



Research Paper

Investigation of International Students Quality on Educational Services

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Abstract

While higher education institutions are among the largest service industries of the 21st century, education has become the most prominent global symbol of prestige. These institutions are tackling multiple tasks not only to maintain and uphold their identities but also to provide quality services. These services create a continuum of high quality education that meets learners' needs, and thus offer golden opportunities for attracting applicants on the local and global levels. A total of 355 international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) were included in this study, which assessed their perception of the quality of teaching and learning and the services provided by the support staff of this institution of higher education. The research scale was a set of questionnaires adopted and translated from Hamidah et al. (2004). The findings from this study mirrored the moderate perception of the international students about the educational services.

Keywords: Teaching; Learning; Service; International; Student; Perception

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1. Introduction

The website of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) suggests that the Malaysian education industry is becoming a popular destination in Asia by getting recognized by the international students. Moreover, according to UNESCO reports, Malaysia ranked number 11 among other higher education institutions. The population of international students escalated from 2,000 in 1995 to 75,000 in 2009, reflecting an upsurge in their numbers. One third of these students are from China and Indonesia, the others are from the Middle East, North Africa and East Asia. Over 480 public and private higher education institutions are operating in Malaysia to meet the needs of their local and international students [1]. Accordingly, the number of the international students at UTM, which is one of Malaysia's leading higher education institutions, has increased considerably. This university has gained popularity and reputation in the local community as well as in the international community. The tremendous upsurge in the number of local and foreign students'

intake by 2012 is indicative of this reputation. According to UTM's Vice Chancellor, 1,235 international postgraduates registered for the 2011/2012 Session II, which was indicative of a remarkable increase in the number of enrolled international students from 8,940 students to 10,175 students. In fact, the highest number of enrolled international students, i.e. 10,888, was achieved in 2011 and 1,910 of these 10,175 student have completed their [2]. Good academic records and excellent educational services could contribute to the promotion of UTM, which provides healthy competition to the other institutions. This is because quality education has been debated for several decades. It is acknowledged by many educationists or scholars that education is the key to success in today's world and it has also been recognized as a profitable industry all over the globe. To receive better services, international students are generally willing to pay extra tuitions. Research has also revealed that international students are prone to more psychological and social distress and stress than the local students [2].

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Examples of these distress factors are cultural shock, social isolation, financial difficulties, immigration laws, anxiety, stress and depression [3-4]. Quality services, therefore, serve to assist these international students, especially in assimilating into the local community particularly when the new environment is not using English as the mother tongue. These students naturally expect to have access not only to quality teaching services but also to support services in the institution they are planning to enroll in. They are definitely willing to pay the price for the quality services they are looking for. The overarching goal of this research was to investigate the international students' perception of educational services, viz. the teaching and learning services and the support staff services, at UTM, Johor Bahru Campus.

2. Literature

2.1 Perception

The process whereby an individual select, organizes and consolidates information into a clear, comprehensible and meaningful image is called "perception" [5]. It is believe that despite similar exposure to particular information, each individual selects and manages the information differently depending on their perception. The perception of quality varies from one person to another. Evangelos and Graham (2007) believed that service quality is determined by the individual's needs and expectation of the services and how the services satisfy their expectations. According to the investigation results, customer satisfaction with service quality is positively associated with the customer's perception of service quality. Services that do not fulfil customer expectations adversely influence the customer's perception. Hence, students' sense of attachment and their loyalty to institutions can be affected by their perception about the educational services. Although the perceptions of quality should normally involve a range of variables, this research solely focuses on how the international students perceive the teaching and learning dimensions as well as the services provided by the support staff at the faculty and School of Graduate Studies.

2.2 Teaching and Learning

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990), learning is the process of acquiring knowledge or skills by studying, experiencing, or being taught. Slavin (2003) defines learning as a personal transformation by virtue of experience. Teaching may also be defined as the act of showing or helping someone learn something, providing them with knowledge, and making them know or understand. However, Brown (2007) suggested that teaching could not be separated from learning. He argued that teaching involves the guiding and facilitation of learning, which sets the scene for learning and

enables learner to learn. To him teaching and learning always occurs together.

2.3 Support Staff

An employee whose is responsible for helping an organization to operate is considered to be part of the support staff. Support staff could include either technical or office workers. The role of the support staff in facilitating learning cannot be overlooked because of the stiff competition among the institutions for attracting new international students. Administrative staffs take on various duties in higher education institutions. These employees include the data entry clerks, analysts, secretaries and executives, while the technical staff is also responsible for maintaining the smooth management of the lectures, equipment and buildings. Being dedicated, efficient and able to work independently or as part of a team are among the expectations surrounding the support staff. According to Yeo (2009), institutions are able to provide quality services to their customers or the international students in our case by dint of their human capitals. The support staff of UTM are expected to greet the 'customers', help other staff, focus on the 'customer' service, be properly capable of time management, and have technology skills just to name a few.

