

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF SENSE OF  
BELONGING AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
AT A PRIVATE ISLAMIC COLLEGE IN KUALA  
LUMPUR

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The number of international students in Malaysia has increased significantly today. Being away from their home country had exposed them to various challenges which lead to sense of belonging issue. The main purpose of this qualitative research is to understand sense of belonging towards the college for international students in a private Islamic College in Kuala Lumpur. The study also aim to explore i) international students definition on sense of belonging towards the college; ii) international students' experiences in relation to sense of belonging towards the college; iii) coping strategies employed by international students to deal with the challenging experiences in a new environment; iv) the roles of sense of belonging in enhancing students' performance and v) international students' suggestions to enhance or develop sense of belonging towards their college. Twelve international students from various countries such as from Nigeria, Bangladesh, The Philippines, Maldives, China, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia and Ghana were involved in this study. All of the participants were interviewed using semi structured interview protocol. The interviews took place at different times and settings. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings of this study showed that the participants define sense of belonging as being relationally valued and accepted, committed, comfortable, sociable and respected. The themes for international students' experiences are classified to good experiences and challenges. The themes for good experiences are having good relationship with college community, knowledge imbibed with Islamic value experience, opportunity to study and working experience, dealing with calm Malaysians and having family members in Malaysia. While their challenges are language barriers, relationship and communication issue, racism and discrimination, college management system, pedagogical styles, financial struggle, food, family, being scammed by an agent, Malaysian government regulation and weather issue. In dealing with various challenges they adopted active coping strategies as well as avoidant coping strategies. Four themes were generated for research questions number four which are commitment, no effect, understanding and group work. Finally the participants voiced out suggestions to college management, international students, lecturers, local students, college community and Malaysians in general in order to help international students to enhance their sense of belonging.

## خلاصة البحث

ارتفع عدد الطلبة الأجانب في ماليزيا بشكل ملحوظ وغير مسبوق. وقد تشكل لهم الابتعاد عن أوطانهم تحديات كثيرة والتي تؤدي إلى خلل في الشعور بالانتماء. الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث النوعي هو بيان مفهوم الشعور بالانتماء إلى الكلية عند طلبة الدوليين الدارسين في الكلية الإسلامية الأهلية في مدينة كوالالمبور. تهدف الدراسة أيضا إلى البحث عن (1) مفهوم الشعور بالانتماء إلى الكلية عند الطلبة الدوليين (2) تجارب الطلبة الدوليين في الشعور بالانتماء إلى الكلية (3) الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلبة الدوليين للتعامل مع التجارب الصعبة في البيئة الجديدة (4) دور الشعور بالانتماء في تحسين أداء الطلبة الدوليين و (5) الوسائل المقترحة من الطلبة الدوليين لتعزيز الشعور بالانتماء إلى كلياتهم. شارك في هذه الدراسة اثنا عشر طالبًا دوليًا من دول مختلفة، منها: نيجيريا وبنجلاديش والفلبين وجزر المالديف والصين ومصر وإيران وتونس وغانا. تمت مقابلة جميع المشاركين باستخدام بروتوكول المقابلة شبه المنظم. وأقيمت المقابلات في أوقات وأماكن مختلفة. وتم استخدام التحليل الموضوعي لتفسير البيانات حيث أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن مفهوم الشعور بالانتماء عند المشاركين هو أن يكونوا مقدرين ومقبولين وملتزمين ومرتاحين واجتماعيين ومحترمين. تم تصنيف تجارب الطلبة الدوليين إلى محورين، هما: محور التجارب الإيجابية ومحور التحديات. وتتمثل التجارب الإيجابية في وجود علاقة جيدة مع المجتمع الجامعي، والمعرفة المبينة علمًا لتجارب المتعلقة بالقيم الإسلامية، وفرصة الدراسة والخبرة المهنية، والتعامل مع الماليزيين الهادئين والإقامة مع أفراد الأسرة في ماليزيا. وأما التحديات التي تواجههم فهي الحواجز اللغوية، والقضايا المتعلقة بالعلاقات والتواصل، والعنصرية والتمييز، ونظام إدارة الكلية، والأساليب التربوية، والمشاكل المالية، والتغذية، والعائلة، والاحتيايل من قبل الوكالات، والأنظمة الحكومية الماليزية وقضية الطقس. تبنى الطلبة استراتيجيات التأقلم النشط في التعامل مع العديد من التحديات، بالإضافة إلى استراتيجيات التأقلم الانطوائي. تم إنشاء أربعة محاور للأسئلة البحثية رقم أربعة، وهي: الالتزام، بدون تأثير، والتفاهم والعمل الجماعي. وأخيراً، طرح المشاركون اقتراحات لإدارة الكلية، وللطلبة الدوليين، وللمحاضرين، وللطلبة المحليين، وللمجتمع الجامعي وللماليزيين بشكل عام من أجل مساعدة الطلبة الدوليين على تعزيز شعورهم بالانتماء.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

