

## **THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE EDUCATION QUALITY**

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### **Abstract**

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2000), two individual could experience similar exposure but how each individual chooses, coordinates and interprets the information depends greatly on each needs, desire and aspirations. Relatively, a quality service or product provided by an organization will greatly influence customer's perception on whether to accept or reject the service offered. This paper will highlight and discuss the international student's perception of service quality in higher learning institute particularly elements that are related to teaching and learning quality in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. A total of 355 international students participated in this study and the instrument used was a set of questionnaire adopted from Hamidah *et.al* (2004) based on the Analysis Model of SERVPERF.

**Key Words:** *International, Education, Service, Quality.*

**JEL Classification:** 125

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has been recognized as a money-making industry in many parts of the world. Recently, this profitable trade has also seen its growth in the public and private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Each of these institutions is competing to offer the finest and most excellent service to attract international students who are considered as 'customers' in this money generating and lucrative business. Correspondingly, the Malaysia government in gearing towards its developing economic status, grants its support to the institutions by providing various incentives as these international students are treated as an asset as they are the 'small ambassadors' to their countries. In fact, to generate healthy competition, some institutions offer generous scholarships for qualified international students to establish its competitive status in education. Each institution tries to make available high quality services on its campus surroundings and provides good atmosphere in creating a center of excellence for these prospective 'customers'. Priorities are given in hiring qualified academicians in meeting the highly anticipated and demanding needs of its now valued customers. Simultaneously, to control this situation from getting out of hand, the Ministry of Education has also taken its initiative to implement certain standards to ensure good and quality services offered by the institutions, thus maintaining its education quality. Some of the standard measurements used are the Management Quality Assurance (MQA) and the International Organization of Standards (ISO) while most institutions would have to acquire to the National Accreditation Board (LAN) to obtain its courses recognition.

Besides paving its way to quality education, the higher learning institutions have the responsibility of maintaining their international students' satisfaction. This must be given priority similar to marketing a product. Chai and his colleagues (2009) believe that quality services become one of the most vital factors in fulfilling new customer's needs which are the key indicators to customer's faithfulness. In an organization, when marketing a product, customer satisfaction is always related with the assessments made by the customer sentiment and anticipation before and after obtaining the product. Similarly, in higher learning institutions, international students' satisfaction towards services and facilities provided by these institutions are extremely significant. As suggested by Helgesen and Nettet (2007) an institution administrators should give more attention on the quality service it provides, in order to increase the students' satisfaction level as they are its main customers and their views are imperative and important.

## **1.1. Objective**

The objective of this study is to identify the international students' satisfaction level in the teaching and learning provided by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

## **2. LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Definition of Concept**

#### **2.1.1. Customer Satisfaction**

Hoyer and MacInnis (2001) regard satisfaction as a feeling related with approval, contentment, feelings of freedom, pleasure or enjoyment that have a positive effect on an organization productivity. Meanwhile, John and Joseph (2002) define customer satisfaction as a positive or cognitive reaction within an individual self. However, in management area, customer satisfaction refers to the result of what customers' anticipate and what customers' get from the service rendered (Caruana, Money, & Berthon, 2000; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1988). Clarke (2001) states that an effective customer satisfaction not only refers to the value worth but it must also be able to create the constant dependability among customers.

#### **2.1.2. Service Quality and Perception**

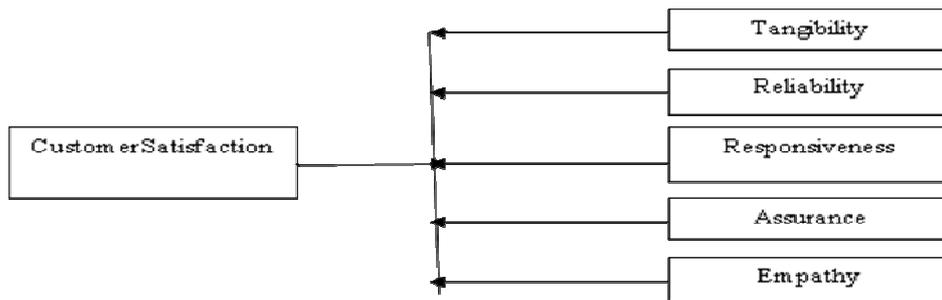
In measuring quality or performance in an institution, Sik and Mahatma (2011) define quality as an intangible concept which can be evaluated by various markers such as identified service quality, number of students who graduated or official recognitions of the institution. Simultaneously, quality is also referred to as whether the product is considered suitable for consumer or the degree to which the merchandise successfully satisfies the customer needs (Beverly *et al.*, 2002). Robert (2010) believes that the assessment of product refers to the comparison between what an individual expects and perceives of the product. Asghar *et al.* (2011) consider the higher service quality in institutions as becoming competitive and would be able to determine the customer satisfaction and dependability level. According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2000), customer perception is extremely important in a decision making process because perception can be defined as a process where an individual selects, organizes and deduce what he has seen and received into his mind before making his own interpretation.

