

Retention Amongst Pre-University Students at a Foreign University Branch Campus in Malaysia: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Student retention is of key importance to many private higher education institutions in Malaysia. This paper discusses the factors influencing a selected group of former pre-university students' decision to continue their undergraduate studies in the same university where they had completed their pre-university studies. In-depth interviews were conducted, and three major themes of student retention were identified namely, the educational quality at the institution, educational quality at pre-university level and the overall conducive study and support environment. The findings provide insights on retention related challenges and issues faced by this group of students. This study also suggests ways on how the university could successfully improve its student retention.

Keywords: in-depth interviews, pre-university students, student retention

1. Introduction

Each year the private higher education institutions in Malaysia compete for students even before and immediately after the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education (equivalent to O-level) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) or Higher School Certificate (equivalent to A-level) results are announced. Various methods are used to attract students to study at their respective institutions. Students who obtained their SPM/O-level qualification could enrol either in a pre-university program at both public or private higher education institutions or continue with their STPM/A-level studies. The pre-university program which is equivalent to a year 12 is developed by the university itself. It provides a guaranteed pathway for students to gain admission into the university upon successful completion and achieving the required qualification of the pre-university program. A-level students who do not meet the admission requirements into the undergraduate program will also undertake this pre-university program which normally runs for a year. The pre-university program is internally assessed and commonly includes both coursework and examinations. Once students are enrolled in a pre-university program, these institutions need to ensure students continue their studies with the enrolled institution and reduce the attrition rates. There are various factors that come to play in ensuring students remain in the enrolled institution and hence raise the retention rates.

The pre-university program at this foreign university branch campus commenced its first intake of students in April 2014 offering a science and business pathway, respectively. This branch campus is managed as a private university in Malaysia. The pre-university program has since grown in terms of pathways and student enrolment. Upon successful completion of their pre-university studies, students will progress to the undergraduate programs at this university. The pre-university students are one of the largest cohort of students at this foreign university's Malaysia campus.

There is keen competition among private higher education institutions to retain students. Hence, it is imperative to understand these pre-university students' perspective regarding the factors influencing their decision to progress to the undergraduate degree programs.

According to Berger and Braxton (1998), Tinto's (1975, 1993, 1997) interactionist theory views retention as the fit between students' academic capabilities and motivation and the institution's academic and social characteristics. The stronger these matches, the stronger will be the commitment of the student to complete his/her studies in the enrolled institution.

The objective of this study was to explore factors influencing the pre-university students' decision to continue

their studies with this university and suggest ways on how the university could improve its student retention success. In-depth interviews were conducted among ten former pre-university students to probe their subjective experiences.

This study will deepen our understanding of the retention related issues from the students' perspective. Additionally, it hopes to meet one of the key elements of the university's retention strategy i.e., mapping of contributing factors towards student retention. As retention is a continuous and a long-term process, this study will also shed light on the learning and teaching (L & T) and non-L & T related practices within this university's pre-university program that may influence students to continue with their undergraduate studies.

Furthermore, Giannakos, Pappas, Jaccheri and Sampson (2017) had proposed that future studies on student retention to include pre-university students, former students who have dropped out of their studies and students from different educational systems and cultures. Thus, this study aims to address these areas and contribute to the literature on student retention in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Student retention has been a concern since the 1600s (Aljohani, 2016). Aljohani (2016) stated that among all the variables of student attrition, the quality of the student's institutional experience and the level of a student's integration into the social and academic system of a higher learning institution were the most influential variables. These variables were reported by the major student retention models such as: The Student Retention Integrated Model by Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda in 1993, Tinto's Student Integration Model in 1975, The Institutional Departure Model by Tinto in 1993 and The Undergraduate Dropout Process Model by Spady in 1970 and 1971.

Student retention is a global issue and higher education institutions have applied a variety of strategies to retain their students. The quality of faculty-student interaction is one of the key factors for student retention based on a research by Tinto in 1993. Subsequently, Tinto (2004) recommended to the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education that financial and academic support, faculty, staff, and peer advising, counselling, and mentoring also promotes student retention among low-income students.

The study on student retention was further extended by Chrysikos, Ahmed and Ward (2017) when they explored social and learning experiences among first-year undergraduate computing students in a UK higher education institution through Tinto's Student Integration Model. They found that a student's initial goal and the institutional commitments had the largest direct effect on retention. Their studies also showed that having appropriate student support systems contributed towards student retention.

