
International Journal of Management, Finance and Accounting

Understanding the Happiness Journey of International Students Through Maslow's Lens: A Qualitative Study Beyond Academics

Kyra Law Ley Sy^{1*}

¹Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: kyalaw@mmu.edu.my (ORCID:0000-0001-7034-5002)

Abstract

This research investigates the factors contributing to happiness among international students at a Malaysian university through a qualitative, semi-structured questionnaire administered to 10 students (5 female and 5 male) from nine countries. Four key themes emerged, aligning with Maslow's Hierarchy: 1) Personal Achievement and Academic Fulfillment- happiness derived from educational success and career progress; 2) Social Connection and Belonging- the importance of relationships and cultural integration; 3) Health and Environmental Comfort- adaptation to climate and living conditions; and 4) Internal Reflection and Emotional Regulation- the impact of mindset and coping mechanisms on overall happiness. The research demonstrates that international student happiness is multidimensional, influenced by factors ranging from basic physiological needs to self-actualisation, consistent with Maslow's framework. Educational institutions can utilise these findings to enhance support services, foster inclusive environments, and develop targeted interventions that address the unique needs of international students. This holistic understanding of international student happiness contributes valuable insights for improving the overall educational experience and well-being of diverse student populations in Malaysian institutions.

Keywords: Social, Emotional, Well-being, International Students, Qualitative Analysis



International Journal of Management, Finance and Accounting

Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2026) <https://doi.org/10.33093/ijomfa.2026.7.1.8>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International License.

© University Telekom Sdn. Bhd.

Published by MMU PRESS. URL <https://journals.mmupress.com/ijomfa>



Received on 24 April 2025; Accepted on 1 July 2025; Published on 28 February 2026

To cite this article: Law, K. L S. (2026). Understanding the happiness journey of international students through Maslow's lens: A qualitative study beyond academics. *International Journal of Management, Finance and Accounting*, 7(1), 221-247. <https://doi.org/10.33093/ijomfa.2026.7.1.8>

1.0 Introduction

The globalisation of higher education has led to a significant increase in student mobility across international borders (Sidhu et al., 2021). Malaysia has emerged as a prominent educational hub in Southeast Asia, attracting thousands of international students annually due to its quality education, affordable tuition fees, cultural diversity, and strategic location (IESCO Team, 2024). With the increasing enrolment of international students in Malaysian institutions, a comprehensive understanding of their happiness and well-being has become essential for educational institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders. Happiness is a multidimensional construct encompassing various facets of the human experience, including emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and psychological functioning (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). International students encounter obstacles to happiness as they negotiate unfamiliar cultures, academic institutions, and social contexts without the support of their home communities. Students' happiness has a significant impact on academic achievement, retention rates, mental health outcomes, and overall educational experiences (Leung et al., 2021). However, the current literature lacks substantial research into the unique elements of pleasure among international students in Malaysian higher education.

This study addresses a key research gap by examining the happiness experiences of international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. The study provides nuanced insights into pleasure in cross-cultural educational settings by examining the diverse living experiences of students from various cultural backgrounds. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs serves as the theoretical foundation, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how diverse human needs, ranging from basic physiological requirements to sophisticated self-actualisation aspirations, influence motivation and satisfaction in this educational setting. This research is valuable beyond academic inquiry because it provides practical insights that educational institutions can employ to improve support services, optimise campus environments, and develop targeted interventions to suit the requirements of international students. Furthermore, the findings can inform policy development at the institutional and national levels, potentially boosting Malaysia's position as a desirable global education destination.

Hence, this study employs a qualitative approach to gather diverse perspectives and experiences from individuals from nine countries (Kaur & Law, 2025). The study employs a semi-structured questionnaire and rigorous thematic analysis to identify primary dimensions of happiness corresponding to Maslow's hierarchy, highlighting the complex interdependence of individual needs, cultural backgrounds, and institutional environments in determining the happiness of international students.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 International Student Mobility and the Malaysian Context

The internationalisation of higher education is a distinguishing element of today's global education trends. More than 5.3 million students studied internationally, representing a roughly 50 per cent increase over the preceding decade (UNESCO, 2019). This extraordinary student mobility has prompted adjustments in educational institutions worldwide, necessitating new instructional techniques, support services, and cultural changes on campus. Malaysia has taken a strategic position in the global education industry by enacting comprehensive policies to develop the country as a regional education centre. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 states that the government intends to recruit 250,000 international students by 2025, reflecting the country's strong commitment to the internationalisation of education (Kaur & Law, 2025).