## 2.2 Model

### 2.2.1. Model of Customer Satisfaction

This study is based on the model of customer satisfaction by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1988). This model consists of five critical criteria in relation to international students satisfaction level on the quality of services offered at UTM. The five criteria's are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Figure 1 below shows the model of customer satisfaction:

**Figure-1: Model of Customer Satisfaction**



Source: Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1988:21)

Tangibility is one important factor that can be observed and perceived by the international students. This element must be given special attention because it is noticeable and a mirror reflection of the service quality provided by UTM. On the other hand, reliability refers to the trust given by the international students to the UTM authority of the service offered in order to satisfy their needs. Respectively, reliability is a link between UTM and the international students. The link means the ability to provide quality education and good service to its international students. If the service offered is acceptable and accurate, the international students will put a high degree of trust in the authority capability.

The third factor in this model is responsiveness which refers to the reaction or reply received by the international students through UTM authority in understanding their problems and predicament. If the put forward services are perfect and precisely similar as their expectations and needs, the international students will feel a tremendous amount of assurance. The international students will then build up enough confidence to the UTM authority for giving them the best service possible. This assurance will make them feel more relaxed and happy thus comes the feeling of empathy. Empathy refers to the way UTM authority tries to comply with the international students' problems and needs. Thus, the

international students' satisfaction level will increase and they will feel a sense of belonging and connected by the understanding by the UTM authority in compromising with their interests and providing quality services which meet their expectations.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Respondent, Instrument and Data Analysis

A total of 355 international students from various faculties and countries who are still studying in UTM are randomly selected to participate in this study in April 2011. 233 are male and 122 are female respondents. These students come from countries such as Turkey, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Libya. The instrument used is a set of questionnaire adopted from Hamidah *et al.*(2004). The Cronbach alpha value for the pilot study is 0.976. Data analysis involved quantitative and qualitative method using the SPSS version 16.0. The analysis is used to identify the international students' satisfaction level towards teaching and learning quality in UTM. Table 1 shows the three major categories to differentiate the satisfaction level towards teaching and learning:

**Table 1: The Mean Value**

Mean Value	Satisfaction Level
1.00 - 2.33	Low
2.34 - 3.67	Moderate
3.68 - 5.00	High

### 4. FINDINGS

**Table 2: International Student Satisfaction Level According To Teaching and Learning**

Level	Mean	N	(%)
Low	1.00 -2.33	35	9.9
Moderate	2.34 – 3.67	229	64.5
High	3.68 – 5.00	91	25.6
Total		355	100

**Table 3: T-Test Analysis for Teaching and Learning Based on Gender**

Element	Gender	N	Mean	Df	t-Test	Sig.
Teaching and Learning Quality	Male	233	3.22	353	-0.823	0.494
	Female	122	3.28			

\*The mean difference is significant at values 0.05

**Table 4: Level of Teaching and Learning**

No.	Items	Mean	Level
1	Teaching and learning	3.55	Moderate
2	Lecturer/Supervisor	3.53	Moderate
3	Student (international)	3.58	Moderate
<b>Total Mean</b>		<b>3.55</b>	<b>MODERATE</b>

