

Beyond Academic Satisfaction: Factors Shaping Foundation Students' Choice for Undergraduate Study at a Private Islamic University in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing foundation students' decisions to either continue their undergraduate studies at the same institution or transfer elsewhere. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data was collected via a structured survey from 151 students at a private Islamic university in Malaysia and qualitative data was gathered through open-ended questions to gain deeper insights. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, while the qualitative responses were analysed using descriptive content analysis to identify recurring themes. The quantitative results revealed high levels of student satisfaction with academic quality, trust in the institution, and a strong commitment to remain, qualitative analysis revealed significant deterrents to retention including inadequate infrastructure such as overcrowded hostels, poor Wi-Fi, overwhelming academic pressure, financial constraints due to high tuition fees and limited aid, and a lack of attractive or relevant undergraduate program options. The study concludes that while institutional strengths in teaching foster initial loyalty, retention is jeopardized by deficiencies in the overall student experience. Universities must therefore adopt a holistic strategy that addresses these non-academic factors to successfully transition foundation students into their degree programs and ensure long-term sustainability. However, the study is limited by its reliance on a single institution and a cross-sectional design, which restricts the generalisability of the findings and does not capture changes in student perceptions over time.

Keywords: Student retention; Foundation programme; University choice; Higher education management; Student satisfaction; Malaysian higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Government of Malaysia has introduced a range of educational policies and initiatives aimed at positioning the country as a centre of educational excellence, not only within Southeast Asia but also globally. One significant development arising from these efforts is the establishment of pre-university programmes—commonly known today as foundation or matriculation programmes—which were introduced in several Malaysian universities in the 1980s. Over time, these programmes have developed a strong reputation as an effective preparatory pathway, serving as a springboard for students to transition smoothly into undergraduate degree studies.

Upon completing their foundation studies, students are required to make important decisions regarding their academic progression, including the selection of universities and degree programmes that best align with their aspirations and opportunities. Given the increasing number of school leavers entering universities through foundation programmes as a pathway to bachelor's degree studies, limited attention has been paid to how these students decide on their choice of university. As students constitute a central stakeholder group in higher learning institutions—shaping enrolment patterns, institutional sustainability, and academic culture—understanding their decision-making processes is essential for strategic planning. Previous studies on student choice have underscored the importance of institutional reputation (Su et al., 2021) as well as financial considerations (Hoang & Huy, 2021) in shaping enrolment decisions.

The decision-making process at this stage is complex, as students must navigate a wide range of institutional choices, academic pathways, and external influences. Factors such as institutional characteristics, programme offerings, perceived quality, and broader policy environments may shape these decisions in different ways (Mosbiran et al., 2021; Azman & Abdullah, 2021; Yeap et al., 2021; Fadzil et al., 2022; Mustafa et al., 2022; Sufian et al., 2020; Chachuli et al., 2021; Shaturaev, 2021; Malik & Ayop, 2020; Hasin & Nasir, 2021).

While it is reasonable to assume that multiple factors influence these choices, the specific determinants and their relative importance remain insufficiently understood. Students may respond to a combination of student satisfaction, institutional marketing strategies, governmental policies, perceived academic quality, financial considerations, and the information provided by foundation programmes themselves. Moreover, the relationships among these factors—particularly how institutional image, policy context, and students' expectations interact—appear to be context-specific and warrant closer examination.

Although these factors are widely regarded as a predictor of institutional loyalty, emerging evidence suggests that factors like satisfaction alone may not guarantee retention. This study addresses a critical apparent contradiction observed in foundation programmes: students report positive academic experiences yet remain uncertain about continuing at the same institution. Insights generated from this research may assist higher education institutions in developing market-responsive policies, strengthening collaborative initiatives, and positioning themselves competitively to attract this student segment.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the key reasons students decide to transfer from the university's foundation studies program to other institutions.
2. To explore the academic, social, and institutional factors that influence students' preferences and decisions to leave.
3. To assess how student satisfaction and loyalty impact retention within the foundation studies program.
4. To provide practical insights to help the institution realign its retention strategies to improve the effectiveness of the foundation studies program.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods as outlined by Creswell and Clark (2017), and focuses on students' choice in selecting a university after completing their foundation studies.

Sampling

One hundred fifty-one Foundation Programme students, comprising 81 females, 68 males, and 2 unidentified gender records, from a private Islamic university on the East Coast of Malaysia participated in this study. These participants were Foundation of Human Science students from the first intake in July 2019 until the ninth intake in July 2024. The study employed a total population sampling technique, whereby all available students from the Foundation of Human Science programme within the specified cohorts were included in the study. This approach was adopted to ensure comprehensive representation of students' experiences and perspectives across different cohorts. A coding system was applied to identify the students' interview data, ranging from S-01 to S-151.

