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Internationalisation of Higher Education: International Students' Satisfaction

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Introduction

Malaysia aspires to be an international education hub and in achieving this, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) then, has put in place internationalisation of higher education as one of the strategic trusts as stipulated in Malaysia National Strategic Plan of Higher Education (PSPTN) Phase 1 (2007-2010). The objective of this strategic trust is to establish world recognition, produce marketable graduates, attract international students and generate innovation through research and development (MoHE, 2007). This strategic trust will eventually help to build the brand and reputation of Malaysia as international education provider. With that, the Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education has set the target to attract 150,000 international students by the year 2015 and 200,000 by 2020, with average consistent growth of 13.5 percent annually (MoHE, 2007). In achieving this target, it is pertinent for Malaysia as the host country to ensure that these students are satisfied with their educational experience in Malaysia and hence, through positive WOM (word-of-mouth), it will be able to attract more students to study in the country. Therefore, this article aims to provide a brief literature review on factors that influence international students' satisfaction. It is hope that this review may provide some insight for policy makers and university administrators in achieving the nation's aspiration.

International Students in Malaysia

The Observatory of Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) in its report in 2007 highlighted Malaysia as one of the emerging contenders in international education market, capturing around two percent of the international student market showing significant growth in student enrollment. The enrollment of international students at both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) for a period of nine years shows drastic increment, dominantly at private HEIs. There were 18,242 international students in 2001, and in less than ten years, the number has grown to 86,919 in 2010, with about 16 percent growth per annum (MoHE, 2011). Malaysia is currently housing 93,000 international students (NST, 2013). About 70 percent of international students enrolled at private HEIs. Of this, about a third are from China and Indonesia, while the rest are mainly from MENA countries (Middle East and North Africa) and Western Asia (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Student Satisfaction

Like any other organisations, customer satisfaction will impact market share, productivity, return of investment and the quality of services offered to their customer (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997). A satisfied customer is viewed as an indispensable means of creating sustainable advantage for the organisation in the current competitiveness. Customers who are satisfied will have positive effect on them. Satisfaction of customers become the key to customer retention and positive word of mouth communication (Harvir & Voyer, 2000), this applied to education service.

“The opposite of satisfied customers will be the dissatisfied customers where negative WOM may tarnish the reputation and brand of university, eventually losing potential customers”

Satisfied students will help to attract more potential students to the institutions through increased student loyalty, positive WOM communication and image of the higher education institutions (Arambewela, Hall & Zuhair, 2006, Arambewela, 2003). With positive WOM, they will likely recommend family members and friends to pursue higher education at the particular university that they are satisfied with. This will eventually improve customer retention and growth for the university, and hence lead to better branding and reputation for the university (Arambewela, 2003). The opposite of satisfied customers will be the dissatisfied customers where negative WOM may tarnish the reputation and brand of university, eventually losing potential customers (Guolla, 1999). Athiyaman (2000) has confirmed strong relationship between satisfied student with positive WOM and customer retention. Universities need to ensure that they have delivered their services well and that student as their customers are satisfied with their services. This will help to increase student enrollment, reduce student attrition and enhance student experience (Arambewela & Hall, 2011b). Therefore, student satisfaction is a key strategic variable in maintaining stiff competition in international higher education (Arambewela et al., 2006; Arambewela, 2003).

Vast literature demonstrates that university faced tremendous challenges due to stiff competition in terms of student enrollment and securing fund, funding constraints from federal or state government and the rising cost of higher education (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999; Butt & Rehman, 2010). All these had posed a great challenge to universities to re-look into improving services and

quality to attract its customers, here refers to students (DeShields Jr. et al., 2005). Therefore, universities need to be more customer-oriented in managing their students (Butt & Rehman, 2010). HEIs need to strategise improving process and procedures to become more customer-oriented (DeShields Jr. et al., 2005; Butt & Rehman, 2010).

The concept of student as customer is not new (Douglas, McClelland & Davies, 2008; Guolla, 1999). However, this supplier/customer relationship is not as clear cut as some other service relationships, given that students are also “partners” in the learning process (Douglas et al., 2008). Service quality and customer satisfaction are important issues for universities competing at undergraduate and postgraduate level for local and international students (Douglas et al., 2008). Even though there are many debates about the role of students, for example they can be customers, clients, producers and products (Arambewela, 2003; Guolla, 1999), there seems to be some consensus that students’ role as customers is more appropriate in measuring students’ satisfaction (Arambewela, 2003). To stay relevant and competitive, institutions need to understand the challenges associated with marketing of their services (Mazzarol, 1998) and the need to improve service quality (Arambewela, 2003). Due to this reason, HEIs need to carefully analyse key factors contributing to student satisfaction and therefore, develop strategies accordingly.

