

Education Service: International Students' Perception

Azizah Rajab

Language Academy

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus, 81310, Malaysia

azizah@utm.my

+6075531775

Hamidah Abdul Rahman, Siti Aisyah Panatik, Roziana Shaari

Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development, Universiti

Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus,

81310, Malaysia

hamidah@utm.my

+6075531896

Abstract

Nowadays education has become the world leading symbol of prestige and higher learning institutions are among the largest service industry in the 21st Century. These institutions are facing multiple tasks not only to maintain and uphold their identities but also to provide quality services which offer golden opportunities not only in attracting applicants either locally or internationally, but provides a continuum of high quality learning that meet learners needs. This survey is conducted among 355 international students' in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia UTM), to investigate their perception towards the quality of teaching and learning and the services provided by the support staff in this institution of higher learning. A set of questionnaire which has been adopted and translated from Hamidah et al. (2004) has been used as instrument of this study. The result shows that the perception of the international students towards the educational services is at a moderate level.

Keywords: Teaching, Learning, Service, International, Student, Perception.

1. Introduction

According to the Malaysia of Higher Education (MOHE) website, Malaysia education industry is getting recognized by the international students and becoming a popular destination in Asia. Currently, UNESCO reported that Malaysia is rated at number 11 among other higher learning institutions. In fact, the number of international students has jumped and escalated from 2,000 in 1995 to 75,000 in 2009 with one third of them are from China and Indonesia while others are from Middle East, North Africa and East Asia. Altogether, Malaysia has more than 480 public and private higher learning institutions to cater the needs of these local and international students (Harian Metro, 2012). Based on these figures, as one of Malaysia's leading higher learning institutions, there has been a considerable increase in the number of international students studying in UTM. Its popularity and reputation has escalated not only in the local community but internationally. This is shown through the tremendous upsurge of locals and foreign students' intake until the year 2012. According to UTM's Vice Chancellor, a total number of 1,235 international postgraduates registered for 2011/2012 Session II which saw a remarkable rise of overall international students' enrolment from 8,940 students to 10,175 students. In fact, 2011 has showed the highest total recorded international students with 10,888 and out of this total population, 1,910 of them have completed their studies (Harian Metro, 2012). Good academic record and excellent education services could play a role in promoting UTM which provides healthy competition among other institutions since quality education has become a subject of argument since decades ago. Many educationist or scholars affirm that education is the key to today's success and has been recognized as a money making industry in all part of the world. Generally, international students are willing to pay extra for better services as research has shown that international students are prone to suffer more psychological and social distress than local students (Ward, 2001). These include culture shock, social isolation, financial difficulties, immigration laws, anxiety, stress and depression (Lin & Yi, 1997; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Therefore, quality services are needed in order to assist these international students especially to help them assimilate into the local community particularly when the new environment is not using English as the first language. Naturally, these students expect to have access not only to quality teaching but also support services in the institution they plan to enroll. They are definitely looking for quality services for the price that they have to pay. This study aims to investigate the international students' perceptions towards educational services in UTM, Johor Bahru Campus mainly on two aspect; teaching and learning and support staff services.

2. Literature

2.1 Perception

Perception is a process where an individual selects, organises and deduces information into a clear, comprehensible and meaningful image (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000). They believe that although given similar exposure towards certain information, how each individual choose and manage the information differs and depends on one's interpretation. Different people perceive quality differently. Evangelos and Graham (2007), agree that service quality depends on one's needs and expectation of the services and how the services meet with his/her expectations. Research shows there is a positive relationship between customer perception and customer satisfaction towards service quality. Services that do not fulfil customer expectation have negative effect towards their

perception. Thus, students' perception towards the educational services can affect their sense of belonging and their loyalty towards the institution. Even though perceptions of quality should normally consider a range of variables, this study is only interested at how the international students perceive teaching and learning aspect plus services provided by the support staff at the faculty and School of Graduate Studies.

2.2 Teaching and Learning

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) defines learning as gaining knowledge or skill by studying, from experience or being taught. Slavin (2003) defines learning as a change in an individual caused by experience. Teaching may be defined as showing or helping someone learn something, providing with knowledge, causing one to know or understand. However, Brown (2007) believes that teaching cannot be defined apart from learning because teaching involves guiding and facilitating learning which set the conditions for learning and enables learner to learn. To him teaching and learning always occurs together.