Research Instruments

The quantitative questionnaire was initially adapted from the study "*A Study on Factors Influencing Student Loyalty Towards Higher Learning Institutions*" by Norhayati Yusof, Bahtiar Jamili Zaini, and Rosnalini Mansor (2019), whose work provided the foundational framework for its development. To ensure contextual relevance and alignment with the objectives of the present study, the instrument was subsequently refined and modified to suit the study. The refinement process included reviewing and rephrasing selected items to suit the participants' academic context while maintaining the core constructs of student loyalty identified in the original study. To further enhance its content validity, the revised questionnaire was evaluated by two expert lecturers with experience in higher education research and survey design, who provided feedback on clarity, appropriateness, and reliability of the items.

The 13-item survey questionnaire and 2 open-ended questions were distributed to 151 students via Microsoft 365 Forms. Figure 1 shows the sections in the questionnaire. A link was shared, and the respondents were required to respond in the presence of the researchers to ensure they fully understood the items and could react accurately.

Figure 1: The questionnaire sections and items.

Section (S)	No of Item
SA Satisfaction	4 (S4-S7)
SB Students' Trust	3 (S8 - S10)
SC Emotional Commitment	2 (S11 - S12)
SD Institutional, Academic and Social Factors	3 (S13 - S15)
SE Overall Satisfaction and Loyalty Impact on Retention	1 (S16)
Total	13

This study also closely examined the qualitative data analysis methods employed by previous researchers. The qualitative method was used to identify the common themes representing the issues and strategies that can be taken. Coding serves as a systematic approach, organizing data into themes, sub-themes, and categories (Kuckartz, 2019). According to Kuckartz, coding aids researchers in retrieving information from the data, whether in the form of words or phrases. This approach aligns well with the research context. Repeated readings were conducted as an active method for identifying themes and sub-themes. Below are the open-ended questions:

1. Can you describe any challenges you have faced during your foundation studies that may have influenced your thought about leaving the institution?
2. In your opinion, what is the most important factor the university should focus on to retain foundation students for undergraduate programs?

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data collected using the questionnaire designed by Norhayati et al. (2019) was analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis and the rich qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analysed thematically. Students' agreement with the 13 items was calculated into percentages to determine the majority of the responses 'very satisfied', 'somewhat satisfied', and 'neutral' regarding these factors. The open-ended responses were then thematically analysed, and a coding system was used to organize the data into themes, sub-themes, and categories. Consequently, the qualitative data and qualitative findings were triangulated and integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping students' experiences and to determine the key reasons influencing their decision to continue at or transfer from the university after completing the foundation program.

This study also tested the relationship between the four constructs using inferential statistics. Cronbach's alpha checked the reliability of each multi-item construct. Pearson correlation checked the link between the constructs. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA compared groups by gender and by the institution students joined after the foundation programme. A multiple regression tested which constructs predict emotional commitment. These results are reported below, alongside the descriptive findings from Table 1 to 6.

For qualitative, the thematic analysis method was employed in this study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). A theme captures something important about the data related to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Hence, thematic analysis provides a purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced data account (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) have proposed a six-phase process, which can facilitate the analysis and help the researcher identify and attend to the important aspects of a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis plan consists of six phases familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the findings.

The six phases of analysis are as follows:

1. Familiarizing with the Data: The interview recordings were transcribed, and the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to understand the overarching ideas, patterns, and direction concerning to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
2. Generating Initial Codes (Open Coding): The researcher generated initial codes by referring to interview transcription. It was done manually by reading the printed-out manuscripts and obtained the sense of the whole ideas. Then systematically coding the transcripts.
3. Generating Themes (Selective Coding): The researcher sorted the codes into potential themes and examined clusters of codes about the entire dataset. Themes represent interpretive analyses of the data, helping to draw insights about the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
4. Reviewing Themes: The researcher refined the themes by connecting them with existing knowledge, enhancing clarity, quality, and rigor. This step also facilitates consensus among researchers regarding theme development. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and organized to address the research questions. Concise, each theme was assigned descriptive titles. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
6. Producing the Report: After completing the coding process, the researcher synthesized the themes and wrote the final report ((Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inferential analysis of the study's constructs

The four constructs (satisfaction, trust, emotional commitment, and institutional/academic/social factors) were tested with reliability analysis, correlation, group comparison, and regression. These tests sit alongside the descriptive findings in Table 1 to 6 below, and give a fuller picture of how the constructs relate to student retention.