The Malaysian higher education industry exhibits distinct characteristics that significantly impact international student experiences. Malaysia has several competitive advantages, including low college costs, the use of English as the teaching language, a multicultural environment, political stability, and strategic geographic proximity to major Asian markets (Hashim, 2024; Rahman et al., 2018). These features have contributed to Malaysia becoming the world's 11th most popular destination for international students (Thoo et al., 2022). Malaysia's international student population is diverse, with students from the Middle East, China, Indonesia, Africa, South Asia, and

Central Asia. This diverse mix creates a complex, multicultural environment within Malaysia's educational institutions.

Over the past decade, the experiences of international students at Malaysian universities have undergone significant growth. Initial research focused on practical adjustment obstacles, such as language limitations, academic gaps, and cultural adaptability (Cao, 2024). As the study area evolved, more subtle elements of student experiences emerged. Studies on acculturative stress among international students found that cultural remoteness strongly predicted adjustment difficulties (Koo et al., 2021). The coping techniques of international students vary significantly depending on their nationality and cultural background. The association between institutional support services and international student happiness has shown that thorough orientation programs, language assistance, and cultural integration activities improve student experiences significantly (Ammigan & Drexler, 2022). Despite the growing literature on educational experiences, international student satisfaction in Malaysian institutions remains very low. Current research has focused mainly on measuring educational service satisfaction rather than overall well-being. As Khalifa et al. (2021) noted, while service satisfaction is a significant aspect of the student experience, it is only one facet of total pleasure. This significant study is an important opportunity to gain a more thorough and nuanced understanding of international student happiness, particularly in the Context of Malaysian higher education.

2.2 Conceptualising Happiness in Higher Education

In recent years, the concept of happiness in educational contexts has undergone significant evolution, shifting away from basic satisfaction measures toward more comprehensive notions of well-being (Norozzi, 2023). Evaluations of student satisfaction concentrated on specific components of academic services, such as course quality, facilities, and administrative assistance (Alsheyadi & Albalushi, 2020). Bakracheva (2020) provides a comprehensive definition of happiness that incorporates three key components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and eudaimonic well-being. The components enable educators to understand a more nuanced context for measuring

international student satisfaction, as several elements have a substantial impact on students' well-being. Academic components, such as teaching quality, learning environments, and assessment techniques, are equally important.

The social dimension is another important component of students' satisfaction. Friendship network with local students is favourably correlated with subjective well-being (Alsarrani et al., 2022). Environmental variables significantly impact students' satisfaction, with lodging quality, university facilities, and community safety all playing vital roles (Zaman & Hosain, 2024). Cultural integration appears to be important for international students, as it involves the establishment of a harmonious fusion between their home culture and the host culture (Lee & Kim, 2021). International students often form inaccurate expectations based on insufficient pre-arrival knowledge, which contributes to initial adjustment challenges and a decreased enjoyment of their experience (Mohamed, 2020). This research emphasises the necessity of educational institutions providing accurate pre-arrival information to help students form reasonable expectations for their educational experiences.

2.3 Underpinning Theory

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offers insight into the complex nature of international students' satisfaction in educational contexts. The model has been widely applied in various sectors since 1943, including education, psychology, and human resource management (Navy, 2020). Maslow's hierarchical system divides human needs into several levels, starting with physiological needs at the bottom and progressing to safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualisation at the top (Boltvinik, 2023). This paradigm provides valuable insights into the various facets of international students' experiences, with each level representing a unique component of the student experience.

At the most basic level, physiological demands include access to good nutrition, adequate shelter, sufficient sleep, and suitable learning environments. International students studying in Malaysia often face challenges related to these demands, particularly

during their initial transition phase. Dietary adaptation is a significant challenge, as students transitioning to Malaysian cuisine often struggle to find familiar food alternatives or adjust to local culinary offerings (Mohamed, 2020). Housing quality is another important aspect that determines student satisfaction, with difficulties including inadequate amenities, high noise levels, and inconvenient distances from campus, all of which are detrimental to overall happiness (Xu et al., 2020). Environmental adaptation also poses a physiological difficulty, as many international students must adjust to Malaysia's tropical environment, which differs significantly from their home countries and may impair sleep habits and overall comfort (Mohamed, 2020).

Financial, physical, and psychological security are all aspects of safety. Financial problems are among the most pressing issues for international students in Malaysia, with many expressing concerns about tuition costs, living expenses, and currency rate volatility (Elfaki et al., 2023). Health issues are another significant consideration, as international students often express concerns about the availability, quality, and affordability of healthcare (Men et al., 2024). Furthermore, students' views of campus security and neighbourhood safety affect their psychological comfort and, as a result, happiness. International students often perceive Malaysian campuses as safe locations, but concerns may arise about off-campus safety, particularly in metropolitan areas (Lee et al., 2022).