## 5. DISCUSSION

The result of this study shows that international students satisfaction towards the three main elements in teaching and learning quality in UTM is at a moderate level (refer to Table 2 and 4). This result is consistent with the research conducted by Hamidah *et.al.* (2004) on the perception of the first and third year mainstream students in UTM that produce similar finding. Munawar, Ahmad, & Nawaz (2011), indicate in their study that service quality does have a significant relationship with student satisfaction level. The result of this study has a huge implication towards teaching and learning in UTM, since the international students are giving their perspective towards the services offered based on their first hand experience in UTM. As stated by Oldfield and Baron (2000), it is the job of the institution on how to deal with the problem because students' criticism and assessment are part of the service quality. Therefore UTM has an uphill battle ahead of them to resolve this issue in providing better service to meet the international students' expectation as the number keeps growing and currently their perception of the services provided is only at a moderate level. As stated by Clarke (2001) an effective customer satisfaction not only refers to the value worth but it must also be able to create the constant dependability among customers. Since the result of this study is at moderate level, the 'dependability' factor is still not there which means there are still some areas that the international students are not fully satisfied.

In the area of teaching and learning the least satisfactory items include 'the use of language in the classroom is of high quality' (mean 3.19) and 'academic advisory system is effective' (3.42). Even though these items are the least satisfactory items, they are still in the moderate and more towards high level. However, to make it totally in the high level, these are the areas that UTM has to tackle quickly. UTM should hire more qualified staffs who posses good reputation in conducting research and proficient in their language usage. Academic staffs less proficient in using English language should be sent for courses to help them

improve their proficiency level. This is important so that international students could understand their lectures and academic staffs could uphold quality teaching, understand and meet the international students' needs. Academic advisory system should also be improved by not putting the burden solely on the shoulder of academic staffs. Some of these can be distributed among the non-academic staffs that are hired especially to help the international students or set up a special center to cater for their problems, for example an international office that have advisory service for international students.

As for lecturer and supervisor category, the least satisfactory items include 'lecturer/supervisor meets student regularly' (mean 3.23) and 'lecturer and supervisor are always on time'(mean 3.43). Again, even though these items are the least satisfactory items, they are still in the moderate and more towards high level. However, to make it totally in the high level, UTM has to improve on few minor problems. International students as customers have a high expectation of a product or service provided. If the product or service received is beyond their expectation, their satisfaction level can be at a high level. However, if the product or service does not meet their expectation and requirements, the result would be lower. This is supported by Robert (2010), who says that interaction between academic staffs and students are also part of the assessment students make when analyzing the teaching and learning quality of an institution. The international students' anticipation of a highly qualified and knowledgeable supervisor sometime affects their perception. This perception is normally constructed before teaching and learning process can even take place. Navarro, Iglesias, & Torres (2005) say that students usually evaluate the quality of institution based on the grounds of tangibility (teachers), reliability and responsiveness (method of teaching) and management of the institution. According to them, these are the main factors that determine student satisfaction level. Therefore, academic staffs in UTM has the responsibility of meeting international students regularly based on their needs and should be on time either for lecture, supervision or other appointment. This is to ensure that the international students' receive the necessary attention whenever they are faced with academic or non-academic problems.

The international students who enrolled in UTM come from different cultures and backgrounds, and the adjustment process that they take to assimilate in Malaysia may take time. This is proven under the item 'understand local culture' (mean 3.33) which shows that the international students do not fully understand the Malaysian culture even though they study in UTM. However, this item is more towards moderate-high level rather than moderate-low. Thus it is not a serious

problem but to make the result better, UTM authority especially the one involved with curriculum to introduce 'local culture' as a subject to be taken by these international students or provide exposure so that they are aware, value and appreciate the local culture. At the same time, the international students should act on campus in accordance to the acceptance of this culture so that they do not offend any party. As emphasized by Kruse *et.al*, (2010) realizing new needs and creating new entrepreneurial opportunities will help customer gain higher satisfaction level on the services provided

## **6. CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, the result of this study shows that the teaching and learning quality at UTM is at a moderate level. Even though UTM as a research university has successfully enrolled thousands of international students, they should be more understanding of the international students' predicament when studying locally. International students' expectation of a quality services have to be taken seriously in order to produce highly motivated students and quality products which can compete at a higher level specifically after graduation. UTM also needs to be more proactive by re-examining and re-organizing its service quality in providing better service quality that fulfils international student needs especially those items that are in the moderate-low level. This notion is supported by Sureshchandar, Rajendran and Anantharaman (2002) who say that there is definitely a high relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

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