

# Level of Students' Retention Among International Students: Is Gender and Level of Study Make a Difference?

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**Abstract:** *The study aims to identify to what extent integrated factors influence students' retention. The research was conducted at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). The sample consists of 112 postgraduate students at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). The construct of retention factors measured is Islamic culture and the environment, psychological and health care services, community engagement and personality development, academic qualifications, university administration, and quality of life. The instrument was delivered to the respondents to obtain the data and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data obtained. In terms of instrument reliability, a high-reliability value was revealed for all retention factors which are greater than 0.7. The difference between the two groups in the aspect of gender and the academic level was analyzed by an independent sample t-test. The results show that there is a significant difference in the academic level of postgraduate and undergraduate for all retention factors while no significant difference was found in terms of gender difference for all retention factors. The result also showed that the students have a positive opinion on the aspect of the Islamic environment, teaching effectiveness, and the quality of life on the IIUM campus. Meanwhile, the lower mean scores in psychological and health care services and university administration aspects implied that the students less favor the services of psychological needs and health care in IIUM as well as they have a low opinion in terms of the administration of IIUM.*

**Keywords:** Islamic perspective, Retention factor, university students, education

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a growing interest in exploring student retention in the educational context over the past decades due to the sizeable transformation of students from a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds in higher education (Crosling, 2020). It used to be the responsibility of the students themselves to make sure they complete their studies and make it to the finishing line when the student profile was homogenous in higher education. Now, the responsibility is shared among students and higher education institutions (Crosling, 2020). Furthermore, it is also costly to the institutions when students are dropping out from their studies – not just to the students themselves or their families.

The United States, despite being one of the most advanced nations in education is facing student retention problems with 60% of students who enrolled in a 4-year bachelor's degree program in 2010 ended up their degree in 6 years, instead (Owolabi, 2018).

Throughout the research period, although student retention is more commonly used now, the study of student retention before was used in a negative connotation such as student withdrawal, student attrition or dropouts (Tight, 2019). Numerous studies have attempted to explain the reasons that influence student retention. A lot of the studies are review of literature on student retention and these have shown that there are recurring themes that contribute to student retention.

The academic review of literature on student retention in higher education has evolved from just evaluating the theories from sociology, anthropology, and human resources during the early research study on student retention to more comprehensive theories on human beings including physiological, psychological, sociological, cultural, organization, environmental, interactional and even economic views (Aljohani, 2016).

A great deal of previous research into student retention in higher education has focused on institutional factors (Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Thomas, 2002) as one of the huge determinants for student retention. Aljohani (2016) reported that the quality of the students' institutional experience is among the primary factors in the major student retention models.

The accessibility for support such as academic literacy in nursing schools is significant to retaining students in school. Those who received support through programs such as professional communication and academic literacy were found to achieve a higher GPA and were 7 times more likely to remain in their program (Glew et al., 2019). A similar study by Shelton, (2003) among nursing students has also found that students were more likely to endure to completion of their studies when they received faculty support.

Previous studies have failed to demonstrate a one-shoe-fits-all factor that is the definite causal effect of student retention as there are many factors contributing to why a student decides to drop out or leaves school. As the factors contributing to student retention can be extensive, researchers would usually classify the factors into a different central category to further explain the sub-factors. Bowles and Brindle (2017) separated the factors into situational, dispositional, and institutional, Aljohani (2016) divided them into personal, academic, social, and institutional while Thomas (2002) argued that diversity and funding are two major categories that affect student retention.

Diversity may be seen as one of the major components at schools that enroll students worldwide such as schools in England (Thomas, 2002). The willingness of an institution to embrace diversity is associated with the student's sense of belonging and that they are worthy and welcomed at that school. To date, several studies revealed a correlation between a sense of belonging and student retention (Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Boyd et al., 2020; Owolabi, 2018; Sass et al., 2018). A sense of community (Boyd et al., 2020) which is a subcontract of belonging plays a role in making the student feel connected to the professors and college (Thomas et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing concern on student retention in higher education and many researchers have classified the factors that may contribute to student retention, there exists a lack of holistic approaches to researching the student experience (Tight, 2019). A holistic student experience

should at least include the psychosocial, cognitive abilities, cultural background, socioeconomic, social engagement, and institutional responsibilities aspects.