Subsequently, the results from Giannakos, Pappas, Jaccheri and Sampson's (2017) structural equation modelling study among 344 undergraduate and post graduate computer science students at a Norwegian university contributed towards the student retention literature. Their studies revealed that cognitive gains, non-cognitive gains, supportive environment, usefulness of the degree and students' personal values (e.g., lack of belongingness in the computer science field) were crucial for retention.

Our understanding on student retention were further deepened through Haverila, Haverila and McLaughlin's (2020) quantitative study among 395 business students which comprised an almost equal number of international and domestic students at a mid-sized Canadian university. This study discovered that domestic students viewed the quality of instruction at this institution to be a more important retention variable as compared to their international counterparts. The two groups, however placed an equal importance on support services as a retention variable. Financial support was the major predictor of retention intentions for both groups.

The higher education institutions in Malaysia also face the challenges of student retention. A quantitative study by Rose, Said and Anbalagan (2018) among 197 students at a private university in Malaysia found factors such as academic support, time management and goal commitment to have a significant impact towards student retention level. Chuah and Lim (2018) added a different perspective to the student retention literature. They adapted quality analysis tools commonly used in the manufacturing sector and developed a system to better monitor the progression of students at an open university in Malaysia. Their system reduced interdepartmental inconsistency within the university, provided students with a clearer study pathway and overall reduced the drop-out rate.

Based on the above cited literature, there were various factors such as academic support, quality of student experience, study environment, goal commitment of students', faculty-student interaction and student integration into the academic system which had contributed to student retention at higher education institutions around the world.

3. Methodology

The primary data for this study was derived from in-depth interviews among ten former pre-university students of this institution. These students were chosen through a purposive sampling method. According to Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) purposive sampling enables the researcher to tap into the knowledge and experience the participants possess. These students were chosen as they were previously taught by the authors and they are assessed to have a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002).

As this is an exploratory study, a semi-structured interview approach was taken to gain the participants views on the topic. The interview questions were derived after reviewing the relevant literature and considering the views of one associate professor and three assistant professors who each possess over 15 years of teaching experience both at the undergraduate and pre-university levels. The interviews were conducted by the authors. Each author interviewed between 2 to 3 participants. Except for one interview that was held face-to-face, the remainder of the interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and Zoom given the Movement Control Order restrictions in Malaysia due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. An interview guide ensured that each researcher had a set of similar interview questions to establish consistency.

The interviews were recorded with the participants consent. Each of the participant was interviewed between 30–45 minutes. The interviews were held from March 2020 to August 2020. Each participant is identified with a pseudonym and comes from a variety of background as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' background

Participant's pseudonym	Background
Desmond	Currently employed at the branch campus.
Sarah	Employed by the branch campus till end June 2020.
Calvin	Currently Year 2 at the branch campus
Mary	Currently Year 2 at the branch campus. Left the university before re-joining.
Maggie	Currently Year 1 at the branch campus
Isaac	Currently Year 1 at the branch campus
Terrence	Currently Year 1 at the branch campus. At another institution prior to joining the pre-university program.
Angela	Currently Year 1 at the branch campus
Zandria	Left for another institution for undergraduate studies
Roger	Left to work

Member checks were undertaken to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study. To determine the credibility of the author's interpretation and understanding, the participants checked through the interview transcripts. The authors also cross checked each other's transcript to ensure no data was overlooked during the data analysis stage. Following these feedback and comments, the interview transcripts were reviewed. These steps resulted in the data being reanalysed many times. The textual data were analysed in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines. Through an iterative process, the data were organised into similar categories from which themes were derived. Table 2 below shows an example on the development of the theme 'educational quality: institution level'.

Table 2. Educational quality: Institution level

Units of relevant meaning		
wholesome degree programme	recognised university	industry experienced lecturers
highly ranked	better-quality	accredited programmes
very knowledgeable lecturers	quality of studies	international degree
good educational system	UK education	syllabus is quite up there
prepares you well	reputation	experienced lecturers
teaching is very rich	university doing a good job	syllabus similar as in the UK

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the transcript analysis, three major themes were identified namely the educational quality of the institution, educational quality at pre-university level and the conducive study and support environment. The themes describe the participants' experience as they journeyed through their studies at the branch campus. A

selected sample of the participants' experience are highlighted with verbatim quotations.

