

Full Length Research Paper

# Destination choice, service quality, satisfaction, and consumerism: International students in Malaysian institutions of higher education

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This pilot study examines the pull factors influencing international students in selecting Malaysia as the host country and their perceptions of service quality in Malaysian institutes of higher education. It has been found that students from the Middle East countries came to Malaysia mainly due to agent recommendation, lower costs, and comfortable climate. They were somewhat satisfied with their host institution. The Chinese students came to Malaysia upon the recommendation of their parents and relatives, familiarity of the country, and perceived favorable study environment. And they were somewhat dissatisfied with their host institution. These groups of students seemed to treat education as an investment and they placed importance on such factors as reputation, quality of academic staff, course content, program-related issues, costs, delivery of services, and management's concern for them. They perceived that, overall, their host institutions were not performing satisfactory in providing quality education services. Finally, our data suggest much consumerism among these international student groups.

**Key words:** Study destination choice, service quality, student consumerism, student satisfaction.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing globalization in the sector of higher education for the past couple of decades. The globalization of higher education can be seen from the large flow of students studying abroad and the increasing number of colleges and universities providing educational services across borders. It has been estimated that there are two million students studying worldwide outside of their home countries, and this number may increase to

eight million by the year of 2025 (Altbach, 2004). Most of the international students are from countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. They study in only a small number of host countries with USA, France, Germany, UK, and Canada as the five leading host countries. By far USA is the largest provider of international education. In 1990, USA was the host to students mainly from Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Taiwan. France had a large proportion of its students from Morocco and Algeria; while Germany drew heavily from Turkey, Iran, and Greece. Malaysia and Hong Kong were the top two source countries for UK; and for Canada, Hong Kong, Philippines, and China were the top three sources of students (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996).

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In mid-1980s, Australia emerged as a player in the international education industry. It has become a major exporter of educational services and is a host country for students of various Asian countries. Prior to 1985, Australia's involvement in international education was tied to the provision of overseas aid program. The Australian government sponsored partly or fully almost all international students studying in the country. However, a major policy shift occurred in the mid-1980s—Australia commercialized and opened up her higher education to fee-paying international students. Fees were imposed on overseas students to raise international revenues and to recover costs. Australia experienced a significant increase in the number of international students since then, with Hong Kong and Malaysia as the main source countries (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996). Nowadays, Australia is an aggressive recruiter of international students to increase its higher education's revenues (Altbach, 2004).

Mazzarol, Soutar, and Sim (2003) have described three distinct waves of globalization in international higher education industry. The first wave involved the movement of students to host countries to study, and this was the usual model throughout much of the last century. The second wave involved forward integration through twinning programs with local institutions which allows students to study a foreign degree in their home countries. The third wave now is the setting up of branch campuses in foreign markets and the development of online courses through information technologies. Both Australia and UK are the pioneers in the process of forward integration and opening up branch campuses in other developing countries. Australian universities, for example, have built campuses in Malaysia and linked up with local academic institutions. More recently, they have ventured into Vietnam and South Africa to offer Australian degrees offshore (Altbach, 2004). Altbach (2004) refers the second and third waves as the movements of "new transnationalism:"

Just as students are on the move, so too are institutions. We are at the beginning of the era of transnational higher education, in which academic institutions from one country operate in another, academic programs are jointly offered by universities from different countries, and higher education is delivered through distance technologies. This growth will affect flows of students from one country to another. (p.22)

Parallel to the third wave in the globalization of international education is the expansion of higher education systems within the source countries to increase opportunities for students to study at home and to raise revenues. Many Asian countries have emerged as the new entrants to this lucrative international education

industry. Malaysia provides a good example in this aspect. Malaysia has been one of the major source countries for US, UK, and Canada (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996). Malaysia used to "push" away many students to study overseas due to limited access to higher education in the home country. Now, Malaysia is trying very hard to retain her own students studying locally and to "pull" international students from various countries especially those from China. Malaysian government has decided to make the country the education hub in the Asian region. Since the late 1980s, the government has implemented various measures such as opening up private colleges and universities, twinning programs with foreign universities, use of recruitment agents, easy visa application process, and permitting branch campuses of foreign universities, to attract foreign students studying in the country. The international student number of Malaysia has grown from a mere 3,508 students in 1999 to 72,000 students in 2009. The foreign students in Malaysia are mainly from Asian countries with China as the major source country followed by Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Maldives, Singapore, Yemen, Oman, Myanmar, Korea, and Vietnam ("International flows of mobile students at tertiary level," n.d.; "Foreign students turn to Malaysia, 2009).

