Investigating attributes of international students' satisfaction in private universities in the Klang Valley, Malaysia

Cheok, Mui Yee[1] and Benjamin Chan, Yan Fah[2]

[1]Associate Professor, Graduate School of Business, UNIRAZAK
[2] Professor, Graduate School of Business, UNIRAZAK

*cheokmy@unirazak.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The government of Malaysia has spent a substantial effort to attract international students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia. As such, there is a need to ensure that students are satisfied with the quality of services provided by universities in areas of physical facilities or even customer service, for instance. However, there has been insufficient evidence that examined the dimension of service quality and international students' satisfaction in the context of the education industry, as past researchers focused this area of research mostly in the commercial sectors. Hence, this study investigated the influence of the dimension of service quality on international students' satisfaction in private universities in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. A total of 376 survey questionnaires were collected from major private universities located in Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur using the random sampling approach. After analyzing the data using statistical software, the empirical result showed that reliability of service, assurance of service, staff's responsiveness, staff's empathy as well as tangibility of universities influenced the satisfaction of service provided to international students. By integrating these attributes into students' studying experience, t private educators would be able to further improve the enrolment of international students into Malaysian private universities.

Keywords: private universities, service quality, students' satisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education not only contributes to the social and economic progress, but also the regional Gross Domestic Product per capita of the country. Malaysia targets to have 250,000 international students studying in higher education institutions in 2025.

As of September 2019, there were more than 1.25 million students pursuing their tertiary education in Malaysia, with about 70% of them enrolled in PHEIs. Although foreign students account for only about 14% of the total enrolment of private higher education institutions, it accounts for 40% of the total revenue for the sector as a whole (Yojana, 2020).

However, the prolonged disruption of the novel coronavirus has been sustaining for almost one and a half years. According to MAPCU's statement (Yojana, 2020), new foreign student enrolment has been about 7,000 in 2020 compared with 16,500 in 2019, after the graduation of about 23,000 students in 2020. Foreign student population had dropped to around 52,000 students in

2020 compared to 92,415 in 2018 and that revenue from foreign students fell by around 44% in the entire education sector. Not only education leaders suffer financial losses, they are challenged with students' learning satisfaction through the lockdown period that may lead to the attrition of online learners (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996).

Previous research studies (e.g. Fortune, Spielman, and Pangelinan, 2011; Tratnik, 2017) have investigated student's perception and satisfaction toward online learning and face-to-face learning. Tratnik's (2017) research commented that students taking the face-to-face course were found to be more satisfied with the course compared to their online counterparts. However, Fortune, Spielman, and Pangelinan (2011) argued that there was no statistically significant difference in learning preference was found between online and face-to-face learning experience.

Many past studies (e.g. Moawad, 2020; Rovai & Downey; 2010) have examined areas of students' engagement towards e-learning as well as teachers' literacy on e-learning tools. In addition to that, most recent studies (e.g. Aljeraiwi & Sawaftah, 2018; Fındık-Coşkunçay et al., 2018; Rovai & Downey, 2010) have focused their research in the technical aspect of information technology. For instance, Aljeraiwi & Sawaftah (2018) found the issue of technical difficulty that caused students' and faculty's barrier for effective e-learning.

However, these studies did not give much consideration to social factors and those related to students. Investigating attributes that influence students' satisfaction on the overall service quality by higher education providers during their e-learning process can provide a deep understanding that may improve and promote a positive online learning environment.

Based on the above argument, it becomes pertinent to ascertain the impact of service quality on international students' satisfaction in Malaysia. This paper adopted the "SEVQUAL" theory (Parasuraman et al., 1988) to examine the connection among these variables, namely, tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2009). This research, therefore, attempts to investigate the extent of impact of service quality attributes on international students' satisfaction during the pandemic period in Malaysia.

The main research question is:
- to examine the extent to which tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy influence international students' satisfaction during the pandemic period in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.
- to identify the main determinant of service quality that influence international students' satisfaction during the pandemic period in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Yilmaz (2007), service quality is defined as an experience that a person anticipates and perceives when a service is delivered by a service provider (Yilmaz,2007). Akbaba and Kilinc (2001) further explained that the quality of service is perceived as unsatisfactory or low if the service delivered by the provider is not matched to expectation of consumers and vice versa.
Many researchers have cited Parasuraman's et al. (1988) and Zeithaml's et al. (2009) work in terms of utilising their constructs to evaluate service quality, which include tangible/physical characteristics, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Borishade et al. (2021) further ascertained that higher education providers should embrace these elements of service quality into their operation context in order to stay competitive in the uncertain environment.

