

Campus Life for International Students: Exploring Students' Perceptions of Quality Learning Environment at a Private University in Malaysia

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Abstract

The number of international students enrolling at higher learning institutions in Malaysia is increasing each year. However, the quality of learning environment is not always easy to measure, particularly for private universities which are not financially aided by the government, where the learning environment is characterized by their physical construct, quality of staff and academic atmosphere. There have been numerical quantitative researches on the perceptions of university quality learning environment but it is argued that a qualitative approach would add to existing knowledge by providing deeper insights, and from a different perspective. The purpose of the present study was to explore international students' perceptions of a private university through individual in-depth interviews. 15 international students from ten different countries were selected for this study. Various themes emerged from the interviews, some of which have not yet been uncovered in past research investigating learning environment. The findings provide evidence that students expressed their common expectations, concerns, and hopes for a quality university learning environment. This study also provides support for the employment of qualitative approach in the study of perception and quality learning environment.

Keywords: international students, perceptions, learning environment, quality education, private university

1. Introduction

There are 476 private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia but only 58 of these institutions have obtained either university or university college statuses (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). According to the statistics published by the Ministry of Higher Education, there were 86,923 foreign students registered at institutions of higher learning in the year of 2010. More than 70% of these students enrolled at private universities. The number of international students registered at higher learning institutions in Malaysia is expected to increase each year. Given these figures, it is therefore important for higher education institutions in Malaysia to ensure that students are satisfied with the quality of learning environment. This is particularly urgent for private institutions who are not funded by the government and whose source of revenue depends solely on student enrolments. Students' perceptions on learning environment can serve as a useful tool for the improvement of the quality in tertiary education. The learning environment at these universities vary according to the size of the campus, physical environment, qualification of their staff, students' quality and students' academic performance.

The primary aim of this study is to define the quality learning environment perceived by students at a private university. Therefore, the objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to determine international students' perceptions of quality learning environment at a private university. Then, it provides researchers with a general framework for quality of learning experience in the eyes of international students and thirdly, it provides insight into the strengths and weaknesses of education as perceived by the international students.

2. Literature Review

A review of the literature of quality universities education generates several issues such as learning environment, approaches to study, and academic outcomes (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). Learning environment refers to the experience of student at higher learning institution. This consists of caring academic and administrative staff,

comfortable environment, quality learning facilities, adequate resources and commitment of the administrators to the improvement of education service quality. These contribute significantly to the students' personality and satisfaction (Banwit & Datta, 2003; Elliot & Healy, 2001; J. Douglas, A. Douglas, & Barnes, 2006). According to Green (1994), the quality of education is explained by the demand for greater efficiency. Efficiency gains have been achieved largely by changes in the approach to teaching and learning. Quality can be interpreted differently by different people. Quality can be conceptualized into five distinct categories namely exception, perceptions, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation.

Likewise, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1990) use reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy to describe the quality of service. Quality learning process is one of the components to determine the quality tertiary education. For instance, student-centered learning is a quality learning process that focuses on the needs and abilities of the students and on topics that are relevant to the students' daily lives, needs, and interests. Students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge. It is believed that student-centered learning design will be able to improve students' overall performance. Similarly, research has shown correlations between students' deeper approaches to learning and higher quality learning outcomes. Trigwell, Porsser, and Waterhouse (1999) studied of 46 science teachers and 3956 science students has shown that teachers' approaches would affect students' approaches to learning. They also encouraged academic staff to implement quality student-centered approaches in their teaching in order to produce higher quality students' learning.

Educational facilities play an importance role in an institute of higher learning. Ndirangu and Udoto (2011) studied the quality of learning facilities and learning environment at five Kenya's public universities. Their findings shown that quality of the library, online resources and lecture facilities provided by Kenyan public universities did not meet quality measures of adequacy. They were unable to support the desired educational programs effectively and facilitate the development of learning environments that support students and teachers in achieving their goals. Their finding indicated that university administrators need to invest more on the improvement of educational facilities as it would enhance student's learning.

