

Why Choose Islamic Higher Education? Exploring Factors Influencing Student Enrolments in Malaysian IHEIs

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Abstract

Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Malaysia play a vital role in integrating Islamic values with modern education, yet they face challenges in attracting and retaining students. This study explores the factors influencing student enrolment in Malaysian IHEIs, focusing on motivations, challenges, and strategies for improvement. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative and qualitative interviews to gather data from secondary school graduates, current students, parents, and policymakers. The findings reveal that religious and ethical considerations, affordability, and parental influence are key motivators for students choosing IHEIs. However, misconceptions about the relevance of Islamic education, competition from conventional universities, and limited institutional resources pose significant challenges. Based on the results, the study proposes actionable strategies, including curriculum modernisation, enhanced marketing, expanded financial aid, and industry partnerships, to improve enrollment rates and strengthen the competitiveness of IHEIs. This research contributes to the growing knowledge on Islamic higher education and provides valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to enhance the sustainability and appeal of IHEIs in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs), Student Enrolments, Higher Education Challenges, Religious and Ethical Education, Enrolments Motivations*

1. Introduction

Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Malaysia have long been integral to the nation's educational and cultural fabric, offering a unique synthesis of religious and secular knowledge. These institutions, such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin (UniSIRAJ), aim to produce graduates who are not only academically proficient but also deeply rooted in Islamic values and ethics. Over the years, IHEIs have contributed significantly to the development of human capital, particularly in fields such as Islamic studies, law, education, and social sciences (Hashim et al., 2020). However, the evolving landscape of higher education, marked by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting student preferences, has posed challenges to the sustainability and growth of IHEIs (Ahmad et al., 2021).

The importance of IHEIs in Malaysia's education system cannot be overstated. They serve as centres for the preservation and propagation of Islamic knowledge while simultaneously addressing contemporary societal needs (Hanafi et al., 2020). According to Ismail et al. (2022), IHEIs play a critical role in fostering national unity and moral integrity by integrating Islamic principles into their curricula. Despite their contributions, these institutions face increasing competition from conventional universities and private higher education institutions, which often offer more diverse academic programs and are perceived to offer better career prospects (Razak & Abidin, 2023). This competition, coupled with misconceptions about the relevance of Islamic education in the modern job market, has led to fluctuating enrollment trends in IHEIs (Yusoff et al., 2021).

The purpose of this concept paper is to explore the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs, identify challenges, and propose strategies to enhance their attractiveness. By understanding the motivations behind student choices and addressing the barriers to enrollment, this study aims to contribute to the sustainability and growth of IHEIs in Malaysia. Moreover, the literature review highlights a significant paucity of similar studies within both local and international academic publications. This scarcity underscores the potential for enhancing the body of research related to this topic, thereby contributing valuable insights to the academic community.

The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the higher education sector, enabling them to make informed decisions that align with the needs of students and the demands of the job market.

2. Problem Statement

Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Malaysia are at a critical juncture, grappling with fluctuating enrollment trends amid increasing competition from conventional universities and private higher education institutions. While IHEIs have historically played a vital role in integrating Islamic values with modern education, their ability to attract and retain students is being challenged by several factors.

One of the primary concerns is the declining or stagnant enrollment rates in IHEIs. According to Razak and Abidin (2023), the enrollment growth rate in IHEIs has plateaued in recent years, with many students opting for conventional universities that offer a wider range of academic programs and perceived better career prospects. This trend is further exacerbated by the intense competition from both public and private universities, which often market themselves as more aligned with global educational standards and industry demands (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Another significant issue is the perception of Islamic education among students and parents. Despite the emphasis on moral and ethical development in IHEIs, there is a growing misconception that graduates from these institutions are less competitive in the job market compared to their counterparts from conventional universities (Yusoff et al., 2021). This perception is often fueled by a lack of awareness about the diverse academic offerings and career opportunities available to IHEI graduates. For instance, Ismail et al. (2022) found that many students and parents associate IHEIs primarily with religious studies, overlooking their contributions to fields such as law, education, and social sciences.

Financial considerations also play a critical role in shaping enrollment decisions. While IHEIs often provide affordable tuition fees and scholarships, the rising cost of higher education and

limited financial aid options remain barriers for many students, particularly those from low-income families (Hashim et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of robust marketing and outreach strategies by IHEIs further limits their ability to attract a diverse pool of applicants (Razak & Abidin, 2023).

Furthermore, the rapid transformation of the global job market has raised questions about the relevance of IHEI curricula in meeting contemporary industry needs. Employers increasingly seek graduates with technical skills, critical thinking abilities, and adaptability, which are areas where IHEIs are perceived to lag behind conventional institutions (Ahmad et al., 2021). This misalignment between academic programs and market demands has contributed to the declining appeal of IHEIs among prospective students.