Reliability of the constructs

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each multi-item construct and for the full 12-item pool.

Figure 2 : Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	N
SA — Satisfaction	4	.750	151
SB — Students' trust	3	.764	151
SC — Emotional commitment	2	.522	151
SD — Institutional, academic and social factors	3	.736	147
Full scale (12 items)	12	.893	147

Three constructs pass the common .70 cut-off point (Nunnally, 1978): SA at .750, SB at .764, and SD at .736. SC is .522, which is below this point. This result is normal for a two-item scale, since alpha depends on how many items a scale has, and a two-item scale needs a stronger link between its items to reach .70. The link between S11 and S12 is $r = .353$, $p < .001$. This link is strong enough to keep both items in one construct, but it is a limit of the SC measure. The full scale, with all 12 items, has strong reliability at .893.

Correlation between the constructs

A Pearson correlation test checked how the four constructs relate to each other.

Figure 3 : Pearson Correlation Test

	SA	SB	SC	SD
SA - Satisfaction	-	.694**	.653**	.569**
SB - Students' trust		-	.714**	.564**
SC - Emotional commitment			-	.594**
SD - Institutional, academic and social factors				-

** $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $N = 151$.

All four constructs have a positive link with each other, and all links are significant. Trust and emotional commitment have the strongest link, at $r = .714$, which supports the point that trust drives loyalty. Institutional, academic and social factors have a weaker link with the other three constructs, at $r = .564$ to $r = .594$. This factor may measure a different part of the decision to stay or leave, and it should stay

separate from satisfaction and trust rather than being folded into either one.

Group comparison by gender

An independent-samples t-test compared male and female students on each construct.

Figure 4 : Independent- samples T-test

Construct	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t	p
SA - Satisfaction	4.25 (0.57)	4.14 (0.62)	1.20	.231
SB - Students' trust	4.05 (0.76)	3.82 (0.72)	1.93	.055
SC - Emotional commitment	4.22 (0.73)	4.02 (0.69)	1.67	.098
SD - Institutional, academic and social factors	4.13 (0.70)	4.05 (0.79)	0.66	.512

No construct shows a significant difference between male and female students. Trust is close to significant, at $p = .055$, with male students reporting slightly higher trust. This point is not proof of a real gender effect, but it is worth a sentence in the discussion.

Group comparison by institution enrolled after the foundation programme

A one-way ANOVA test compared three groups of students: those who stayed at Islamic Institution, those who moved to a public university (IPTA), and those who moved to a private university (IPTS).

Figure 5 : One-way ANOVA Test

Construct	Private Islamic University M	IPTA M	IPTS M	F(2, 148)	p
SA - Satisfaction	4.21	4.10	4.21	0.31	.731
SB - Students' trust	3.94	3.84	3.93	0.15	.863
SC - Emotional commitment	4.24	3.55	3.93	9.96	< .001
SD - Institutional, academic and social factors	4.14	3.98	3.83	1.25	.290

Only emotional commitment shows a significant difference between these three groups. A Tukey post hoc test places the difference between the Islamic Institution group and the IPTA group: mean difference = 0.69, $p < .001$. The IPTS group does not differ from either group. Students who moved to a public university report the lowest emotional commitment. This result may link to financial pressure, since a public university often costs less.

Association between perceived influence of satisfaction and gender or institution (S16)

A chi-square test checked if the answer to S16 (whether satisfaction with the foundation programme influenced the decision to stay or leave) links with gender or with the institution a student joined.

Figure 6 : Chi-square Test

Test	χ^2	df	p
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S16 × Gender	0.88	2	.644
S16 × Institution enrolled	5.21	4	.266

Neither test is significant. The answer to S16 does not depend on gender, and it does not depend on which institution the student joined.

Regression: predicting emotional commitment

A multiple regression test checked if satisfaction (SA), trust (SB), and institutional/academic/social factors (SD) predict emotional commitment (SC).

Figure 7 : Multiple Regression Test

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	VIF
Constant	0.49	0.28	1.77	.079	-
SA - Satisfaction	0.27	0.09	2.95	.004	2.12
SB - Students' trust	0.42	0.07	5.63	< .001	2.10
SD - Institutional, academic and social factors	0.21	0.06	3.30	.001	1.61

Model: $R^2 = .588$, adjusted $R^2 = .580$, $F(3, 147) = 70.05$, $p < .001$. $N = 151$.