Belongingness and love must be linked to social ties, cultural integration, and fulfilling relationships. Social support networks have a significant impact on the adjustment and contentment of international students (Shu et al., 2020). Connecting with local students and other international students provides emotional support and facilitates cultural adjustment. However, language limitations impede social integration for many international students in Malaysia (Singh & Jack, 2022). Communication techniques, societal conventions, and relationship expectations can vary significantly among cultures, making it challenging to establish social connections. Furthermore, homesickness and separation from family pose substantial obstacles to emotional well-being, with technology-connectedness somewhat alleviating but not removing these issues. Academic achievement is a significant source of pride for international students, as it confirms their decision to study abroad and enhances their future employment

opportunities. Academic acknowledgement and performance provide great happiness for international students at Malaysian universities (Deni et al., 2021).

Some international students describe being marginalised or treated differently because of their country, race, or religious affiliation (Tavares, 2024). These experiences can substantially influence students' sense of belonging and psychological well-being in their current educational setting. International students who consider their school experience to be truly transformative and closely tied to their personal beliefs are happier and more satisfied (Bui et al., 2021). Developing cross-cultural competence, independence, and a global viewpoint contributes significantly to self-actualisation. As international students navigate new cultural contexts, they often develop stronger intercultural skills and broader worldviews, which benefit both personal growth and future professional aspirations. Academic inquiry, intellectual stimulation, and the pursuit of passionate interests significantly improve this satisfaction component among international students (Al-Desouki et al., 2024). Furthermore, Chong et al. (2022) demonstrate that international students who participate in significant research projects, community service initiatives, or artistic endeavours report feeling more fulfilled and purposeful throughout their academic journey. Thus, applying Maslow's hierarchy to examine the experiences of international students highlights the interconnectedness of various elements that contribute to overall pleasure and well-being.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed an online semi-structured questionnaire that combined both structured and flexible aspects to extract valuable content from a diverse group of respondents. This hybrid technique combines planned questions with adjustable conversation flow, allowing researchers to perform in-depth subject investigations based on participant responses. Semi-structured questionnaires are a methodologically sound strategy that is extensively used in various fields, including the social sciences, market research, education, and healthcare (Pitura, 2023). This methodology provides researchers with balanced support combining methodological rigour and adaptive flexibility.

3.1 Respondent Profiles

The research employed purposive sampling to recruit 10 participants from a private higher education institution in Malaysia, gathering relevant data. The respondent group comprised five females and five males. The selection criteria included participants between 19 and 21 years of age who were enrolled in a higher learning institution, possessed English communication skills, and participated in virtual classes. All respondents were assigned pseudonyms. The demographic composition of the participant group is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Nationality
F1	Female	Egypt
F2	Female	China
F3	Female	Pakistan
F4	Female	Kenya
F5	Female	Tanzania
M1	Male	China
M2	Male	Taiwan
M3	Male	Maldives
M4	Male	Mauritius
M5	Male	Indonesia

3.2 Data Collection Method

As a data collection method, the online semi-structured questionnaire combines elements of both structured and unstructured approaches. It is particularly suited for qualitative research, where the aim is to gather in-depth insights into the social and emotional well-being of international students. In this study, online semi-structured questionnaires were administered to 10 participants. All the data were recorded, and the information gathered was put together for analysis purposes.

3.3 Data Analysis

In this study, a thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected. Once data is collected, it is analysed qualitatively. Thematic analysis often identifies patterns, themes, or trends in the participants' responses. Since participants' responses are open-ended, interpretation involves identifying recurring themes and understanding the deeper meaning behind the responses. In this study, thematic analysis is used. Thematic analysis involves six key steps (Braun & Clarke, 2021): First, the researcher familiarises themselves with the data through repeated reading and initial note-taking. Second, generate initial codes by systematically identifying interesting features across the dataset. Third, search for themes by collating codes into potential patterns. Fourth, review themes by checking if they work at both the coded extract and the entire dataset levels. Fifth, define and name themes by refining specifics and generating clear definitions. Sixth, produce the report by selecting vivid examples and relating the analysis to the research questions. This iterative process moves from raw data to meaningful patterns and interpretations.

To reach the data saturation point, it becomes noticeable when the themes, patterns, or codes start to repeat. Data saturation is achieved when sufficient information has been gathered to allow replication of the study, no new insights or data can be obtained, and no further meaningful coding is possible (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this research, code or thematic saturation is reached when repeated codes or themes are consistently observed during data analysis, with no further information or new connections between them emerging. Thus, two main themes were identified, along with five sub-themes, to elaborate on the insights necessary to achieve data saturation.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This study examines the lived experiences of international students studying in Malaysia, with a focus on the factors that influence their sense of happiness. Based on thematic analysis, four major themes emerged, each encompassing a variety of influences on emotional well-being (Table 2, Figure 1).