2.4 Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction refers to the fulfilment of customer's needs and expectations [11]. The end users of a product or a service are known as the customers. John and Joseph define customer satisfaction as positive or cognitive reaction provoked in an individual. Kotler suggests that customer satisfaction is a sense of pleasure or disappointment experienced by an individual because of comparing a product's perceived performance with their experience. Customer satisfaction grows with service quality. Hence, satisfaction is defined by the customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. Serving a motivation for organizations and employers, quality enables them to push the boundaries by providing better services. In this regard, service delivery is important to secure the satisfaction of international students. Service quality has great financial implications for institutions that are vital for success. As a measure, customer satisfaction helps discover not only customers' demands but also their needs and expectations. A learner is considered to be a "customer" of an institution. Therefore, the learner's loyalty and sense of attachment to an institution are influenced by their perceptions and opinions of the service quality.

2.4.1 Customer Satisfaction Model

SERVQUAL or Rater is a service quality model for improving customer services. It identifies five key areas that according to the customers form the

service qualities [14]. With the aid of RATER, service providers can concentrate on the dimensions of customer expectations. They are also capable of improving their service quality by identifying their customer expectations. Reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness are the five dimensions addressed by RATER. In this study, the ability to deliver the service promised to the international students is called reliability. The institution must provide services that can satisfy the needs and expectations of the international students. Assurance is the trust and confidence offered by the institution as an attempt to help the international students feel more relaxed and happy. Covering the functions of the support staff, this dimension determines whether they possess the right knowledge and skills to deliver the service to the international students. The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials at UTM is known as tangibility. The sports, banking, accommodation, cafe and other service facilities available in the campus constitute this element. Moreover, the caring individualized attention devoted by the institution to international students in times of difficulty is called empathy. This element is mainly defined by the support staff and academic staff, who may be understanding when dealing and communicating with international students. Responsiveness refers to the response provided by the institution to the international students about their problems and predicament. It determines whether the institution is willing to accommodate their demands and provide prompt services and whether it is able to quickly solve the international students' problems.

Dimensions	Relative Importance
Reliability	32 %
Assurance	19 %
Tangibility	11 %
Empathy	16 %
Responsiveness	22 %

Figure 1: RATER Model rated by relative importance [14].

3. Methodology

3.1. Respondent, questionnaire and data analysis

A set of questionnaires adopted and translated from Bahasa Melayu to English from Hamidah et al. (2004) was distributed among over 400 international students of UTM in April 2011. The research was conducted as a survey of 355 international undergraduate and postgraduate students. The participants included 233 male and 122 female students from various faculties and countries such as Turkey, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Libya (i.e. mixed distribution). The questionnaire was composed of two parts: the

quality of teaching and learning consisted of 38 items while the quality of services provided by the support staff was composed of 11 questions. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the pilot study was also 0.976. Furthermore, to attain the research goal, data analysis was performed in SPSS 16.0 to determine the frequency, percentage, and the mean values. Studying and identifying the perception of international students about the quality of teaching and learning and the services provided by the support staff of UTM constituted the goal of this research.

4. Findings

Table 1: International Students Perception of Teaching and Learning

No	Level	Mean	Male	Female	Total	(%)
1	Low	1.00-2.33	3	1	4	1.13
2	Moderate	2.34-3.67	134	63	197	55.49
3	High	3.68-5.00	96	58	154	43.38
Total			233	122	355	100

Table 2: International Students Perception of Support Staff

No	Level	Mean	Male	Female	Total	(%)
1	Low	1.00-2.33	12	8	20	5.63
2	Moderate	2.34-3.67	110	66	176	49.58
3	High	3.68-5.00	111	48	159	44.79
Total			233	122	355	100

5. Discussion

As regards teaching and learning, the results were indicative of the high expectations of the international students about the provision of teaching and learning services in English. In other words, it was found out that the international students' expectations are that '*English should be used widely in teaching*' (mean 4.05-refer to Appendix) and '*the use of language in the classroom is of high quality*' (mean 3.19-refer to Appendix). Hence, UTM has to address and offer solutions to these issues to be able to uphold its reputation as a favorable international institution meeting the international standard. This institution is recommended to hire qualified academic staff that

is proficient in English. However, in case this option is not feasible, this university is recommended to offer short compulsory courses in English to the non-proficient academic staff. This may indirectly enable the international students to function and communicate successfully with the lecturers or supervisors. Alternatively, to tackle the challenges faced by the international students in studying English texts, UTM should determine higher International English Language Testing System (IELTS) cut-off scores. UTM is also advised to admit only those international students that score higher than 6.5 in their IELTS exam before they are accepted for the post-graduate courses. The undergraduates should also be required to take compulsory English classes. Education quality can be improved and maintained if the importance and the role of English language are known to the entire campus.

