

Provide Good Service Quality to Satisfy Students' Needs and Make Them Become Loyal Students

Liew Kok Keong^{#1}, Rohaizat Baharun^{#2}, Nabsiah Abdul Wahid^{#3}

^{#1 & #2}Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

^{#1}kliw001@yahoo.com (Corresponding Author), ^{#2}m-Rohaizat@utm.my

^{#3}Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

^{#3}nabsiah@usm.my

ABSTRACT

This research studies the relationship between student satisfaction and student loyalty within the higher education service. Knowing student expectation is insufficient, it is important to reduce the gap between expectation and the service actually rendered by higher education institutions. Identify the gaps for improvement. More specifically; i) to examine the cognitive and affective aspects of students' satisfaction and ii) to investigate crucial antecedents of satisfaction that lead to loyalty. From the 329 responses obtained from students in the public university in Malaysia, study found that the relationship between student satisfaction and student loyalty was only partially supported. Perceived benefits of the course, feedback and assessment, physical environment and emotional factors all play an important role in influencing positive word of mouth, willingness to pay more and switching behavior. The study has shown relationship among variables that contribute to satisfaction and loyalty. Higher educational institutions could consider these factors as indicators or pointers which would offer an added advantage to providing standards of service quality to satisfy students' needs and make them become loyal students.

Keywords: Cognitive, affective, satisfaction, loyalty, higher education institutions.

1. Introduction

Higher education is perceived as extremely important in today's society, just finishing high school alone is not enough, completing higher education means expanding and gaining more knowledge and skills, and the opening of more career opportunities. For most people a university education has become the necessary route to professional success. Higher education institutions have to constantly formulate new strategies to ensure that their quality of service produce skilful, innovative and creative students

to contribute to the competitiveness of today's business environment.

A university is responsible to produce knowledgeable and capable graduates to meet the human resource needs of organizations in the business, industrial and service sectors including public services [1]. It is important to look into areas of deficiency in order to have excellent institutions of higher learning. Institutions that delivering quality services that meet the expectations of students and their parents, and also to the prospective employers of these future graduates [2].

The number of private higher education institutions in Malaysia have grown over the years, which, due to increasing competition, begun to create attractive marketing strategies, for example shorter time to obtain a degree. Private educational institutions have to be truthful about the facilities and courses they offer and not to mislead students. Some private institutions spend plenty of money in advertising, attractive advertising can raise customer expectations but sometimes it only increases customer disappointment. Location, facilities and quality of lecturers are among the criteria used by most people when grading the higher educational institutions. Some institutions are charging high fees with inadequate facilities and premises, some are unable to survive due to shrinking enrolment of dissatisfied students.

The most important is the quality of service provided by educational institutions that captures the hearts and minds of students. Educational institutions cannot control student perceptions, but can take specific steps to manage their expectations by looking into the service quality. This study will explore on student's satisfaction component which has significant impact on student's loyalty. The main focus of this study is to provide a useful insight about the perception of students towards service providers of higher educational institutions.

2. Brief review on literature

Service quality is often conceptualized as the comparison of service expectations with actual performance perceptions. In measuring service quality, SERVQUAL has been widely used. Originally, SERVQUAL consists of ten dimensions but reduced to five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy). The idea of this model is to measure the gaps between expectations and perceptions. Service quality is also a multidimensional concept [3], [4].

In measuring educational service quality, researcher [5] customized these dimensions into six groups of educational service attributes namely feedback and assessment, physical environment, interaction and support, administration, learning materials, course structure and content. Ref. [6], in her study of student evaluation of academic delivery, has used several variables, includes perceived benefits of the course. In pursuing higher degree courses, employment and salary are specific attributes which have been used. Perceived benefits refer to items that promote further self-development as perceived by the respondents.

Studies suggest that the most important factors leading to student's satisfaction include quality of lecturer or classroom delivery, the relationship between the lecturer and students in class [7]. Empirical study on university environment highlights key ambient factors such as comfort (seat/desk), temperature and humidity (room/theatre), design and functionality (design/appealing of lecture theatre), audio and visual features (projector), all these factors have a significant relationship on the level of student pleasure [8]. Research in European universities found determinants of student satisfaction, such as lecturer-student contact, course content and learning materials, variety of courses offered, teaching quality, academic advice available, and quality of technical equipment [9].