Besides focusing on the educational facilities, university administrators also need to understand students' views on campus experiences. K. Singh, Augsutine, and B. Singh (2010) examined 1167 student' perceptions about their university experience. These experiences comprising of skills development, program quality, student support, teaching quality, learning environment and resources, learning community, academic guidance and campus experience. The study found that majority of the students had a positive university experience. The dimension which has the highest mean score was campus experience and the lowest mean score was learning environment and resources. The study suggested that more focus should be on students' campus experience in order to improve the quality of university life.

Similarly, Haarala-Muhoned, Ruohoniemi, Katajavuori, and Lindblom-Ylänne (2011) explored 426 first-year students' perceptions of their teaching-learning environments in three professional academic disciplines at a university. Their result suggested that veterinary and pharmacy students experienced their teaching-learning environment more positively than law students. Significant differences in students' perceptions were found between disciplines on staff enthusiasm and support, constructive feedback and support from other students. Comparisons between the disciplines helped in recognizing special features of each discipline from novice students' points of view.

Besides different studies pertaining to the students' perceptions on teaching and learning environment, Clewes (2003) believes students' perceptions of institutional quality can be considered an "outcome quality". Students are encouraged to participant actively in the learning outcomes (Katiliute & Kazlauskienė, 2010). Students' perception on quality education in higher learning institutions provides opportunities to universities to determine students' learning experience and initiate proper strategies to achieve institutional effectiveness (J. Douglas et al., 2006). Criteria for assessing quality in higher education require understanding different conceptions of quality that inform the preferences of stakeholders (Harvey & Green, 1993). Students' experience with their learning milieu can serve as a tool for the improvement of learning environment (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, & Groggaard, 2002). A student perception of quality is an important variable to be studied in this context.

3. Research Methodology

The research design for this study was informed by a qualitative approach. When using this approach, researchers attempt to describe and interpret the more complex and hidden facets of a particular human experience. These comprehensive descriptions provide the basis for analysis (Moustakas, 1994). A set of semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on previous work related to the quality of learning

environment (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Mayya & Roff, 2004; Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell, 2002; Boshier & Pratt, 1997). The questions developed in the protocol asked students to reflect on the quality of their learning experience.

The participants represented a purposeful sample (Creswell, 1998). The researcher obtained the approval of 15 international students from two different disciplines at a private institute of higher learning in Malaysia. Selection of these international students was based on the ability of the researcher to gain access to these students. Consent letters were sent to the students who have enrolled in one of the degree courses at the time of the interview. The consent letters contained the purpose of the study and confidentiality of the participants. The students signed the consent forms and recognized that the research is relevant to the improvement of quality of university education. In-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998) were conducted in a quiet room and open-ended interviews lasted about 60 minutes (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read several times. The researcher manually coded the transcripts to look for constructs. Drawing from the students' learning perspectives, constructs emerged from the purposeful sampling addressing perspectives as to how students' view quality university education. The constructs were then categorized into a few main themes (Creswell, 1998).

The process of the study is consistent and reasonable over time and across researchers (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2000). The transcripts served as another determinant of dependability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers also used member checking to review the transcripts in order to clarify the concurrence of the emerged themes (Krefting, 1991). Quotes were used to support the objectivity of this study. Credibility is defined as the correctness of a description, conclusion, explanation, or interpretation (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

4. Research Results

Table 1 shows a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants, who are identified by pseudonyms throughout this paper. All the participants are full-time students and currently undertaking their bachelor degrees in the school of business and hospitality.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Characteristics

Respondents pseudonym	Gender	Discipline	Nation of origin
Mei Lee	Female	Hospitality	Taiwan
Anne	Female	Hospitality	Indonesia
Sulaiman	Male	Hospitality	Indonesia
Khin	Male	Hospitality	Burma
Cho	Female	Hospitality	Burma
Ai Lin	Female	Hospitality	China
Xu Yang	Male	Business	China
Amir	Male	Business	Kyrgyzstan
Nurul	Female	Business	Kyrgyzstan
Mastura	Female	Business	Tanzania
Edward	Male	Business	Tanzania
Emad	Male	Business	Sudan
Betty	Female	Business	Kenya
Hasan	Male	Business	Maldives
Nordin	Male	Business	Bangladesh

