

Perceived Factors and Value by Undergraduates on Private University Education

Ming-Ming Lai, Siok-Hwa Lau⁺, Nurul Afidah Mohamad Yusof and Kok-Wai Chew

Multimedia University, Malaysia

Abstract. This paper examines to what extent the academic, teaching, services, and information technology (IT) related service factors are important in university degree programmes. Perception of the value-added of a university's related services are investigated, too. We surveyed 681 undergraduate students from two popular private universities in Malaysia. The results showed that academic factors are the most important for the bachelor degree programme, followed by teaching, IT and services. The students' perceived value added of the IT components to the programme is only between minor to moderate value. Library facilities obtains as the highest perceived value added while parking space has the lowest score.

Keywords: higher education, undergraduates, perceived value, value-added, and satisfaction.

1. Introduction

It has been increasingly challenging for management of higher education to continually provide reputable and value-added university degree programmes in a highly deregulated and competitive higher education industry. Good understandings of how customers, namely undergraduate students, perceive the university degree programmes offered are very crucial in a university's strategic planning. The university's management takes serious efforts to continually improve the annual assessments of university rankings at both national and international levels. Hence, it is interesting to find out how students' perception of the degree they enrol in and the important factors in the degree programmes. This paper examines to what extent the academic, teaching, services, and information technology (IT) related service factors are important in university degree programmes as perceived by the undergraduates in a university for an emerging economy such as Malaysia. We also examine how students perceive value-added services. The findings of the study bridge the gap between what students perceive and what the universities provide.

2. Literature Review

Schmidt [1] indicated that measuring value-added in service sectors such as higher education is very difficult. Nonetheless, the application of the value-added measures would provide insights to the top management of the college or university on why students select one college over the others. He stated that perceived value of the selected college is equalled to out-of-the-pocket costs to the student. Rodgers [2] investigated whether the value-added measures developed for secondary education in United Kingdom to be higher in the education sector. The results concluded that the model of valued-added measures cannot be replicated in higher education. Hence, he urged that there is strong need to develop better models and measures which can be applied to higher education.

Price, Matzdorf, Smith, and Agahi [3] examined to what extent do facilities and geographical factors affected the selection of university by the undergraduates. They conducted a questionnaire-based survey to first-year students registering in year 2000 and 2001 with a total response of 4,812 and 3,930 respectively.

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel.: + 606-2523976; fax: +606-2318799
E-mail address: shlau@mmu.edu.my

The survey showed that the most important factor in selecting the university was the availability of the desired course. This result is consistent in all institutions that took part in the study. Other factors that also had a very high importance in almost all institutions were the availability of computers and the quality of library. They also found that most university marketing paid somewhat little attention to these facilities-related factors, although they could affect the students' experience. The research also indicated that the university's reputation for teaching was more important than the research.

Maringe [4] indicated that programme, price and prominence were the most important factors for the choice of the university in the UK. Programme factors are items such as field of study and details of courses. Price includes the cost of living and the opportunities for part time jobs. Lastly is the institution's prominence in terms of the overall reputation and staff credentials. The study was based on a sample of 387 students of Sixth Form schools and colleges in the Southampton University Partnership Scheme.

Lai, Kwan, Hazlina, Mahdhir, and Yap [5] examined the effectiveness, teaching, and assessment methods of finance courses in the first private university in Malaysia in 2006. About 224 students from the Bachelor of Finance degree programmes participated and the results showed that the students demonstrated positive attitudes toward finance courses as a whole. The traditional chalk and talk lecture method was still the most preferred teaching method despite the private university emphasizing on online learning and instructional tools. Finance students perceived that final exam to be the most important mode for the assessment system, followed by assignment and midterm examinations.

Ivy [6] investigated the motivational factors for pursuing tertiary education on 427 Sixth Form students from three colleges in Leicester, United Kingdom through self completion quantitative questionnaires in May 2007. The study found that future job prospect and economic factors were listed as the top motivators. It stated that academic and family were the key motivators for Asian students.