Table 2: Summary of Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Personal Achievement and Academic Fulfilment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Accomplishment Through Academic Success • Motivation Driven by Future Aspirations and Family Expectations
Social Connection and Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Support from Family and Friends • Community Engagement and Acts of Kindness
Health and Environmental Comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of Physical and Mental Well-being • Influence of Living and Study Environments
Internal Reflection and Emotional Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness and Coping Strategies • Balancing Internal and External Pressures

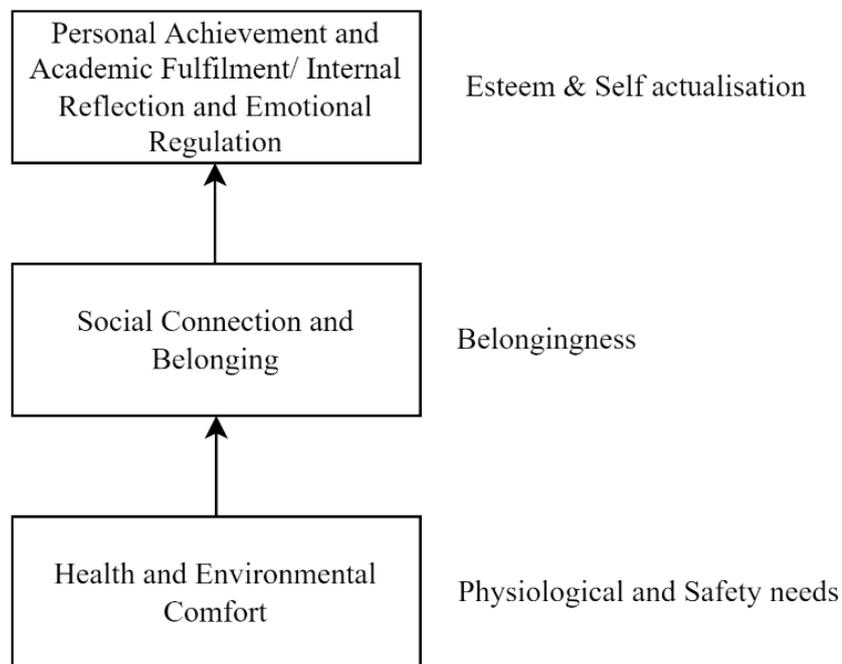


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework with Underpinning Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy

4.1 Theme 1: Personal Achievement and Academic Fulfilment

Academic success is a fundamental contributor to international students' happiness in Malaysian institutions. The research findings demonstrate that students derive significant

psychological benefits from achieving academic milestones, including enhanced self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. Participants consistently identified strong performance in examinations, timely completion of assignments, and mastery of complex course content as key sources of happiness.

Several factors affect my happiness, the first being my personal and academic accomplishments. This is a main factor that affects my happiness because I believe it to be one of the most important goals in my life currently. (F1)

The data indicates that academic achievement validates students' capabilities and justifies their decision to pursue international education. This validation is particularly significant given the additional challenges faced by international students, including language barriers and adapting to unfamiliar educational systems. As students overcome these obstacles, they experience a heightened sense of accomplishment that enhances their emotional well-being. Self-discipline and practical time management skills further augment this relationship between achievement and happiness. Students who successfully establish productive study routines report greater confidence in their academic capabilities and future professional prospects. This forward-looking perspective transforms current academic efforts into meaningful investments in long-term goals, creating a sustained source of motivation and satisfaction throughout their educational journey in Malaysia.

4.1.1 Sense of Accomplishment Through Academic Success

Academic achievement represents a fundamental source of happiness for international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. Students consistently report that successful academic performance generates significant psychological benefits, including enhanced self-esteem, confidence, and overall life satisfaction. The challenging assignments, examinations, and course requirements produce a profound sense of accomplishment that directly contributes to happiness.

My happiness is my sense of accomplishment and pride when I can understand a difficult concept or get a good grade for a subject. (F1)

This achievement-happiness relationship manifests particularly strongly when students overcome academic obstacles. International students face unique challenges, including language barriers, unfamiliar educational systems, and adaptation to different teaching methodologies. When they successfully navigate these difficulties and demonstrate academic proficiency, the resulting sense of mastery provides substantial emotional rewards. One student participant noted that earning high marks after struggling with complex material delivered “*the greatest satisfaction.*”

Another factor that affects my happiness is how I feel about what I am learning. If I think that what I am learning does not interest me or is something I do not believe in, it will be challenging to learn about the material. On the other hand, if I think what I am learning is exciting and essential, it will be much easier to understand the information and learn the material. (M4)

The happiness derived from academic success extends beyond immediate fulfilment to reinforce students’ sense of academic identity and belonging. For many international students, academic accomplishment validates their decision to pursue education abroad, confirming their capabilities within competitive academic environments. This validation strengthens their commitment to educational goals and enhances overall psychological well-being. Furthermore, academic success creates a positive feedback loop, with achievement-based happiness increasing motivation, which in turn facilitates additional academic success.