It has been forecast that the demand for education services within the Asia-Pacific region is growing strongly over the years to come, and Malaysia appears to compete actively in this region with the existing education suppliers such as UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The financial benefits of playing host to fee-paying foreign students have been well demonstrated -by these established players. It is expected that more countries will enter into this lucrative international education industry. Singapore has already played a significant role in this third wave of internationalization of education. Other countries that have shown signs of similar development include Thailand, China, and Vietnam (Mazzarol et al., 2003).

### **Push-pull factors of studying abroad**

Why do students study abroad? Two sets of factors—push and pull factors—influence students' decision to go international. Push factors are forces from the source country which initiate a student's decision to study overseas. On the other hand, pull factors are forces from the host country that attract international students to come to study. Some of these push and pull factors are inherent in the source country, some in the host country, and some in the individual students (Agarwal and Winkler, 1985; Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003).

The following are the push and pull factors identified by Altbach (2004), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and

McMahon (1992):

Factors that push students away from their home countries include:

- i. A lack of access to higher education in home country.
- ii. Highly competitive entry requirements of home schools.
- iii. Lack of quality or “world-class” institutes of higher education.
- iv. Unavailability of specializations that students want to study.
- v. Limited opportunities for study at the master’s or doctoral levels.
- vi. The priority placed on education by the government (government policy).
- vii. Social forces such as family influence and discriminatory admission policies against certain races.
- viii. Political forces such as government instability, student unrests, and civil riots.

Factors that pull students to the host country include:

- i. Reputable academic institutions.
- ii. The prestige of receiving a foreign degree.
- iii. Enhanced employability upon graduation.
- iv. Career opportunities in the host country.
- v. Opportunities to migrate to the host country.
- vi. Host nation political interests in the home country through knowledge transfer or cultural links.
- vii. Host nation support of international students via scholarships or other financial assistance.
- viii. Marketing efforts such as the use of student recruitment agents and advertising.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) have identified six pull factors found to be important in influencing international students’ selection of a host country. The authors argue that these six pull factors provide a framework for understanding what motivates a student’s selection of destination choice. They are as follows:

1. The overall level of awareness and knowledge of host country: This is influenced by such factors as the availability of information, the ease of getting information, the host country’s reputation for quality, and the recognition of its qualification in student’s home country.
2. Referrals or personal recommendation that the host country receives from parents, relatives, friends, and agents.
3. Cost issues: This includes the cost of tuition fees, travel costs, living costs, and social costs such as crime and safety.
4. The environment of the host country: This refers to the study environment, living environment, and comfortable climate.
5. Geographic proximity: It is about how close the host

country is to the student’s home country in relation to distance and time.

6. Social links: This is related to whether the student has family members, relatives, or friends staying in the host country; or whether any of them has studied there before.

Once the decision to study abroad has been made, these pull factors become apparent as they influence the study destination choice. Pull factors are those factors making one host country relatively more attractive than its competitors. Hence, it is important to examine what attracts international students to come and study in a particular host country.

### **Education service quality**

Given the increasing competition in the world market for international education, it is imperative for institutes of higher education in the host country to attract and retain foreign students. The need for service quality in higher education from the customer’s perspective has been widely discussed by various researchers (Ford, Joseph, and Joseph, 1999; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Joseph, Yakhou, and Stone, 2005; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Rowley, 1997; Russell, 2005; Shank, Walker, and Hayes, 1995; Tan and Kek, 2004). It has been argued that higher education can be classified as a marketable service as it possesses all the characteristics of a typical service industry—intangible, heterogeneous, perishable, inseparable from the person delivering it, and high customer (student) contact. The environment of education service industry has become fiercely competitive as students now have more choices, and they have become more demanding and discriminating in their selection of colleges and universities. Therefore, it is imperative for educational institutions to deliver and monitor quality services to achieve customer satisfaction and profitability (Joseph, et al., 2005; Russell, 2005; Shank, et al. 1995).

To assess customer perceptions of quality service, the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman and his colleagues has been widely used by researchers. The service attributes included in this model are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988 and 1993). However, Joseph and his colleagues question the applicability of SERVQUAL model in measuring service quality in the education industry. They believe that the five dimensions are not appropriate to be used in education industry. When students evaluate the quality of their educational experience, they are likely to use different criteria with different importance weights. They argue that the importance-performance technique introduced by Martilla and James (1977) is most suitable to assess service

quality in education (Ford, et al., 1999; Joseph and Joseph, 1997).

Martilla and James (1977) developed a simple and easily-applied technique for measuring service attributes in terms of their importance and performance. Service quality is seen to be the function of customer perceptions of performance and the importance of the attribute. The mean importance and performance ratings of the service attributes included in the study can be plotted as points on a two-dimensional grid, which is divided into four quadrants labeled as below:

**Concentrate here -- quadrant A, top-left quadrant:** Customers consider the service factors that fall into this quadrant are relatively important but are not being performed satisfactory by the service provider.