Mai [7] did a comparative study between UK and US students' satisfaction in higher education. A survey was conducted to compare postgraduate business school students' perceptions of the education they received in the US and UK. The sample consisted of 332 respondents with 184 UK students from 11 universities and 148 US students from 12 universities. Overall impression of the school and overall impression of the quality of education were significant predictors for overall satisfaction of the education received.

Alves and Raposo [8] found that the university's image had the most influence on student satisfaction in higher education, followed by the value of higher education and perceived education service quality. The population in this study consisted of all students from the Portuguese state universities. A survey using questionnaires was used to collect data from 2,687 students that were chosen randomly. Their research revealed that the main effect of satisfaction was student loyalty.

Gibson [9] had reviewed previous studies to determine major attributes that influenced business students' perceptions of overall satisfaction. Teaching quality, skills and knowledge acquired, course curriculum, student's feeling of 'belonging' and their perceptions of the universities' responsiveness and concern were the most significant determinants of overall satisfaction.

3. Data and Method

We used systematic sampling in which the respondents are students who had lecture/tutorial classes on Thursday in two of the popular and largest private universities in Malaysia. Prior to the actual study, a pilot study was conducted. Face validity was done with the experienced academics while reliability of the constructs was examined, too. We conducted the actual survey from October to November 2010 and collected 681 usable questionnaires.

The questionnaire had many sections such as the section to indicate the importance of bachelor degree programme and to assess the student's perceived value added contributions of university-related services to bachelor degree programme where he or she had enrolled. The last section sought the demographics of the respondents. Descriptive statistics and factor analysis were performed.

4. Analysis and Discussions

Of the 681 undergraduate students in this study, male respondents slightly outnumber female respondents, accounting for 51% and 49% respectively, and Malaysian students are a large majority (94.1%). Chinese students represent the highest number of respondents (80.6%) among the ethnic groups. Nearly 70.5% of the respondents' age range between 20 and 21 years. From the academic achievement perspective, a large number of students obtain a CGPA in the range of 3 to 3.66 (41.7%) and 2 to 2.99 (41.9%) in this study. The majority of the respondents (63.2%) take a loan to support their degrees and a minority (9.8%) are on scholarship.

On the whole, respondents positively rate the overall value of their bachelor degree with good (47.7%), fair (24.5%) and excellent (20.1%). However, respondents who would probably recommend their university's bachelor degree to others are 39.5%, whereas 31.9% are uncertain on this issue.

Table 1 shows the importance of bachelor degree programme to the students. The Cronbach's alpha for all variables, i.e. Academic, Teaching, Services and IT, are all higher than 0.70 [Hair, 10], which indicates that they all are reliable instrument to be used in the study. The result shows that academic factors play the most important role in the bachelor degree programme, followed by teaching, IT and services. They are all significant at 99% significance level.

Table 1: Importance of bachelor degree programme

	Cronbach's alpha	Factor Loading	Mean ^c	Standard deviation
<i>Academic:</i>	0.844			
1. Overall bachelor degree lecturers' teaching quality		0.654	4.33**	0.852
2. Overall students' quality		0.603	3.87**	0.845
3. Overall academic quality -- Quality of exam, test, quizzes, assignment and project questions		0.759	4.12**	0.857
4. Bachelor degree programme curriculum (content)		0.617	3.87**	0.890
Average			4.05**	
<i>Teaching:</i>	0.826			
1. Teaching methods -- lecture, tutorial		0.564	4.27**	0.873
2. Examination assessments – mid term, quiz, final exam		0.736	3.90**	0.881
3. Coursework assessment – assignment, project		0.672	3.96**	0.870
Average			4.04**	
<i>Services:</i>	0.805			
1. Academic advisory programme		0.830	3.52**	0.941
2. Availability of consultation hours		0.658	3.68**	0.938
3. Size of class		0.649	3.78**	0.957
4. Class schedule		0.725	3.94**	0.906
5. Cost of living		0.723	3.94**	0.946
6. Bachelor degree programme website		0.545	3.67**	0.954
Average			3.76**	
<i>IT:</i>	0.906			
1. Computer facilities		0.790	3.96**	0.937
2. Lab facilities		0.821	4.01**	0.957
3. Availability of online teaching materials		0.750	4.02**	0.945
4. Technology-based learning method		0.726	4.04**	0.884
5. University's ICT services – internet connection in the campus		0.743	4.10**	0.960
Average			4.03**	

Notes:

^c The respondents were asked to record their responses by indicating their importance with each statement on a 5-point scale anchored on 1 (Very unimportant) to 5 (Very important)

* Significant at P<0.05, ** at P<0.01.

