

Theoretical Framework for analyzing International Students' Concept of Expectation and Consumer Satisfaction in an International University

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Abstract

This paper is regarding study and analysis of relevant literature to create the theoretical framework for understanding how the expectations of international students vary and what they regard as consumer satisfaction during their experience in higher education at an International University. The aim of the study is to better understand how the student's expectations vary due to their geographical diversity and what they consider as consumer satisfaction by the time they are done with the program. It is also important to understand the parameters they consider to measure how satisfied they are with the relevance of the experience by the time they complete their education.

This study explores what are the various aspects that students consider as necessary parameters to feel they have received what they expected with the education experience. What are the expectations of a student when they join a program? Do these expectations differ by nationality or programs? What do the students consider when measuring satisfaction level?

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review and analyze the literature regarding students' satisfaction with various aspects of the education and services that they receive at an International university. It is obvious that students are the single most important stakeholders in any university. Their experience and satisfaction is of importance to the University's management. Students are the consumers even if not the direct customers of the university. It is important to understand what their expectations are and if they feel they have achieved it on completion of their education. It is also important to understand what kind of experience they had during their course of studies.

From the perspective of an International student, is it enough for a University to have good quality education and a good reputation only? Is it also a necessity to have qualified educators from relevant industries and good student facilities to attain this positive experience? What would really add up as a positive experience for students as they graduate? Are the expectations same for each country or do they vary by nationality?

Objective of Study

The study aims to understand the expectations of students when they join University. The study will try to decipher how much variation exists in these expectations based on the student's nationality and whether or not they are satisfied by the time they complete their education at the university.

Research Problem

The paper explores the variation in expectations of international students from their University when they join for higher education and also their perception of satisfaction on completion of their degree.

Research Question

- What are the expectations that International students have when joining a University for higher education?
- How do these expectations vary from student to student based on their nationality?
- How do these students perceive consumer satisfaction on completion of their education?

Literature Review

International students are valued in any international university not just for their monetary contribution but also for the rich cultural mix they bring to the environment of the university. A good mix of international students, give the domestic students an opportunity to sample the global environment even without having to leave their own country. International universities are more popular with students of today who wish to learn about the whole world and venture out to try their futures. The everyday interactions and test of knowledge with the International students add a rich ingredient to this experience. This education better prepares the students for a more global future as compared to other private and public universities whose exposure to the global culture is a lot less. The university and the country will gain much more from the international students studying in the international universities.

These international students popularize some universities over others based on what they expect their experience to be. Since the contribution of this student population is particularly of very high importance to the university, it is equally important to make sure their university experience is a positive one. Nevertheless, research conducted into the experiences of international students in higher education worldwide indicates that students' parameters and levels of satisfaction vary (Roberts, P. and Dunworth, K. 2012). It is not at all surprising since they are from all over the world and their cultures and expectations are so diverse. Understanding how to meet the expectations of these students cannot merely be based on how higher education is treated on the domestic level but to understand the diverseness of their needs. Along with the learning experience this level of satisfaction will also require the need to communicate for better understanding and providing facilities at the physical and mental level.

From the point of view of Universities, it is increasingly important to understand students and their various needs in order to be able to succeed in catering to them. Being able to maintain the

‘distinct image’ is important to retain and increase the competitive advantage in the market. Some universities specifically invest their time and money in increasing the brand name and the education quality as per market needs to create a differentiation from the competition (Palacio, A. B., et al, 2002). Based on the changing market trends and the students various perceptions of what they want, universities are collaborating with organizations to create future human resource pool which gives stability and confidence to students on their choice of education and university.

Expectations of students

The vast range of degree courses and institutions available to students today make the decision making process rather complex (Price, I. et al; 2003). Among expectations some of the widely discussed needs of most students are as follows:

1. Brand or reputation of the University
2. Quality of education
3. Facilities provided and
4. Services or support

Brand or reputation of the University is very important for most international students who judge the quality of the university based on the brand recognition. The legends of many universities decide for them how many applications will be received in one year to be able to choose the best match from among the applicants. A study done within Bournemouth University stated, the reputation of their hospitality and tourism programs and educational links are the most important considerations in student decision making, regarding their choice of program and place of study (Russell, M. 2005). If fees are higher than that of competition universities, then the reputation must be ‘promoted with increased vigor’, as reputation is the crucial constituent in the ‘positioning of a university in its competitive environment’.

