

# A Qualitative Study of Factors Contributing to International Students' Satisfaction of Institutional Quality

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## Abstract

This study explores the factors contributing to institutional quality at five private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. There have been numerical quantitative researches on the perceptions of university quality learning environment but it is argued that a qualitative approach would add to existing knowledge by providing deeper insights from a different perspective. A random sample of 15 international students studying in institutions of higher education in Malaysia were investigated. The study was based on the data collected through open-ended interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded accordingly. A number of constructs emerged from this study and were categorized into a few main themes. The results of the study indicate that constructivist approach, lecturers' teaching styles, campus experiences, state-of-the-art facilities and career preparation influence students' perceptions of quality campus experiences. This study provides useful insight that offer opportunities for stakeholders to plan and initiate appropriate strategies for the betterment of the educational institution.

**Keywords:** international students, factors, satisfaction, institutional quality

## 1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning have shown phenomenal growth in Malaysia during the early 90s'. These institutions are increasingly recognized as a service provider and are placing greater emphasis on students' needs and expectations. This becomes even more important for self-funded private universities whereby their main source of income is from students tuition fees. There are 20 public and 40 private universities in Malaysia with approximately 90,000 international students in 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2010). The rapid expansion of private universities has resulted in these universities to carefully consider their marketing effort in this open market environment. Intense competition has forced universities to plan for strategies that satisfy the needs of their students. Therefore, it is important for private higher institutions in Malaysia to satisfy the needs of international students by maintaining quality learning environment. Student satisfaction on quality learning environment can served as a useful measurement for institutional quality in Malaysia. Thus, the primary aim of this study is to define student satisfaction on institutional quality. Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold. First, it seeks to determine international students' satisfaction on quality learning environment at private universities. Then, it provides researchers with a general framework for satisfaction in the eyes of international students. Secondly, it provides insight into the factors contributing to international students' satisfaction.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Satisfaction

Satisfaction can be reflected in students' perceptions of campus experience and services provided by the host institution. Elliot and Healy (2001) claim that student satisfaction is influenced by their campus lives. This consists of the dimensions of academic, physical, social and spiritual environments. Students may be satisfied with the academic programs but may not have similar views regarding the campus facilities. These campus experiences consist of academic advice from staff, students' feeling towards campus, students' expectation and experience of social life and facilities, campus support services, effective teaching personnel, student's perception on being cared by staff, career perspective, recruitment procedure, financial aid, registration effectiveness and safety on campus.

Similarly, satisfaction can be viewed from students' attitudinal outcomes of the quality of education at an institution. According to O'Driscoll (2005), student satisfaction is based on the availability of infrastructural, academic, welfare and communication support systems. His study showed that academic support was the most important factor that influenced student satisfaction, followed by facilities such as classroom, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and library access. Student satisfaction is an essential indicator of quality teaching and a measurement tool of education process (Ramsden, 1991). Browne, B.A., Kaldenberg, Browne W. B. and Brown (1988) argue that student satisfaction is driven by course quality and curriculum. Student satisfaction can be determined by effectiveness of instruction and physical environment. Navarro, Iglesias and Torres (2005) stress the six potential determinants of student satisfaction namely facilities, teaching elements, teaching method, physical environment, administrative tasks and support services. Their survey identified that teaching staff, teaching methods and administration of the course were the key aspects of student satisfaction. Thus selecting the right teaching personnel and applying suitable teaching methods according to the type of students would increase the credibility of an institution.

### *2.2 Institutional Quality*

Quality learning experience depends on the course content, quality of academic advice, teaching personnel and elective course available. Nuemann and Nuemann (1993) believe that an educational institution can be divided into direct and indirect inputs. Direct input is the investment on educational program such as content, resources, and flexibility; whereas indirect input is the process enhancing learning namely student-faculty interaction. Research carried out by Lecky and Neill (2001) showed that universities need to ensure a standardize curriculum. Standardize curriculum allows peer evaluation and input from the students. Quality education requires regular assessment on course, curriculum, teaching skills and material used for studies (Massy, 2003). High quality courses would increase the willingness and commitment of students. Courses conducted by universities should be valuable, meaningful and beneficial to learner's future career prospect.