2.3 Support Staff

Support staff is an employee whose work is helping an organisation to operate. Support staff could be either technical or administrative workers. As a result of vast competition among institutions in drawing new international students, the contribution of support staff in facilitating learning cannot be overlooked. Administrative staffs in higher learning institutions undertake a variety of duties. This includes data entry clerks, analysts, secretaries and executives while technical staffs are responsible in maintaining the smooth running of the lectures, equipment and buildings. Support staffs are always expected to be dedicated, efficient and able to work alone or as part of a team. Yeo (2009) emphasizes that an institution is heavily dependent on the human resources to provide a good service to its customers or in this context the international students. In fact, support staffs in UTM are expected not only to greet 'customers', and help other staff, but also focus on 'customer' service, possess good time management and technology skills, just to name a few.

2.4 Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as fulfilment of customer's needs and expectations (Oliver, 1997). Customers are people who receive a product or service. John and Joseph (2002) define customer satisfaction as positive or cognitive reaction within an individual self. Customer satisfaction, according to Kotler (2000) is a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to his experience. The higher the service quality, the more satisfied the customer will be. Thus, satisfaction is based on consumer expectations and perceptions of service quality. Quality is a motivator for organisations and employers to push themselves to greater heights and provide better services. In this context, service delivery is important to ensure international students' satisfaction. Service quality has great financial implications to the institution which is essential to its success. Customer satisfaction measure is a tool for discovering not only customers' wants but also understanding their needs and expectations. In an institution, learner is considered as 'customer'. Consequently, learner perceptions and opinions towards service provided affect his loyalty and sense of belonging.

2.4.1 Customer Satisfaction Model

The SERVQUAL or Rater is a service quality model to improve customer service which identifies five key areas which form the service qualities from customers' perspective (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). RATER helps service provider focuses on the dimensions of customer expectations. By identifying customer expectations, service providers are able to improve and serve customers better. The five dimensions in the RATER model include reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness. In context to this study, reliability is the ability to deliver the service that has been promised to the international students. The services offered by the institution should be able to satisfy international students' needs and expectations. Assurance is the trust and confidence that the institution is able to provide to make international students feel more relaxed and happy. This aspect includes the function of support staffs whether they have the right knowledge and skills to deliver the service to the international students. Tangibility is the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials in UTM. This element includes the sport facility, banking, accommodation, cafe and other service facilities in campus. Empathy is the caring individualised attention that the institution gives to international students when they face difficulties. Support staff and academic staff do play an important role in this element as whether they demonstrate understanding when dealing and communicating with international students. Responsiveness refers to the response international students receive from the institution regarding their problems and predicament. Whether the institution is willing to accommodate their demands, provide prompt service and whether the institution is able to solve the international students' problem and difficulty at a speedy rate.

Figure 1: RATER Model rated by relative importance from Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1990)

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

3. Methodology

3.1 Respondent, questionnaire and data analysis

In April 2011, a set of questionnaire adopted and translated from Bahasa Melayu to English from Hamidah et al. (2004) was distributed to more than 400 international students in UTM. Survey method was chosen and a total of 355 international undergraduate and postgraduate students participated in this study with a mix distribution of 233 male and 122 female from various faculties and countries such as Turkey, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Libya. The questionnaire was divided into two categories; quality of teaching and learning comprises of 38 items questions and quality of services by the support staff comprises of 11 items questions. The Alpha Cronbach value for pilot study was 0.976. SPSS version 16.0 was used to

analyze the data in identifying the frequency, percentages and also the mean in order to answer the objective of the study which is to identify the perception of international students towards the quality of teaching and learning and services provided by the support staff in UTM.

4. Findings

Table 1: International Students Perception towards 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 towards 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

Table 3: Overall Perception towards 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

5. Discussion

In the teaching and learning aspect, the results show that the international students have high expectation towards the use of English in teaching and learning. The results indicate 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, to maintain the reputation as a favourable international institution with international standard, UTM has to address and provide solution to these issues. It is suggested that qualified academic staffs whose proficient in English language should be hired. However, if this notion is not possible, then it is recommended that short courses in English for non-proficient

academic staff should be made compulsory. Indirectly, this may help international students to function and communicate successfully with their lecturers or supervisors. Alternatively, the problems of international students experience in studying using the medium of English could also be solved if UTM impose higher score for International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entrance requirement. It is advisable for UTM to accept international students who score more than 6.5 for their IELTS before they are accepted to the post-graduate courses and for undergraduates they are required to attend compulsory English classes. Once everyone on campus recognizes the important and the role of English language, education quality can be improved and education quality can be maintained.

