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Perceptions of international students on service quality delivery in a Malaysian public university

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of international students of service quality delivery (SQD) in a Malaysian public university.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was limited to the University's immediate physical environment and its associated human and systems-based services. The physical environment in this study focused on the University buildings and all their contents, for example, the physical structures and infrastructure and related services. Qualitative methods were used and purposeful sampling was employed to select six international students from three different regions who were attending graduate level programs in a Malaysian public university to give their views on the quality of service delivery directly linked to the physical environment of the university. An understanding of students' thoughts and expectations of the quality of services offered, especially given that they were from varied social and cultural settings, is crucial to the adoption of measures for continuous improvement in today's customer driven higher educational market.

Findings – The results show that the university is appreciated for its environmental friendly vegetation, numerous facilities and several policies and regulations allied to its environment but they also show gaps between the well developed policies and their corresponding implementation; the results also evoke the differences in understanding and implementation of services, requiring empathy in today's education world, between senior staff and their junior counterparts as well as interpretation of experiences of services encountered by international students.

Originality/value – The findings and discussion, especially with regard to the systems and human related service responses, could serve as a base for understanding some of the thoughts of international students and could be replicated on other campuses with a view to understanding how other students feel about their physical environments and the related services as well.

Keywords Service quality, Universities, International students, Malaysia, Individual perception

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Service quality delivery presents the public face an institution is identified with and this identity is gaining ground as an important consideration in higher educational institutions. Service quality assesses the performance of products and services from the customers perspective (Manjunatha and Shivalingaiah, 2004). Thus the customer plays a pivotal role in determining the level of satisfaction with a given product or

service. The insistence on quality assurance initiatives by funding bodies and the compulsory dictates to compete both by ascending higher in league tables as well as attracting more students has changed the course of higher education. Malaysia's Public Universities are no exception to such a premise.

The ongoing increase in the number of higher educational institutions through the opening of branch university campuses underscores the prominence university education is gaining, but also points to an institution's competitiveness in attracting and retaining students. As Shattock (2003) indicated, managing universities is a holistic process; the functions are closely interlocked and mutually dependent so that a weakness in one function can affect others and strengths in key functions can be mutually reinforcing. Service has been recognized as an effective tool for a competitive advantage (Voon, 2007), which is why much attention is currently focused on it. The rapid democratization of education has necessitated the establishment of a more uniform and systematic approach to quality assurance in public universities (Ministry of Education, 2004). Prominent among the Quality Assurance schemes is service quality delivery, which is usually easily identified and conceived by *inter alia* the students who are direct recipients of education. Student expectations are a valuable source of information (Sander *et al.*, 2000; Hill, 1995), and, as direct users of the services offered by universities, often have a pragmatic view of what is being offered and how it can be improved upon.

International students have become an important commodity in today's higher education arena and many countries like Britain, Australia and the United States have put in place measures aimed at attracting them. Britain instituted a package of incentives geared towards attracting more non-European students; the Australian Government, likewise, has been working with its Universities to streamline efforts to attract international students while in the US, a study was sanctioned to restore competitiveness for international students and scholars (Pandit, 2007). Like these countries, Malaysia's higher education authorities have recognized the importance of international students and have taken significant steps to attract them. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, as of 2009, had 2 percent of the world's international student population and was ranked the world's 11th most preferred study destination. In 2010 Malaysia had about 80,000 international students from between 160 and 170 countries and is on the verge of being in the top ten countries based on the number of international students (MOHE, 2010). The country is therefore a strong force in international Education and thus they need to examine and understand how these students fit into and perceive the physical environment of the university, which will likely have similarities differences with their previous experience.

Much of the service quality delivery carried out in universities in Malaysia has been focused on a more general assessment of domains, which are incorporated within the physical environment and its accompanying human and system based services. Konting *et al.* (2009) conducted an exit survey for the assessment of quality in UPM academic programs and services mainly among graduating students. The service domains in this study were mainly broad based and included teaching and learning experiences, administration and student services. Their findings also explored general areas bordering on student satisfaction, attributes of achievement of graduate students and satisfaction levels based on gender, study programs cluster and residences. Similar studies have been carried out in service related facets of the universities in Malaysia notably the University Libraries and many of these are quantitative studies that rely

mainly on the mean and standard deviation among other numerical tools for
evaluation. But since service quality deals with human interactions, a qualitative
enquiry that seeks deeper understanding and descriptions of experiences of the target
group is more appropriate in assessing attributes, especially those related to students'
interaction with a university's the physical environment.