Quality education covers the areas of classroom delivery, feedback to students and relationship between student and lecturer. Douglas, J., Douglas A. and Barnes (2006) identified consistency in teaching, teacher quality, lecture and tutorial notes were some of the important factors contributing to quality education. Among these factors, teaching and learning materials was ranked the highest, followed by the use of Information Technology (IT) facilities. Chickering and Gamson (1987) argue that quality education is related to instructors' performance, response time and flexibility when handling student's questions. Their study indicated that instructors should apply student-centered approach in their teaching and learning.

Quality education revolves around communication between teachers and students, among teachers themselves and between local and international institutions. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) stress that faculty interactions with the students provide a better learning environment for the students. Research showed that students' relationship with lecturers and friends was the fundamental factor of quality higher education (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). Thus, an effective communication between students and lecturers provide a better understanding for the learning and knowledge management process. Their study indicated that student-faculty interaction regardless of academic or non-academic staff was the key to promote willingness of student to be committed in their studies and assisted them in getting through the difficulties at an institution (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Funds and skills are needed for an institution to achieve its institutional quality. A university needs to have sufficient funds to offer financial aid to students, supporting research activities, renovate school and implement goals and strategies (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Funding not only assist in research activities for students, it is essential for modern educational facilities to support learning processes (Mavondo et al., 2000). Pierce, Matzdorf and Agahi (2003) identified top eight reasons for students to select a particular institution in their study. Their selection inclusive of courses offered, availability of computer labs, library facilities, good teaching reputation, self-study area, efficient public transport and a friendly atmosphere.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The respondents were 15 full-time international undergraduate students studying at five private universities in Malaysia. Respondents came from nine different counties namely Japan, Philippines, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Indonesia, China, Australia, Cambodia and Maldives and were identified as I1 to I15 accordingly throughout this paper. A qualitative approach was employed for this research and in-depth interviews were conducted to determine these students campus learning experiences. Researchers attempt to describe and interpret the more complex human experience based on these interviews (Creswell, 1998). An open-ended interview protocol was developed based on previous work related to educational quality (Mayya & Roff, 2004; Entwistle et al., 2002; Lizzio et al., 2002). Before the interview, each respondent was given a consent form and an information sheet

outlining the objective of the research, the criteria for respondents, research procedures and respondent rights. The interview questions addressed their perceptions of institutional satisfaction, learning difficulties and attitudes towards teaching and learning. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded. Many important constructs emerged from the data. The constructs were then categorized into a few main themes (Creswell, 1998). The themes are first described and then supported by verbatim quotations from the respondents.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings and results of the qualitative analysis of the interview data. The five main themes emerging from this study are:

##### 4.1 Constructivist Approach

Some teaching seems to place greater emphasis on critical thinking and students were expected to discuss and voice their opinions. Generally, students could identify the benefit of group discussions. Of the 15 respondents, ten of them displayed great interest in group discussions. They believed that group discussions helped them in their studies and encouraged them to think critically. The following quotations displayed some typical answers:

*“There is a discussion in the classroom and they always ask questions beside of giving lectures. They don’t just read, sometime, they call your name and you have to think critically.”* (13, Philippines Female Student)

*I prefer to do in group because everybody will contribute and share their ideas. These ideas will help us to get the best answers. If you are doing alone, you may not able to think an overall solution.* (11, Japan Male Student)

*During tutorial, we discussed and came out with different solutions. For certain subjects, we formed in groups and came out with our solutions. It does matter about the solutions; we will get the correct solutions from our lecturer.* (114, Cambodia Female Student)