4.1 Educational Quality: Institution level

All participants highly acknowledged that the quality of education at this university convinced them to join the pre-university program and subsequently continue with their undergraduate studies.

Calvin, a recipient of the High Achievers Award in the pre-university program shared his views regarding the university's reputation as follows:

"Actually, even if I didn't get the High Achievers Award, I think would join this university. There are a few reasons. I think the overall degree program offered here is what I wanted. It is quite wholesome, in terms of the credentials and accreditation by certain institutions and the fact that I get to transfer to other campuses. It gives me the opportunity to study this subject in other countries. It helps increase my horizon & enables me to learn from other people's perspective."

He further added:

"I was told this university is a pretty recognised university when it comes to studying business & economics. Since it is a very recognised university, I think it is a very good opportunity for me to come here and expand my knowledge and learn from the lecturers who may have experiences from different industries. Lecturers share huge insights on the industry and knowledge from the companies they worked before. Their teaching is very rich. We students are not treated like factory products. They want to make sure that they produce students who are very knowledgeable. I think this university is doing a good job there. Hence, I would think this university is one of my first choice."

Terrence who completed 2 semesters of his American Degree Program (ADP) at another private university and subsequently completed his pre-university studies at this university instead, explained the following:

"The education at XYZ University is quite lacklustre. And after I went to ADP, I realised going to America wasn't for me, so I decided to stay in Malaysia and study at this university. USA is too relaxing as I think there isn't much during study so it's quite hard for me to focus if I were to go to USA."

He further emphasised:

"I can feel that in this university the quality of education is really better. The teachers here care more as compared to when I was in XYZ University, the teachers would just come into class or not come at all sometimes. I'm doing quantity surveying (QS) and this university is basically ranked among the top three institutions offering QS in Malaysia. I decided to come to this university because of that reason."

Maggie, a first-year undergraduate student commented:

"I actually joined this university because of the accounting and finance degree offered because we can choose to take ACCA and then there's an accelerate program. Yeah, another reason is because the degrees are *Master of Arts* for Accounting."

For Maggie although the Master of Arts for Accounting is a first degree, the naming convention of the degree offered more prestige to her.

It is evident that these participants chose to study at this branch campus given the reputation of the university and the fact that it is a UK qualification that they will gain at the end of their studies. Completing the pre-university program provided them with a guaranteed pathway towards the university's undergraduate programs.

The knowledgeable and experienced lecturers coupled with the university's Go Global program and other features such as the accelerate programs further influenced these participants decision to continue their studies with this university.

4.2 Educational Quality: Pre-University Level

Sarah who completed her pre-university studies at another private institution and subsequently joined this pre-university program had the following to share:

"I can tell that it is very different. When I came into this university, they introduce me with plagiarism. At my previous institution when they conduct assignments, student would just copy and paste from Google. And even the lecturer also knows, but they just close their eyes and say okay it is your assignment and they would just give a good grade."

She commented further:

"That was a really big challenge for me. Coming from an institution where they just allow you to just copy

paste everything and then coming here you have to know paraphrasing and you can't copy from other people. It was a challenge, but I can see that really taught me how to do a really good paper and essay. It used to be a challenge, but it really changed into, you know, giving me a really good foundation in writing a good paper.

That's why even though this university is really tough, tougher than other institutions, their syllabus is quite up there, I would say they really produce good graduates. They prepare you for working experience and even for academic; they really prepare you well. So that's why I choose to continue my study at this branch campus even for my degree."

Desmond who was among the pioneer batch of this pre-university course commented positively on the program:

"I'm given a lot support being in the pre-university program. As a student from high school transitioning to study at this university, this kind of support is very important. Students like us basically do not have an idea what is happening in tertiary studies. It provided me with the correct platform. This allowed me to be able to know what I am supposed to face in the following years within the one-year period of the program. The one year I had was really, I would say an enjoyable experience. For me it enhanced my decision to continue with this university."

Mary who left the university after her pre-university course, subsequently changed her mind. She returned to do her undergraduate studies at this university and shared the following views:

"When I was in this university doing my pre-university studies, I realized that lecturers actually would take the time to attend to you personally. ABC University was very strict with their studies and sometimes difficult to cope. It was too much. That was one of the reasons why I prefer this university because like while I was doing my pre-university studies, I really had the time and like it so much. I felt that the lecturers that I had were really doing their part in explaining their slides."