Potential students regard providing quality service in a tertiary education institution as an important determinant for deciding on the choice of university. Specifically, the quality of education is determined by the extent of whether universities fulfill students' expectations (Tan and Kek, 2004).

Factors that have been studied extensively in the past are mostly related to unsatisfying matters, such as facilities, the environment, the administration, placement services, learning material, support services, and activities provided by universities (Kaur & Bhalla, 2018). All these issues imply that quality education is considered as a series of services that is offered in a study package and it is expected to satisfy the expectation of students (Korka, 2009). It is undoubtedly that providing excellent service quality is the key driver of student gratification (Cronin et al., 2000; Petterson and Spreng, 1997).

Student satisfaction is defined as the extent to which a student achieves his/her expectation. The economic uncertainty as well as competitive market reinforces higher education providers to better enhance their delivery of excellent learning experience in order to sustain their market presence (Curtis et al., 2009). That's why institutional providers need to pay great attention to learner satisfaction (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2013).

Particularly in the uncertainty of the pandemic situation, students are even more judgemental in terms of evaluating whether the delivery of quality online education compared to face-to-face education (Worlu et al., 2016). Hence, student's satisfaction evaluation becomes vital for higher education providers, as it determines the sustainability of performance (Oldfield and Baron, 2000).

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The sample of respondents was students who are currently studying in private universities in the Klang Valley. The data of this study was done using an online survey questionnaire. Random sampling was adopted as the approach to sample 376 students (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. SPSS was then used to analyse the data collected from the field.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result, 57.71% of respondents were female and 43.35% of them were aged between 18 to 24 years old. A total of 32.71% of respondents were studying degree programs at their universities.The Cronbach's Alpha score of reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, tangible and students' satisfaction demonstrated internal consistency of scale.

Based on the empirical result, 72.1% of the variance in international; students' satisfaction was explained by reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness and tangible. In addition to that, it was concluded that reliability (t value = 6.791, $p < 0.05$), assurance (t value = 7.241, p value < 0.05), empathy (t value = 8.779, p value < 0.05), responsiveness (t value = 7.368, $p < 0.05$) and tangible (t value = 9.913, p value < 0.05) were significant predictors of international students' satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical result, tangibility is perceived as the main determinant that influences international students' satisfaction. The more appealing the visual presentation of the e-

infrastructure, the more likely international students perceive universities' facilities and equipment as satisfactory. This finding implies that education providers should continue to enhance their e-infrastructure to meet students' expectations.

Empathy is another key determinant that university providers should pay attention to as it influences the satisfaction of international students. The more empathy that education providers demonstrated, the more likely international students would feel satisfied with the quality of service provided. Students require an adaptation period to adjust to the changes in the learning system during the pandemic period, as they are faced with problems of poor internet connection and infrastructure (Bakalar, 2018) at their temporary staying places or home countries. It implies that teachers should assist their students to seal through the transition of learning approach smoothly.

In addition to tangibility and empathy, responsiveness is another determinant of international students' satisfaction. The more willing teachers assist students to deliver prompt and effective services, the more satisfied they are towards universities. This finding implies that there should be a closed interaction between teachers and students' learning and motivation.

Assurance is concluded as the next determinants of international students' satisfaction. The more credibility and competence university providers, the more students are satisfied with services offered. It implies providers would need to work their ways to enhance students' confidence level during this difficult period of time.

Reliability is the last determinant of international students' satisfaction. The greater the ability of university providers to offer consistent and trustworthy services throughout the period of difficult time, the more likely international students would feel satisfied with the services provided. This finding implies that students depend on university providers to offer quality of service consistently.

The collection of data was challenging as it was conducted during the MCO locked down 1.0 in 2020 and so the response rate was not encouraging despite numerous attempts had been made.

A longitudinal comparative study between the current and post pandemic period in the area of service quality and international students' satisfaction would be encouraged. Public universities or local students could also be included to compare the satisfaction level of service quality provided by private universities in Malaysia between the current and post pandemic period.