Harvey (2003) argues that feedback from students may be a perception about the learning and teaching, support facilities and learning environment. It serves as a guideline for institutional improvement and source of information for the stakeholders. A male student from China (I11) described about the usefulness of feedback. *“They [Lectures] give a lot of examples in class to make us understanding about the subject. They also ask us for feedback after every class to ensure that we understand the information given to us...”*

One respondent thought that memorizing or rote-learning was not a good learning method. Instead, she preferred to understand the underlying concepts and applied them in her daily life. Her conversation illuminated this point:

*When you have learned something, you won’t remember for long just by listening. A few days later, you forgot. Quality education means you remember and apply in your life. Sometime, you don’t even know why you do something. So umm...is very important that you know what you are doing.* (14, Philippines Female Student)

##### 4.2 Lecturers’ Teaching Style

Lecturers play an important role and determine the progress of their students in an institution. Some of the lecturers made jokes and created an interesting learning atmosphere. *“I’ve one lecturer who is very funny. He always [speak] out of topic. He tells us stories and I like the stories actually, I think this is an interesting learning method...and I enjoy that (16, Hong Kong Male Student).”* This theme consonant with the findings from Browne et al.’s (1998) study. Lecturers must thoroughly understand the subject, are willing to answer questions, are approachable and have a sense of humor. He felt that these lecturers made classes more interesting and were able to capture the attention of students.

Ten of the respondents thought that a good lecturer should be able to give extra information to the students. They were knowledgeable and always well-prepared for classes. When asked about the knowledge of the lecturers, some of the respondents believed that lecturers should go beyond the subject matter by giving proper justification. This finding is similar to previous studies describing about the importance of instructors in students’ learning experiences (O’Toole et al., 2000; Willcoxson, 1998). In particular, Sander et al. (2000) found that new university students desire lecturers who have good teaching skills, approachable, knowledgeable, enthusiastic and organized. The excerpts below portrayed students’ perceptions of good lecturers:

*The lecturers I have are very knowledgeable. They are either Masters or PhD holders. They know their stuff and know what they are teaching.* (14, Philippines Female Student)

*...basically they are knowledgeable and know what they are teaching and of course good communication skills. I*

*think quality education is about the professionalism regardless of how much you have to face ...as long as you can get a quality thing which allows you to grow more mature...* (11, Japan Male Student)

*Most of my lecturers are really good. They are really clear on what to teach in class.* (13, Philippines Male Student)

Teaching styles is one of the important themes dealing with quality education. Respondents mentioned that the lessons conducted by lecturers should be clear and easy to understand. These international students preferred academic staff with industry experiences and are able to relate their previous experiences in the lessons.

*I really like some lecturers because of their knowledge and attitude. [Like] I have one particular Food and Beverage (FNB) lecturer. He really cares about his students. He never forces us to do something that we really don't like. He will talk to us slowly and explain to us properly especially for students who are weak in English. He knows how to handle lazy students properly.* (19, Indonesia Female Student)

*Basically it is quite good compare to other colleges because we learn more than other students. We have very experienced lecturers. I am studying hospitality and most of my lecturers are from hospitality line. They know better about the industry and they are able to teach you in a more professional way.* (110, Indonesia Female Student)

The close rapport between students and lecturers has promoted better understanding between them. Most respondents were satisfied with teacher-student relationship and class interactions. They preferred flat rather the hierarchical mode of teacher-student interactions. Respondents preferred a close rapport between lecturers and students. Respondents illustrated this point:

*uh....ya..um..one of my lecturers involve in the culinary operation, .er.usually when special events held in college, some students have to pay in order to get involve but she always try to get us free and so that we get the experience.* (114, Cambodia Female Student)

*I think quality education should be more interaction. I mean lecturer should communicate with their students, not like lecturers are lecturers and students are students. They cannot communicate together.* (17, Hong Kong Male Student)

A respondent felt that lecturers should communicate in English instead of Malay or Chinese during class. This is illustrated as follows:

*The teachers explained to the local students in Malay or Chinese. I am not racist but still feel very awkward. You know that you just feel like you don't understand what they are talking. For me, I don't get it. I wished they could use English in class so that everyone is treated equally.* (18, Pakistan Male Student)