Services connected to the immediate physical environment are unique to the identity
of a University and can thus be used to a University's advantage if they are identified
and further researched with a view to further improvement. Therefore a more focused
study that gives the immediate physical environment more attention among the other
variables can help establish its significance in today's international higher education
market. International students contribute much needed funding due to the high tuition
fees they pay compared to their local counterparts and they add cultural diversity to
the university communities. Incorporating international students within such a study
can be instrumental in evincing a body of thought about service delivery which, if
improved, can be rewarding to the Universities in the long run.

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to educe the views of international students of the
quality of service delivery in a public university in Malaysia. Quality of service
delivery was limited to the domain of the University's physical environment and its
accompanying human and system-based services. This study, has the important
rationale of informing the university authorities, lecturers, staff and students of the
thoughts of a group of international students with significant variances regarding
service quality delivery within the context of the University's physical environment.

Previous studies of service delivery have always embedded the physical
environment into larger units such that its usefulness and impact ends up being
overshadowed by the other elements. The quality of services related to the immediate
physical environment of a University such as the physical terrain, classroom space and
ventilation issues, safety and security issues and facilities connectivity are the focus of
this research. The effectiveness of the systems based services connected to the physical
environment, such as the policies, guidelines, instructions and signposts for instance
was also viewed as important. In addition, the human-based services such as the
response to issues of thefts, robberies, environmental related services have an impact
on perceptions of the university.

Quality in higher educational institutions (HEI) is a dynamic ongoing matter and, to
some extent, relies on the students' perception of the value being offered by the HEIs
(Konting *et al.*, 2009). Such views, it is hoped, can help encourage the university
authorities to understand the quality of services offered as assessed by the
international students. Therefore the findings of this research can help the
understanding of the thoughts of a group of stakeholders i.e. international students.
This, together with further studies of the other stakeholders, will evince how services
connected to the physical environment can be structured or further improved to
enhance the satisfaction of students and the general perception of the university.

Methodology

A qualitative design was used for this study and Maximum Variation Sampling (MVS),
a special form of purposive sampling, was employed to select and interview six

international students from different regional backgrounds and faculties currently pursuing PhD in the University being studied. Purposive sampling has been identified by scholars as appropriate for specific inquiries that target a specific group of people especially when a researcher wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation (Neuman, 2003). This is important because studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2002). Maximum Variation Sampling (MVS) was used to select students from different geographical locations who also had varied cultural backgrounds. In MVS, units are included that maximize differences on special characteristics (Ary *et al.*, 2008). The reason for use of MVS was, despite the limitations of generalization of qualitative research, to be able to gauge how the six respondents from various geographical locations and cultures view service quality delivery. This type of sampling reveals differences but may also identify commonalities across the units (Ary *et al.*, 2008). Maximum variation sampling is also aptly used when the sample size is very small (List, 2004), as was the case in this study.

Six subjects from two continents were chosen. All were currently pursuing their PhDs in one of the Public Universities in Malaysia. Two hailed from African Countries, West and North Africa specifically while the other four were Asians but from different countries with varied cultural orientations to enable the gathering of rich responses viewed from different perspectives. Guided by the specifications of MVS, subjects were chosen from four different faculties and all of them were at least in their fourth semester in the university. The reason for targeting PhD students who had at least spent four semesters was to be able to have respondents who had experienced studying in other institutions and have also spent sufficient time in the university under study to be able to assess the quality of facilities.

Interviews were conducted in order to get information from respondents who are directly interacting with the physical environment and related services of the university under study. Frey and Oishi (1995) defined an interview as a purposeful conversation in which one person asks prepared questions (interviewer) and another answers them (respondent). Also since qualitative research was more interested in the depth of the data rather than breadth and requires the researcher to play an active role in the data collection (Wimmer and Dominick, 1997), the semi-structured interview method was preferred in this study as it enabled interjections at the appropriate times to further seek clarification of ambiguous responses and in instances where important points were given by the subjects that needed further elaboration.

The interviews were recorded on an audio tape as suggested by Ary *et al.* (2008) because this method was much less distracting and accurately recorded the proceedings during the entire session. The consent of the subjects was sought and approval given prior to recording the interview on tape. After the initial interview more data was collected to clarify and further elaborate on some topics. This was mainly done by telephone conversation and on one occasion the subject chose to respond by electronic mail. The three-level ladder of analytical abstraction developed by Carney in 1990 and presented by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to aggregate and synchronize the data collected from the respondents. In the first stage the data was reconstructed to fit a narrative and then categorized to match sets. The second stage involved the repackaging and aggregating the data and the third stage involved the developing and testing of the propositions, which were further constructed into an explanatory framework.