**Keep up the good work – quadrant B, top-right quadrant:** Customers consider the service factors that fall into this quadrant are relatively important and are also performed satisfactory by the service provider.

**Low priority – quadrant C, bottom-left quadrant:** Customers consider the service factors that fall into this quadrant are relatively less important although they are not being performed satisfactory by the service provider.

**Possible overkill – quadrant D, bottom-right quadrant:** Customers consider the service factors that fall into this quadrant are relatively less important but are being performed satisfactory by the service provider.

The primary focus of the importance-performance is to identify specific service attributes which customers perceive to be relatively high important but are not well performed by the organization. For example, customers may not come back for business when fast service, a perceived important service attribute, is not being given when they need it. Importance-performance analysis is a very useful tool for developing marketing strategies. It provides insights regarding what aspect of the marketing mix should be improved and the prioritization of organizational resources (Hawes and Rao, 1985; Martilla and James, 1977). It has been widely used by researchers in analyzing the importance and performance of various service industries such as education, health care, and banking (Ennew, Reed, and Binks, 1993; Ford, et al., 1999; Hawes and Rao, 1985; Hemmasi, Strong, and Taylor, 1994; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Joseph et al., 2005).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) have urged for the need of a host country and its institutions to ensure quality in education and that their marketing and promotion activities substantiate the quality claim. Similarly, Ford et al. (1999) have stated that "intense competition in higher education in many countries mandates the need for

assessments of customer-perceived service quality for differentiation purposes" (p. 171).

## **Student consumerism**

Student consumerism has become a topic of interest among the researchers in education for the past decade or so. It is based on the notion that students are the customers and education is the product. Students with consumer orientation are expected to be served in ways they find pleasing. They regard college or university as just another marketplace where their needs and wants should be met. In addition, they expect to get back the value for which they are paying in the form of schools fees. Student consumerism is exemplified by (1) statements like "I am paying for this course," "I am paying for the lecturers' salary," "I am the customer; I pay the tuition," and "I am the paying customers and I don't like the fact that your class is sold out;" and (2) behaviors like negative evaluation of lecturers who fail to provide customer-service traits such as understanding, concern, friendliness, and support (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002; Delucchi and Smith, 1997; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998).

Delucchi and Smith (1997) argue that student consumerism is a product of postmodernism—where the society has evolved into a new historical era, moving from a modern to a postmodern period resulting in student consumerism that affects student attitudes towards their education. However, Eisenberg (1997) takes on another perspective and argues that student consumerism may be partly due to the changing classroom demographics. Nowadays, there is much diversity in student population:

"...today a greater percentage of students are more likely to be women and minorities—ethnic, racial, and economic. Additionally, a greater number of students are the first in their families to attend college. This means that students entering college today do not have the same backgrounds, experiences, and expectations as previous generations or as their instructors" (Eisenberg, 1997, p. 330).

Student consumerism will affect classroom expectations, behaviors, and outcomes for both the students and educators. Given the increasing consumer orientations among students, it is of interest to examine how college or university students view their higher education—that is, to assess their degree of consumerism (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002).

## **Purpose of the study**

In lieu of the increasing role played by Malaysia in

hosting international students in the higher education industry, the present study attempts to examine the following issues:

1. The pull factors influencing international students in selecting Malaysia as the destination choice of study.
2. Their perceived service quality of Malaysian higher education.
3. Overall satisfaction with their host institution.
4. The degree of student consumerism among the international students in Malaysia. This issue is especially relevant given the costs incurred, both financial and non-financially, in coming to a foreign country for education.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The sample of this pilot study consisted of two groups of international students taking a local course of study at one private college and one private university respectively. The group of students studying in the private college will be referred as Group S in College S. The other group of students will be referred as Group M in University M. Data were collected using survey questionnaires which were personally distributed to these students. Group S consisted of 20 Chinese students (70% male, 30% female) from the People's Republic of China (PRC) taking a local two-year diploma program. They have been in the program or with the college for six months. Group M consisted of 24 students with 100% male. They were mainly from the Middle East countries, and the programs that they enrolled in ranged from diploma to graduate level. They have been in the programs or with the university for six months to three years, with an average of 1.5 years. These two groups of international students were selected based on convenience sampling.

The convenience sampling technique is used due to the exploratory nature of the present study. Its focus was to probe the perceptual differences of two groups of foreign students with different country of origins in education quality and services. Besides, convenience sampling is deemed to be appropriate for exploratory type of study when further research will subsequently be conducted with a probability sampling technique (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010; Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin, 2010).