4.1.2 Motivation Driven by Future Aspirations and Family Expectations

International students attending Malaysian institutions identify career advancement as a primary driver of their educational pursuits. These students approach their academic experience as a deliberate investment in their professional future, establishing a direct connection between their current academic efforts and anticipated long-term career outcomes.

Expectations of the future - Everyone wants a bright future including me. Sometimes I was confused about the future and thought a lot of things. I felt uneasy and stressed. But

more often I knew who am I and what I should do. I think the knowledge and skills I have learned will give me more opportunities in the future. This high expectation of the future made me feel happier. (F2)

The data reveals that students maintain specific professional visions, whether establishing businesses in their home countries, securing positions with multinational corporations, or pursuing advanced academic credentials, that serve as powerful motivational anchors. These aspirations create a framework through which present difficulties are recontextualised as worthwhile sacrifices for future benefits, enhancing resilience during challenging academic periods. Family expectations constitute another significant motivational dimension. A few international students feel a sense of responsibility to honour financial and emotional family investments in their education. Making family members proud through academic accomplishments represents a powerful source of happiness and fulfilment. This motivation often carries cultural significance, particularly for students from collectivistic societies where educational achievement reflects positively on the entire family unit.

They have given me the need to make my parents and family proud and give back to them. Therefore, any source of accomplishment, academic or personal, highly affects my happiness. (F1)

I am in contact with my friends and family even though we cannot meet physically, and I am just sharing stories of how their day went by. (F5)

It affects how I process my negative emotions into positive ones to empower and further teach me to be a better person and shape my personality. (M5)

The intersection of personal aspirations and family expectations creates a robust motivational basis that sustains academic engagement and contributes significantly to student happiness, aligning with the esteem and self-actualisation levels of Maslow's hierarchy.

4.2 Social Connection and Belonging

Social relationships represent a fundamental pillar of human happiness and well-being. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals who maintain strong interpersonal connections report significantly higher life satisfaction and emotional resilience. Quality friendships provide companionship, validation, understanding, and opportunities for personal growth. Family relationships offer stability and unconditional support during challenging periods, even when maintained across distances. Community engagement further enhances happiness by fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

Being able to not stress out during my work and using the Pomodoro technique have aided me. This technique makes me happy because I can juggle completing my work and having free time. I can meet all deadlines and have a social life, which delighted me. (F4)

4.2.1 Emotional Support from Family and Friends

Regular communication with family members and meaningful connections with peers were vital emotional anchors for students navigating academic pressures and personal challenges. The family connections offered stability and unconditional encouragement when facing academic setbacks or personal difficulties. Simultaneously, peer relationships fostered a sense of belonging through shared experiences and mutual understanding. Friends created safe spaces for vulnerability, validated feelings, and offered practical assistance during challenging periods. The complementary support systems created a comprehensive emotional safety net, significantly contributing to students' resilience and psychological well-being throughout their academic journeys.

I like to share my daily study experience and life with my parents and friends. I wanted their reply and comments. That made me not feel lonely and helpless. (F2)

Being emotionally relaxed and content. Feeling relaxed and calm, without being anxious about anything. Everyone can be happy if surrounded by things and people they love. (F5)

As an international student, my family is not in Malaysia; therefore, friends are important. When my family is not around, friends are the ones who can listen to me and who I can hang out with. (M2)

4.2.2 Community Engagement and Acts of Kindness

Active engagement in community service and charitable actions improved overall well-being. Students who often volunteered, whether through official groups or spontaneous aid to peers, reported higher levels of social connectivity and personal fulfilment. The prosocial activities promoted participation in supportive societies while increasing people's sense of effectiveness and purpose and receiving appreciation for contributions enhanced this positive feedback loop by validating their efforts and strengthening social relationships. The reciprocal nature of community participation, both giving and receiving assistance, resulted in long-term social ecosystems that protected students from isolation during stressful academic periods. Integrating individual identity with communal purpose resulted in demonstrable increases in psychological well-being and life satisfaction throughout schooling.