The model explains 58.8 percent of the change in emotional commitment. All three predictors are significant. Trust has the strongest effect, then satisfaction, then institutional/academic/social factors. The VIF score for each predictor is below 2.2, so the three predictors do not overlap too much with each other. The model's residuals show some skew and some extra kurtosis, which is a normal effect of using a 5-point scale in a straight-line (OLS) model. A future study could use an ordinal or PLS-SEM model instead. For now, this result matches the correlation results above, and it supports the point that trust and satisfaction are the strongest drivers of commitment.

Conceptual framework

The results above support a simple model. Satisfaction, trust, and institutional/academic/social factors act as causes of emotional commitment, and emotional commitment then affects the outcome, whether a student stays or leaves. This model fits the apparent contradiction this study set out to explain: the causes score high on average, but the outcome does not always follow.

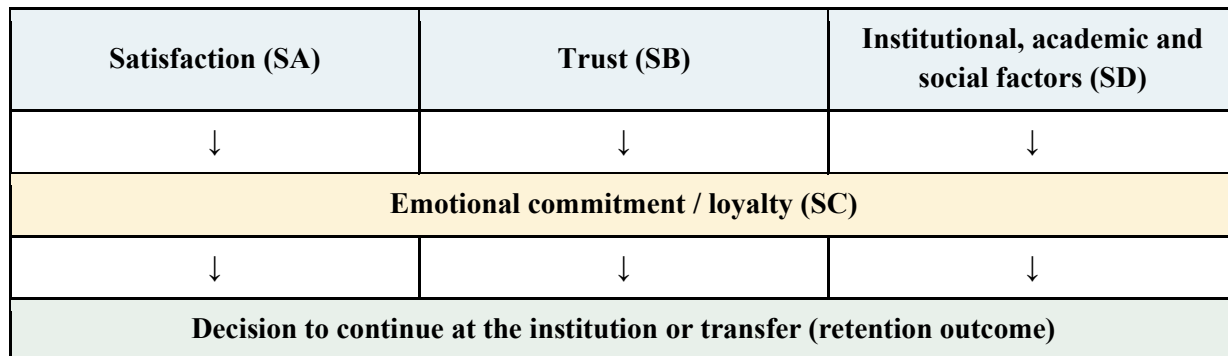


Figure 8 : A Conceptual Framework for Foundation Student Retention

The regression result above is the basis for the arrows in this model. It also explains a mixed result: all four constructs score high on average, but some students still choose to leave. Trust carries more weight than satisfaction alone, and the qualitative data below show where trust breaks down: unmet promises about facilities, and gaps in financial aid.

Through an in-depth analysis of the collected data, several key themes emerged that provide insight about the most important factor that the university should focus on in order to retain the foundation students for undergraduate programs. These themes reflect the core issues and experiences shared by the participants and are integral to understanding the study. Three key themes that emerged from both quantitative and qualitative data.

The Apparent contradiction of High Satisfaction and Underlying Dissatisfaction.

The data in Table 1 addresses the question: “To what extent are you committed to continuing your studies at this university after completing the foundation program?” Based on the analyzed data, the level of student commitment to continuing their studies at the same university after completing the foundation program is high. The majority of respondents, 77 individuals or 51.0%, stated that they are ‘fully committed’ to remaining at the university. Furthermore, 44 respondents (29.1%) indicated that they are ‘somewhat committed’. The combination of these two categories shows that a substantial number of students, 80.1%, have a strong inclination to remain at the institution. However, there is a portion of respondents, 25 individuals (16.6%), who chose to be ‘neutral’, indicating an undecided stance. Only a small number of respondents showed low or no commitment, with 3 individuals (2.0%) being ‘not committed at all’ and 2 individuals (1.3%) being ‘somewhat uncommitted’. Overall, these findings clearly demonstrate that the university has successfully maintained the commitment of the majority of its foundation students to pursue higher education at the same institution.

Table 1: Commitment to Continue Studies in Private Islamic University

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Fully Committed	77	51
Somewhat Committed	44	29.1
Neutral	25	16.6
Not Committed at All	3	2
Somewhat Uncommitted	2	1.3
Total	151	100

The data in Table 2 addresses the question: “To what extent are you satisfied with your academic experience throughout your foundation program?” Based on the analyzed data, the level of student satisfaction with their academic experience throughout the foundation program is very high. The majority of respondents, 104 individuals (68.9%), stated that they are ‘very satisfied’ with the academic experience gained. Meanwhile, 38 respondents (25.2%) indicated that they are ‘somewhat satisfied’. The combination of these two categories shows that a large proportion of students, 94.1%, hold a positive view of their academic experience. This clearly reflects the effectiveness of the

foundation program in providing a satisfactory learning experience. However, there is a small number of respondents who showed a low level of satisfaction, with 4 individuals (2.6%) being ‘very dissatisfied’ and 5 individuals (3.3%) being in the ‘dissatisfied and not dissatisfied’ position. Overall, these findings prove that the academic quality offered in the foundation program successfully meets the expectations and satisfaction of the majority of students, making it a key determinant in their decision to remain at the institution.