International students coming from diverse countries have different cultural background with different needs and wants that institutions need to satisfy (Arambewela & Hall, 2011a). International students face various difficulties in adjusting to a different economic and cultural environment and to different learning and teaching styles (Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004). Quality of education undoubtedly plays an important role in student satisfaction and should be the prime concern of universities (Mavondo et al., 2004). However, their needs and satisfaction are not limited to academic needs but the entire living and learning environment at host country.

Determining Factors of International Students’ Satisfaction

Based on the review of literature, it was observed that factors which determine international students’ satisfaction comprised of internal environment and external environment; some recent research found emerging factors which include personal values (Arambewela & Hall, 2011a) and image (Jiewanto, Laurens & Nelloh, 2012).

The variables to measure students’ satisfaction should be derived from what are important to students rather

than factors that the university think are important to students (Arambewela et al., 2006). Most studies on student satisfaction focused on internal environment (DeShields Jr. et al., 2005; Douglas et al., 2008; Bianchi & Drennan, 2012; Arambewela & Hall, 2006). Internal environment comprises two areas which are educational services and non-educational services also known as core and peripheral services (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012). Educational service it refers to teaching quality, study programme, teaching staff and method of instruction, recognition of the degree, engagement of teachers with students, academic performance of the students, industrial training and other services related to teaching and learning (DeShields Jr. et al., 2005; Douglas et al., 2008; Bianchi & Drennan, 2012; Arambewela & Hall, 2006). Non-academic services include other support services within the campus, such as accommodation, security, student services, student clubs and society, orientation, library services, transportation, friends, modern facilities like high tech computer lab, gym, and attractive campus with shops (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012; Douglas et al., 2008; Mavondo et al., 2004; Arambewela & Hall, 2006). Non-academic or peripherals services form part of the overall customer satisfaction and this is particularly true for international students. Peripheral services such as living conditions, accommodation, safety, cultural activities, socialisation, visa and entry requirement may play a crucial role in enhancing international student satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012).

However, only measuring the internal environment may not be adequate to gauge the overall educational experience, thus need a broader aspect beyond the internal environment (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999) in measuring student satisfaction. Therefore, external environment plays an equally vital role in measuring student satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). International students spent almost one third of their time outside the campus environment, and thus they are also members of the host community. Community is defined as groups representing local community members that live along with local students and other international students (Arambewela & Hall, 2011b). It was found that community life experience of international students has a major input into international students' satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2011b). External environment includes the social and physical dimension outside of the university campus (Arambewela & Hall, 2011b). These include social relationships such as friendship patterns, discrimination, living arrangements, housing and accommodation, beautiful touristic attractions and good weather, receiving high support from home stay family or friends and well organised and safe city with good customer service, transportation and medical services, experiencing a new culture, food and language, feeling welcome and accepted by local people (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012). Research by Arambewela & Hall (2011a) found that safety and lifestyle within

host community has equivalent importance as education. All these contribute to the entire experience and will impact the overall international students' satisfaction. Gracia-Aracil et al. (2007) and Sam (2001) found that international students who have made satisfactory social contacts with local communities express satisfaction with their learning environment. A growing body of research suggests that integration into the social environment is a crucial element for the entire learning experience for international students (DeShield Jr. et al., 2005).

National Survey on International Student Satisfaction

Emerging contenders in international education like New Zealand recognised the importance of international student satisfaction. Hence, its Ministry of Education (2004) has conducted a national survey on international students in New Zealand. The report reveals that the most important factors in choosing New Zealand as a study destination were English-speaking environment, safety and the international recognition of New Zealand qualifications, the quality education and cost. The report also states that students were more influenced by recommendation from peers when choosing destination of study. In a more recent national study, international students studying at universities and institutes of technology and polytechnics were satisfied with their experiences of living and learning in New Zealand in 2011. Seventy-eight percent of university respondents and 84 per cent of institutes of technology and polytechnics respondents would recommend their New Zealand institutions to people who are thinking of studying overseas. Based on the result of this report, on the whole, New Zealand HEIs were able to meet learning and living needs of international students.

Thus, for the case in Malaysia, a national international student satisfaction survey or an index will be a valuable yardstick to determine the satisfaction level of international students in the country. Understanding the factors and level of satisfaction among international students are important for the government and the industry. By knowing this, the Malaysian government may plan and mitigate areas that need improvement. With this knowledge, it may assist the government in attending to international students' concerns more appropriately, such as developing more student friendly policies. It is hope that future research on developing a national international student satisfaction index may be conducted. In achieving an education regional hub, international students' satisfaction becomes imperative for planning and strategising in attracting 200,000 international students by the year 2020.

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