Zandria who has an elder sibling studying at the undergraduate level at this university, left after completing her pre-university studies. The financial constraints faced by her parents and her undergraduate course of study not being offered by this university led to her joining another private university. The fees at the other university were much lower and Zandria received a living allowance. Zandria also mentioned that she wished that she could continue studying at this university and narrated her fond memories as follows:

"I really like the way lectures were conducted at this university. I like the study materials. I really like my lecturers, to be honest they were very helpful. I actually want to mention all of their names here. I really appreciate my pre-university lecturers. I really had fun during my pre-university studies."

Roger who left for work to gain confidence and experience after completing his pre-university studies, had the following views about his pre-university lecturers:

"The lecturers were much focused and paid attention to students whenever they do not understand something and explains back thoroughly. They were well prepared and able to simplify the studies by giving us proper techniques."

Generally, the participants were of the view that their pre-university lecturers showed a genuine interest in their students. This indirectly motivated the participants to do well, hence reducing the possibility of them failing and moving to another institution or drop out from their studies. As explained by Thomas (2002), the student-staff relationship is very important as it helped mitigate students' involuntary withdrawal. Hence, it is imperative for staff within the pre-university program to continue to build rapport with the students from the first contact point. The orientation program which the lecturers were actively involved provided a good platform for them to get to know and better understand the needs of each of their student.

4.3 Conducive Study & Support Environment

The participants unanimously mentioned that one of the main factors for them to continue their studies at this university is the conducive study and support environment. This can be further categorised into the internal and external environments.

4.3.1 Internal Environment

Roger opined the following:

"The students here were well behaved in classes and friendly to each other. There were no fights, conflict or feeling of discomfort among each other. The venues on campus like the library, Wheesh Room, 365 Room and cafeteria are student friendly."

Angela who recently joined the undergraduate program shared the following:

“My friends were very helpful and supportive. This is important for my studies and mental health. I feel like they were very helpful. The lecturers were all nice and kind too.”

She further added:

“I like the virtual learning environment too. It is very helpful. I can go through the slides anytime, anywhere. And now with Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, that’s very helpful actually because I can go through the recordings again and watch.”

Isaac, an international student mentioned:

“You get much attention from the professors as well as the classmates because my class is rather small. We were divided into 3 tutorial groups which was good because you will be able to concentrate in the class itself. I’ve already like made some good relationship with the professors as well as my classmates. I have a lot of good friends here and they never treated me like a foreigner. I wouldn’t risk all of this. I don’t see any reason for me to go elsewhere.”

He further added his satisfaction with the university’s International Office:

“Whenever like I sent an email or make a call to the International Office, they responded back like very shortly.”

The first year of joining the university is a crucial year for students. In the pre-university program, they were able to experience life as a university student. The participants not only had positive experiences while studying the program but also forged cordial relationship with their classmates. These coupled with the ample university facilities and support services formed a strong basis for them to continue studying in this institution.

4.3.2 External Environment

The Malaysia campus is situated in the administrative capital of Putrajaya, a planned city 25km south of Kuala Lumpur. As a city with vast green areas and man-made lakes, it makes the campus an ideal location for studies.

Calvin, a second-year undergraduate student shared the following:

“It was because of my personal preference, mainly because of the location. I love this university’s campus simply because there are not many distractions. I mean it is a very nice place to study, quiet you know, I would say the environment also gives the vibes to study. It is not like other universities. Other universities I wouldn’t name them but around them there are full of other distractions—malls, shopping areas, restaurants”.

He further added:

“Whereas here, our location is quite enclosed. I think that’s the main reason why most of the students here are able to excel in their studies mainly because this university really caters and do their best to ensure that we have the perfect environment to study. It is a very conducive environment”.

Similar views were also shared by Isaac. He verbalised the following:

“The best thing about our university is that it has a beautiful and modern campus. Everywhere you go you can find like a place to study and that indicates that the university is not crowded, it is not overpopulated with students.”

“I can’t like dismiss the view of the lake. It is really really relaxing! You have no idea how it feels like to study on the second floor and then you have this view (lake) in front of you. It is a really good study environment”.