### Measurement

The survey questionnaire contained questions measuring the influencing factors in selecting the study destination, the perceived importance of various service attributes in education, the perceived performance of the educational institutions in those attributes, the overall satisfaction with their host institution, and student consumerism.

**Influencing factors in selecting a host country:** Twenty-two items measuring six dimensions of the factors influencing the decision on destination choice were taken from the study by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). These six "pull" factors are knowledge and awareness of the host country (four items), personal recommendations (three items), cost issues (eight items), social links and geographic proximity (three items), and the environment (three items). Refer to Table 1 for the individual items. Respondents

were asked to indicate those factors that led to their decision to come to Malaysia to study.

**Importance of service attributes in higher education:** Sixty-four service attributes were identified to measure service quality in higher education and they were classified into 14 dimensions. The 14 dimensions are reputation, campus environment, facilities, program issues, course content, course assessment, academic staff, delivery of lectures, administrative, delivery of services, costs, recreational activities, career opportunities, and concern for students. The items and dimensions were adapted from various research studies—Athiyama (1997); Ford, et al. (1999); Joseph and Joseph, 1997 and 1998; Joseph, et al. (2005); Kwan and Ng (1999); Oldfield and Baron (2000); Shank et al. (1995); and Tan and Kek (2004). This approach of identifying the salient attributes through literature review has been suggested by Hawes and Rao (1985). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each of the 64 service attributes on a 5-point scale ranging from 1, not important, to 5, extremely important.

**Perceived performance of service attributes:** Respondents were then asked how well they perceived the quality of each service attribute to them. They were asked to rate the performance of their college or university with respect to each of the 64 service attributes on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (poor performance) to 5 (excellent performance). In accordance with the procedure by Martilla and James (1977) and Joseph and Joseph (1997), there was a separation of importance measures and performance measures. The performance evaluation of the 64 service attributes was presented separately in a later section in the questionnaire to minimize biases or compounding effects.

**Satisfaction with Decision:** Respondents' satisfaction with their decision to study in the host country was measured using a single item taken from Athiyaman's (1997) satisfaction measurement scale. Respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their decision to attend their present local college or university in Malaysia on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied.

**Student Consumerism:** Student consumerism was measured using five items adapted from Delucchi and Korgen (2002). The five items are "If I am paying for my education, I am entitled to the certificate/diploma/degree," "I would take a course in which I would learn a little but would receive an A," "It is the lecturer's responsibility to keep me attentive in class," "A lecturer should try to award the grade that I need to receive financial aid," and "A lecturer should try to award the grade that I need to get into another program of study or graduate school." Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to each of these statements based on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = disagree very much to 6 = agree very much.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Influencing factors of destination choice

Table 1 presents the influencing factors in selecting a host country. It can be seen that the two groups of students were drawn to the same host country by two distinct set of factors. The Middle East group (Group M) came to Malaysia upon the recommendation of agents,

**Table 1.** Influencing factors in selecting Malaysia as the host country.

	Group M (%)	Group S (%)
<b>Knowledge and awareness of Malaysia</b>		
1. Easy to obtain information on Malaysia	54	65
2. Knowledge of Malaysia	50	30
3. Quality of education in Malaysia	42	5
4. Malaysian qualifications recognized	42	0
<b>Personal recommendations</b>		
1. Parents/relatives recommended	8	55
2. Agents recommendation	83	15
3. Reputation of institution	4	45
<b>Cost issues</b>		
1. Lower school fees	83	40
2. Lower travel costs	46	25
3. Lower cost of living	67	40
4. Job opportunities	0	30
5. Safe (low crime) environment	4	70
6. Low racial discrimination	0	30
7. Established population of overseas students	0	25
8. Entry qualifications accepted	4	25
<b>Social links and geographic proximity</b>		
1. Friends/relatives studying in Malaysia	46	65
2. Friends/relatives living in Malaysia	0	25
3. Malaysia is close to my country	29	20
<b>Environment</b>		
1. Comfortable climate	79	40
2. Exciting place to live	4	60
3. Quiet-studious environment	0	65

and the common influencing factors cited by them were lower costs and comfortable climate. The PRC group (Group S) came to Malaysia upon the recommendation of their parents and relatives, and they were being “pulled” by the favorable environment and familiarity of the country. Many PRC students already have friends and relatives studying in the county and they got to know Malaysia quite well.