From the interviews, four themes that students perceived as quality learning environments were uncovered from the fifteen participants. The results were organized into four different themes. These themes describe the students' responses to the quality learning environment. The themes are first described and then supported by verbatim quotations from the participants but pseudonyms were used to provide anonymity. The four main findings in this

study are:

4.1 Preferred Learning Approaches

Twelve out of the fifteen international students preferred to attend tutorials rather than lectures. They perceived tutorials to be more “interesting” and “fun” compared to lectures. Students revealed that lectures were dull as there was not any interaction between the lecturers and the students—lecturers delivered the lessons by reading pre-prepared slides. On the other hand, tutorials gave students the opportunities to interact with either the lecturers or fellow classmates. Furthermore, tutorial class was smaller compared to lectures. In this respect, the excerpts from the interviews showed the following perspective:

I like interacting. I am more interested in tutorial than lectures. Some lecturers know how to interact with the students but some don't. They just talk like one way game. For me, lectures are duller than tutorials. Tutorial more interesting, there is more involvement stuff like that, so it is fun. (Betty, Kenya)

Where tutorials are concerned, six of the students said that they preferred tutorials to lectures as they tend to involve group discussions. The students interviewed felt that they were able to interact and participate during group discussions. They believed group discussions helped them in their studies, especially in coming up with solutions to the problems presented to them. The tutors would often give them some feedback after group discussion. Emad described the benefit of group discussion by saying:

I like group discussion. I prefer to do in group because everybody will contribute to each other, give ideas and share of what you think about the cases. Many ideas will help us to get the best answers instead of doing the case study yourself. You may not able to think an overall solution as some people think differently.

Another student who preferred this student-centered learning approach mentioned:

I think lecture just listen but tutorial we can communicate and discuss in groups. I mean during tutorial, we can discuss and come out with your own answers. For example, our economic class, we formed in groups then come out with our solutions. The solution can be right or wrong. It doesn't matter as lecturer will give us correct answer. I think different people have different opinions. So, if we discuss we can get more information. (Ai Lin, China)

Students are required to solve real world problem in some of the tutorials. They believed they could apply what they had learned in their future profession. Anne, a student from the School of Hospitality indicated, “*The learning for me is quite useful and interesting because something that I learn can be applied in work. The lecturers let us think more to [the] future rather than just learn from the textbooks.*”

Most of the students felt the courses they were studying were relevant to their future professions. Students believed hands-on activities were better than learning the theories as they didn't have to memorize all the theories from the textbooks. Five students who preferred hands-on activities offered the following perspectives:

I think practical is useful. We know the real life situation and how to operate it. We might not have to be[come] a waiter but we have to manage [the] people. We have to know how it operates so we do [handwork] ourselves in order to get [a] better understand. (Mei Lee, Taiwan)

4.2 Perceptions of Lecturers

Fourteen of the students felt that the lecturers at institute of higher learning were very helpful and friendly. These lecturers helped them to progress in their studies. The lecturers would respond to all questions asked by students. Mei Lee stated, “*...Like if you have [any] questions, they try to give you the answers after class. Something you need to clarification and you dare not raise your hand in front of everybody, they can also spend their time on you. There are really helpful.*”

Some of the lecturers made jokes and created interesting learning environment. For instance, Anne said that, “*...although he is not highly educated but he is really professional. He has lot of experience. Like he knows how to grab attention [of the students]; he knows how to make us interest [ed] in the subject...*” One student said that he preferred to learn in a “fun” way and preferred lecturers who could create jokes in the class. He felt bored if the lecturers just explained about theories. In his opinion, lecturers need to make the class more interesting in order to capture the attention of the students. A student who preferred “funny” lecturers stated:

I like funny lecturers. He or she can make lectures interesting and not too boring. Some lecturers are boring, that's the problem. Learn in the fun way, most important we learn something. The lecturers tell jokes but we learn after funny jokes. (Xu Yang, China)

Six students thought lecturers must be able to explain their content well and give relevant examples. Furthermore,

a good lecturer should be able to give extra information to the students. They were knowledgeable and always well-prepared for classes. When asked about the knowledge of the lecturers, some of the students believed that lecturers should go beyond the subject matter by giving proper justification. The excerpts below portrayed students' perceptions of good lecturers:

Good lecturers just don't read from the lecture notes, they give extra examples. They use real-life situation, they ask questions from us, they tell funny stories, and they go a little beyond the lecture. As long as he or she teaching the good stuff and if I come with questions, he can provide me the answers. (Hasan, Maldives)

One student felt that Malaysians' multi-racial societies brought different kinds of learning experiences. She could learn different points of view from different ethnic lecturers, as one student pointed out:

Learning is good. Is not just like we have one Malay lecturer. They have [There are] different cultures, open your mind [to be] to see thing differently. [Now] we have Malay, Chinese and Indian lecturers, they come from different backgrounds. You open up your mind to different point of views. It is not just fix to one. (Betty, Kenya)

Almost half of the respondents felt that Malaysian lecturers had different kinds of English accent. The students had listening problems at the beginning of the semester. Usually this problem could be overcome after one or two semesters. However, majority of the students felt the lecturers could communicate well. A student from the School of Hospitality felt that different accents were important in the tourism industry. Those who are serving in the hotel industry need to understand different kinds of accent in order to serve their customers better, as one student commented:

I can understand most of the lectures but maybe some I can't. I try because the very first time I came here, I really can't understand some of the[ir] accents. The lecturers come from different places and have different kind of accents. I should try to listen to other people because in the future I need to serve people in my field. I am in hospitality right, I work in the hotel. People come from different places; I can't be like [saying] I don't understand you, then the customers really get angry. (Mei Lee, Taiwan)

4.3 Perceptions of Atmosphere

Students said the library is spacious with numerous useful reference books. However, some students had negative impressions about the library. They perceived the library to be a noisy place to do their revision. Many students like to discuss in the library. Conversely, Khin gave some positive comments about the library, "*I study in the library as I like the atmosphere there. There are many useful books there. Most of the time, I will do my revisions in the library. Sometime, if I am free, I will borrow some books and read at home. I will go there with my friends or by myself. Most of the time, I will go there with friends because we need to discuss and share about our subjects so that we can prepare for the exam.*"

Students learn more by listening to their peers than by listening to their lecturers (Levin, Glass & Meister, 1984). Peers often have a better understanding of what other students do not know. Low-achievers or students who have subjects' related problems can seek extra help and guidance from Student Learning Center. The center provides guidance especially to the low-achievers via their peers. A student who had sought guidance from the center gave the following compliments:

Sometime you don't get what your lecturers said in class. When you get someone else to teach you, different perspectives and teaching-learning skills. You get it more cause some of the people who are teaching are students. Some lecturers learn so much, so they think more advance than the students. So when you talk to student's level, someone thinking that level is easier to understand. (Cho, Burma)

There is a state-of-art commercial building in the university. Students like to hang out with their friends at this area. Most of the students were concerned about the price of food at the food court and restaurants. One student felt that it was out of his budget if he were to eat at the food court or restaurants. Hasan described his views regarding the commercial building:

The food is very expensive here. The commercial block is good for me to hang out with my friends. I am on tight budget. I don't buy food from these places. So after lecture or class, I just bring a sandwich from home and hang out there.