Table 3: Overall Perception of Teaching and Learning /Support Staff

No.	Types	Dimensions	Mean	Level
1	Teaching and Learning	Teaching and learning	3.55	Moderate
		Lecturer/Supervisor	3.53	Moderate
2	Support Staff	Support Staff at Faculty	3.49	Moderate
		Support Staff at School of Graduate Studies (SPS)	3.52	Moderate
	Total	Overall Mean	3.52	Moderate

This study revealed the moderate perception of the international students about the lecturers or supervisors at UTM (refer to Table 3). Although 'moderate' may sound "inadequate", the international students at UTM highly respect the lecturers and supervisors according to our findings. The students scored highest on items such as '*do not use students for personal gain*' (mean 3.71-refer to Appendix) and possess '*good academic qualification*' (mean 3.62-refer to Appendix). Abd Razak et al. (2006) suggested that learners deserve a lecturer or supervisor who is an expert in a given area and who is willing to deliver the knowledge. Most international students expect highly qualified lecturers or supervisors. Since the learners believe that lecturers or supervisors "*do not use them for personal gain*", the academic staff of UTM are highly specialized in their profession. These results also reflect the strict adherence of the lecturers or supervisors of UTM to moral codes. Moreover, the international students do respect their lecturers and supervisors. However, since most local students communicate in Bahasa Melayu, which is their spoken language, the international students may think their English language skills are not enough for dealing with the non-English environment of UTM. In addition, the international students' confidence in the education system of UTM is

justified because the majority of the academic staff is highly qualified according to the results. Therefore, there is almost no problem with the academic matters and the possible problems can be solved by the academic staff. Given that UTM plans to improve its educational services from time to time based on the needs and expectations of international students, the results from this study have a significant implication to the educational services at UTM. Nonetheless, the international students' continuous criticism, feedback and assessment would considerably contribute to the improvement in the service quality at UTM. Besides, UTM has to go all out to meet the growing number of international students' needs and expectations, because the international students' perception of educational services provided at UTM is assessed moderate. According to Arambewela and Hall (2009), positive perception of education services may originate from the students' satisfaction. The fruits will be improvements in the positive words of mouth, students' loyalty to that particular institution, and indirect attraction of more international students.

Prior to this research, it might have been believed that the international students are dissatisfied with the support staff either at the faculty level or at the schools of graduate studies because of the extensive bureaucracy involved in many respects. Surprisingly, according to our findings the international students; perception of the UTM support staff is moderate (Table 2), hence the confirmed satisfaction of the international students with the services provided by the support staff. Investigation results also revealed that in the eyes of the international students, the support staff at UTM is always '*well dressed and appear neat*' (mean 3.63-refer to Appendix). At the same time, the students realized that the support staff do '*communicate effectively*' (mean 3.56-refer to Appendix) and do '*keep records accurately*' (mean 3.56-refer to Appendix). These results are in line with the claims made by UTM about the considerable involvement of the support staff in the management of all background operations in the institution. These employees, especially the counter staff, are needed to maintain the service efficiency, because they convey the image of the institution. Although the results from this study indicated a moderate level, continuous improvements are needed to ensure that every goal is achieved for the satisfaction of students' needs. This is because international students always look for high-quality support, orientation programs and efficient service delivery. International students enjoy less cultural and social support than the local students for being in a foreign country, and there are greater differences between their expectations and experiences at foreign universities [18]. International students as well as the support staff dealing with these students should learn the new culture jointly. To ensure the support staff is

exposed to and aware of the different professional cultures and attitudes of other countries monitoring and supervision should be carried out regularly. Cultural awareness can also be raised by offering exchange programs to the support staff and international. As put by Denton (1989), offering training programs to staff is the best way to ensure excellent service quality. Employees are equipped by training, which also maximizes their potential. In addition, it is possible to warmly welcome and make the international students feel at home in a foreign environment by running "courtesy campaigns" such as the "customer friendly" program. A simple smile could make a person sound more approachable. International freshmen would be grateful if the friendly support staff reassured them that their problems would be looked after. For example, UTM launched a SMILE CAMPAIGN on May 2011 by UTM's Vice-Chancellor to encourage its students and staff to motivate and inspire each other in order to make someone else's life a little better even in the worst condition [20].