When I feel like I have contributed to society, I feel content by smiling at people or helping in charities. (F4)

4.3 Health and Environmental Comfort

Physical health emerged as a fundamental determinant of student happiness, functioning as both an enabler and a barrier to positive experiences. Students with consistent wellness routines reported enhanced cognitive functioning, emotional stability, and increased energy levels, all of which are necessary for academic engagement. Conversely, even minor illness episodes substantially diminished the capacity for positive emotions and productivity.

Health is a factor. I was in a nasty mood whenever I had a sore throat. (M1)

My health and environment, I believe, have the greatest impact on my happiness. Starting with health, I care for my mind and body by exercising regularly and paying attention to my wants and feelings, as I tend to ignore myself, resulting in a lack of happiness. (F3)

4.3.1 Importance of Physical and Mental Well-being

The physical environment similarly influenced psychological states, with natural settings and organised spaces promoting concentration and reducing cognitive fatigue. Campus architecture that incorporates greenery, natural light, and comfortable study areas is correlated with higher satisfaction ratings. When maintained in an orderly manner, personal living spaces serve as restorative environments rather than additional stressors. The findings highlight the interconnection between physiological well-being, environmental Context, and psychological flourishing in the academic experience.

My state of health does not allow me to do so. I do not look at these as struggles, though. I try to push myself forward because I feel everyone struggles, but if we let those get in our way, we will never succeed. To apply this to the assignment, though I feel I will be able to do the work happily with a perfectly healthy body, I never let this get in my way to stop me from working. (M3)

4.3.2 Influence of Living and Study Environments

The physical characteristics of students' living and academic spaces demonstrated measurable effects on emotional equilibrium and cognitive performance. Personalised dormitory spaces with meaningful decorations, proper illumination, and efficient organisation were consistently associated with lower anxiety levels and improved sleep quality. Similarly, campus environments featuring architectural coherence, accessible green spaces, and designated quiet zones facilitated focused study while providing sensory respite. Noise pollution emerged as a particularly significant detractor from environmental satisfaction, with students reporting diminished concentration and increased stress when subjected to persistent auditory disruptions. The importance of

ecological design considerations in educational settings suggests that institutional investments in the quality of physical space yield tangible benefits for student well-being and academic performance.

Working in a less noisy environment makes me happy. (F4)

My current environment is either at cafes with friends, at home with my family, or at work with my co-workers and boss. This factor affects how I control my happiness in each situation. (M10)

4.4 Internal Reflection and Emotional Regulation

Self-awareness and emotional control have emerged as important aspects of student well-being. Participants displayed extensive metacognitive abilities, routinely monitoring their emotional states and making conscious interventions as needed. When faced with academic pressure, successful students used proportionate responses rather than catastrophising, situating immediate failures within their longer-term goals. Furthermore, students expressed increased happiness when their everyday activities were consistent with their fundamental beliefs and personal growth goals. This alignment of conduct and ideals laid the groundwork for genuine enjoyment that overcame situational obstacles.

Self-satisfaction - I am always happy with my self-discipline and disgusted with my laziness. And the exam marks always affect my happiness. (F2)

4.4.1 Self-awareness and Coping Strategies

Effective emotional management has emerged as a differentiating feature among resilient students facing academic problems. Students reported using cognitive reframing strategies to convert potentially harmful perceptions of events into more balanced judgments. The internal regulation systems helped to maintain psychological well-being throughout academic careers.

Stress is always the biggest factor that affects my happiness. As I said, the online learning mode makes adapting very hard. Every time lecturers start to teach new things, my stress will come out like a waterfall. (M2)

4.4.2 Balancing Internal and External Pressures

Students often struggle to balance institutional responsibilities with their well-being in today's academic institutions. Students who maintained psychological homeostasis were proficient in boundary setting, strategic work prioritisation, and purposeful stress management approaches. When early symptoms of impaired well-being were detected, these individuals regularly reviewed their emotional states. Furthermore, effective students created personalised bases for comparing external demands to internal capabilities, allowing them to make educated judgments regarding commitment allocation. This calibration enabled long-term performance without compromising psychological well-being, resulting in an academic experience characterised by engagement rather than fatigue.

The first factor is the pressure that comes with studying. Especially from week 6 to week 9, just after midterms, the deadline for assignments is fast approaching. This has put a lot of pressure on me and significantly impacted my happiness. (M1)

5.0 Conclusion and Future Research

The study found that international students' satisfaction is complex, encompassing academic accomplishment, social relationships, health, and inner emotional strength. Understanding these factors can help institutions develop stronger support systems and settings that promote student well-being.