Validity was assured by follow up questions to clarify points and the verification of the individual's responses by issuing them with drafts of the initial interview reports. Further a parallel observation tour of some salient facilities was separately undertaken after the interview in order to assess the reliability of some of the responses given in respect of these. This study may not be generalized because it is unique in looking at the physical environment of one University, which would naturally be different from any other university. However, the findings could serve as good reference points for some of the issues raised about services related to the physical environment of a university and thus provide a basis for similar enquiries by other universities.

Findings and discussions

The six interviewees are labeled INT1, INT2, INT3, INT4, INT5 and INT6 for anonymity. All six respondents were above the age of 40 years and had attended a University other than their current university either in their home countries or overseas during their Bachelors or Masters Degree programmes. INT1, INT2, INT5 and INT6 are male while INT3 and INT4 are female and all of them are PhD candidates in four different faculties. All respondents were in their fourth semester or later in their research degrees. In addition all of them were employed in their respective countries and had at least eight-to-ten years work experience.

1. Quality of service related to the immediate Physical environment

All the six respondents had a positive view of the university's physical environment, describing it as serene with reasonably apposite natural vegetation befitting an academic environment and also viewed positively the availability of several other facilities like the Health Centre, Restaurants, sitting spaces, parking lots, clean water facilities, toilets and places of worship. All of them also stressed the health benefits associated with an environment full of vegetation and fresh air like the University under review. INT1, INT5 and INT6 described it as one of the best in Malaysia in comparison to the other universities, three of which INT1 indicated he was privileged to visit. INT2, and INT3 and INT4 corroborated this view in their respective responses with INT3 describing how several faculties are openly spread out in the University landscape with lots of trees, shade and fresh air. They all mentioned the good connectivity of the physical terrain with good road networks that links all the important amenities made possible by a reliable campus transportation system in the University. INT1 and INT3 however queried the availability of facilities during vacations when important ones like restaurants are closed and students staying on campus have to go off campus to get food.

The classrooms, seminar rooms, and resource centers in the four faculties of the respondents were all described as spacious and all air-conditioned with at least two twin doors that can be accessed even by the physically challenged. INT1, 1NT2 and INT5 describe them as very good while INT3 preferred to say they were up to standard. INT4 and INT6 while describing them as having all the necessary facilities commented the size of some of the classes as well as the furniture. INT4, INT5 and INT6 also bemoaned the architecture of their respective faculties in terms of the design of their corridors most of which are flooded with water during and after rain, leaving them very slippery and this is often difficult to detect with the white shinny tiles on the floor. INT4 in particular narrated her ordeal in her second semester thus: "I was

rushing home after lectures when the rain just stopped and I slipped so badly that if it were not for the help of a man beside me I would have fallen badly because I totally lost my balance".

INT4 and INT6 also noted the lack of consistency in the labelling of the washrooms for males and females on the various floors of their respective faculties. INT6 for instance notes: "On the first floor it is male toilets first, then female toilets first on the second floor and male toilets first on the third floor" and added that the floors are so similar in appearance that sometimes you are not sure which floor you are on. INT4 notes that throughout the campus there is different labeling of washrooms with some in English, others in Malay and yet others with illustration of males and females as signs.

Safety of the University was looked at differently by the interviewees. INT1, INT4 and INT5 described it as very good judging the fine spacing of the faculties from each other with INT1 saying: " the spacing between buildings in faculties and the faculties themselves is a good safety measure on the part of the University..". He also confirmed the availability of fire extinguishers in all the buildings in his faculty, a point reiterated by both INT4 and INT5 with respect to their faculties. However, he narrated a few cases of lap top snatches told by some of his friends. INT2 thought the basic safety measures were put in place by the university but the rest is more an individual responsibility when he says: "When we take the right steps, go to the right places and are cautious we would be safe". INT3 mentions the availability of security on campus, the display of fire extinguishers in her faculty and attested to seeing the same in other faculties she visited. INT6 also corroborated the general good safety of the University with good lighting, the presence of security personnel and well cared for vegetation around campus. The vegetation could otherwise have been a safe haven for reptiles like snakes.

All six however bemoaned the difficulty in understanding safety signs because they are mostly written in Malay. INT3 particularly lamented the implications of such taken-forgranted assumption of safety signs written only in Malay when she says "it can prove more serious in the event of accidents especially in today's legally fussy world". INT6 also narrated how he walked around with his laptop and Google Translate during his first semester in other to translate whatever was written in Malay including the names of many faculties he came across on campus and confessed to not still knowing some faculties despite spending more than two years in the University. All six were positive about the connectivity of the facilities through the transportation network. However INT2, INT4, INT5 and INT6 all think that the good work of the transport system stops during the semester breaks when only international students are left on campus as the system becomes slower and some drivers exhibit a rather care free attitude.