#### **Importance-performance analysis of education service attributes**

Tables 2 and 3 show the student perceptual importance and performance means of the 14 factors for Group M and Group S respectively. Group M viewed all of the service areas as important especially such factors as course content, cost, academic staff, reputation of the institution, and facilities (all five factors have a mean of

greater than 4.00). Group S was more discerned in the importance of the service areas. They were more concerned of the quality of the academic staff, school reputation, the delivery of services, program-related issues, management’s willingness to care (concern for students), and cost (all six factors have a mean of greater than 3.00). Reputable educational institutes, quality academic staff, and cost issues are the common important factors cited by both groups.

The findings of this study are quite consistent with those by Kwan and Ng (1999). The authors found that students regard education as an investment and thus they stress on such factors as reputation, quality of lecturers, course content, facilities, and cost. In addition, the finding that PRC students (Group S) want their problems and views being heard is also consistent with that by Kwan and Ng (1999). They found that communication with the school is a significant factor contributing to Chinese students’ satisfaction with the education provided.

**Table 2.** Important-performance means of Group M.

	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Importance (I)</b>	<b>Performance (P)</b>	<b>(P-I)</b>
1	Course content	4.37	3.43	-0.94
2	Cost	4.18	3.61	-0.57
3	Academic staff	4.11	3.60	-0.51
4	Reputation	4.03	3.79	-0.24
5	Facilities	4.02	3.63	-0.39
6	Career opportunities	3.90	3.43	-0.46
7	Delivery of service	3.89	3.18	-0.70
8	Program issues	3.87	3.59	-0.27
9	Campus environment	3.85	3.86	0.01
10	Concern for students	3.80	3.08	-0.72
11	Delivery of lectures	3.76	3.38	-0.39
12	Administrative	3.76	3.49	-0.28
13	Recreational activities	3.61	3.56	-0.05
14	Course assessment	3.59	3.19	-0.41

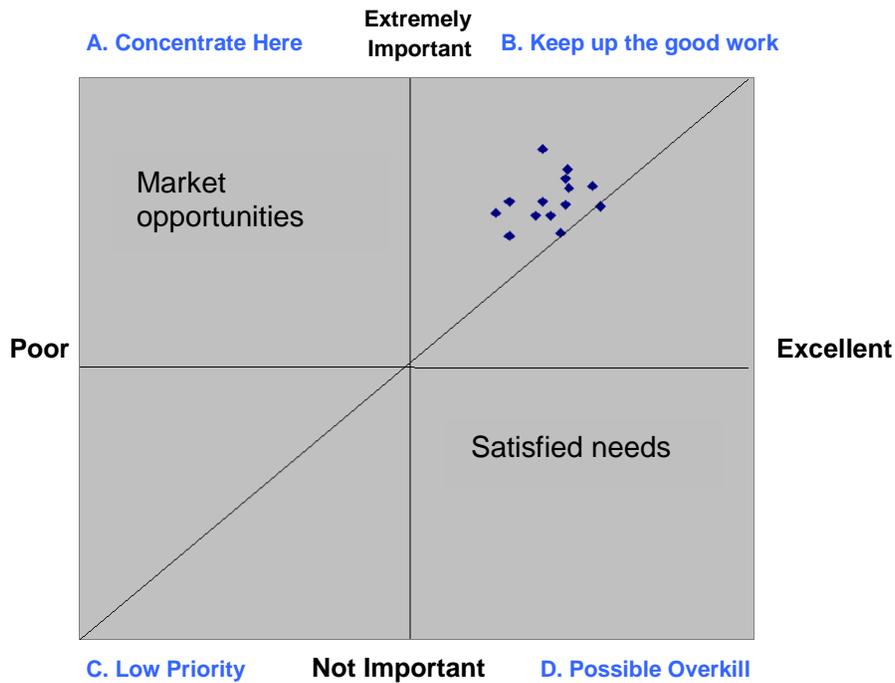
**Table 3.** Important-performance means of Group S.

	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Importance (I)</b>	<b>Performance (P)</b>	<b>(P-I)</b>
1	Academic staff	3.67	2.24	-1.43
2	Reputation	3.63	2.77	-0.87
3	Delivery of service	3.59	2.70	-0.89
4	Concern for students	3.34	2.50	-0.84
5	Program issues	3.33	3.13	-0.19
6	Cost	3.12	2.57	-0.55
7	Career opportunities	2.93	1.40	-1.53
8	Course content	2.90	2.31	-0.59
9	Delivery of lectures	2.88	2.08	-0.80
10	Administrative	2.83	2.32	-0.52
11	Campus environment	2.78	2.08	-0.70
12	Facilities	2.75	2.00	-0.75
13	Course assessment	2.48	2.01	-0.46
14	Recreational activities	2.03	1.56	-0.46