The importance of examining student retention and minimizing the factors that directly or indirectly influence student dropouts is undeniably paramount. As such, with the current advancement in research, it is even now possible for higher education institutions to predict student dropout at an accuracy rate of more than 80% and false-positive rates between 10 to 15% (Palacios et al., 2021).

A number of authors have considered the factors of sense of belonging or sense of community (a sub-contract) of belonging to be a significant determinant in student retention (Boyd et al., 2020; Owolabi, 2018). However, this study will integrate the existing constructs with an Islamic perspective. Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify to what extent Islamic culture and the environment, psychological and health care services, community engagement and personality development, academic qualifications, university administration, and quality of life have been attractive to students in an international Islamic university in Malaysia. In addition, the researchers explore the role of gender and level of students study toward retention factors.

## **2. Methods**

This research was purposely done to explore the student retention factor from students' perspectives. The sample of this study involved 112 postgraduate students of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). All respondents are international students who come from other countries to come to study in Malaysia. Instead of the students' aspect, the retention factors in this study are more focused on the institutional aspect. The construct of retention factors measured is Islamic culture and the environment, psychological and health care services, community engagement and personality development, academic qualifications, university administration, and quality of life. Table 1 shows the constructs overview for the retention factor.

Instrument validation was made by some experts in the field and was validated with an empirical test at a university. SPSS software was used to obtain the instrument's reliability as well as its validation. The result of the analysis shows a high-reliability value of Islamic culture and the environment, psychological and health care services, community engagement and personality development, academic qualifications, university administration, and quality of life which are greater than 0.7. Finally, the filtering for questions and questionnaire items was made to be used in this study.

The instrument was delivered to the respondents to obtain the data. The students' data which consists of postgraduate and undergraduate students were collected at the university. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data obtained. The result of the analysis is shown in the form of a mean score. In order to find out the differences between gender and academic level differences in retention factors, an independent sample t-test was used to see the existence of significant differences between the groups.

**Table 1**

No.	Construct of retention factor	Items	Range score	Min	Max
1	Islamic culture and the environment ICE	7	1-5	1	5
2	Psychological and health care services	4	1-5	1	5
3	Academic qualifications	4	1-5	1	5
4	University administration	5	1-5	1	5
5	Quality of life	3	1-5	1	5

From this table, it shows that all of the constructs using the agreement Likert scale where Islamic culture and the environment ICE have 7 items, psychological and health care services (4 items), academic qualifications (4 items), university administration (4 items), and quality of life (3 items).

### 3. Result and Discussion

For each construct, the underlying items were averaged to form mean scale scores. It is evident from Table 2 that three constructs exceed 3.5 in mean score which are Islamic culture and the environment ICE (3.83), academic qualifications (3.64), and quality of life (3.54). This means that all the respondents have a positive opinion on the aspect of the Islamic environment, teaching effectiveness, and the quality of life on the IIUM campus.

**Table 2**

No.	Construct of retention factor	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Islamic culture and the environment ICE	112	3.83	0.65
2	psychological and health care services	112	3.41	0.82
3	academic qualifications	112	3.64	0.83
4	university administration	112	3.36	0.75
5	quality of life	112	3.54	1.02

The highest mean score in the Islamic culture aspect implied that the university succeeded in nurturing and displaying Islamic practice inside the campus. This indirectly influences the student retention rates in IIUM. In this research, the term “academic qualification can be referred to as the quality of academics in the teaching and learning aspect inside IIUM. The positive response from the respondents in the academic qualification construct implied that there is effectiveness in the teaching and learning process inside IIUM which led to the increase in the student retention rates. This was supported by Jottler (2020) who discovered that the academic factor is a strong mediator in student retention. Moreover, Haverila et al. (2020) emphasize that learning institutions should give more attention to taking high-quality instructors for teaching and learning sessions to increase the students’ retention rate. The result of this study also implied that the life quality inside IIUM is fit enough for the learning environment as there is a feeling of security and comfort for the students to study at IIUM. The finding from Crossling (2017) stated that institutional factors facilitate improving the students retention. Besides, a study on nontraditional community college students by Haynie (2019) discovered that academic counseling and student services as the institutional factor led to the students’ graduation and retention.