Table 2: Satisfaction with Academic Experience

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Dissatisfied and Not Dissatisfied	5	3.3
Somewhat Satisfied	38	25.2
Very Dissatisfied	4	2.6
Very Satisfied	104	68.9
Total	151	100

The data in Table 3 addresses the question: “To what extent do you feel the foundation program has prepared you for university-level studies?” Based on the analyzed data, the majority of respondents hold a very positive view regarding the effectiveness of the foundation program in preparing them for university-level studies. A total of 76 students, or 50.3%, felt that they were ‘prepared,’ while 49 individuals (32.5%) felt ‘very prepared’ for university-level studies. The combination of these two categories indicates that a large number of students, 82.8%, feel confident and ready to face academic challenges at a higher level. However, there is a small number of respondents, 25 individuals (16.6%), who adopted a ‘neutral’ stance, indicating uncertainty or a lack of strong opinion on this matter. Only 1 respondent (0.7%) stated that they were ‘not prepared’. These findings clearly demonstrate that the foundation program offered is highly effective in preparing students, and it has achieved its primary goal of producing competent graduates for university studies.

Table 3: Foundation Program’s Effectiveness In Preparing Students For University

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Neutral	25	16.6
Not Prepared	1	0.7
Very Prepared	49	32.5
Prepared	76	50.3
Total	151	100

Although the quantitative findings indicated that students were generally satisfied with their academic experience, the qualitative responses revealed a more nuanced perspective. Several students described experiencing considerable difficulty in adapting to the academic demands of the foundation

programme. They explained that the transition to higher education required them to cope with a fast-paced curriculum, multiple concurrent assignments, and higher academic expectations than they had anticipated. These challenges often resulted in feelings of stress, anxiety, and being overwhelmed.

Many participants also highlighted the difficulty of balancing academic responsibilities with personal commitments. Some students reported that managing several assignments simultaneously became particularly challenging, especially when group members did not contribute equally. Consequently, these academic pressures affected their learning experience and confidence in progressing to undergraduate studies.

The following excerpts illustrate students' experiences:

"One challenge I faced was balancing the heavy workload with personal commitments. At times it became overwhelming." (S-12)

"Many students struggle to adapt to the intensity of academic demands in a short time, leading to stress and anxiety about their ability to succeed in an undergraduate program." (S-61)

"Assignment comes at the same time and if the team not have any common sense, we might delay our Assignment and that will got our marked been cut." (S-110)

"One significant challenge was difficulty in adapting to the academic workload, which was much heavier than I anticipated." (S-114)

"One of the challenges I faced during my foundation studies was the difficulty in adjusting to the workload and academic expectations." (S-116)

"Too much assignments." (S-120)

"Common challenges include difficulty adapting to academic expectations such as managing workloads or understanding complex subjects." (S-133)

Overall, these responses suggest that while students appreciated their overall academic experience, many encountered substantial challenges in adapting to the rigorous demands of foundation studies. The findings indicate that academic workload, time management, and adjustment to higher education expectations remain important factors influencing students' learning experiences and may affect their decisions regarding continuation to undergraduate programmes.

In discussing strategies to retain foundation students for undergraduate programmes, many participants emphasised the importance of continuous academic support. Students believed that effective academic guidance would help them cope with the rigorous demands of foundation studies while increasing their confidence and preparedness for undergraduate education. They viewed academic support as more than assistance with coursework; it also included personalised guidance, accessible learning resources, and meaningful engagement with lecturers and the university community.

Several participants suggested that providing structured academic support would improve students' sense of belonging and encourage them to continue their studies at the same institution. They also highlighted the importance of creating clear academic pathways and support services that enable students to successfully transition from foundation to undergraduate programmes.

The following excerpts illustrate these views:

"The most important factor that universities should focus to retain foundation students for undergraduate programs is providing continuous academic support and guidance. This can help students feel more prepared and confident to continue their studies at the next level." (S-28)

"In my opinion, the most important factor that a university should focus on to retain foundation students is academic support and engagement. This encompasses providing personalized academic advising, accessible tutoring services, and fostering a sense of belonging within the academic community." (S-61)

"The most important factor for retaining students is a strong sense of belonging through academic engagement, support services, campus integration, and clear progression pathways to undergraduate programs." (S-73)

These findings suggest that students perceive continuous academic support as a critical institutional strategy for improving retention. Beyond helping students overcome academic challenges, comprehensive support services foster confidence, strengthen students' connection with the university, and facilitate a smoother transition into undergraduate studies, thereby increasing their likelihood of remaining at the institution.

