

Managing Quality Support Staff in a Higher Learning Institution

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Abstract. For the past few years, the contribution of support staff has received tremendous attention due to the important function that they play in a higher learning institution. It is known that an institution relies heavily on its support staff to help the smooth running of the institution which is equally as essential as learning. A person gets his higher education in the institution where knowledge is gained and learned. Thus higher learning institution as a centre of learning helps not only to culture but also coach, guide and teach people. One could not deny the fact that, academics create educational system, however, they still need the contribution of support staff in facilitating its management system especially in assisting and disseminating information. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which support staff has shaped the management system of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) from the perspective of its international postgraduate. A total of 225 international postgraduate responded to the questionnaire adapted from Hamidah et al. [1]. This paper will present, discuss and highlight the findings of this study as obtaining the result enable continuous improvement in the quality of support staff service within the institution.

Keywords: managing quality, support staff, higher learning institution, international postgraduates

1. Introduction

A higher learning institution is a place where students get their education and expand their knowledge. Ghombavani and Bijandi [2] state that education “promote and enhance knowledge, develop research and also provide a favourable field for developing country” (p.64). Realizing the importance of education, most institutions offer courses that teach students to be independent even though they have to follow certain set of educational structure developed by the institutions’ management system. The purpose of having this specific rule in education system is, to control its local and international student’s enrolment that increase each year. Generally, these systems mainly focus on the academic achievement in attracting applicants especially international students who travel to other country for the purpose of doing their tertiary study. As a consequence, the large increase in the number of international postgraduates pursuing their tertiary study in Malaysian tertiary educational institutions has caused the value of education to rise tremendously. Thus, the need to provide quality education is necessary. As higher learning institutions cannot solely focus on academic, they therefore, have to pay close attention to the services or management systems to ensure that the two components are easily accessible to their students. On top of that, one could not deny the fact that services have become more important and crucial in recent years, as it turns out to be the centre of attention among new candidates. Due to this reason, most institutions place extra emphasis not only on learning environment but extra stress on the services that they have to offer.

Therefore, as a result of the vast competition among institutions in drawing new applicants, the contribution of support staff in facilitating learning in this higher learning environment cannot be denied and recently has received a fair amount of interest, especially when the list of tasks that they are expected to fulfil

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in their services to the institution are getting wider and endless. Most importantly, they are expected to have acquired many skills so that they could give higher priority to the needs of the international students. At the same time, these support staffs are required to handle computers and other equipments efficiently, such as photocopy machine, printer or fax machine as they are usually responsible for making copies of important documents.

They also have to keep files as well as faxing out documents to international students or other institutions such as responding to application forms or replying letters. Subsequently, they also have to ensure that all guidelines are followed and complied with the institution regulations. On top of all that, they have to maintain constant service in order to uphold quality performance. As suggested by Lagrosen [3], research that focuses on the service quality can help higher institutions to measure the success of their quality management system.

In quantifying the functions of support staff in a higher learning institution, most support staff deals not only with academic and other non-academic staff but foremost the international students. Support staffs in UTM are expected not only to greet ‘customer’, and help other staff, but also focus on ‘customer’ service, possess good time management and technology skills. It is also their responsibility to concentrate on tasks that help accelerate their daily chore dealing mainly with international postgraduates. At the same time, they are also assigned to maintain database of all the international students, using various software packages. This data includes the international postgraduates’ names, addresses, phone numbers, account number, the results for every semester and other important data related to international students’ activities. UTM as one of the higher learning institutions in Malaysia and regains its RU status in 2010 presents an attractive education through programs that are broad in scope with a strong focus on discipline ranging from Engineering, Technology, Management and Education. However, how does UTM ensure that the service it offers meets the expectation of these international postgraduate. Similarly, how does it assess the quality of its support staff in meeting the needs of the international postgraduates and what are the indicators of their performance? Therefore, this study is conducted to answer all those questions. This study is crucial to the understanding of the support staff dedication and loyalty in rendering their service to both the institution and international students. This is in agreement with what Carden and Dellifraire [4] belief that a customer satisfaction is what the customer expects to obtain from a deal and what the customer actually receive from it.

2. Methodology and Result

This study investigates the international postgraduate perception towards services provided by the support staff in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. The instrument is administered during the second semester of 2010/2011 session. A total of 225 international postgraduates consisting of 151 male and 74 female from various faculties and courses responded to 11 questionnaire items adopted from Hamidah et.al. [1]. The Cronbach’s alpha value for the pilot study is 0.97. The questionnaire is analysed using mean and percentages. The results of the study are shown in the tables below.