The physical environment interestingly plays an important part in the lives of international students, as the University campuses become their second homes throughout their period of study. Stimulation theories indicate that the physical environment is a source of sensory information that is essential for human well-being (Hutchison, 2003), and López *et al.* (1992) expound this further when they stated that stimulation theories indicate the meaning people construct regarding particular stimuli – in this case the physical environment. The concordance of responses about the physical environment as being generally ideal, especially considering the varied

regional and educational backgrounds as well as differences in faculties of the respondents, suggests that the University's physical environment is up to standard. Nonetheless the repeated complaints about the state of campus during vacations rings an alarm about the conditions. Observations and enquiries confirm that some of the service providers like the banks and restaurants are operated by private individuals and companies who would not run at a loss during the vacations because of the small number of students on campus. However the Banks have been confirmed to operate throughout the year irrespective of vacations and there is need for the University Authorities to look for alternative measures to ameliorate the absence of restaurants, in particular, on campus during vacations.

The physical landscape and vegetation was appreciated likewise the classrooms and lecture halls. The spacing of buildings within faculties, the spread of faculties and the presence of security posts in all strategic locations was praised as good proactive safety measures in addition to the provision of fire extinguishers, building plans as well as the placement of close circuit television cameras in strategic locations around the University. The common complaint about the inability to read safety signs, notice boards and other sign posts in English is indicative of the challenges of communication on the part of the international students and the need to endeavor to provide such vital information in English as well as Malay. INT 3 in particular raised an important point regarding the legal implications of not communicating important information especially safety related messages in the unfortunate event of accidents. Effective communication is an essential component of organizational success whether it is at the interpersonal, intergroup, intragroup, organizational, or external levels (Wertheim, 2008).This is particularly so when it involves students and most importantly safety issues. As posited by Manjunatha and Shivalingaiah (2004) understanding customers' preferences along service quality dimensions reveals their priorities and addressing these priorities would reduce the gaps in service quality.

2. System based services

All interviewees gave similar views of the system-based services such as the policies, rules, regulations and guidelines but to a variety of extents. INT1, INT2, INT4 and INT6 all indicated that the system based services like policies guidelines and instructions were well attended to by the university. All also gave examples of policies to substantiate their views. INT1 and INT4 narrated how policies and instructions about bus schedules are found at all bus stops on campus including guidelines about how to report difficulties when encountered. INT2 and INT6 repeated the same about transportation and also gave the library as another good example where clear guidelines are provided about the facilities and how to access them both in hard copies as well as online. They also cited the library and International office as examples where almost all facilities are labeled in English and Malay as well as their online services. INT3 agreed with the others on the existence of clear policies and concise rules especially with transportation and the library but argues that there is sometimes inconsistency between policies and practice in some divisions in the University and gave an example of a section of the international office which has good opening schedules but in her experience closes sometimes even on days it has promised to open. She indicated: "I know their opening schedule but on more than five occasions I went there only to see a notice that indicated they were close for that day and no further

explanation was given as to why". INT5 was also in agreement with good policies and rules being in place but indicated that the presence of such in today's Universities should be a foregone conclusion and it is rather the level of their implementation and effectiveness that is usually the focus. INT5 also alludes to many good policies of the university that are disappointingly not implemented in the expected manner by the appropriate officers.

The responses are indicative of the efforts of the University authorities to meet their contractual obligations to the students by developing policies, rules and regulations geared towards helping students accomplish their goals. Marked instances of the differences between design and implementation have also resulted in some sections often failing to operate as promised. The responses of having good policies and regulations vindicates the University in its pursuit of effective service delivery but raises questions regarding the proper monitoring of staff tasked with implementation of these policies and the dedication of concerted efforts towards ameliorating the gap between the "good promise" in the policies and regulations and the shortfall in fulfillment.