There have been some studies of the effects of emotions on satisfaction with service quality. Studies suggest that emotion is a fundamental attribute in satisfaction [10]. Satisfaction is partly cognitive and partly affective (emotional) evaluation of a consumption experience. Separating both the cognitive and affective evaluations are necessary for modeling consumer behavior in service setting [11]. There are two types of emotions, namely positive and negative. Positive emotions include happy, hopeful and positively surprised, while negative emotions include angry, depressed, guilty and humiliated [12].

Emotions have an influence on behavior. People respond to a situation in certain ways, they try to maintain positive emotions and to avoid negative emotions. People who have positive emotions will share their experiences with others or tend to stay with what they are doing. In

contrast, negative emotions will result in complaining behavior or to leave from what they are doing [13].

There is a direct relationship between emotions and customer loyalty behavior [12], [14]. The loyalty scale of the behavioral intentions battery used to measure customers' loyalty, consisting 13 items, have been grouped into five dimensions namely, loyalty to company, propensity to switch, willingness to pay more, external response to problem and internal response to problem [15], [16]. These dimensions were later customized by researcher [5] into four dimensions to measure educational service quality which consists of positive word-of-mouth, complaining behavior, switching behavior and willingness to pay more.

Loyalty is more common among service customers than among customers of tangible products. Customers who are satisfied with a service when comparing to other available alternatives, portray greater loyalty to existing service than dissatisfied customers [17]. It has been realized that customer satisfaction leads to customer retention and other favorable post-consumption behavior [18].

Several variables have been identified for the construction of theoretical framework for this study. The independent variable which is student satisfaction consists of two components, cognitive and affective dimensions. The dependent variable is student loyalty. The broad framework is shown in figure 1.

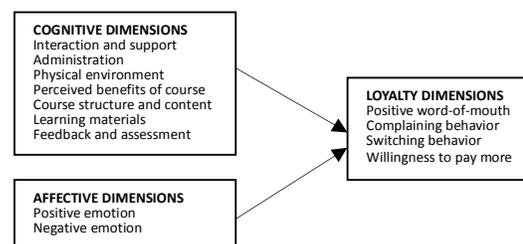


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

2.1 Research hypothesis

Based on the research model, two main hypotheses are formulated to test the influence of independence variables on dependence variables:

H1: There is significant relationship between cognitive dimensions and loyalty dimensions.

H2: There is significant relationship between affective dimensions and loyalty dimensions.

3 Research methodology

Samples of this study are undergraduates and post-graduates from the public university. A total of 365 questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate and graduate students. From the total number of 365

questionnaires distributed, 340 were returned, the response rate was about 93.15 %. Some of the questionnaires were not fully completed by respondents and hence abandoned from the analysis. This result a total of 329 usable data. Graduates consist of 114 and undergraduates consist of 215 individuals. All measurements were designed in 7-point likert scale.

4 Results

Factor analysis was performed on cognitive dimensions, varimax rotated principal components analysis was carry-out on the items of 7 variables which comprise of 31 items. One item, learning materials which are clear of objectives, was found to cross load with factor of more than 0.35, thus it was omitted. The factor loading for each item must be at least 0.50 on one factor and less than 0.35 on another factor [19]. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was excellent at 0.90 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at 0.001 level. According to [19], the acceptable value for KMO is set at 0.50 and Bartlett's test of sphericity should be significant at the acceptable value of less than 0.05. There are 7 factors which emerged with the eigenvalues greater than one and the total variance explained was 67.14%. Items with eigenvalues less than one were rejected, factors with eigenvalues of equal to or more than one were retained for further analysis [19]. These items have been re-grouped. Refer to table 1(a) and 1(b).