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 Practical Implications

This study adds to the growing body of literature on international student well-being by focusing on the Malaysian Context, which has distinct cultural, climatic, and institutional characteristics that may influence student experiences differently. First, institutions could establish comprehensive academic support systems that address the challenges faced by international students. Second, universities could create orientation programs that set realistic academic expectations and teach time management techniques. Third, developing opportunities for international students to celebrate their academic successes and share success stories may boost motivation and happiness. Ultimately, faculty development programs could focus on fostering supportive student-teacher interactions that take into account cultural disparities in learning styles. The tailored interventions would effectively address key characteristics that influence international student satisfaction, potentially leading to increased retention rates, improved academic achievement, and an enhanced institutional reputation.

5.1.2 Theoretical Implications

This study extends Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to international education environments, suggesting that it remains relevant for understanding complex cross-cultural educational experiences. The findings contribute to the theoretical debate by demonstrating how different hierarchical requirements work concurrently rather than sequentially in educational environments. The findings contribute to the theoretical debate by demonstrating how different hierarchical requirements work concurrently rather than sequentially in educational environments. This challenges traditional linear models that suggest students must fully satisfy lower-level needs before progressing to higher-order learning objectives. Instead, the research reveals that cognitive, social, and personal development needs operate simultaneously within classroom settings. Students can pursue self-actualisation through creative projects while still addressing basic security concerns, or engage in collaborative learning that fulfils both social belonging

and intellectual growth needs. This concurrent processing suggests educational frameworks should accommodate multiple developmental pathways occurring in parallel, rather than assuming a rigid step-by-step progression through hierarchical stages. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the interconnectedness of academic accomplishment, social integration, and psychological well-being, contradicting compartmentalised approaches to student development theory. This study contributes to cross-cultural psychology perspectives on educational well-being by highlighting cultural differences in how students prioritise specific requirements. The findings contribute to a more sophisticated theoretical context for conceptualising international student happiness that recognises fundamental human needs and culturally particular expressions in Malaysian higher education settings.

5.2 Future Research

Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to investigate how the happiness of international students changes over their academic years in Malaysia. Comparative research on variations in happiness among institutions would provide valuable insights. Additionally, researchers could investigate the efficacy of customised interventions to improve certain aspects of student satisfaction. Investigating the association between happiness and objectively evaluated academic achievement measures might add to the existing findings. Furthermore, investigating how digital technologies and online learning settings affect international student satisfaction is an important area of research in the changing higher education landscape.

Author Contributions Statement: Conceptualization: K.L.L.S; Methodology: K.L.L.S; Formal analysis and investigation: K.L.L.S; Writing: K.L.L.S.; Resources: K.L.L.S. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding Statement: No funding was received to assist with preparing this manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank all the participants in this study, as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers of the International Journal of Management, Finance, and Accounting, for their valuable feedback and comments.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author has no competing interests in declaring that they are relevant to the content of this study.

References

- Al-Desouki, R. B., Abdellatif, M. S., Idris, A. I., & Mohammed, A. F. (2024). The quality of academic life and its relationship with academic passion among university students. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion, 13*(1), 470.
- Alsarrani, A., Hunter, R. F., Dunne, L., & Garcia, L. (2022). Association between friendship quality and subjective well-being among adolescents: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health, 22*(1), 2420.
- Alsheyadi, A. K., & Albalushi, J. (2020). Service quality of student services and student satisfaction: the mediating effect of cross-functional collaboration. *The TQM Journal, 32*(6), 1197-1215. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1108/TQM-10-2019-0234>
- Ammigan, R., & Drexler, M. L. (2022). Exploring the relationship between academic performance and the international student experience: Implications for university support offices and academic units. In *International Student Support and Engagement in Higher Education* (pp. 101-116). Routledge.
- Bakracheva, M. (2020). The meanings ascribed to happiness, life satisfaction and flourishing. *Psychology, 11*(1), 87-104.
- Boltvinik, J. (2023). On the contributions of Max-Neef et al. to the theory of human needs 1. In *Beyond ecological economics and development* (pp. 13-34). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 13*(2), 201-216.
- Bui, H. T., Selvarajah, C., & Vinen, D. G. (2021). The role of student–university value alignment in international student acculturation in Australia. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 84*, 142-154.