The quality of education is no more limited to a well-developed curriculum only, anymore. Students research on what they want to study and the relevance of that curriculum for the chosen field of their study. Again it is not just limited to relevance of the curriculum. Quality of a University also lies in the faculty members who will teach the various subjects. Commonly students reflected that their university’s performance was ‘best in the areas of encouragement of innovation and the quality and experience of staff’. Students selected programs dependent on the eminence of faculty members while the prominence of ‘organizational learning and expertise’ is thought to be the foundation of competitive advantage (Russell, M. 2005). Students today want to be taught by professors who have rich knowledge of their subjects not just due to educational degrees but due to relevant work experience from which they can quote and guide students. The quality of education also deals with the relevance of how much theory is mixed with practical experience so that students know the application of the theories that they study in their field of work.

Education is not limited only to the curriculum and the lecturers but also the relevant facilities needed to learn the practice of the theories. As per the variation in expectations of students, facilities may include a building with proper classrooms or breakout areas or a football field. Laboratories and various student departments are just as important to enrich the experience of the

students. Possibilities to learn about various cultures, trade habits and languages also create a lot of interest in students. Asian students specifically prefer teacher centered learning facilities while European students prefer more student-centered learning experiences (Russell, M. 2005).

Finally one of the most important elements which all students expect is support from their educators and supporting staff during their experience at the university. For some students who come from other countries the support services are most important. These students so not know the language or culture of the new country and neither do they know their way around. They heavily depend on the services to choose on the University. A survey identifies location and social facilities in town as the second and third priority factor for 25% of university students (Price, I. et al; 2003). Many times shortcomings of a University are overlooked provided the students are happy with the support that they are receiving. The support can be either to help with their assignments or extra tuition or it may be about help with their accommodation and services around the campus. Some students also need to be heard by the management and believe a representative student body to speak for all students is a very important part of the support services.

Variation by nationality

The development in the 'international education market' in the next twenty years will be controlled by Asia which will 'account for almost 70% of the global demand for international higher education'. Consumer satisfaction in these sectors will be a crucial strategic means of upholding such a competitive situation with 'long-term benefits arising from student loyalty, positive word of mouth and image of the higher educational institutions' (Arambewela, R., 2006). This is possible by meeting challenges of cumulative worldwide competition and growing student expectations for 'quality, service, and value for money'.

It is proved in a study that Asia will continue to be the 'chief growth region'. Student bodies will contain over 70% of consumers from China and India which are developing as two foremost foundations of international students. Non-Asian countries like Turkey, Morocco and Iran will become fresh foundations of international students in future. This is in view of the growing mandate for foreign education in these countries. In contrast, the study assesses that the demand from 'traditional countries' like Europe and the USA would wane over the years.

Now international students account for over 25% of all foreign students in higher education and the statistics is expected to mature considerably with the growth in demand in countries like China and India. "The students from China, India, Indonesia, and Thailand selected for this study are from countries that represent 61% of all Asian postgraduate students studying in Australia and have shown a potential for further growth" (Arambewela, R., 2006).

The requirement to understand the consumers' needs grow with the variation in clientele. Students from various countries come with various expectations when it comes to their perception of what they would like to gain by the end of their education period. Students from China and Thailand perceive satisfaction of their expectations much differently than students from India and Nepal or Europe and USA. To be able to retain the waning students flow from the western countries and to be able to attract the new flow of students, universities need to be able

to not only concentrate on customer orientation but also customize support services and facilities based on needs of various students.

Perception of Consumer Satisfaction

The marketing aspects of all universities aim at higher enrollment. When students expectation is met their level of satisfaction leads to loyalty towards their institution. Students tend to refer other prospective students to the same institution which leads to higher enrollment numbers. It is certified that contentment with the program clearly affects consumer devotion, which is measured through satisfactory social communication and the intent to rejoin other programs offered by the same institution (Navarro, M. M., 2005).

Research done in the past stated that it costs much more to attract a new customer than it takes to retain an existing customer. In the same way in universities a student's level of satisfaction can be measured by their decision to stay on at the university or further education. Educational institutions disagree to be customer oriented as they do not see it fit for their reputation. Though more and more universities are understanding the need for customer orientation to sustain in the competitive marketplace. "Students who complain and are responded to immediately, even if the response is not favorable, can actually become more loyal than students who appear to be satisfied without complaints" (Deshields Jr, O. W., et al, 2005) .

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