3. Human based services

All interviewees described human based services from personal experience. INT1 narrated meeting the Dean of his faculty on five or six occasions during the semester and he has always helped to solve his problems. INT2 also gave a similar account of meeting his Dean who was so compassionate about his problem that he was so surprised and deeply appreciative but also narrated an ordeal with one of the lower level administrative staff whose attitude fell considerably short of that of the Dean. Overall he posits that human based services are satisfactory because "if you come across few bad cases you are always relieved to see another good one who helps you so well that you are forced to forget the bad one". INT3 believes that service personnel are different but observed that senior officers like Deans, Assistant Registrars etc. are more helpful and often more sympathetic to international students. This view was corroborative of those of INT1 and INT2 who also gave a similar version of their encounters with the Deans of their faculties. INT3 singles out the bank in the University where she has repeatedly been treated almost equally in terms of friendliness and related good gestures by all the employees from the branch manager to the security at the door. She notes that most times a few junior staff are the problem and thinks some of them are not properly trained or oriented in the new paradigm of treating students as customers. She also thinks some have the difficulty of understanding English and tend to shy away from helping international students who can only communicate with them in English. INT 4 notes how the Dean of her faculty knows her by name and asks about her progress but other officers rarely smile at her often making her conclude that she is more of a nuisance to them because of her repeated visits to their offices for one service or the other. INT5 and INT6 also generally gave positive views of the human based services especially from the Deans and Faculty but criticised how staff in general want to be given so much time to devote to problems that could be solved almost immediately. INT6 narrated "Even if you want a simple letter to be written for you or some service that could be done by yourself if you had the resources they will ask you to come back in three days and when you query they tell you 'This is the rule Mister' . . . and I think rules are only there to guide and they should not remote control us".

Accounts of the show of empathy by senior university staff as compared to their junior counterparts has surfaced in the responses of all the interviewees. Could it be that senior staff are more accustomed to the demands of today's service orientated educational system? Limitations in the level of spoken English were also indicated as possible causes for the attitude of some junior staff towards international students. Complaints of sticking to the rules, often to the detriment of students, have also surfaced markedly in the responses of the interviewees most of whom firmly believe that many tasks could be done almost immediately, or within a day, but service providers would prefer to have it done after days, for instance in their comfort zones, because that is how it is stipulated in the rules. Hartline and Ferrell (1996) believe that the behaviors and attitudes of customer contact employees primarily determine the customers' perception of service quality. Chebat and Kollias (2000) also thought in a similar fashion when they indicate that the human interaction element is essential to determine whether customers consider service delivery to be satisfactory. Higher educational institutions in today's commercially competitive environment must be concerned with how students feel about their educational experiences (Bemowski, 19921). In essence, the experience of students shapes their thoughts on the quality of service which underlines why it is important that those staff that they come into contact with are appropriately coached to deal with them in a pleasant and professional manner.

Interestingly the majority of shortcomings, as observed by the interviewees, did not mention lack of financial resources as a challenge but rather attitudinal related reasons such as lackluster and rather carefree approaches and behaviors as the cause of the shortcomings in quality of service on the campus. This therefore indicates that without much effort the quality of services related to the physical environment can be significantly improved if authorities focus more on what occurs in practice in their areas of jurisdiction in the University. This University has a the physical environment that has attracted very positive feedback and has been constructively portrayed by all the six respondents from varied physical and social background, however, it was found wanting on the corresponding human related services. This indicates that serious efforts need to be directed to these issues in order to attract and retain international students whose importance in today's higher education landscape has already been alluded to as very important. More on the job training regarding communication skills especially in English and orientation on the need to treat students as customers could be helpful in solving problems of poor treatment of students. Moreover the need to step up the supervision of junior and ancillary staff by their more experienced seniors can help reduce or eliminate some of these complaints.

Conclusions

This paper communicates the perceptions of six international students on the quality of service related to the physical environment of a public university in Malaysia. It shows that while the University management is committed to the provision of much needed services by putting in place good policies, translated into fine rules and regulations in an ideal environment generally described as suitable for academic interaction, some related services especially those that are human based were found to be wanting in certain categories of staff. While the senior staff were generally positively represented in their goodwill and empathy towards International students,

their junior counterparts have been described as wanting in these respects suggesting, perhaps, their lack of information or supervision or both in service delivery in today's competitive academic environment. The results also demonstrate that students mostly gauge quality of service based on their experience of those services and does show the need for service contact personnel to be more receptive to their customers since they project the face and identity of their institutions.

Like most qualitative enquiries this study has the limitations of generalization because of its uniqueness in concentrating on the physical environment of a single university which would most likely be different from any other university and for the fact that only six interviewees were selected to evince their thoughts on the subject despite their varied backgrounds. Nonetheless the findings and discussion, especially with regard to the systems and human related service responses, could serve as a base for understanding some of the thoughts of international students and could be replicated on other campuses with a view to understanding how other students feel about their physical environments and its related services as well.

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