In contrast, the two other constructs having lower mean scores which are psychological and health care services (3.41), as well as university administration (3.36). This showed that the respondents do not favor the services of psychological needs and health care in IIUM and they also have a low opinion in terms of the administration of IIUM. The lowest mean score in the

administration aspect interpreted that there is something that needs to be improved in administration inside IIUM. According to Thomas (2002), staff attitude is a part of the criteria from student perspectives in order to improve the student retention rate. Furthermore, Shelton (2003) emphasizes that a caring atmosphere is crucial in promoting the students' retention.

**Table 3: Independent sample t-test**

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	Sig
Islamic culture	Undergraduate	32	3.31	.69	-6.18	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	4.04	.51		
Health care services	Undergraduate	32	2.97	.90	-3.49	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	3.60	.72		
Community engagement	Undergraduate	32	3.15	.76	-3.56	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	3.65	.63		
Academic qualification	Undergraduate	32	2.98	.96	-5.02	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	3.90	.60		
University administration	Undergraduate	32	3.03	.83	-3.10	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	3.50	.67		
Quality of life	Undergraduate	32	2.97	1.17	-3.52	0.00
	Postgraduate	80	3.77	.86		

P≤.05

An independent sample t-test was executed to make the comparison between undergraduate and postgraduate respondents with regard to their scores in the students' retention factors. From the result in Table 3, it can be interpreted that there is a significant difference in scores between undergraduate and postgraduate students in all factors, which are Islamic culture ( $t = -6.18, p = 0.00$ ), health care services ( $t = -3.49, p = 0.00$ ), community engagement ( $t = -3.56, p = 0.00$ ), academic qualification ( $t = -5.02, p = 0.00$ ), university administration ( $t = -3.10, p = 0.00$ ) and quality of life ( $t = -3.52, p = 0.00$ ). Therefore, it can be said that all the student retention factors give more influence to postgraduate students as compared to undergraduate students.

**Table 4: Independent sample t-test**

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	Sig
Islamic culture	Male	72	3.80	.70	-0.74	0.46
	Female	40	3.90	.56		
Health care services	Male	72	3.43	.84	0.30	0.76
	Female	40	3.38	.80		
Community engagement	Male	72	3.51	.72	0.07	0.94
	Female	40	3.50	.69		
Academic qualification	Male	72	3.60	.90	-0.68	0.50
	Female	40	3.71	.681		
University administration	Male	72	3.38	.80	-0.20	0.84
	Female	40	3.34	.65		
Quality of life	Male	72	3.50	1.03	-0.51	0.61
	Female	40	3.61	1.02		

P≤.05

Table 4.2 demonstrated the result of the independent sample t-test concerning the gender difference in the students' retention factors. From the table, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between male and female students in all the retention factors in this study.

#### 4. Conclusion

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is a unique university with a multi-nationality of students that is built based on the Islamic perspective and environment. The students come from more than 100 countries around the world with great academic expectations. In this study, the result shows that there is a significant difference in academic level which indicated that the retention factor gives more influence on postgraduate students as compared to undergraduate students. Besides, the result also showed the highest mean score factor that influences student retention goes to the Islamic culture aspect with 3.83. This indicated that the university succeeded in nurturing and displaying the Islamic practice inside the campus which aligned with the purpose of its building. In terms of the academic qualification aspect, the high mean score implied that there is a good learning environment with high-quality instruction inside the university which lead to an increase in the students' retention rates. The result of this study also implied that the life quality inside IIUM is at an adequate level so that students can study comfortably with high satisfaction which also contributes to increasing the rate of students' retention. However, the low mean score in psychological needs and health care, as well as the administration aspect, indicated that there is some lacking most probably in terms of social interaction of staff that need to be put attention so that the students' retention rate can be improved. Finally, the results show that there is a significant difference in the academic level of postgraduate and undergraduate for all retention factors while no significant difference was found in terms of gender difference for all retention factors

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