

THE INFLUENCE OF SERVICE QUALITY ON
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION TOWARDS
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OF ISLAMIC
UNIVERSITIES IN MALAYSIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction of International students in Islamic higher learning institutions in Malaysia. This research proposes a conceptual framework based on the HEPERF model, which explores the effect of several dimensions of HEDPERF Service quality on customer satisfaction in Islamic higher learning institutions among Malaysian Edutourists (International Students). The dimensions analysed of HEDPERF Service quality were academic aspects, non-academic aspects, access, program issues and the University's reputation. Data were collected from 220 respondents in four Malaysian Islamic Universities using online questionnaires using the sampling criterion. The empiric results of this research supported four out of the five hypotheses suggested in the research. The dimensions that have a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction in Islamic Universities were related to academic aspects, the reputation of universities, access, and programs issues. Academic aspect is found to be the most influential HEDPERF Service quality dimension in customer satisfaction in Islamic higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Non-academic aspect does not have a significant influence on customer satisfaction but reflect a positive relationship with consumer satisfaction in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia. For university administrators and researchers, this study offers useful insights into enhancing the standard of service quality of higher learning institutions and thereby building a happy and loyal customers in the long-term.

خلاصة البحث

الغرض من هذا البحث هو استقصاء أثر جودة الخدمات على رضى العملاء في مؤسسات التعليم العالي الإسلامية في ماليزيا. يقترح البحث إطاراً تصورياً مبني على نموذج **HEDPERF** الذي يستكشف أثر بعض محاور جودة الخدمات لنموذج **HEDPERF** على رضى العملاء في مؤسسات التعليم العالي الإسلامية أوساط سياح التعليم (الطلبة الوافدين). وكانت المحاور في نموذج **HEDPERF** لجودة الخدمات التي تم تحليلها هي الجوانب الأكاديمية، الجوانب غير الأكاديمية، سهولة الوصول، حيثيات البرامج، وسمعة الجامعة. تم جمع بيانات 220 مشارك من الجامعات الإسلامية الماليزية باستخدام استبيان على الإنترنت باستخدام العينة المعيارية. ودعمت النتائج العملية للبحث أربع فرضيات من أصل خمس فرضيات تم اقتراحها في البحث. وأظهرت المحاور التي لها تأثير دلالي وإيجابي على رضى العملاء في الجامعات الإسلامية علاقة بالجوانب الأكاديمية، وسمعة الجامعات، وسهولة الوصول، وحيثيات البرامج. كما وجد أن الجانب الأكاديمي هو المحور الأكثر تأثيراً على نموذج **HEDPERF** لجودة الخدمات في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في ماليزيا. لم يكن للجانب غير الأكاديمي تأثير ذو دلالة على رضى العملاء لكنه عكس علاقة إيجابية برضى العملاء في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في ماليزيا. بالنسبة للإداريين والباحثين في الجامعات، يقدم هذا البحث رؤية حول تحسين مستوى جودة الخدمات في مؤسسات التعليم العالي وإيجاد علاقة طيبة وولاء لدى العملاء على المدى البعيد.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science (Marketing).

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, my parents , my son, and my brothers
and sisters who have encouraged, helped and supported me in the accomplishment of
my projects*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The challenges in achieving higher education excellence are many and difficult to deal with as for any other industry (Chong & Amlil Hazlin, 2014). The quality of education is one of the main factors that motivate students to enroll at a specific university (Bhuiyan et al., 2010). Because of numerous factors such as restricted access to education in home countries as well as globalization, many students have been pushed to leave their homelands and travel overseas in order to pursue their education (Chong & Amlil Hazlin, 2014). Many governments are also pressed to put funding systems in place to support the higher education sector in order to improve the quality of their education service to attract new students in their country (Chong & Amlil Hazlin, 2014).

In the twenty past years, Malaysia has become one of the favorite destinations for foreign scholars who are willing to continue their education abroad (Ali et al., 2016). In 2014, Malaysia was ranked twelfth in a list of top twenty study destination countries (Ali et al., 2016), before South Korea (13). Moreover, Malaysia was also ranked as the world's eleventh preferred higher education destination for international student population amounting to 100,000 students (Rahman et al., 2017).