Desmond shared how he felt at ease when joining this university as the second batch of the pre-university students. The transition from high school to a university and living in the city were challenges that he faced at that time. He reflected:

“The environment is very helpful; in a way it eases my mind. We are in a very small but diverse group and at the same time we were able to focus more onto our studies. Everything just started brand new. The peace of mind allows me to focus on my studies”.

The participants spoke highly of the campus environment and its surrounding. The Malaysia campus which is situated away from shopping malls and other distractions seem to be a major draw to the participants. For them, the environment is conducive to their overall studies as compared to the other universities. This too is a factor that influenced their decision to continue their undergraduate studies at this university.

Yorke and Longden (2008) in their study found that one of the factors influencing retention is whether students

were happy or otherwise regarding the location and environment of the institution. They also discovered that younger students tend to be more concern on various aspects of the geographical environment in which they study and/or live as compared to older students.

5. Limitation and Future Research

Except for one interview that was held at this university's campus, the remaining interviews were held online while the participants were at home due to the movement restrictions. It would have been better if the interviews were held at this university's campus as it would have provided context to this study and elicited a richer response from the participants. According to Atieno (2009), research must be conducted in a physical setting within which the participants can interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions better.

The findings from this study are limited in its ability to be generalised as only qualitative data was collected. Nonetheless, the experiences of the participants will enhance our understanding on student retention matters in the context of Malaysia's private higher learning institutions.

A quantitative study on the themes developed from this study would benefit the private higher learning institutions. It would add value to the study on student retention if stronger or weaker factors influencing students' decision to continue their undergraduate studies in the same university could be determined. As students are currently learning on an online mode due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to study whether these factors are still important or are there other factors that will influence their decision to stay or leave.

Future studies in this area could also investigate retention amongst private school students, and undergraduate and post graduate students at private higher learning institutions especially in this current pandemic.

6. Conclusion

The participants' views while studying in this pre-university program and later in their undergraduate studies with the same university provided a deep understanding on student retention matters within this institution. Although 2 of the participants did not continue their studies after completing their pre-university studies, both spoke highly of their time at the university.

For this group of students, the overall quality and reputation of this university and more specifically the quality of education received whilst studying in the pre-university program were the main attractions for them to continue their undergraduate studies. The environment both internally and externally also contributed towards their decision to remain at this university.

It is evident that the university needs to continuously strive to further improve its reputation and overall standing among private higher education institutions in Malaysia. Students at the point of entry into the pre-university program are already taking these factors into consideration. The steps taken by the university in its advertising and promotion programs should be further enhanced to attract more potential students and retain existing ones.

Within this pre-university program, the rapport built between the lecturers and students is crucial for student retention. The specially designed Fit-For-Future orientation program offered to all students joining the pre-university program is the first opportunity for these new students and the lecturers to get to know each other. Through various activities, discussions and talks during the Fit-For-Future program, these students gained a first-hand experience of what it will be like studying at this university. Additionally, the tutor-tutee program which involves regular meetings between assigned group of students to a lecturer is a good avenue for lecturers to understand the needs of their students and how they could support at-risk students. With more pathways offered in this pre-university program and in line with the university's Retention Strategy, a student's request to change pathways should be seamless if he/she meets the requirements.

The extra mile taken by the pre-university program lecturers in supporting the students' learning experience should be continued and encouraged. As these students are transitioning from high school to university life, the lecturers' support and concern will inevitably leave a lasting impression on the students and influence their decision to continue studying at this university. Vogt (2008) highlighted a "distant" student-faculty relationship will lead to lower confidence amongst students and can impact on student retention. Today, it is crucial for lecturers to ensure a strong sense of identity, belonging and community amongst students who are dependable on online studies most of the time. By harnessing the virtual learning environment and community, students can collaborate and learn from each other, hence strengthening their social circles and reducing the possibility of them leaving for another institution.

The facilities and support within the university for example the International Office, student accommodation and

student services are equally important in ensuring students are satisfied and will want to continue studying after their pre-university studies. The clubs and societies too provide a social network for students to seek support and guidance from their peers during their academic journey and thus reduce the likelihood of them dropping out. It is also worth noting that the geographical location and lesser commercial distractions near the Malaysia campus as compared to other private universities within its league are some of the features that could be further marketed to attract and retain students.

There are bound to be students who will eventually leave because of a variety of reasons beyond an institution's control. Nonetheless, retention is everyone's responsibility as the cost to recruit a new student is certainly much higher than retaining existing students.

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