Table 1: International Postgraduate Satisfaction Levels towards Support Staff in the Faculty

Level Mean	Gender		Mean	N	(%)
	M	F			
Low	13	5	1.00 -2.33	18	8
Moderate	65	42	2.34 – 3.67	107	47.56
High	73	27	3.68 – 5.00	100	44.44
Total	151	74		225	100

Table 2: International Postgraduate Satisfaction Levels towards Support Staff in SPS Office

Level Mean	Gender		Mean	N	(%)
	M	F			
Low	11	7	1.00 -2.33	18	8
Moderate	60	32	2.34 – 3.67	92	40.89
High	80	35	3.68 – 5.00	115	51.11
Total	151	74		225	100

Table 3: International Postgraduate Overall Satisfaction Levels towards Support Staff

Level Mean	Gender		Mean	N	(%)
	M	F			
Low	9	5	1.00 -2.33	14	6.22
Moderate	66	37	2.34 – 3.67	103	45.78
High	76	32	3.68 – 5.00	108	48
Total	151	74		225	100

3. Discussion, Recommendation and Conclusion

The finding of this study demonstrates that the perception of the international postgraduates towards UTM support staff is at a high level (refer to Table 3). The results indicate that the international postgraduates irrespective of gender, who are currently pursuing their higher degree in UTM are extremely satisfied with the services and help provided by the support staff at both the faculty and SPS office in UTM. This study proves that the support staff has comprehensively covered his/her duties in the institution which ended up with high outcomes result from this study. This is consistent with what Wisniewski [5] mentions about service quality which is the distinction between what is envisaged and what is perceived. Literarily what it indicates is that, the international postgraduates are surprised with the high quality services demonstrated by the support staff in UTM. It is assumed that before they enrolled as a student in UTM, they might have a negative perception of the services they might experience in this institution. Malherbe and Pearse [6] believe that if the service quality is above the expected standard, the customer would be pleased with the result. Thus, with the high satisfaction level, the international postgraduates are extremely contented with the services provided by the support staff in UTM which is definitely above their anticipations. Hence, support staff is an individual's and employees who play an important role in the institution. They have portrayed that they do have excellent communication skills and efficient in dealing with the international postgraduates, as well as providing prompt service and always willing to help the international postgraduates as showed by the findings of this study.

Generally, high levels of learning for all students require high levels of service by those who serve them. In maintaining quality support staff within a competitive setting, it is suggested that UTM implements quality management strategy and practical approaches to promote quality service. Therefore, it is recommended that UTM takes a conscious strategic decision to align its service delivery as the best way to cope with customers' desire, needs and expectation especially toward a better service quality [7]. This can be done through improving management strategies or staff development program to maintain the present high quality service of its support staff to its international postgraduates.

One of the strategies used as a way of encouraging support staff to sustain their service and to facilitate them to reassess their priorities is through training, courses or workshop. In human resource management practice, training is considered as an important factor that can assist an organization in producing high productivity [8; 9; 10]. During the training, support staff should be encouraged to contribute via constant discussion and should be persuaded to show personal commitment by asking their peers to assist on how to improve on their service. Additionally, during such trainings, courses or workshops, sharing of information should be highlighted, where an informal sharing of experiences on how to deal effectively with international postgraduates should be extensively discussed. This could be achieved by making it one of the important agendas of the program. During these sessions, practical hands on workshops should also be introduced, where support staff should be motivated to explore, discuss and evaluate different aspects of international postgraduate issues. Discussion with other support staff across or within faculties or other higher institutions should also be put into practice as a means of creating coherent support strategies. Courses that enhance leadership skills should also be emphasized as well as keeping support staff up to date with the latest technology or training program. Continuous training, courses or workshop and access to the finest and most current practices for their positions would enable them to perform their jobs effectively and successfully. Moreover, evaluation of shared information should be established before and after each training or workshop. This is to ensure, that their experiences are documented to improve future management strategy that works. Statements, suggestions or comment box for support staff to submit reflective remarks on problems and

issues related to international postgraduates should also be made easily accessible. This is to ascertain that two ways evaluations are practiced. On the other hand, for international postgraduates, the availability of appraisal information such as online evaluation as a way of sharing information and assessing support staff should be constructed. The purpose of obtaining this assessment is to enable continuous improvement in the service quality within the institution especially among UTM's support staff. International postgraduate survey questions, such as used in this study should be encouraged and constantly monitored because evaluating taking into account students' feedback towards improving support staff management program and management strategy. A high standard service quality would be one of the definite ways of attracting more international applicants to enroll as UTM's students which is consistent with UTM's RU mission.

Other recommended strategy that would work well in improving service quality among UTM support staff is, the management should commit and exercise practiced leadership to inculcate new ways of working. This is suggested in order to maximize the management's quality as best practices are always refined and improved in producing conducive learning and working environment. It is undeniable that, for an institution to succeed it must have a healthy working environment. Mendes and Stander [11] share similar sentiment. They mention that an organization that has the tendency to become market leader needs to recognize the importance of focusing on their employees besides the organization environment. Therefore, an effective management method of an institution includes allowing the employees to participate actively in its management meeting or discussion because this is where displeasure and discontentment are voiced out. It is clear, that both dissatisfaction and displeasure will expand if complaints and requests are not fulfilled and justified, and as the result it will ultimately lead to the disruptions of academic activities. This is stressed with a view to highlight the problems and strengthening the relationship between support staff and UTM management team, in order to guarantee that there is a comfortable atmosphere which can contribute in improving productivity and performance.

In conclusion, the environment of support staff in a higher learning institution is rapidly changing due to the high demand from international students. Consequently, the functions and the development program for support staff must also be viewed appropriately. Even though the results of this study indicate that the international postgraduates are extremely satisfied with the service provided by UTM support staff, however, as responsible employees, they should always make their best effort to ensure that they contribute to the development of the institution in the future. They must also assist the institution in achieving its mission and vision, in order to retain its RU status by ensuring rapid dissemination of information, knowledge and appropriate responsiveness to new learning situations especially towards its international students.

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