The result of this study shows that the perception of the international students towards lecturer or supervisor in UTM is at a moderate level (refer to Table 3). Even though some may think that 'moderate' is not good, but based on the results of this study, the international students in UTM have high regards for their lecturers and supervisors. 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) are the two highest scored items. According to Abd Razak et al. (2006) 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 their lecturers or supervisors who are highly qualified. This study confirmed that UTM academic staffs are very professional in practising their profession as learners believe that lecturer or supervisor '*do not use them for personal gain*'. The results also demonstrate that lecturers or supervisors in UTM are highly ethical in their work. The results also demonstrate that the international students do respect their lecturers and supervisors even though the international students may find that their English language skills are not adequate to allow them to cope with the non-English environment in UTM since most local students communicate in Bahasa Melayu as their spoken language. However, the international students' confidence in the education system in UTM is justified since most of the academic staffs hired are highly qualified as stated by the results. Therefore, issues related to academic matters are literally non-existent or able to be resolved by these academic staffs themselves. Nevertheless, the results of this study have a significant implication on the educational services in UTM as the institution plans to improve its educational services from time to time based on the needs and expectations of international students. Nonetheless, international students' continuous criticism, feedback and assessment would greatly help to improve the service quality of UTM. As the international students' perception of educational services provided in UTM is only at a moderate level, UTM has to go all out to meet the growing number of international students' needs and expectations. According to Arambewela and Hall (2009) students' satisfaction would definitely lead to positive perception towards educational services. This would in turn encourage positive word of mouth communication, encourage students' retention and loyalty towards that particular institution and indirectly attract more international students' enrolment.

Before this study was conducted, some might have thought that the international students might have displeasure feelings towards the support staff either at the faculty level or at the School of Graduate Studies since a lot of bureaucracy are involved in several areas. Surprisingly, the results show that the perception of the international students towards UTM support staff is at a moderate level (refer to Table 2). This indicates that the international students are satisfied with the services provided by these support staff. Results indicate that international students found that the support

staff in UTM is always ‘*well dressed and appear neat*’ (mean 3.63-refer to Appendix). At the same time, they found that the support staff do ‘*communicate effectively*’ (mean 3.56-refer to Appendix) and do ‘*keep records accurately*’ (mean 3.56-refer to Appendix). Therefore, these results are consistent with UTM emphasizes that support staff plays a major role in the running of all the background works in the institution. They are needed to maintain the efficiency in service delivery especially the counter staffs because they are the image of the institution. However, even though the results of this study is at a moderate level, continuous improvements need to be done to ensure that every goal is achieved to satisfy students’ needs due to reasons that international students always look for high quality support, orientation programs and efficient service delivery. Being in a foreign place; international students have less culture and social support compared to local students and there would be a greater difference between their expectations and experience in university (Khawaja and Dempsey, 2008). Learning a new culture is not limited to international students, but also with any support staff who handles these students. Regular monitoring should be employed to ensure that support staff is being exposed and aware of the different work culture and attitude of other countries. Exchange programmes for support staff and international students should be implemented to create cultural awareness among them. Denton (1989) suggested that training programs for staff is the best way to ensure excellent service quality. Undergoing trainings equips employees and maximise their potential. “Courtesy campaign” such as “customer friendly” program would make international students feel welcomed and comfortable in a foreign environment. A simple smile would make one look more approachable. New international students would definitely appreciate the warmth of support staff to reassure them that their problems are looked into. In support of this, UTM for example, has 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 a worst condition (www.utm.my).

Even though the results of this study show that the quality of support staff in UTM is at a moderate level, support staff should always be informed of the benefits of international education so that their attitude would be reflected in the services that they offered. This is supported by Soo and Elliott (2010) who belief that international students bring diversity of experience to the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of an institution. Generally, international students’ who enrol in UTM came from various countries, cultures, backgrounds and they need time to adapt and assimilate to the local culture. Therefore, it is part of the responsibilities of the support staff to prioritize their needs and make access information easily in any condition to reduce or break the cultural boundaries felt by these students.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the international students’ perception towards educational services in UTM is at a moderate level. Nevertheless, in providing better quality educational services to fulfill the needs and expectations of international students, UTM should evaluate at periodic intervals its services. International students’ perspective, feedback and suggestions, if any, should not be neglected as there is solution for every weakness in the university. Their response would assist in identifying problems and could be modified, improved and upgraded. As stated by Bashir (2007) international students who choose to study in foreign countries expect enhanced quality. Lastly, everyone has a role to play in making UTM a better learning institution in order to improve its perceived quality of

education. By providing high quality educational services, UTM will be ensured of continued entry of exceptional high quality international students and stay competitive in this education business.

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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 certain time, they do so.	3.41
10	When students have problems, they are sympathetic and reassuring.	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