In Malaysia, education tourism is acknowledged as a new emerging industry (Kamdi et al., 2016). Due to its rising popularity as a niche segment in the tourism industry, educational tourism is currently regarded as a significant sub-sector of the economy as a whole that requires more focus and investigation (Kamdi et al., 2016) .

Edu-tourism has gradually gained more attention in Malaysia in view of its potential as a new source of economic growth (Matahir & Tang, 2018). Malaysia's

efforts as a global educational hub have gained popularity within the last decade, including the creation of agencies to assist international students in immigration and enrolment matters, and the development of educational centers in specified countries (e.g. the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, China, etc.)(Matahir & Tang, 2018). In addition, the promotion of educational tourism is carried out through cooperative inter-agency structures among the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) and the Ministry of Higher education (MOHE) which led to *101 Edutourism packages* in 2015, containing information on public universities in Malaysia (Kamdi et al., 2016).

Considering the forward progress of international student access into local colleges and universities, Malaysia is planning to draw 250,000 foreign students by 2025 (Rosnan& Abdullah, 2018). There are reportedly approximately 122,034 foreign students enrolled in public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2018 (Rosnan & Abdullah, 2018). As it can be seen by these promising results, the number is still below the estimated target of 150,000 students, mainly due to heavy competition from other regional educational hubs, such as Singapore and South Korea (Sabbir et al., 2017). As a result, Malaysia cannot easily realize the benefits of educational tourism as anticipated (Matahir & Tang, 2018).

Great efforts have been made by the Malaysian government in order to internationalize its education system and polarize students from all around the world (Lee et al., 2018). Amongst the efforts that have been made are scholarships that are provided to both local and international students (Lee et al., 2018). Consequently, the number of international students has steadily augmented in Malaysian territory and Malaysia is gradually becoming a favorable place for international institutions to open campuses and branches such as Nottingham and Monash universities (Maga & Nicolau, 2018). The influx of international students is becoming potentials of income for the

tourism industry, hence stressing the importance of the study in finding ways to attract more international students to local universities potentially by improving quality of service of the universities.

After the commercialization of tertiary education in the 1990s, there is a rise in the population of Muslim students in Malaysia from different parts of the world. As an example, there is a significant increase of Chinese and Bangladeshi Muslim students in Malaysian campuses who see Malaysia as a peaceful and developing Muslim country. The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) was founded in 1983 with the help of the Islamic Conference Organization and a number of individual Muslim countries by the Malaysian Government (Abu Bakar & al-Shboul, 2008). IIUM is governed by a board representing eight sponsoring governments and several international organizations, including the League of Islamic Universities, the Federation of Universities in the Islamic World, the International Association of Universities and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (Ali et al., 2016).

Service quality is the main topic to explore for Edutourism in Malaysia because it is undeniable that service quality plays an important role in both service industries and business (Kotler et al., 2018). Several studies and researches have been carried out on service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction, and several models have been developed also to measure quality of service (Malik, 2012). It is a common concept in the service business to emphasize that quality service has a key impact on customers' satisfaction and customers' retention (Farahmandian et al., 2013).

Regarding service quality in education service, several studies have proven that students' satisfaction is a key cause of competitive advantage as it leads to students' retention and long-term survival strategies that are contingent also on the service quality

that is provided by the universities in order to stand out from other learning institutes (Farahmandian et al., 2013).

Henceforth, based on the amount of work carried out, and the literature available on service quality and customer satisfaction within Malaysian institutions of higher learning (Ali et al., 2016), it is important to conduct a deeper study in the Malaysian Islamic higher learning institutions and focus on foreign students. Thus, this study examines the influence of service quality on international students' satisfaction amongst four Malaysian Islamic Universities (International Islamic University of Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, University Sultan Azlan Shah, and University Sultan ZainalAbidin).