For academic, the students seem to emphasise more on the overall lecturers' teaching quality and the quality of assessments, rather than the students' quality and the programme content in selecting the bachelor

degree programme. In teaching, students find that the teaching methods during the lecture and tutorial classes are more important, in comparison to the course assessments. They are all, however, important to the students.

In terms of the services, the academic advisory programme is of the least importance to the students. Meanwhile, the most important factors to the students are class schedule and cost of living. It shows that cost of living not only influences the choice of the university in the UK [Maringe, 4], but it also influences the selection of the bachelor degree programme. The high mean for all components in the IT factor indicates that students are very comfortable with the learning style which incorporates IT in it. The availability of the online teaching materials would have made it much easier to the student to access them anytime and anywhere, as compared to the traditional hardcopies of lecture materials. It could save time and money as well. Technology- based learning method, on the other hand, could make the learning process more interesting than the chalk and talk classes. The university's ICT services, such as Internet connection in the campus, is found to be the most important item in the IT factor. Given the fact that information nowadays are all at the fingertips, it is indeed important to have fast Internet connection which will definitely assist students with their research and studies. Overall, the high importance of the IT factor as ranked by the students shows that they are adapting well to this new way of learning.

Table 2 provides students' perceived value added contributions of university related services to bachelor degree programme. Despite having a very high importance in the bachelor degree programme, the students' perceived value added of the IT components to the programme they have enrolled shows only between minor to moderate value. It is plausible that the dissatisfaction with this particular service rendered by the institution leads to such a finding. The component which has the highest perceived value added is the library facilities. Meanwhile, parking space has the lowest score.

Table 2: Students perceived value added contributions of university related services to bachelor degree programme he/she has enrolled

	Cronbach's alpha	Factor Loading	Mean ^c	Standard deviation
<i>IT:</i>	0.818			
1. Computer facilities		0.769	2.66**	0.973
2. Lab facilities		0.780	2.67**	0.969
3. Online learning facilities		0.676	2.65**	1.063
Average			2.66**	
<i>Other Services:</i>	0.831			
1. Sports facilities		0.512	2.39**	1.016
2. Adequate parking space		0.731	2.04**	1.332
3. Academic advisor		0.863	2.50**	0.893
4. University counsellor		0.822	2.34**	0.937
5. Discussion area		0.572	2.46**	0.985
6. Front desk services		0.624	2.36**	1.022
Average			2.35**	
<i>Basic services:</i>	0.770			
1. Food courts/Cafes/Restaurants		0.657	2.44**	0.905
2. Accommodation facility		0.666	2.40**	1.021
3. Library facilities		0.759	2.82**	0.914
4. Safety of the university campus including hostel		0.742	2.59**	1.110
Average			2.56**	

Notes:

^c The respondents were asked to record their responses by indicating their importance with each statement on a 5-point scale anchored on 1 (Very unimportant) to 5 (Very important)

* Significant at P<0.05, ** at P<0.01.

5. Conclusions

This research has indicated that academic factors are the most important for the bachelor degree programme, followed by teaching, IT and services for undergraduate students in Malaysia. Hence, university administrators should prioritize their limited resources to academic and teaching factors such as hiring lecturers that can teach well, and provide training to academics on how to prepare high quality assignments, projects and exam questions. Emphasize should be given on the design of relevant and contemporary curriculum for the courses. IT facilities to facilitate and enhance students' learning should be provided by the university's management, as students think that these facilities are important.

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