“The Ministry aspires to develop Malaysia as an International education hub with a difference, one that is valued by students for its competitive advantage in providing value-for-money higher education and that balances quality and affordability with the added value of rich cultural experiences. This includes the continuous expansion of Malaysia’s capacity to host international students for higher education, with a target enrolment of 200,000 international students by 2020 and 250,000 by 2025.” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015)

The above are the objectives of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) to ensure that Malaysia becomes an education hub in this region. For the past several years, many international students have chosen Malaysia as a place to continue their education. In 2017, about 170,068 international students were recorded, of which 103,198 of them had enrolled in private universities, university colleges and colleges (MOHE, 2017). The previous Education Minister Dato’ Seri Idris Jusoh believes that the number is expected to rise to 200,000 by 2020 (“Malaysia has one of highest proportions of international students pursuing higher education”, 2015). The number is expected to keep increasing to 250,000 by the year 2025 and Malaysia is now one of the largest recruiters of international students globally (MOHE, 2015). In 2017, the five countries sending the most students to Malaysia are Bangladesh, China, Nigeria, Indonesia and Yemen (MOHE, 2017). As a general estimate of the demographic breakdown of 100 international students recruited, 40 would be from Asian countries (China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Singapore, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Maldives & Kazakhstan), 19 would be from Middle Eastern countries (Iran, Yemen, Syria & Iraq), 11 would be from Eastern African countries

(Somalia, Uganda & Tanzania) and 12 students would originate from Western African country (Nigeria) (MOHE, 2015). In addition to this number, Malaysia has one of the highest proportions of international verses domestic students with the average ratio being almost 1:10 (“Malaysia has one of highest proportions of international students pursuing higher education”, 2015).

It is believed that the students are interested to study in Malaysia in contrast to other nations because Malaysia has the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) which assures that study programmes offered are internationally recognised (“Foreign students continue to choose Malaysia as a preferred higher learning destination”, 2018). Additionally, past research has shown that the international students’ selection criteria when they choose Malaysia as their study destination include qualifications of the teaching staff, English usage, and high quality staff (Siti, Abdul & Rohaizat, 2010). However, unlike Siti et al., (2010), Siew, Nik and Rokiah (2013) opine that Malaysia’s environment is internationally recognised for its qualifications and reputation, quality and accreditation and competitive programme fees; all of which have been identified to be the common key attributes that have been found to be significant from past researches on main factors that attract international students to Malaysia. For international students from Iran, Malaysia’s attraction include its status as an Islamic developing country as well as its reputation as an Asian gateway, career relevant courses with in demand skills for greater employability, multi-ethnic population living together harmoniously, sound economy, socially safe country with a stable government and low serious crime rate (Khodabandelou, Karimi & Ehsani, 2015). For African students in Malaysia, among three main factors that made them decide to study in Malaysia are the medium of instruction (teaching) of English, the possibility of transferring to another country, such as Australia, the US and the UK

and the recommendation by agents in their own home country (Lian, 2011). In contrast, Siti et al. (2010) found that students from African nations have a strong preference for good learning environment, customer focus and location. From the findings of these past researches, it is now well established that different students from different nations require different needs and wants (Siti, et al., 2010). Salyers, Carston, Dean and London (2015) suggested that other than various selection criteria when choosing the host country for their academic journey, international student motivation and expectations of the experiences were also varied. Among the motivations factors that were highlighted include opportunities for “hands on” career development, language, and cultural knowledge acquisition (Salyers et al., 2015).

Due to the positive reasons that encourage the increasing number of international students who continue their higher education learning in Malaysia, it shows that private colleges can play a big role in Malaysian education system. To cater to the demand for education, there are about 410 private colleges, 70 private universities and 34 private university colleges which have been established in Malaysia (MOHE, 2015). Since Malaysia is a Muslim majority country, private Islamic colleges have also been established together with other colleges. Interestingly, Islamic colleges do not only receive international students from various backgrounds but those from different religions too.