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For external factors, includes language factor (common language), historical links between the host country and the home country relationships, geographical proximity, and the availability of programs based on science and technology are the main factors for selecting a location to study

Due to the fast-paced development of technology and globalization, the competition is increasing amongst educational institutions in Malaysia, each trying to attract international students to join their institutions (Rosnan & Abdullah, 2018). Thus, one of the issues related to Edutourism in Malaysia is competition (Ismail, Masron, & Ahmad, 2014). This competitiveness is both regional (among Malaysian public Universities) and international (among foreign universities)(Ismail et al., 2014). This competition among higher education institutions which propose similar courses makes the strategy of striving to improve the quality service very necessary and essential (Rodríguez-González & Segarra, 2016). Simply stated, all this competition has a

negative effect and it consequently declines the registration of international students in Malaysian universities (Tang, Cheah, & Chua, 2019). Furthermore, the quality of education is one of the main factors that motivate students to enroll at a specific university (Bhuiyan et al., 2010). For example, before a student enrolls to a specific institution, he or she will do his or her own research to understand the reputation of the institution before choosing where to study.

Hence, to analyze the factors that affect overall service quality, several research studies in the past emphasized the principle of customer satisfaction to Edutourism (Parasuraman, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Ostrom and Iacobucci, 1995). All these research studies indicated that in the edutourism industry, consumer satisfaction results in loyal consumers who are likely willing to spread positive word of mouth and come back to pursue their studies.

Nowadays, in Malaysia, most higher education institutions and universities seek to attract foreign students and follow internationalization (Rodríguez-González & Segarra, 2016). Very few academicians have explored the Edutourism sector, particularly the Malaysian context as the focus of their studies. (Rodríguez-González & Segarra, 2016). In fact, there are very few academicians conducting research and literature reviews on the tourism behaviour aspect of international students (Kamdi et al., 2016).

Recent research studies that have been conducted in customer satisfaction and service quality on higher education institutions specified that there is insufficient literature (Maga & Nicolau, 2018). Additionally, studies that have been carried out concerning students' perception of service quality concentrated mostly on private universities and in developed countries such as the United States, Australia, UK, while in the developing countries, the research studies concentrated on public universities

(Szeto, 2014). Regarding Malaysia's higher education, the existing literature on service quality is very partial (Maga & Nicolau, 2018). Thus, as Malaysia is a developing country and is on its way to become an educational hub, it needs to explore more and study the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction concerning the Edutourism sector.

As the market in Edutourism becomes increasingly competitive, new participants join the race every day (Rosnan & Abdullah, 2018). Hence, the issue of customer satisfaction towards Edutourism should be explored further. This competition among higher education institutions that propose similar courses makes the strategy of striving to improve the quality service very necessary and essential (Rodríguez-González & Segarra, 2016). Henceforth, based on the amount of work carried out, and the literature available on service quality and customer satisfaction within Malaysian institutions of higher learning (Ali et al., 2016), it is essential to conduct a deeper study in the Malaysian Islamic higher learning institutions. Thus, this study examines the influence of service quality on international students' satisfaction amongst four Malaysian Islamic Universities (International Islamic University of Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, University Sultan Azlan Shah, and University Sultan Zainal Abidin).

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

In the service business sector, it is essential to deliver and focus on apparent service quality to satisfy customers, obtain retention and competitive advantage, and be distinctive in the competition. This study will apply the HEdPERF model that was developed by (Abdullah, 2006) which measure service quality in higher education sector in order to identify the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction

among Islamic Universities in Malaysia. The main purpose of this study is to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To determine the influence of academic aspect towards consumer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia.
- 2) To determine the influence of non-academic aspect towards consumer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia.
- 3) To determine the influence of reputation aspect towards consumer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia.
- 4) To determine the influence of access aspect towards consumer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia.
- 5) To determine the influence of program issue aspect towards consumer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the influence of academic aspects towards customer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia?
- 2) What is the influence of non-academic aspects towards customer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia?

- 3) What is the influence of reputation aspects towards customer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia?
- 4) What is the influence of access aspects towards customer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia?
- 5) What is the influence of program issues aspects towards customer satisfaction among international students in Islamic higher learning Institutions in Malaysia?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research will help the Islamic higher education system by contributing to consumer satisfaction via service performance in order to encourage Edutourism. Furthermore, this study will help to determine the main factors that affect foreign students (customers) satisfaction and will enable Islamic educational institutions to gain knowledge and direction in order to achieve full customer satisfaction that will lead to consumer loyalty. In fact, satisfied consumers share their experience via word-of-mouth, testimonies and so on, to encourage other family members to come study in Malaysia.