Table 1(a). Factor Loadings of Cognitive Dimensions

Item	factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Interaction and support (lecturer)							
well prepared for the class	0.72						
trustworthy	0.72						
helpful and supportive	0.72						
keeping students record correctly	0.69						
able to communicate ideas effectively	0.64						
competent in presenting class material	0.63						
Administrative Staff							
attentive to student inquiries		0.86					
attend to student inquiries immediately		0.86					
caring and helpful		0.84					
friendly		0.83					
Physical Environment							
room is clean			0.70				
seats are comfortable to sit on			0.66				
room has audio visual equipment			0.65				
seating arrangement allows clear view			0.63				
room is spacious			0.62				
good lighting within the room			0.62				
ventilation system is excellent			0.53				
Perceived Benefits of Course							
able to find a highly paid employment				0.86			
able to find employment				0.83			
can find interesting employment offers				0.83			
allow to enter a higher program				0.58			
Course Structure and Content							
good variety of courses provided				0.77			
commitment to academic excellence				0.74			
content of the courses within my major				0.65			

Table 1(b). Factor Loadings of Cognitive Dimensions

Item	factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Learning Materials							
are available in the bookstore							0.71
are available in the library							0.70
are easy to understand							0.63
Feedback and Assessment (lecturer)							
gives constructive feedback							0.72
marks student assignment quickly							0.70
provides reasonable consulting hours							0.65
Eigenvalue	10.6	2.48	2.05	1.76	1.56	1.35	1.07
Percentage of variance (Total: 67.14%)	34.0	8.00	6.60	5.69	5.02	4.36	3.46
KMO measure of sampling adequacy					0.90		
Bartlett's test of sphericity					6069 ***		

Factor analysis was performed on affective dimensions, varimax rotated principal components analysis was carry-out on affective dimensions consist of 2 variables (i.e. positive emotion and negative emotion) which comprised of 7 items altogether. Two items from the negative emotions showed cross loading more than 0.35, hence they had to be omitted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.81 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at 0.001 level. There are 2 factors which emerged with the eigenvalues greater than one, the total variance explained was 79.42%. Refer to table 2.

Table 2. Factor Loadings of Affective Dimensions

Item	Factor	
	1	2
Positive Emotion		
overall study experience at this university make me feel hopeful	0.90	
overall study experience at this university make me feel surprised	0.87	
overall study experience at this university make me feel happy	0.86	
Negative Emotion		
overall study experience at this university make me feel humiliated		0.91
overall study experience at this university make me feel guilty		0.91
Eigenvalue	4.51	1.05
Percentage of variance (Total: 79.42%)	64.5	15
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	0.81	
Bartlett's test of sphericity	1893 ***	

Factor analysis was performed on loyalty dimensions, which consist of four variables with 12 items were subjected to varimax rotated principal components analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.76 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at 0.001 level. There were 4 factors which emerged with the eigenvalues greater than one and the total variance explained was 68.47%. For these four factors, no items were omitted as there was no significant cross-loading. Refer to table 3.

Table 3. Factor Loadings of Loyalty Dimensions

Item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Positive Word of Mouth				
recommend the course to someone else	0.92			
encourage friends to apply for the same course	0.90			
say positive things about the course	0.83			
consider the same university if pursue further study	0.74			
Complaining Behavior				
complaint to external agencies if experience problems		0.80		
complaint to school staff if experience problems		0.79		
complaint to other students if experience problems		0.74		
Switching Behavior				
study in another university. If it offers a better price			0.80	
try to study fewer subjects at this university			0.74	
try to switch to another university if experience problems			0.70	
Willingness to Pay More				
pay a higher price for the benefits currently received				0.86
continue the same course if the price increases				0.85
Eigenvalue	3.31	2.50	1.31	1.09
Percentage of variance (Total: 68.47%)	27.6	20.9	10.9	9.08
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	0.76			
Bartlett's test of sphericity	1372.6***			

The alpha values of all study variables were presented in Table 4. Alpha coefficients were in the range of 0.65 to 0.95, and all are at the acceptable level. According to [20], only reliabilities less than 0.60 are considered to be poor.

Table 4. Reliability Coefficient of Variables

Variables	Total Items	A. Coefficient
Physical environment	7	0.81
Interaction and support	6	0.88
Course structure and content	3	0.87
Feedback and assessment	3	0.81
Administration	4	0.95
Learning materials	3	0.68
Perceive benefits of course	4	0.87
Positive emotion	3	0.92
Negative emotion	2	0.93
Positive word of mouth	4	0.87
Complaining behavior	3	0.71
Switching behavior	3	0.65
Willingness to pay more	2	0.67

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the relationship between variables. There were four sets of multiple regression analyses performed. The independent variable was cognitive and affective dimensions, and dependent variable was loyalty dimensions.