Since there are many international students in Malaysia, it is important to note that students in foreign countries and minorities usually have issues with belongingness (Slaten, Elison, Lee & Scalise, 2016; Wells & Horn, 2015; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nayland & Ramia, 2008; Johnson, 2007). Moreover, the minority or international students also experienced other various challenges (Ramos, Cassidy, Reicher & Haslam, 2016; Urbanovic, Wilkins & Huisman, 2016;

Kodabandelou, Karimi & Ehsani, 2015; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe & Caldwell, 2014; Campbell, 2012) that are related to integration and sense of belonging in academic institutions (Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016; Marshall, Zhou, Gervan & Wiebe, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Leary & Allen, 2011; Marshall, Zhou, Hall, Cabrera & Milem, 2011; Mallet, Wagner, Burrow, Mello, Worrel & Andretta, 2011; Meeuwisse, Severiens & Born, 2010).

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Most studies about sense of belonging were conducted in academic institutions in western countries (Pichon, 2016; Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch & Cong, 2015; Spanierman, Soble, Mayfield, Neville, Aber, Khuri & De La Rosa, 2013) and the methods adopted were quantitative (Seyitoglu & Cevik, 2016; Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016; Liu, Wong & Tsai, 2016; Wells and Horn, 2016; Spanierman, et al., 2013; Johnson, 2012; Marshall et al. 2012; Hall et al., 2011; Mallet et al., 2011). Thus, many have suggested qualitative studies in understanding sense of belonging (Seyitglu & Cevik, 2016; Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016; Curtin et al., 2013; Meeuwisse et al., 2010 & Strayhon, 2008) as the students' experiences on campus bring benefits to students and their sense of belonging, but the extent of how students perceived this benefit is unclear (Wells & Horn, 2015). It shows that this qualitative study is needed to understand in depth about the meaning of sense of belonging among international students, their experiences inside and outside the college as well as how sense of belonging relate to their performance.

Apart from that, international students might face various issues and challenges that are related to sense of belonging in academic institutions (Park et al., 2016; Ramos et al., 2016; Liu, Wong & Tsai, 2016; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014;



Johnson, 2012; Marshall, Zhou, Gervan & Wiebe, 2012). International students such as African students in Malaysia were reported to experience discrimination and felt unwelcomed by the local communities (“African students appeal for understanding that not all of them are bad”, 2012) as they find it hard to develop friendships with Malaysian students (Lian, 2011). Iranian students in Malaysia have also reported facing several issues and challenges in terms of finance, visa process, culture and health insurance (Kodabandelou, Karimi & Ehsani, 2015). Although several research have been done in Malaysia to understand challenges faced by international students (Khodabandelou et al., 2015; Alavi & Syed, 2011; Lian, 2011; Zuria, Salleh, Saemah & Rahman, 2010) and coping mechanism adopted by them (Yusliza, 2012) , there is no evidence that they have addressed the issue of sense of belonging and its connection to students’ performance. Apart from that, Malaysia has established Education Malaysia Global Services which handles management and processing student pass/visa as well as enhancing the management of international student welfare and engagement (Education Malaysia, 2019) and due to that, international students experience in Malaysia in this study may give new inputs to different practice and policies by the ruling government.

In addition, occasionally international students who study in a private Islamic college are not Muslim and sometimes have to endure callous statements made by the faculty, staff and other students apart from having to experience campus culture which often make the religious international students feel “uncomfortable or marginalized on campus” (Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016 p.20). Thus, further study is essential to expand the understanding of religious students’ experience and how it relates to sense of belonging (Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016).

Besides, sense of belonging refers to the subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics' (Mahar, Cabigo & Stuart, 2013). This puts international students at a higher risk of experiencing less sense of belonging considering that they are studying and living in a new environment. Students' experiences in academic institution contribute to their sense of belonging (Slaten et al., 2016; Pichon, 2016, Wells & Horn, 2015) and seem to also have an impact on students' success (Aish & Schereneir, 2016; Glass et al., 2015; Shook & Clay, 2012; Brown & Burdsal, 2012) as "belongingness appears to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive effect" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Glass and Wesmont (2014) also describe that "belongingness exerted a direct positive effect on academic success" (p. 115).

The challenges that are faced by international students are many as mentioned above. Thus, the issue of sense of belonging including challenges and coping mechanism needs to be addressed as sense of belonging will make international students have 'confidence in themselves' (Aruma & Hanacor, 2017) and to ensure they can perform well and complete their studies which will in turn guarantee more international students to pursue their education in Malaysia subsequently materialising Malaysia's aim to become an education hub in South East Asia.