#### 4.3 Campus Experiences

Quality education is correlated to the level of satisfaction of their learning experiences. Positive campus experiences reflect on institutional quality (Elliot & Healy, 2001). Higher education institutions not only emphasize on students' social values, capabilities and skills but also their campus experience (Ginsberg, 1991). These experiences can be viewed from the perspectives of caring academic and non-academic staff, comfortable environment, adequate facilities and resources. Studies showed that positive campus experiences contributed significantly to student satisfaction (Douglas et al., 2006; Banwet & Datta, 2003; Elliot & Healy, 2001). Four respondents actively participated in societies, clubs and fieldtrips organised by universities or students respectively.

*American Degree Programme (ADP) provides lot activities for the students. It also organises field trips. For instance, we visited the Malaysian Nuclear Research Centre.* (12, Japan Male Student)

*Good campus experiences means able to hang around with my friends. ...so I..think value for money because you are not only studying but making new friends.* (115, Maldives Female Student)

#### 4.4 State-Of-The-Art Facilities

Besides positive campus experiences, good facilities such as library, computer services, health and leisure facilities should be provided to all the students. Two thirds of the respondents claimed that tuition fees were too high. However, they felt that it was value for money judging from the state-of-the-art facilities provided by the universities. They believed that these facilities motivated them to learn. Five respondents felt that well-equipped library and facilities were important for learning. Students' responses illustrated below shows the importance of good facilities:

*Good facilities are important. I think right now we use technology in our life. So the computers need to be*

*good..uhm... Overall, it has pretty good. It has a gym and is very cheap.* (11, Japan Male Student)

*Atmosphere here is very conducive. The 5-storey library is actually very good. It is better than study at home. I am doing my final year diploma. I need to do a lot of research. I don't have to spend money on books.* (110, Indonesia Female Student)

*I stay in a hostel. It provides everything for us. It's really pricy but shuttle is provided, so it's very convenient. Besides, it also provides internet service.* (13, Philippines Female Student)

#### 4.5 Career Preparation

Respondents identified the skills that they have learned would enhance and enrich their future career development. Respondents believed that industry connectivity enables them to secure jobs in the future. Internship was a plus point and increased student employability, confidence and communication skills. The syllabuses were sufficient to prepare them into the real world and increase their confidence level. Two of the students pointed out by saying:

*This programme helps me to improve my communication skills. I am very quiet people when I go to a new environment. I have learned how to make friend and how to talk to people. If there is something that I need, I will go for it.* (19, Indonesia Female Student)

*Malaysia particularly is sort of like uh..multi-ethnic place, so it is more for experience rather than what I have study. um..I find that my experiences come mostly from my internship.* (113, Australia Male Student)

### 5. Conclusion and Implications

Service experience at institutions of higher learning is complex and students undergoing higher education likewise have a complex set of expectations. Despite this, this study has identified five dimensions that influence student satisfaction namely constructivist approach, lecturers' teaching styles, campus experiences, state-of-the-art facilities and career preparation. Besides these dimensions, there are many areas where further research is required. This research uses a qualitative approach to investigate the institutional quality as perceived by international students. It would be useful to employ a quantitative method to measure the constructs revealed by the respondents in this study. It is hoped that this study has offered a useful starting-point for such research. Furthermore, a study could be conducted on local student perceptions of institutional quality. Thus, a comparative study could be conducted on local and international students' satisfaction of institutional quality. The findings in this study will benefit many higher educational institutions which recruits international students. The findings highlights that tertiary institutions need to ensure that international students are satisfied with the campus learning environment. Lecturers should expose students to constructivist learning approach such as group discussion, student feedback and conceptualize teaching. Students prefer lecturers who were knowledgeable, have a good command of English and equipped with industry experience. Courses should be sufficient to prepare students for their future career development and students are encouraged to participate in various activities organized by the university in an effort to instill the positive campus experiences.

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