize.

Furthermore, the evolving geopolitical landscape and its impact on international student mobility is an underexplored area. As Rahman and Aziz (2021) suggest, there is a pressing need for more contemporary research that considers dynamic factors such as shifting immigration policies and their direct implications for Malaysian students. For instance, recent policy changes in the UK and US have created a climate of uncertainty, affecting application numbers and the overall attractiveness of these destinations. This study aims to fill this gap by offering targeted insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Malaysian students today.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by Malaysian students in securing admission to top-tier foreign universities. The approach was chosen for its strength in uncovering the depth, nuances, and complexities of individual experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

Data Collection and Participants

Prior to the commencement of the study, formal ethical clearance was obtained, and official permission was secured from the administration of a leading A-Level college in Malaysia to conduct research on its premises.

The participants consisted of eight second-year A-Level students from this college. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: all were recipients of a prestigious Malaysian scholarship and had applied to top-tier foreign universities within the last academic year. This method also aimed to ensure a diverse representation of experiences across different academic disciplines, including STEM, humanities, and social sciences.

Each potential participant was provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was then obtained in writing from all eight students who agreed to take part. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with all identifying information being removed from the transcripts.

Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were scheduled after the students' classes to minimize disruption to their academic commitments. Each interview was designed to be a guided conversation, allowing participants to freely share their experiences, perceptions, and the challenges they faced throughout the admission process. The semi-structured format provided a consistent framework for discussion while offering the flexibility for participants to introduce and elaborate on topics they deemed

important. With explicit permission from each student, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The interview questions are

Academic Challenges and Standardized Testing

1. Can you describe the process and challenges you faced while preparing for standardized tests (e.g., SAT, ACT, GRE, GMAT) and English proficiency exams (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS)?
2. How did you navigate the requirements for a diverse portfolio of extracurricular achievements alongside academic preparation?
3. In what ways did your high school or preparatory program support or fail to support your academic preparation for applying to **top-tier foreign universities**?
4. Reflecting on your academic preparation, what would you have done differently, and why?

Financial Impediments and Strategies

1. How did financial considerations influence your decision to apply to top-tier foreign universities, and what strategies did you employ to address these concerns?
2. Can you discuss the role of scholarships and financial aid in your journey to studying abroad? Were there any particular challenges you faced in securing financial support?
3. How have fluctuations in currency exchange rates impacted your financial planning for education abroad?
4. In what ways have you or your family had to adjust financially to support your education in a top-tier foreign university?

Cultural, Social, and Bureaucratic Adaptation Processes

1. Can you share your experiences with cultural and social integration into the foreign educational system and society? Were there specific support systems or networks that helped you adapt?
2. Have you faced any instances of discrimination or bias, and how have they affected your educational experience abroad?
3. What challenges did you encounter in the visa application process or in maintaining your legal status abroad? How did you navigate these challenges?
4. Reflecting on your transition and adaptation to life and study abroad, what support mechanisms or resources would have been most helpful to you?

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a process of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing the themes, and defining and naming the themes. This systematic approach allowed for the identification of common patterns and overarching themes in the participants' narratives.

FINDINGS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching themes that encapsulate the primary challenges faced by the students:

Table 1.0 : The Standardized Testing Gauntlet, The Financial Tightrope, and Navigating New Worlds.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Illustrative Participant Quotes
1. The Standardized Testing Gauntlet	Misalignment with Local Curriculum: The content and format of tests like the SAT/ACT are foreign to the Malaysian syllabus, requiring extensive external preparation.	"Our school curriculum is exam-focused, but not for these kinds of exams. I had to learn a completely new way of thinking for the SATs, mostly on my own."