Several research studies in the past emphasized the principle of customer satisfaction to Edutourism (Abdullah 2006; Parasuraman, 1991; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Johns, 1996; Powpaka, 1996; Boulding, 1993; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995). All these research studies indicated that in the Edutourism industry, consumer satisfaction results in loyal consumers who are likely willing to spread positive word of mouth and come back to pursue their studies.

The Malaysian government wanted to transform its nation into an educational hub in the Southeast Asian area in order to attract international students to create high-quality and qualified professionals to meet the economic needs of the country (Manaf, Ahmad, & Ahmed, 2013). Furthermore, according to Jusoh (2017), international students contribute enormously to the economy of the country; this contribution is estimated to be RM 5.9 billion per year. The government presumes this figure to increase and reach RM 15.6 billion by this year, 2020.

All this competition in the educational sector leads the ministries to work constantly in order to recognize the key factors for satisfying their customers. Also, they focus on maximizing profit through customers' satisfaction. Thus, it is indispensable to measure service quality and detect aspects that disturb students' satisfaction. By identifying these factors properly, institutions will be able to keep existing customers, then entice new potential customers and finally gain sustainable competitive advantage (Wilkins et al, 2016).

Henceforth, this study is expected to help Islamic higher educational institutions to deliver suitable quality service to their target customers as prescribed by HEDPERF dimensions and offer valued insights to the service providers of the business to gain full customer satisfaction.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Edu-tourism: refers to a person or group of people traveling across countries borders with the intention of learning or participating in any kind of knowledge acquisition (Rodger, 1998).

HedPERF Model: The HEDPERF model consists of five dimensions, namely, academic, non-academic program issues, reputation of university and access.

Consumer satisfaction: The outcome of the customer's evaluation of the efficiency of the service offered by a higher education institution (Kedah, 2015).

6 dimensions of HEDPERF model by Abdullah Firdaus 2005:

1. **Academic aspects:** The academic aspect applies to the roles and obligations of academics (Abdullah, 2006)
2. **Non-academic aspects:** The non-academic aspects dimension refers to the duties performed by non-academic staff who meet the needs and requirements of the institutions' study (Abdullah, 2006).
3. **Access:** The access dimension concerns ease of contact, accessibility and availability of products (Abdullah, 2006).
4. **Reputation:** This aspect is filled with things that emphasize the importance of higher learning institutions in the projection of a professional image (Abdullah, 2006)
5. **Programs issues:** The dimension program issue emphasizes the significance of the specialized knowledge provided by higher education institutions (Abdullah, 2006) refersto“an individual or group of individuals travel across international borders for the purpose of learning, or to engage in any form of knowledge acquisition.” (Rodger, 1998)

1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The first chapter of this study presents a detailed background of the research to be carried out with a description of the precise educational sector that is being studied. Later, it highlights the glitches in the cited business that the research helps to resolve,

by determining the research objectives and the research questions which have to be answered. Finally, this chapter illustrates the significance of the research.

Then, Chapter Two of this research describes the former literature revised to examine the preceding studies carried out on the topic. In addition, after a detailed analysis of the literature, this chapter discusses the main determinants of the quality of service and contribution to customer satisfaction in the education tourism market. The final point is the theoretical framework and the suggested model to be used as a result of the hypotheses derived from past literature. Far ahead, Chapter Three depicts the methodology that is implemented in the current study, and comprises the technique, sample size, research instrument and data collection and analysis procedure.

1.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In the beginning of this chapter, a brief introduction about the educational tourism sector is presented, followed by the background of the research that is conducted. It discourses the fast growing worldwide and lucrative business sector of educational tourism. In addition, the statement of the problem is debated as this research seeks to resolve the issue described, and attempts to fill in the gaps of the educational tourism industry. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the research objectives that must be achieved through the analysis accompanied by the research questions that should be answered. Finally, the significance of the study is exhaustively discoursed.