In light of these challenges, it is imperative to investigate the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs and develop strategies to enhance their competitiveness. Addressing these issues is not only crucial for the sustainability of IHEIs but also for preserving their role as centers of Islamic knowledge and moral development in Malaysia.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to explore and analyze the intricate components of its subject matter, aiming to deepen our understanding and contribute meaningful insights to the field.

1. Identify the key factors influencing students' choice of IHEIs.
2. Examine the challenges affecting student enrollment in IHEIs.
3. Propose evidence-based strategies to improve enrollment rates and enhance the competitiveness of IHEIs.

4. Literature Review

In this chapter, we will analyze various theories and discuss how they can be tailored and applied within the context of this study.

4.1 Theoretical Framework: Push-Pull Theory

The Push-Pull Theory, originally developed to explain migration patterns, has been widely applied in educational research to understand student decision-making processes (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the context of higher education, "push" factors refer to the negative aspects of students' current environments that drive them to seek alternatives, while "pull" factors are the positive attributes of a destination institution that attract students (Chen, 2007). For IHEIs in Malaysia, push factors may include dissatisfaction with conventional education systems or a desire for a more values-based education, while pull factors could include the integration of Islamic values, affordable tuition fees, and strong community ties (Hashim et al., 2020).

4.2 Factors Affecting Enrollment in IHEIs

Several key factors influence enrollment trends in institutions of higher education (IHEIs). These include a broad spectrum of influences such as academic quality and reputation, economic conditions, availability of financial aid, institutional prestige, religious and ethical considerations, program accessibility, and the evolving demands of the job market. Moreover, additional factors significantly impact students' enrollment decisions. Understanding these elements is essential for institutions striving to improve their recruitment strategies and adapt effectively to the changing landscape of higher education.

4.2.1 Academic Quality and Reputation

The academic reputation of an institution is a critical factor influencing student enrollment. According to Ahmad et al. (2021), students and parents prioritize institutions with strong accreditation, experienced faculty, and a track record of graduate employability. For IHEIs, maintaining high academic standards while integrating Islamic values is essential to attract students who seek both religious and secular knowledge (Ismail et al., 2022). However, some studies suggest that IHEIs are often perceived as less competitive than conventional universities in terms of academic rigor and global recognition (Razak & Abidin, 2023).

4.2.2 Religious and Ethical Considerations

The integration of Islamic values in education is a defining feature of IHEIs and a significant pull factor for many students. Yusoff et al. (2021) found that students who prioritize religious and ethical development are more likely to choose IHEIs over conventional universities. This is particularly true for students from religiously conservative families who view IHEIs as institutions that align with their moral and spiritual values (Hashim et al., 2020). However, this focus on religious education can also be a double-edged sword, as it may deter students who perceive IHEIs as lacking diversity in academic offerings (Ahmad et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Financial Factors

Affordability plays a crucial role in students' decision-making processes. IHEIs often offer lower tuition fees compared to private universities, making them an attractive option for students from middle- and low-income families (Razak & Abidin, 2023). Additionally, the availability of scholarships and financial aid programs can significantly influence enrollment decisions. However, limited funding and resource constraints often hinder IHEIs from expanding their financial support systems, thereby limiting their ability to attract a broader student base (Hashim et al., 2020).

4.2.4 Parental and Societal Influence

Family and community play a significant role in shaping students' educational choices, particularly in collectivist cultures like Malaysia. Ismail et al. (2022) highlight that parents often act as key decision-makers, encouraging their children to enroll in IHEIs to ensure they receive an education grounded in Islamic values. However, societal perceptions of IHEIs as institutions that primarily cater to religious studies can limit their appeal to students seeking more diverse career opportunities (Yusoff et al., 2021).

4.2.5 Market Demand and Career Prospects

The employability of graduates is a major consideration for students when choosing a higher education institution. While IHEIs have made strides in aligning their curricula with industry needs, there is a lingering perception that their graduates are less competitive in the job market compared to those from conventional universities (Ahmad et al., 2021). This perception is often fueled by a lack of awareness about the diverse career paths available to IHEI graduates, including roles in education, law, and social services (Razak & Abidin, 2023).

4.2.6 Institutional Facilities and Student Life

The quality of campus facilities and student life also influences enrollment decisions. Students are increasingly seeking institutions that offer modern infrastructure, a vibrant campus

environment, and opportunities for extracurricular activities (Hashim et al., 2020). While some IHEIs have invested in improving their facilities, others struggle with limited resources, which can detract from their overall appeal (Ismail et al., 2022).