Another recurring theme identified from the participants' responses was the need to strengthen the alignment between foundation and undergraduate curricula. Several students suggested that the foundation programme should include subjects and learning experiences that are directly relevant to their intended degree programmes. They believed that greater curriculum alignment would better prepare them for the academic demands of undergraduate study, reduce uncertainty about future coursework, and ease their transition to the next level of education.

In particular, some participants recommended introducing discipline-specific subjects and providing greater emphasis on academic skills, such as assignment writing. They perceived these enhancements as essential in building the knowledge and competencies required for success in undergraduate programmes.

The following excerpts illustrate these suggestions:

"Need to emphasize more on how to make assignments." (S-39)

"The foundation should have law subjects for students go to law course in degree." (S-67)

"There should be greater emphasis on subjects that prepare students for their degree programme. (S-74)

"Make sure the subject is suitable for undergraduate applications." (S-108)

These findings indicate that students value a foundation curriculum that is closely aligned with their intended fields of study. Participants perceived discipline-specific content and explicit preparation for undergraduate academic expectations as important factors in reducing anxiety, improving academic readiness, and strengthening their confidence to continue their studies at the same institution.

This apparent contradiction may arise because satisfaction in an academic sense does not necessarily translate into emotional attachment to the institution. Foundation students often perceive their programme as a transitional phase rather than a long-term affiliation, making practical living conditions more influential in shaping their continuation decisions. The university could alleviate these challenges by reviewing and streamlining course content, offering skills development workshops on time management and effective study techniques, and implementing balanced assessment schedules to prevent the clustering of assignments. Academic mentoring and tutoring support would further assist students in managing academic demands, thereby improving their resilience and motivation to progress to undergraduate studies.

The Role of Institutional Facilities and Support

The data in Table 4 addresses the question: "To what extent are you satisfied with the support services (e.g., student affairs, academic advising, counseling) offered by the university?" Based on the analyzed data, the level of student satisfaction with the support services offered by the university is high. The majority of respondents, 67 individuals (44.4%), stated that they are 'somewhat satisfied,' while 49 individuals (32.5%) are 'very satisfied' with these services. The combination of these two categories indicates that more than three-quarters of the respondents (76.9%) have a positive view of support services such as student affairs, academic advising, and counseling. However, there is a portion of respondents who adopted a 'dissatisfied and not dissatisfied' stance, totaling 28 individuals (18.5%). Only a small number of respondents showed dissatisfaction, with 6 individuals (4.0%) being 'somewhat dissatisfied' and 1 individual (0.7%) being 'very dissatisfied'. These findings reflect that the university has successfully provided satisfactory support services for the majority of its students, but there is still room for improvement to enhance satisfaction among those who are neutral or dissatisfied.

Table 4: Satisfaction with Support Services

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Dissatisfied and Not Dissatisfied	28	18.5
Somewhat Dissatisfied	6	4
Somewhat Satisfied	67	44.4
Very Dissatisfied	1	0.7

Very Satisfied	49	32.5
Total	151	100

The data in Table 5 addresses the question: “To what extent are you confident that the university will fulfill the promises made in its marketing materials, such as university facilities?” Based on the analyzed data, the level of student confidence in the promises made by the university in its marketing materials is mixed. There are 49 respondents, or 32.5%, who are ‘somewhat confident,’ while 31 individuals (20.5%) are ‘very confident’ that the university will fulfill its promises. This indicates that more than half of the respondents (53.0%) have a positive level of confidence. However, a significant number of respondents, 55 individuals (36.4%), chose a ‘neutral’ answer. This reflects that this group does not have a strong stance, either due to a lack of information or insufficient experience to evaluate these promises. There is also a small number of respondents, 14 individuals (9.3%), who are ‘not very confident,’ and 2 individuals (1.3%) who are ‘very unconfident’. These findings suggest that although the majority of students are confident, there is a need for the university to improve communication and demonstrate their commitment to reduce the neutral and unconfident groups, especially regarding promised facilities.