Students felt relaxed and comfortable to study at this institute of higher learning. They are proud to be the student at this University. They were optimistic to pass all the subjects in every semester. Ai Lin from China said, "*I think I can pass all the subject [be]cause the lecturers help me preparing for my exam. I enjoy in my studies because I have good relationship with friends and lecturers.*"

4.4 Perceptions of Social Life

Students need friends and felt secure if their close friends were around. They felt lonely when they arrived in Malaysia. Therefore, four students participated in clubs and societies activities in order to meet some new friends, learn some social and practical skills. Their participation serves as a platform in their future career development. Sulaiman, a hospitality student described the benefit of joining club's activities:

I join BH [Bachelor of Hospitality] club. I want to learn about wine, I am very interested in wine. We share information and sometime we make appointment or outing with lecturers to share our opinions. We share to buy the wine. Wine testing is very complicated.

Betty involved herself in many different societies. According to her, she learned various social and practical skills through her participation in different societies. She even applied her economical knowledge in various societies' activities. Mei Lee from Taiwan felt that club activities could enrich and enhance her studies. These activities gave her the opportunity to observe how people in the service industry performed their daily routines. She offered the following perspective, *"I join BH club. It brings me closer to my field and knows more about what you have learned in class. Actually club is just for relaxed. You still can learn after lecture. Maybe the lecturer accompanies you and he will explain to you what is happening outside life not theory only. I think it is like a balance."*

Emad initiated the Arab Club in the university. His main idea is to help the Middle East students to adjust their new lives in Malaysia. The following interview excerpt explained the main function of him forming the club:

I formed the Arab Club and I am the president of this club. There is a good chance to form the community from the same region. You also can know others and meet a lot of friends. When I arrived here, everybody was like living their own lives. No one cares about others. When you face a problem, no one will help you. When I established the Arab Society, we are all together and help each other if someone has problems.

Student from Tanzania felt the barrier between local and foreign students. She felt that the local students tended to clique among themselves. Mustura said, *"Life is kind of hard because I am not use to friends here. Malaysians like to discriminant especially foreigner. So it is hard to get friends."*

Conversely, an out-spoken female student looked at these barriers from a different perspective, as the student pointed out:

This is all about your personality. You really need to get out cause some people[are] not willing to get out. One thing that I experienced in class, sometimes you have Malaysian students who are so used to their own culture. They form their own group like all Chinese or Indians together. You find that even though you try to get involved ya, the group do[es]n't really associate with you. So it can be a challenge. But then I think the person need to know how to handle it cause that is actually something you will face in the world. The perception is how you deal with it, even you don't, learn[ing] how to deal with it. (Betty, Kenya)

Mei Lin got the feeling that good friends could help her in her studies. Her experiences told her that good friends always shared their lectures notes and exchanged useful ideas. She stated: *"She will tell me whatever she knows and I will exchange my ideas with her. This like compensate what had missed during lectures."*

Majority of the students believe that their English communication skill improved after they have joined this institute of higher learning. One of the students, Nordin, attributed his English communication skill to the English speaking environment. Nordin illustrated that he had to speak in English because all his classmates were unable to speak in Bangladeshi language:

The environment here [is] quite influencing. Of course, I speak more in English because I can't speak Chinese so I speak English with them and my English improve[s]. When I was in Bangladesh, I never speak English with my friends or teachers. But here I have no choice.

5. Conclusion

This research uses a qualitative approach to investigate the quality of learning environment perceived by international students. For the purpose of generalization, further research should employ quantitative method to measure the constructs revealed by the respondents in this study. More research is needed to verify the results. Therefore, further research could be conducted on local students' perceptions of learning environment. A comparison of students' perceptions across these two groups would provide even further insight into each group's perceptions of tertiary learning environment.

In this era of globalization, students are travelling more during the course of their studies. The findings in this study benefit many institutions of higher education that recruit international students and/or have introduced

international student exchange programs. Findings highlighted the need for tertiary institutions to adopt strategies aimed at ensuring that international students experience positive learning throughout their courses. It is clear that there are a number of areas that institutions need to work on to ensure this. In particular, local lecturers not exposed to international students should be retrained and lecturers should also be trained to take their subjects beyond the classroom and to present students with real-life problems. In addition, tactics for fostering relationships between internationals and local students must be implemented with care. Unless institutions start paying attention to the needs of their international students, they may lose out to those that do.

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