4.3 Gaps in the Literature

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs, there are notable gaps in the literature. First, few studies have explored the interplay between religious values and career prospects in shaping student decisions. Second, there is limited research on the role of marketing and outreach strategies in enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of IHEIs. Finally, the impact of global trends, such as digital transformation and the rise of online education, on IHEIs remains underexplored. Currently, we are examining additional factors that may influence students' decisions to select an IHEI. We hope that the findings from this study will provide greater clarity on the perceptions that students have when choosing a place to continue their education.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs. The mixed-methods approach allows for the triangulation of data, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This chapter outlines the research design, target population, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

5.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Push-Pull Theory, which provides a framework for understanding the factors influencing student enrollment decisions. Push factors refer to the negative aspects of students' current environments that drive them to seek alternatives, while pull factors are the positive attributes of a destination institution that attract students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the context of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Malaysia, push factors may include dissatisfaction with conventional education systems or societal pressures, while pull factors may include the integration of Islamic values, affordability, and parental influence. This framework will guide the analysis of student motivations and challenges, providing a comprehensive understanding of enrollment trends in IHEIs.

Table 1: Summary of push and pull factors

Factor	Push Factor	Pull Factor
Academic Quality and Reputation	Perception of IHEIs as less competitive academically and globally.	Strong accreditation, experienced faculty, and graduate employability.
Religious and Ethical Considerations	Perception of IHEIs as lacking diversity in academic offerings.	Integration of Islamic values and alignment with moral/spiritual values.
Financial Factors	Limited funding and resource constraints at IHEIs.	Lower tuition fees and availability of scholarships/financial aid.
Parental and Societal Influence	Societal perceptions of IHEIs as catering only to religious studies.	Parental encouragement to pursue education grounded in Islamic values.
Market Demand and Career Prospects	Perception that IHEI graduates are less competitive in the job market.	Alignment of curricula with industry needs and diverse career paths.
Institutional Facilities and Student Life	Limited resources and inadequate facilities at some IHEIs.	Modern infrastructure, vibrant campus environment, and extracurricular activities.

This proposed theoretical framework aims to enhance the clarity with which the study identifies the driving factors influencing the selection of International Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) among prospective students in Malaysia. By establishing a comprehensive analytical structure, the framework seeks to systematically explore the variables that contribute to students' decision-making processes, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of their preferences and motivations within the context of higher education.

5.2 Research Design

The study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, which involves two phases:

- i. Quantitative Phase: A survey is conducted to collect numerical data on student preferences, perceptions, and enrollment decisions.
- ii. Qualitative Phase: In-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) are conducted to explore the underlying reasons behind the quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by IHEIs.

This design allows the researcher to first identify trends and patterns through quantitative data and then explain these trends using qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

5.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study includes:

- i. Secondary school graduates who are in the process of selecting a higher education institution.
- ii. Current students enrolled in IHEIs and conventional universities.
- iii. Parents of prospective and current students.
- iv. Policymakers and administrators from IHEIs and the Ministry of Higher Education.

A stratified random sampling technique will be used to ensure representation across different demographics, such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, and educational background. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling will be employed to select participants who can provide rich and relevant insights into the research questions.

5.4 Data Collection Methods

5.4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

- Survey Questionnaire:
A structured questionnaire will be developed based on the factors identified in the literature review (e.g., academic quality, religious considerations, financial factors). The questionnaire will be distributed online to reach a wider audience and ensure convenience for respondents.
- Sample Size:
A minimum of 300 respondents will be targeted to ensure statistical significance.

5.4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

- In-Depth Interviews:
Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including students, parents, and policymakers. The interviews will focus on exploring the motivations, challenges, and perceptions related to enrollment in IHEIs.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):
FGDs will be conducted with groups of students and parents to gather diverse perspectives and foster interactive discussions.

- **Sample Size:**
Approximately 10–15 participants will be included in the qualitative phase.

5.5 Data Analysis

This study proposes a comprehensive data analysis methodology designed to encompass all relevant aspects and effectively identify problems associated with interconnected issues. In this context, Mixmode has been identified as a particularly suitable tool for conducting such an analysis, given its capabilities in addressing complex data relationships and uncovering insights that may not be readily apparent through traditional analytical approaches.

5.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation) will be used to summarize the survey data.

Inferential statistics (e.g., correlation analysis, regression analysis) will be employed to examine relationships between variables, such as the influence of financial factors on enrollment decisions. Statistical software such as SPSS or STATA will be used for data analysis.

5.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the interview and FGD transcripts. NVivo or similar software will be used to assist in coding and organizing qualitative data.

The findings will be interpreted in the context of the research objectives and the existing literature.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to ethical research practices, including:

- i. Obtaining informed consent from all participants.
- ii. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.
- iii. Providing participants with the right to withdraw from the study at any time.
- iv. Seeking approval from relevant ethics review boards before data collection.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

The study's findings may be limited by the self-reported nature of survey data, which can be subject to bias. The geographic scope of the study is limited to Malaysia, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. The qualitative phase relies on purposive sampling, which may limit the diversity of perspectives.