Table 5: Confidence in University Promises

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Very Confident	31	20.5
Very Unconfident	2	1.3
Neutral	55	36.4
Not Very Confident	14	9.3
Somewhat Confident	49	32.5
Total	151	100

While the quantitative findings revealed overall satisfaction with the university, many students expressed concerns regarding hostel conditions, small room sizes, and inadequate Wi-Fi, factors that may have affected their intention to remain at the university beyond their foundation studies. Infrastructure and facilities emerged as a critical determinant of student satisfaction. Participants frequently reported dissatisfaction with hostel conditions, citing overcrowded rooms, inadequate study spaces, and the lack of designated prayer areas. Complaints about unreliable Wi-Fi and insufficient classroom resources, such as poor lighting and inadequate audio-visual equipment, were also common. These conditions hindered both academic performance and overall well-being. The following are some excerpts found in the open-ended questions:

According to S-11, she faced challenges with the hostel conditions:

“The bedroom was small and having four people in one room, made it cramped”

The university should also improve its hostel facilities for students:

“For me the challenges I face is due to the room being quite narrow because sometimes I fell like I can’t study or do my tasks comfortably because breathing difficulties and gave me more pressure”. (S-25)

“We need better dorm room” (S-21)

“Room facilities should be more comfortable for the students” (S-29)

“The hostel is really small” (S-44)

Several students expressed concerns about the female dormitory rooms being too small to comfortably accommodate four occupants. The cramped space makes it difficult for students to study, perform prayers, and move around without disturbing their roommates;

“In my opinion, Private Islamic university needs to improve the background facilities such as female dormitory room which are too small ... ”(S-55)

“The cramped female dormitory room makes it very difficult to study and do work because four students are crammed into a very small room, to the point that the prayer space is in the walkway, making it hard to move around and step past other roommates.” (S-92)

“I felt a bit stressed when I found it rather cramped because I was not very comfortable and felt somewhat suffocated sharing a small room with four people. It was stressful, but I tried to adapt myself well.”(S-103)

“Hostel not suitable for 4 student in 1 room.”(S-108)

Besides the hostels, students also mentioned that the university should improve other campus infrastructure.

S-11 mentioned, *“The slow wi-fi made studying and completing assignments difficult.. ”.*

S-86 said *“In my opinion, the university should focus on upgrading the facilities such as classrooms”.*

This is also highlighted by S-89, *“As a student, the facility in the class is also very important to make easier for us to get clearer visuals”.*

The university should also focus on the important factor that will help them to retain the foundation student as suggested when they were asked about factors in retaining them in the university.

S-03, S-07, and S-25 suggested “*Improve facility such as Hostel!*”.

Addressing these concerns by expanding hostel capacity, providing designated study and prayer facilities, upgrading internet connectivity, and enhancing classroom infrastructure would not only improve the learning environment but also contribute to a stronger sense of belonging among students, thereby encouraging them to continue their studies within the university.

Financial and Programmatic Constraints

The data in Table 6 addresses the question: “To what extent are financial factors (e.g., scholarships, tuition fees) important in your decision to stay or transfer?” Based on the analysis, financial factors play a significant role in students’ decisions to stay or transfer institutions of study. A total of 71 respondents, representing 47.0% of the total, considered financial factors as ‘very important’. Furthermore, 45 respondents (29.8%) rated financial factors as ‘somewhat important’. The combination of these two categories shows that the vast majority of students (76.8%) view financial factors as a critical variable in making decisions about their educational path. Only a small number of respondents felt otherwise, with 5 individuals (3.3%) considering financial factors ‘very unimportant’ and 1 individual (0.7%) considering it ‘somewhat unimportant’. This is also supported by 28 respondents (18.5%) who adopted a ‘neutral’ stance. Therefore, it can be concluded that financial support such as scholarships and affordable tuition fees are very important for most students and have the potential to be a determining factor in whether they will remain at an institution or seek opportunities elsewhere.

Table 6 Financial Factors Influencing Decision to Continue Studies

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Very Confident	71	47
Very Unconfident	5	3.3
Neutral	28	18.5
Not Very Confident	45	29.8
Somewhat Confident	1	0.7
Total	151	100

The quantitative findings indicated that financial considerations were among the most influential factors affecting students' decisions to remain at or transfer from the institution. This finding was reinforced by the qualitative data, in which financial constraints emerged as one of the most frequently cited reasons for considering transfer. Many participants highlighted the burden of tuition

fees and the limited availability of financial assistance for foundation students as significant barriers to continuing their studies at the same university. These findings suggest that affordability plays a critical role in shaping students' educational decisions, particularly among those from lower-income backgrounds.