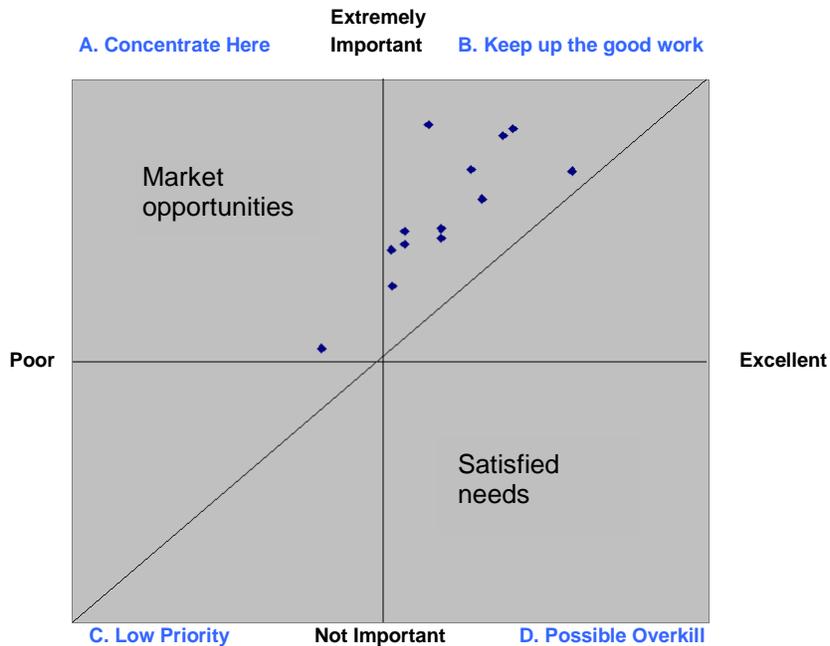
The last column of Table 2 shows the difference between the performance and importance ratings for each of the 14 dimensions. All of the difference values are negative except for the campus environment for Group M. It seems that the only thing that Group M students appear to be getting what they expected is in terms of campus environment. Note that Group M students are studying at a private university with a big compound, whereas Group S students are studying at a city campus with limited space.

Figures 1 and 2 are the importance-performance grids for the 14 service dimensions for both groups M and S respectively. The mean performance values (x-coordinates) and the mean importance values (y-coordinates) were plotted as points on the grids. The

grids were drawn based on the suggestion made by Hawes and Rao (1985) that the x- and y-axis should intersect at each other's mid-point and that a 45-degree diagonal line drawn through the B and C quadrants at the intersection point. This iso-rating diagonal represents points where the importance and performance ratings are equal. The area above the iso-rating diagonal will represent points that have importance ratings exceeding the performance ratings. Consumers would not be optimally satisfied with the service attributes located in this area and "any marketer who could do a better job of providing this attribute would find a receptive market" (Hawes and Rao, 1985, p. 20). Hence, the area above the iso-rating diagonal is marked "market opportunities." Furthermore, the area represents those services that the



**Figure 1.** Importance-performance grid of the 14 service dimensions –Group M  
Campus environment is the only dimension which falls right below the iso-rating diagonal.

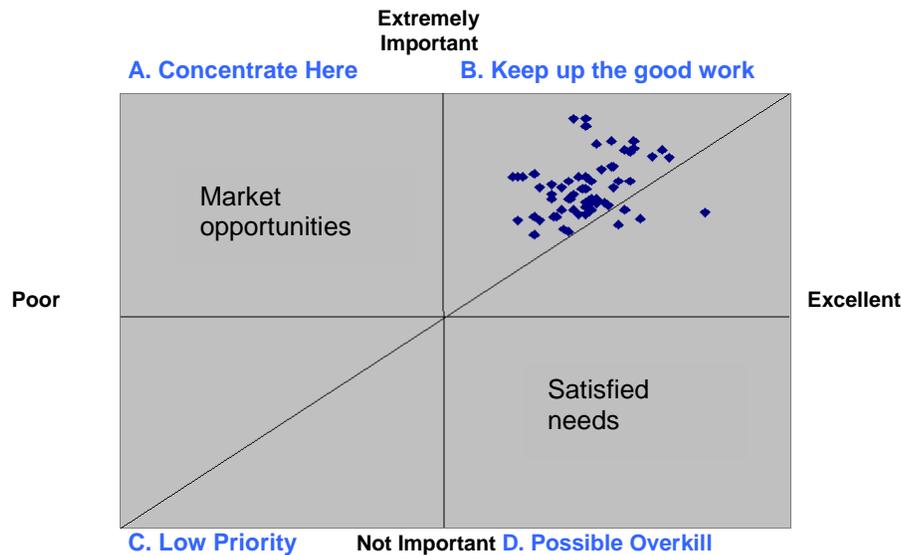


**Figure 2.** Importance-Performance Grid of the 14 Service Dimensions –Group S.

organization is not doing well enough and they should be improved to achieve customer satisfaction.