In the first set of analysis, simultaneous multiple regression was carried out to explore the relationship between cognitive component and affective component of student satisfaction and positive word of mouth (student loyalty). The results showed R square was 27%, perceived benefit of the course ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and feedback and assessment ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$) were positively related to positive word of mouth. Negative emotions ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$) was negatively related to positive word of mouth.

In the second set of analysis, simultaneous multiple regression was also carried out to explore the relationship

between cognitive component and affective component of student satisfaction and complaining behavior (student loyalty). The results showed that R square was 10%, perceive benefit of the course ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) and learning materials ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) were positively related to complaining behavior. Whereas feedback and assessment ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$) were negatively related to complaining behavior. Emotion variables (positive and negative emotions) did not show any relation to complaining behavior.

In the third set of analysis, same method was carried out to explore the relationship between cognitive component and affective component of student satisfaction and switching behavior (student loyalty). The results showed that R square was only 9%, administration ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) and learning materials ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) were positively related to switching behavior. In contrast, physical environment ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$) was negatively related to switching behavior. Emotion variables (positive and negative emotions) did not show any relation to switching behavior.

In the fourth set of analysis, same method was also adopted to explore the relationship between cognitive component and affective component of student satisfaction and willingness to pay more (student loyalty). The results showed that R square was 10%, physical environment ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$) and feedback and assessment ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) were positively related to willingness to pay more. Emotion variables (positive and negative emotion) did not show any relation to willingness to pay more.

5 Discussion

Feedback and assessment was found to be positively related to positive word of mouth and willingness to pay more but negatively related to complaining behavior. This may indicate that the process of giving feedback and assessment, such as providing reasonable consulting hours, feedback on assignment and marking assignment promptly may lead to either positive word of mouth or complaining behavior. When students are very satisfied with feedback and assessment provided, complaining behavior becomes less intense. Ref. [21] stated that customers who complain and receive a satisfactory response will become more loyal than those who have never complained. Students may feel at ease if the service provider resolves any problems which occur. In addition, Ref. [22] pointed out that customer experience occurs when they interact with different elements of context created by service providers. The successful, unique and memorable experience is captured in the customer's mind, this would spread through word of mouth.

According to [23], interactive service quality is considered satisfactory if there is no gap in between the

service encounter process. Students will likely to be satisfied if they are being given feedback with high quality comments such as the detailed aspects of their work and on the improvements focused. Ref. [7] pointed out that students want knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers who cared about their learning and expand their knowledge. This has been noted by [24], where providing special attention and little extras would create a memorable service encounter. The little extras can contribute to service satisfaction and also creates a positive feeling.

Perceived benefits of the course were significantly related to positive word of mouth. As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, higher education is perceived as extremely important in today's society, and for most people a university education has become the necessary route to good jobs and a good lifestyle. For some, without having a degree, it is almost impossible to land that dream. When students perceive that their current courses will assist them in marketing themselves in the job market, finding highly-paid employment position or even continuing their studies up to master's or doctorate level, this would result in a favourable positive word of mouth. It has been realized by [18] that customer satisfaction leads to customer retention and other favourable post-consumption behaviors. Behaviors such as promote the company to others through positive word-of-mouth.

Physical environment was found to be positively related to willingness to pay more and negatively correlated with switching behavior. The conducive learning environment will promote studying more enjoyable. Besides, students will continue their studies until the end of the course even if there is a price increase. According to [25] research, non-academic facilities such as dormitories, food service, library and bookstores indirectly contributed to the quality of a university. These attributes provide students a more satisfactory campus climate and supporting academic programmes. Ref. [8] concluded that students are more concerned with the conducive learning environment provided by the higher education institutions.

Lastly, negative emotions were found to be negatively related to positive word of mouth. When students' negative emotions arise, the intensity of positive word of mouth will be lower. This has been noted by [15], where consumers have a zone of tolerance which is linked to adequacy and the desired service levels. If the service encounter does not meet their expectation, then they will become dissatisfied and develop a negative emotion of the service. Ref. [26] noted low score on perception of both non-academic and academic staff may impact negatively the satisfaction levels of students. Thus steps have to be taken so that positive perception can be attained and students level of satisfaction can be improved. Ref. [27] study in higher education institutions found that quality of

education and facilities provided are key determinants of satisfaction and influential factors for word of mouth.