Although our findings reflected the moderate quality of the service provided by the support staff of UTM, the support staff should be always informed of the benefits of international education so that their attitude is mirrored by the services they offer. In this regard, Soo and Elliott (2010) also stated that international students bring diversity of experience to the undergraduate and postgraduate programs of an institution. The international students who enroll in UTM programs are generally from various countries, cultures, background, and they need time to adapt and assimilate to the local culture. Therefore, the support staff is obliged to prioritize their needs and provide information easily in any condition to reduce or break the cultural boundaries felt by these students.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the international students' perception of educational services at UTM is assessed moderate. Therefore, UTM is recommended to periodically evaluate and assess its services to improve the quality of its educational services and meet the needs and expectations of the international students. Since there is a remedy for every flaw in this university, international students' perspective, feedback and suggestions (if any) shall be valued. Their feedback can contribute to the identification of problems and could be modified, improved and upgraded. Bashir (2007) believe that international students who choose to study in a foreign country expect enhanced quality of services. Lastly, everyone plays a role in improving UTM, as a better learning institution, and its perceived quality of education. The continued enrolment of exceptionally talented international students in UTM and their continued competitive advantage in the education business are contingent upon the provision of higher-quality educational services by this institution.

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Appendix

Teaching and Learning

A. Teaching and Learning

NO	Item	Mean
1	Timetable is suitable.	3.54
2	Timetable is systematic	3.50
3	Supervision of tutorial is relevant.	3.48
4	Attendance is recorded manually.	3.68
5	The use of language in the classroom is of high quality.	3.19
6	The use of language in examination paper is satisfactory.	3.74
7	Length of study is suitable.	3.66
8	Course requirement is not a burden to student.	3.36
9	Industrial training should be implemented in each course.	3.65
10	E-learning facilitates learning.	3.57
11	Courses offered are marketable.	3.53
12	English should be used widely in teaching.	4.05
13	Subject offered is flexible.	3.48
14	Variety of choices in subject offered.	3.45
15	Elective subject is flexible.	3.48
16	Teaching follows the syllabus closely.	3.54
17	Academic advisory system is effective.	3.42
Overall Mean		3.55

B. Lecturer/ Supervisor

NO	Item	Mean
1	Implements a two-way communication with students.	3.52
2	Always on time.	3.43
3	Experience.	3.60
4	Good academic qualification.	3.62

5	Appropriate delivery.	3.46
6	Gives effective lecturer.	3.48
7	Voice is always loud and clear.	3.61
8	Gives appropriate instruction.	3.55
9	Easily accessible.	3.50
10	Pays equal attention to students.	3.54
11	Uses appropriate teaching aids.	3.55
12	Uses teaching aids effectively.	3.53
13	Encourages students to solve problem.	3.54
14	Encourages students to be independent.	3.56
15	Meet student regularly.	3.23
16	Helpful.	3.55
17	Motivated.	3.45
18	Supportive/Dependable.	3.49
19	Provides useful insight.	3.57
20	Do not use students for personal gain.	3.71
21	Keeps record accurately.	3.61
Overall Mean		3.53

SUPPORT STAFF

A. Support staff in the Faculty

NO	Item	Mean
1	Friendly, polite and patient	3.46
2	Always willing to help	3.48
3	Well dressed and appear neat	3.66
4	Efficient	3.50
5	Communicate effectively	3.41
6	Easily accessible	3.43
7	Provides prompt service	3.52
8	Can be trusted with their work	3.53
9	When they promise to do something by a	3.41
10	When students have problems, they are	3.40
11	Keeps records accurately.	3.57
Overall Mean		3.49

B. Support Staff in School of Graduate Studies (SPS)

NO	Item	Mean
1	Friendly, polite and patient	3.55
2	Always willing to help	3.54
3	Well dressed and appear neat	3.63
4	Efficient	3.50
5	Communicate effectively	3.56
6	Easily accessible	3.46
7	Provides prompt service	3.50
8	Can be trusted with their work	3.53
9	When they promise to do something by a certain time, they do so.	3.42
10	When students have problems, they are sympathetic and reassuring.	3.49
11	Keeps records accurately	3.56
Overall Mean		3.52