Similarly, the area below the iso-rating diagonal will represent points that have performance ratings exceeding

the importance ratings. Service attributes located in this area represent “satiated needs” as a marketer would not gain a competitive advantage with a strategy that emphasizes superior provision of these attributes. This



**Figure 3.** Importance-Performance Grid of Individual Service Attributes – Group M. The satiated needs are campus layout and appearance, sport and recreational facilities, participation in social activities, and participation in sport activities.

area represents those services that the organization has done a good job on and the organization should keep up with the good work. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, all of the 14 service dimensions are located above the iso-rating diagonal for both institutes M and S, except campus environment for institute M, which just falls right below the diagonal. Although almost all of the 14 service dimensions fall into the keep-up-the-good-work quadrant (quadrant B), their performance is not what it seems to be.

This is because the service dimensions are located on the left hand side of quadrant B which is close to quadrant A, concentrate-here quadrant. Concentrate-here quadrant implies that services are not being performed satisfactory by the service providers. The idea position should be the right hand side of quadrant B, below the iso-rating diagonal, as this area represents that the service provider has done a good job. The results imply that overall both institutes are not performing quite satisfactory in providing quality services to their customers, the students. It suggests that the performance of all these service factors needs to be improved and monitored regularly to ensure that students are satisfied with their overall educational experience.

To provide a more detailed importance-performance analysis on the service quality, the position of the 64 individual service attributes were plotted as seen in Figures 3 and 4. It seems that institute M is doing well in terms of its attractive campus layout and appearance and of giving adequate opportunities for its students to participate in social and recreational activities. As for institute S, it allows its students the flexibility of choosing their majors in their course of programs. A detailed list of

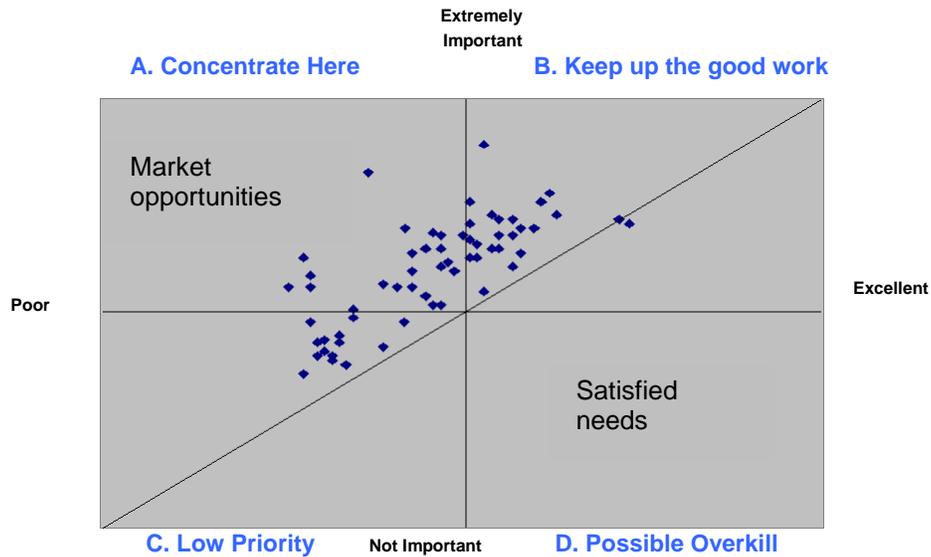
the service attributes together with their perceptual means in importance and performance is given in the Appendix.

### Satisfaction with decision

In terms of how satisfied were they with their decision to attend the local institutions, the students in Group M were quite satisfied with a scale mean of 4.21. It seems that Group M students have perceptual problems with the quality of service delivered by their university, but they were not unhappy overall. It could be argued that the performance of the university falls into the international students' "zone of tolerance" and they perceive an acceptable education experience as along as certain conditions are met (Ford et al., 1999). The students in Group S were somewhat dissatisfied with a scale mean of 2.70. This result indicates that the private college must try harder in satisfying their international students.

### Student consumerism

Table 4 indicates the results of each of the five items measuring consumerism orientation among the two groups of international students. The percentage of agreeing moderately and very much to the statements ranges from 10 to 65. Both groups of students were quite similar in their attitudes in terms of items 1 and 3. At least 50% of them believed that they should get what they paid for, and about 40% of them hold lecturers responsible for their attentiveness in classroom. The results indicate a



**Figure 4.** Importance-Performance Grid of Individual Service Attributes –Group S. The satiated need is flexibility in switching major.