### **1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) to explore the meaning of sense of belonging towards the college among international students;
- 2) to gain better insight of international students' experiences in their life in relation to sense of belonging towards the college;
- 3) to explore the coping strategies employed by international students to deal with the challenging experiences in a new environment;
- 4) to examine the roles of sense of belonging towards college in enhancing students' performance;
- 5) to explore the international students' suggestions to enhance or develop sense of belonging towards their college.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The central research question for this study is – What is sense of belonging towards the college for international students in a private Islamic College in Kuala Lumpur?

- 1) How do international students define sense of belonging towards the college?
- 2) What are the international students' experiences in relation to sense of belonging towards the college?
- 3) What are the coping strategies employed by international students to deal with the challenging experiences in a new environment?
- 4) What are the roles of sense of belonging in enhancing students' performance?

- 5) What are the international students' suggestions to enhance or develop sense of belonging towards their college?

## **1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theory that supports this research is a Model of Sense of Belonging (MSB) developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997). Their model was to clarify the conceptual underpinning of Tinto's theoretical model of students' departure, testing a conceptual model of the antecedents of sense of belonging to examine the extent to which Latino's students' background characteristics and college experience in their first and second year contribute to their sense of belonging in their third year. Many of the studies on sense of belonging among students were considered or developed based on Tinto's model of students' persistence which is also known as student integration model (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) believed that there is a need to reconsider some of the central assumptions that underlie Tinto's revised model of students' departure as they have not refined their notions of integration. One of the criticisms was the difference between students' interaction in the academic and social systems and their actual psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community which remained unclear (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Thus, the model developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997) intended to point out that many of the measures in Tinto's theory actually "capture information on students' academic and social participations in college and other constructs that were intended to be theoretically distinct from a psychological sense of integration" (p. 326). Besides that, they claimed that minority students can feel as a part of campus community without acculturating, conforming or adopting the values of the majority. The main

findings in their study include merging of students' social and academic interactions as well as membership in social community organization which may contribute to their significant effects on sense of belonging in college. However, they also acknowledged that the outcomes of a subjective sense of belonging have not been the focus in their study as they raised the questions of "whether proximal affiliations (a sense of belonging to small social networks), rather than a feeling of belonging to the overall campus community, are more important to students' persistence" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997 p.341).

In short, this model outlines several variables that act as positive (cognitive mapping, managing resources and family support) and negative (perceptions on hostile racial climate includes experienced discrimination and campus tension) effects on student's sense of belonging. The following is an outline of the final model of sense of belonging by Hurtado and Carter, 1997.

Another theory used in this research is Motivational System Theory (MST) by Martin Ford. Ford came out with a formula that seeks to represent motivational factors in one model in which he opined, "achievement and competence are the results of a motivated, skilful and biologically capable person interacting with a responsive environment" (Ford, 1992, p.70). The formula for effective person-in-context functioning is:

$$\text{Achievement} = \frac{(\text{Motivation} \times \text{skills}) \times \text{Responsive Environment}}{\text{Biological Structure}}$$

In order for a person to be effectively functioning, he or she must have four prerequisites as detailed as follows;

- 1) The person must have motivation needed to initiate and maintain the activity until the goal directing the episode is attained.
- 2) The person must have the skill necessary to construct and execute a pattern of activity that will produce the desired result.
- 3) The person's biological structure and functioning must be able to support the operation of the motivation and skills components.
- 4) The person must have the cooperation of a responsive environment that will facilitate progress towards the goal (Ford, 1992, as cited in Campbell, 2007,p. 12)

This formula is simple yet comprehensive to understand students' achievement as it covers the whole person such their motivational factors (belief, goal and attitude), skills (interpersonal, intrapersonal), biological factors as well as how they respond to their environment.

Campbell (2007) applied MST to measure performance of college students pursuing business degrees and the level of academic performance attained across gender and race lines. From his study, it shows that the levels of academic performance are impacted significantly across gender and race lines for college students pursuing degrees in accredited business.