Based on the empirical results, it is concluded that private universities should improve international students' satisfaction in accordance to quality indicators. For one, in order to provide quality education to students, educators would need to take care of infrastructure facilities to reach international students' satisfaction. In other words, university providers should increase their capital investment to further improve their facilities.

CITATION AND REFERENCES

Akbaba, A., Kılınç, I., (2001). Servqual practices in service quality and tourism management. *J. Tour. Res.* 12 (2), 162–168.

Aljeraiwi, A., Sawaftah, W. (2018). The quality of blended learning based on the use of blackboard in teaching physics at King Saud University: students' perceptions. *Journal of Educational & Psycho- logical Sciences, 19*(2), 616–646.

Bakalar, B. (2018). Book Review: Justice on both sides: Transforming education through restorative justice. *American Journal of Qualitative Research, 2*(2), 145-149.

Borishade, T. T., Ogunnaike, O. O., Salau, O., Motilewa, B. D., & Dirisu, J. I. (2021). Assessing the relationship among service quality, student satisfaction and loyalty: the NIGERIAN higher education experience. *Heliyon*, e07590.

Cronin Jr., J.J., Brady, M.K., Hult, G.T.M., (2000). Assessing the effects of quality, value and customer satisfaction on consumer behavioural intentions in service environments. J. Indust. Manag. 2 (2), 5–19.

Curtis, T., Abratt, R., Minor, W., (2009). Corporate brand management in higher education: the case of ERAU. J. Prod. Brand Manag. 18 (6), 404–413.

De Jager, J., Gbadamosi, G., (2013). Predicting students' satisfaction through service quality in higher education. Int. J. Manag. Educ. 11 (3), 107–118.

Fındık-Coşkunçay, D., Alkış, N., Özkan-Yıldırım, S. (2018). A structural model for students' adoption of learning management systems: An empirical investigation in the higher education context. *Educational Technology & Society, 21*(2), 13–27.

Fortune M, Spielman M and Pangelinan D (2011) Students' perceptions of online or face-to-face learning *and* social media in hospitality, recreation and tourism *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* **7**(1) pp 1-16.

Kaur, H., & Bhalla, G. (2018). Determinants of effectiveness in public higher education-students' viewpoint. International Journal of Educational Management, 32(6), 1135-1155.

Korka, M., (2009). Educatie de calitate pentru piata muncii. Editura Universitara Bucuresti, p. 17.

McIsaac, M. S., & Gunawardena, C. N. (1996). Distance education. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.), Handbook of research for educational communications and technology (pp. 403-437). New York: Macmillan.

Moawad, R. (2020). "Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and academic stress in university students". *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala, 12*(1Sup2), 100–107.

Oldfield, B.M., Baron, S., (2000). Student perceptions of service quality in a UK university business and management faculty. Qual. Assur. Educ. 8 (2), 85–95.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L., (1988). SERVQUAL: a multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. J. Retailing 64 (1), 12–40.

Petterson, P.G., Spreng, R.A., (1997). Modelling the relationship between perceived value, satisfaction and repurchase intentions in a business-to-business, service context: an empirical investigation. Int. J. Serv. Ind. Manag. 8 (5), 414–434.

Rajaendram, R. (2020). Road to success, The Star online. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2020/04/26/road-to-success

Rovai, A., Downey, J. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education, 13*(3), 141–147.

Tan, K.C., Kek, S.W., (2004). Service quality in higher education using an enhanced SERVQUAL approach. Qual. High Educ. 10 (1), 17–24.

Tratnik, A (2017). Student satisfaction with an online and a face-to-face Business English

course in a higher education context *Journal Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 15(1) pp. 1-10.

Worlu, R., Kehinde, O.J., Borishade, T.T., (2016). Effective customer experience management in health-care sector of Nigeria: a conceptual model. Int. J. Pharmaceut. Healthc. Market. 10 (4), 449–466.

Yılmaz, I., 2007. The Hotel Business in Terms of Quality of Service Measurement and Client Managers: Izmir Example Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Dokuz Eylul University Institute of Social Sciences.

Yojana Sharma, (2020). Private universities at risk as foreign students stay away, University World News, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=202012021628346

Zeithaml, V.A., Bitner, M.J., Gremler, D.D., (2009). Services Marketing: Integrating Customer Focus across the Firm, fifth ed. McGraw-Hill, New York.