6. Expected Outcomes

This study is expected to yield significant insights into the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs, the challenges these institutions face, and potential strategies to enhance their attractiveness. The outcomes are organized into three key areas: motivations behind enrollment, challenges affecting enrollment, and policy recommendations.

6.1 Insights into Motivations Behind Enrollment

The study is expected to reveal the primary motivations driving students to choose IHEIs over conventional universities. Based on the literature review, these motivations are likely to include:

- **Religious and Ethical Considerations:** Students and parents who prioritize Islamic values and moral development are expected to favor IHEIs (Yusoff et al., 2021).

- **Affordability:** The lower tuition fees and availability of scholarships at IHEIs are anticipated to be significant pull factors, particularly for students from middle- and low-income families (Razak & Abidin, 2023).
- **Parental and Societal Influence:** The role of family and community in shaping educational choices is expected to emerge as a key factor, especially in Malaysia's collectivist culture (Ismail et al., 2022).

These findings will provide a deeper understanding of the unique value proposition of IHEIs and help institutions tailor their offerings to meet the needs of their target audience.

6.2 Identification of Challenges Affecting Enrollment

The study is also expected to identify the major challenges hindering student enrollment in IHEIs. These challenges may include:

- **Perception Issues:** Misconceptions about the relevance and employability of IHEI graduates in the modern job market are likely to be a recurring theme (Ahmad et al., 2021).
- **Competition from Conventional Universities:** The study may highlight the need for IHEIs to differentiate themselves from conventional institutions by emphasizing their unique strengths, such as the integration of Islamic values with modern education (Hashim et al., 2020).
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited funding and infrastructure may emerge as barriers to improving academic quality and student life, thereby affecting enrollment rates (Razak & Abidin, 2023).

By identifying these challenges, the study will provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions to address the barriers to enrollment.

6.3 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study will propose evidence-based strategies to enhance the attractiveness of IHEIs. These recommendations may include:

- **Curriculum Modernization:** Updating academic programs to align with industry needs and global trends, while maintaining a strong focus on Islamic values.
- **Enhanced Marketing and Outreach:** Developing robust marketing strategies to raise awareness about the diverse academic offerings and career prospects available to IHEI graduates.
- **Financial Support Systems:** Expanding scholarship programs and financial aid options to make IHEIs more accessible to students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.
- **Partnerships with Industry:** Collaborating with employers and industry stakeholders to improve graduate employability and address perceptions about the relevance of IHEI programs.

These recommendations will provide actionable insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators, enabling them to make informed decisions that enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of IHEIs.

6.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in several ways:

- It will provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs, filling gaps in the literature related to the interplay between religious values and career prospects.

- It will offer new insights into the challenges faced by IHEIs in a rapidly changing higher education landscape, particularly in the context of globalization and digital transformation.
- It will propose innovative strategies to improve enrollment rates, which can serve as a model for other Islamic higher education institutions globally.

6.5 Implications for Practice

The findings of this study will have practical implications for IHEIs, policymakers, and stakeholders in the higher education sector. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the motivations identified in the study, IHEIs can enhance their appeal to prospective students and strengthen their position in the competitive higher education market. Additionally, the study's recommendations can inform national policies aimed at supporting the growth and development of IHEIs in Malaysia.

7. Conclusion

The enrollment trends at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Malaysia are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including academic quality, religious and ethical considerations, financial affordability, parental and societal influence, market demand, and institutional facilities. While IHEIs have historically played a vital role in integrating Islamic values with modern education, they face significant challenges in maintaining and increasing student enrollment. These challenges include intense competition from conventional universities, misconceptions about the relevance of Islamic education, and limited resources for infrastructure and financial aid.

This study has sought to explore the motivations behind student enrollment in IHEIs, identify the barriers to enrollment, and propose strategies to enhance the attractiveness of these institutions. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping student decisions and offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and educators. The expected outcomes of the study include insights into the key motivations driving enrollment, identification of the challenges IHEIs face, and evidence-based strategies to improve enrollment rates.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing the unique needs and preferences of students while maintaining the core mission of IHEIs as centers of Islamic knowledge and moral development. To remain competitive in the evolving higher education landscape, IHEIs must modernize their curricula, enhance their marketing and outreach efforts, expand financial support systems, and forge partnerships with industry stakeholders. These reforms will not only improve enrollment rates but also ensure that IHEIs continue to produce graduates who are both academically competent and grounded in Islamic values.

In conclusion, understanding and addressing the factors influencing student enrollment in IHEIs is crucial for their sustainability and growth. As Malaysia continues to position itself as a global education hub, IHEIs must adapt to the changing needs of students and the demands of the job market. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this study, IHEIs can strengthen their position in the higher education sector and continue to contribute to the nation's development and the global Muslim community. This study serves as a call to action for all stakeholders to work collaboratively towards the revitalization and growth of Islamic higher education in Malaysia.

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