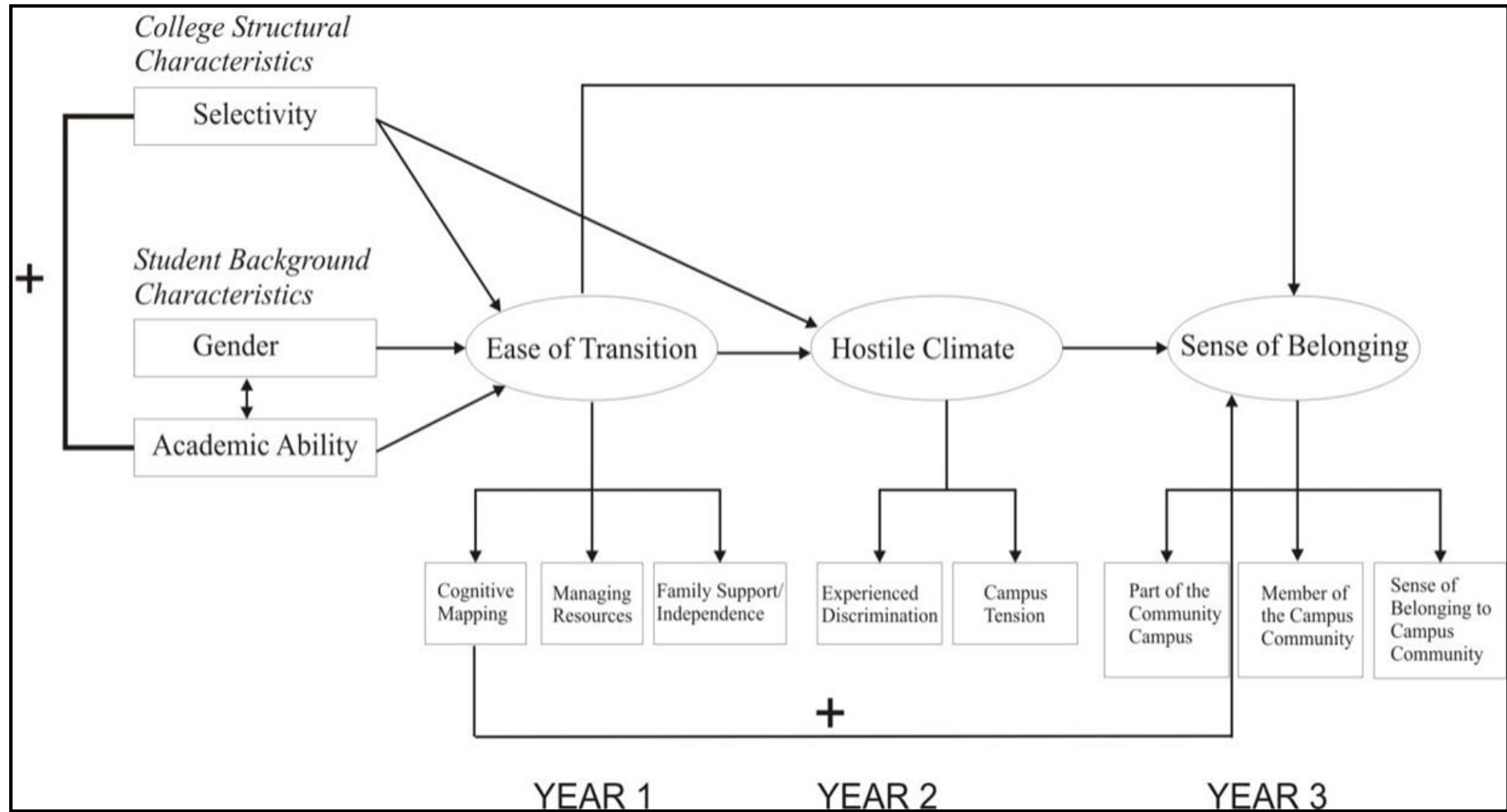


Figure 1.1 Model of Sense of Belonging, developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997)

## **1.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework (Figure 1.2) is based on the Model of Sense of Belonging developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997). The researcher partially adopted this model to understand the experiences and the challenges in relation to the sense of belongingness among international students in a private Islamic college in Kuala Lumpur.

Hurtado and Carter's Model of Sense of Belonging (MSB) helps the researcher to understand factors that influence sense of belonging. However, there is much more which can be explored to understand the sense of belonging among international students, since Hurtado and Carter's study only focused on effects of college transition and perceptions of campus racial climate among Latino students. The Latino students are not really considered as international students in the United States as they are still U.S citizens, and the international students context in this study share a similarity with Latino students as they are minority students. Therefore, the MSB model fits and is suitable to be replicated in this study.

Student background is not included in this conceptual framework as according to Whitten, James and Roberts (2017), student demographic variables such as gender, race and financial concern are not statistically significant. It means according to their study the students' background do not contribute to sense of belonging. The experiences that the students have gone through from year 1 until year 2 as in MSB will not be taken into consideration in this study as the researcher look only at the participants' experiences in their life prior to enrolment and experiences inside and outside of the college at any level and year, without limiting it to year 1 and year 2 students only. To further support this decision, Morrill and Ackermann (2012) were also of the opinion that if sense of belonging were included in the same prediction