6 Conclusion

This study has proven that student satisfaction has significant relationship to student loyalty. It cannot be denied that perceived benefits of the course, feedback and assessment, physical environment and emotional factors all play an important role to influence student loyalty. These factors have to be given kind considerations as it could offer an added advantage to providing standards of service quality to satisfy students' needs and to transform them to be loyal students.

In short [28], knowing student expectation is insufficient, it is important to translate the knowledge into performance, so as to reduce the gap between expectation and the service actually provided. Identify the gaps for improvement.

6.1 Suggestion

Student satisfaction has strong significant impact on student loyalty. The amount of impact varies from each individual, depending on the degree of individual perception and expectation towards the university. It is important for the university to focus on areas that demonstrate deficiencies.

When a student is dissatisfied, one of the possible reaction is to complain to their friend, parents, school staffs or outside organizations. Complaints can be a good thing for a school faculty, in comparison to those who are dissatisfied yet do not complain but instead spread negative word-of-mouth and to a certain extent quit from studying. A complaint identifies specific problems of a transaction that triggered the student dissatisfaction. By correcting these problems, students would feel secure and cared for by the school. In turn, it may trigger positive word-of-mouth about the faculty concerned.

Most students are reluctant to complain to a school staff or to a lecturer face-to-face. Instead of complaining through written letters, institutions can implement complaint management system, for example using the direct telephone line for the students to express their complaints directly to a service representative or a voice recording system. If the service representative can effectively respond to a complaint, the student dissatisfaction would be reduced and the tendency to spread negative word of mouth would also be reduced. All the root causes of complaints will then be identified and solved.

Feedbacks from lecturers are crucial for student improvement and prevent them from making the same mistakes again. Feedback can take place in written form

or verbal form. It is important for all students to receive feedback. Students feel satisfied when lecturers who really care about their learning provide feedback.

Learning materials must be easy to understand and clear of the objectives. It is important for students to be able to find needed materials in the library or in the bookstore. Library should provide a wide selection of journals to support learning. Multiple copies of text should be available in the library to cater to a large number of students requiring the same materials at the same time.

For the first degree students, when they perceived that the benefits of pursuing studies will bring them good pay, ease of acquiring employment and finding interesting employment offers, it may trigger positive word of mouth and avoid complaining behavior. Perceived benefits of the course for postgraduate students are different. In their perception, pursuing a postgraduate degree will initiate a current career change or even a substantial pay increase. Most of the postgraduate students are working adults, who needs huge commitment to be able to succeed. When these students perceive that courses will expand their knowledge, for example, MBA students perceive that courses will equip them with the needed management skills and important strategic business decisions, they are more likely to be satisfied and talk positively about the course and do less complaining.

Lecturers must be able to fulfill students' needs, and intervene when necessary so as to make them feel positive towards their studies. If students are humiliated in front of the entire class, it will invoke negative feeling. Some students are working in part-time jobs in order to have enough income to support their studies. The dual pressure of life makes them stress out, especially postgraduate students. Sometimes students feel burdened with the course assignments, if they cannot manage their time well they may find it increasingly difficult to attend to the assignment. If students fail to complete their schoolwork, they will fall further behind, resulting in increasingly mounting academic pressure. Finally, it would contribute to the feeling of negative emotions.

The front line administrative staff have to recognize their roles and responsibilities in giving excellent service to their respective faculty students. They must improve in some communication techniques which build positive relationships with students. In addition, they must be able to deal professionally with angry and complaining students. The decision makers and school administrators should listen more to student problems and be more transparent with the reasons in their decisions.

Lastly, creating a reputable brand image of higher educational institutions is another important marketing communication strategy to satisfy and retain students. Researchers [29] pointed out that brand image is an important strategy to attach consumers with the brand, in

turn create a long lasting brand attachment relationships, resulting in positive word of mouth and willingness to pay more.

6.2 Limitation

This research was cross-sectional in nature, where data were collected within a particularly short time, thus satisfaction level of the first, second and third year students cannot be ascertained. Secondly, demographic gap between first degree and postgraduate students were too large, which would produce a biased response due to the maturity and working experiences of the latter. Thirdly, as the questionnaires asked for both perception and expectation, hence, students need time for careful reflection. Since the questionnaires were self-administered on the spot, it may lead to rushed and thoughtless replies by students.

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