Several participants explicitly recommended reducing tuition fees and strengthening financial support mechanisms :

S-127 stated, *"Reduce tuition fees."*

Similarly, S-76 explained, *"Tuition fees, because at the foundation level, there aren't many aids available for underprivileged families."*

Likewise, S-59 suggested, *"Reduce some of the costs of bachelor's degree programs,"* while S-88 recommended, *"Increase financial facilities for students."*

These responses indicate that students perceive financial support not only as a means of reducing economic hardship but also as an important incentive for pursuing further studies within the same institution. The findings imply that universities should strengthen financial assistance initiatives to improve student retention. Practical strategies may include expanding scholarships and tuition assistance schemes, introducing more flexible tuition payment plans, reviewing non-essential fees, and establishing partnerships with government agencies, industry partners, and philanthropic organizations to provide sponsorship opportunities. Such initiatives would enhance the affordability and accessibility of higher education, thereby increasing the likelihood that foundation students will continue their undergraduate studies at the institution.

Beyond financial concerns, participants also identified the limited range of undergraduate programmes as a factor influencing their intention to transfer. Although students expressed satisfaction with the university experience, many felt that the available degree programmes did not adequately reflect their academic interests, career aspirations, or evolving labour market demands. Consequently, some students considered pursuing their bachelor's degrees at institutions offering more diverse and market-relevant programmes.

This concern was consistently reflected in participants' responses :

S-55 remarked, *"The choice of degree programs for further studies is limited and unappealing."* Similarly, S-58 recommended, *"Increase course options."*

S-65 suggested, *"In my opinion, the university needs to diversify the courses in the university to attract students to stay."*

Meanwhile, S-77 emphasised the importance of employability, stating, *"University must add more programs that have greater potential in the global market to avoid unemployment or underemployment after students graduate."*

Likewise, S-78 proposed, *"Add more interesting courses."*

These findings suggest that programme diversity is an important institutional factor influencing student retention. Expanding the portfolio of undergraduate programmes, particularly in high-demand and emerging disciplines aligned with industry needs, would not only address students' academic interests but also strengthen their confidence in future employment prospects. By offering programmes that are responsive to labour market trends and students' career aspirations, universities can enhance their competitive advantage while increasing the likelihood that foundation students will continue their studies within the same institution.

To address this, the university could diversify its undergraduate offerings, particularly in high-demand and emerging fields, and strengthen its career guidance services to help students envision clear and attainable academic and professional trajectories. Additionally, the introduction of flexible study options such as dual majors or interdisciplinary programs could further increase the appeal of remaining at the institution.

Student Loyalty Theory, the theory behind the loyalty instrument this study adapted from Norhayati et al. (2019), posits that satisfaction is a primary driver of commitment and retention. The conceptual framework in Figure 7 is this study's attempt to test that theory directly: satisfaction, trust, and institutional/academic/social factors as antecedents of commitment, and commitment as the driver of the stay-or-transfer decision. However, the present findings suggest that, within the foundation programme context, satisfaction alone is insufficient to cultivate loyalty. Environmental and experiential factors, particularly accommodation quality and digital infrastructure, appear to mediate this relationship. The retention of foundation students is strongly influenced by their satisfaction with campus facilities, their ability to cope with academic demands, the affordability of their education, and the relevance of available academic programs. By implementing targeted improvements in these four areas, the university can enhance student satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately increasing the likelihood that foundation students will progress into its undergraduate programs.

The study therefore supports the theoretical assertion that positive academic experiences contribute to favourable institutional perceptions. At the same time, it complicates the linear assumption that satisfaction naturally leads to persistence, demonstrating that students' lived experiences outside the classroom significantly shape their loyalty decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study identifies the factors that influence foundation students' decisions to remain at the private Islamic university for their undergraduate studies. While the institution excels in fostering academic satisfaction, trust, and a sense of belonging—as evidenced by the strong quantitative data—the qualitative insights reveal critical areas of weakness that threaten its retention rates. The cramped living conditions, academic overload, financial burdens, and limited degree choices present substantial risks that can drive students away despite their overall contentment. Therefore, ensuring retention requires a strategic and integrated approach that addresses the entire student experience. By simultaneously enhancing infrastructure, providing robust academic and financial support, and expanding program relevance, the private Islamic university can transform these vulnerabilities into strengths. A university's ability to retain students through the transition from foundation to degree is a direct

measure of its institutional health and long-term sustainability.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Shuhada M.H. (Methodology; Data curation; Formal analysis; Visualisation; Writing-original draft)
Roszalina A.R (Methodology; Data curation; Formal analysis; Visualisation; Writing-original draft)
Nur Azimah M.J (Conceptualisation, Validation; Formal analysis; Writing-review & editing).

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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