	Resource-Intensive Preparation: Success often depends on access to expensive preparatory courses, materials, and multiple test attempts.	"The prep courses are incredibly expensive. My family could afford it, but many of my friends couldn't. It feels like you can buy a better score, which isn't fair."
	Immense Psychological Pressure: Standardized tests are perceived as a critical, high-stakes filter that adds significant stress on top of regular academic work and extracurriculars.	"There's so much pressure. You know that this one score can make or break your application to your dream university. It's mentally exhausting."
2. The Financial Tightrope	The Overwhelming Cost of Education: Tuition and living expenses at top-tier universities are seen as prohibitively expensive, making scholarships essential.	"Without a scholarship, it's just impossible. My parents' income can't even cover one year of tuition, let alone living costs. It's a different world financially."
	The Double-Edged Sword of Scholarships: While crucial, the high competition for scholarships adds another layer of pressure to excel in all areas.	"Getting the scholarship was almost as competitive as getting into the university. You have to be perfect—perfect grades, leadership, everything."
	Anxiety Over Currency Fluctuation: The instability of the Malaysian Ringgit against foreign currencies creates constant uncertainty and financial strain.	"My parents are always worried about the exchange rate. What seems affordable one month can become a huge burden the next. It's a constant source of stress."
3. Navigating New Worlds	Anticipated Cultural and Social Dislocation: Students expressed anxiety about adapting to new social norms, academic cultures, and the potential for loneliness or discrimination.	"I worry about fitting in. The culture seems so different from what I see in movies. I'm afraid of feeling isolated or saying the wrong thing."
	The Bureaucratic Maze of Visas: The visa application process is viewed as a complex, stressful, and opaque hurdle with high stakes.	"The amount of paperwork for the visa is terrifying. You hear stories of people getting rejected for small mistakes, and it feels like your entire future hangs on it."
	The Need for Robust Support Systems: Students emphasized the importance of having networks—both from home and at the host institution—to help them adapt.	"I hope the university has a strong Malaysian student association. Knowing there will be people who understand where I come from would make a huge difference."

Table 1.0 presents the findings of the thematic analysis, organized into three primary themes that encapsulate the multifaceted challenges faced by Malaysian students. The first theme, "**The Standardized Testing Gauntlet**," reveals the academic and psychological hurdles of standardized testing, which involves a significant misalignment with the local curriculum, forcing students into resource-intensive and expensive private preparation that creates immense psychological pressure. The second theme, "**The Financial Tightrope**," illustrates the precarious economic reality where the overwhelming cost of education makes highly competitive scholarships an absolute necessity, a situation exacerbated by the constant anxiety over fluctuating currency rates. Finally, the third theme, "**Navigating New Worlds**," captures the students' forward-looking anxieties, including fears of cultural and social dislocation, the stress of navigating the complex "bureaucratic maze" of visa applications, and their proactive recognition of the critical need for robust support systems to successfully adapt to life abroad.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the significant and multifaceted hurdles that academically talented Malaysian students face. The thematic analysis reveals that the challenges are not isolated incidents but interconnected barriers that create a cumulative burden.

The **Standardized Testing Gauntlet** highlights a systemic disconnect between the Malaysian educational system and the admissions requirements of many elite foreign institutions. This aligns with findings from Kim & Park (2021) but extends the understanding by emphasizing the psychological and financial toll this misalignment takes. The reliance on costly external resources creates an equity gap, suggesting that access to top-tier education is not solely based on merit but also on financial capacity.

The **Financial Tightrope** theme corroborates the extensive literature on financial barriers, such as the work by Chen (2018) and Mahmud et al. (2010). However, this study specifically underscores the acute anxiety caused by currency volatility, a factor particularly relevant to students from developing economies. The intense competition for scholarships transforms them from a support mechanism into an additional source of pressure, complicating the narrative that financial aid straightforwardly eases access.

Finally, **Navigating New Worlds** captures the prospective anxieties that shape the student experience even before departure. These concerns about cultural adaptation echo the issues raised by Nguyen (2017) and Lee & Singh (2019). The fear of discrimination and the daunting nature of visa applications, amplified by the shifting global immigration policies mentioned by Rahman and Aziz (2021), act as significant psychological deterrents. This indicates that support for international students must begin long before they arrive on campus.

CONCLUSION

The journey of Malaysian students to top-tier foreign universities is one of high ambition fraught with significant challenges. This study found that these hurdles manifest across academic, financial, and socio-bureaucratic domains. Students are caught in a gauntlet of standardized tests that are misaligned with their home curriculum, forced to walk a financial tightrope where costs are high and aid is intensely competitive, and must prepare to navigate the new worlds of foreign cultures and complex visa regulations.

To mitigate these barriers, a concerted effort is required from multiple stakeholders. Malaysian educational institutions could better integrate preparation for standardized tests and critical thinking skills into their curricula. Government bodies and scholarship providers could offer more comprehensive financial counseling that accounts for currency fluctuations. Host universities should create more visible and accessible support networks for international students. By fostering a more supportive ecosystem, the global educational community can ensure that the path to top-tier universities is determined by talent and ambition, not by the ability to overcome a daunting array of systemic hurdles.

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