- Cao, X. (2024). Language and Identity: The challenges of language adaptation and cultural identity for east asian immigrant students in western educational systems. *International Journal of Asian Social Science Research*, 1(1), 81-87.
- Chong, M., Gan, B. K. S., & Menkhoff, T. (2022). Enhancing students' global competence through international business study missions. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 15(2), 165-183.
- Deni, A. R., Tumar, A., Houghton, A. M., & Crosling, G. M. (2021). Is all well? Academically successful international students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 35(3), 655-667.
- Elfaki, H. M. O. A., Sherifah, O. M., & Deji, A. (2023). Factors related to financial stress among Muslim students in Malaysia: A case study of Sudanese students. *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 29(6), 1-15.
- Hashim, A. (2024). English-medium instruction in higher education in Malaysia. In *The Routledge Handbook of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education* (pp. 380-393). Routledge.
- IESCO Team. (2024). *Studying in Malaysia: A 2025 guide for international students*. IESCO. Available: <https://iesco.my/study-in-malaysia-guide/>
- Kaur, H., & Law, K. L. S. (2025). Exploring the Experiences and Challenges of Online Learning at a Private University in Malaysia. *International Journal of Management, Finance and Accounting*, 6(1). 277-307. Available: <https://doi.org/10.33093/ijomfa.2025.6.1.10>
- Khalifa, G. S., Binnawas, M. S., Alareefi, N. A., Alkathiri, M. S., Alsaadi, T. A., Alneadi, K. M., & Alkhateri, A. (2021). The role of holistic approach service quality on student's behavioural intentions: the mediating role of happiness and satisfaction'. *City University eJournal of Academic Research (CUeJAR)*, 3(1), 12-32. Available: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353014053>

- Koo, K., Baker, I., & Yoon, J. (2021). The first year of acculturation: A longitudinal study on acculturative stress and adjustment among first-year international college students. *Journal of International Students*, 11(2), 278-298.
- Lee, J. C., Bujang, S., Shminan, A. B., Khan, R. U., Aren, M., & Lim, K. X. (2022). Staying Off-Campus Among Public University Students in Malaysia: Challenges and Motivation. In *EDULEARN22 Proceedings* (pp. 4960-4964). IATED. Available: 10.21125/edulearn.2022.1181
- Lee, N., & Kim, B. S. (2021). International student engagement for sustainability of leisure participation: An integrated approach of means-end chain and acculturation. *Sustainability*, 13(8), 4507. Available: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084507>
- Leung, C., Leung, J. T., Kwok, S. Y., Hui, A., Lo, H., Tam, H. L., & Lai, S. (2021). Predictors to happiness in primary students: Positive relationships or academic achievement. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 1-15.
- Men, Q., Li, W., Khan, A., & Gillies, R. M. (2024). Challenges and strategies for navigating Australian healthcare access: experience from Chinese international students. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 23(1), 189.
- Mohamed, M. M. (2020). Challenges and adjustment of international students in Malaysia: Pre-departure factors and post-arrival strategies. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 8(10), 43-52.
- Navy, S. L. (2020). Theory of human motivation—Abraham Maslow. *Science education in theory and practice: An introductory guide to learning theory*, 17-28.
- Norozi, S. A. (2023). The nexus of holistic well-being and school education: A literature-informed theoretical framework. *Societies*, 13(5), 113.
- Oishi, S., & Westgate, E. C. (2022). A psychologically rich life: Beyond happiness and meaning. *Psychological review*, 129(4), 790.

- Pitura, J. (2023). Using the e-questionnaire in qualitative applied linguistics research. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 2(1), 100034.
- Rahman, M. M., Singh, M. K. M., & Karim, A. (2018). English medium instruction innovation in higher education: Evidence from Asian contexts. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15(4), 1156.
- Shu, F., Ahmed, S. F., Pickett, M. L., Ayman, R., & McAbee, S. T. (2020). Social support perceptions, network characteristics, and international student adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 74, 136-148.
- Sidhu, R., Cheng, Y. E., Collins, F., Ho, K. C., & Yeoh, B. (2021). International student mobilities in a contagion:(Im) mobilising higher education?. *Geographical Research*, 59(3), 313-323.
- Singh, J. K. N., & Jack, G. (2022). The role of language and culture in postgraduate international students' academic adjustment and academic success: Qualitative insights from Malaysia. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2).
- Tavares, V. (2024). Feeling excluded: International students experience equity, diversity and inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(8), 1551-1568.
- Thoo, A. C., Lim, M. B. P., Huam, H. T., & Sulaiman, Z. (2022). Increasing destination loyalty of international students towards malaysian higher educational institutions. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 11(1), 31-41.
- UNESCO. (2019, November 25). *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*. Available: <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention>
- Xu, X., Sunindijo, R. Y., & Mussi, E. (2020). Comparing user satisfaction of older and newer on-campus accommodation buildings in Australia. *Facilities*, 39(5/6), 389-410.

Zaman, F. U., & Hosain, M. S. (2024). Student accommodation characteristics perceived overall satisfaction and academic performance: evidence from six Scottish universities. *On the Horizon: The International Journal of Learning Futures*, 32(4), 159-177.