**Table 4.** Student responses to consumerism items.

Item	Percentage of agree moderately and agree very much	
	Group M	Group S
If I am paying for my education, I am entitled to the certificate/diploma/degree.	54	65
I would take a course in which I would learn a little but would receive an A.	29	15
It is the lecturer's responsibility to keep me attentive in class.	42	40
A lecturer should try to award the grade that I need to receive financial aid.	46	10
A lecturer should try to award the grade that I need to get into another program of study or graduate school.	42	10

consumerist culture among the international students. They expect that higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace and they, as customers, should be entertained with information they found pleasing. These findings are in consistent with those of the study by Delucchi and Korgen (2002).

With regard to item 2, getting A grade with minimal effort, 29% of Group M agreed moderately and very much to this statement versus 15% in Group S. This indicates that the Middle-East students, in comparison with the Chinese students, place less emphasis on learning. They are more likely to enroll in a subject that is easy to get good grade even it provides little or no learning. They are also more likely to demand for grades that can fulfill their personal goals as shown in items 4 and 5. Overall, the Middle-East students exhibit a higher consumerism than the Chinese students in pursuing their higher education in Malaysia.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study aims to identify factors influencing international students in selecting Malaysia as a host country in gaining their tertiary education. An effective diagnostic technique namely the importance-performance analysis was employed to seek potential problem areas that could lead to dissatisfaction among the service recipients. The results of the present study show that students from the Middle East countries came to Malaysia mainly due to agent recommendation, lower costs, and comfortable climate. They were somewhat satisfied with their host institution. The Chinese students came to Malaysia upon the recommendation of their parents and relatives, familiarity of the country, and perceived favorable study environment. They were somewhat dissatisfied with their host institution. The present study also provides some evidence that international students take a consumerist

approach to higher education.

The analysis of this study provides educational service providers with a useful focus in developing marketing mix strategies to capture the market opportunities and in the formulation of differentiation strategy. The results of the study show that Malaysian institutes of higher education need to improve further in providing quality services to their international students. They should be allocating more efforts and resources, both financially and non-financially, in the service areas which are deemed to be important by the students. This should serve as a proactive course of actions to prevent losing their competitive advantage to other institutes which can do a better job in satisfying the needs of the international students. This is especially important given the evidence that some international students take a consumerist approach to higher education. Education administrators should pay more attention in such service areas as the reputation, quality of lecturers, course content, facilities, and cost of education; and to track the performance of these service areas over time.

With regard to student consumerism, what is the role of Malaysian institutes of higher learning in dealing with consumerism among the international students? In consistent of the arguments made by such researchers as Delucchi and Korgen (2002), Delucchi and Smith (1997), Driscoll and Wicks (1998), and Eisenberg (1997); the present authors agree that educational institutions should not buying into a customer-driven philosophy and applying marketing concepts in education in the fullest extent. We believe that consumerism will result in chaos in classrooms--students will challenge the authority of educators if their demands are not being satisfied. Although little can be done to lessen international students' consumerism prior to their admission, much can be done to change that attitude once they arrive on campus. Hence, colleges and universities may develop several measures to motivate learning and to promote intellectual curiosity of international students over their course of program. The following are few suggestions:

**Formal communication:** As the newcomers of the university, international students are required to go through orientation exercises to familiarize with the surrounding. During the briefing session, the values of higher education and the importance of academic ethics should be clearly communicated to them. Every student should receive a copy of handbook detailing the duties, responsibilities, and accountabilities of a young scholar. Clear communication of the university standard will do much to change students' expectations of their education. They must be reminded of the academic expectations on a periodic basis. It is impossible to over-communicate to change their attitudes.

**Learning culture:** Institutes of higher learning today

must cultivate a culture that emphasizes on active learning. Programs and systems should be installed to support a culture for teaching and learning. For instance, student evaluations should not read like a customer survey form that asks students to rate their lecturers' ability to stimulate their interests to study, whether the lecturer recognizes students' difficulties in understanding materials, and whether the lecturer is readily available for consultation. These evaluation criteria would allow students to take revenge on the lecturers if they did not receive the grade that they wanted. Instead, the evaluation should be on the subject itself such as the appropriateness of the syllabus, the scope and depth of the coverage, the knowledge and skills gained from the subject, and the fulfillment of the aims and objectives stated in the syllabus.

**Workshops and seminars:** Workshops, seminars, tutorials, and practical are useful in preparing students to learn. These learning activities should be able to facilitate students to analyze logically, to think critically, and to solve problems creatively.

**Student-lecturer partnership:** Higher education should promote partnership between students and lecturers for mutual understanding and guidance in the pursuit of the academic goals. Lecturers need to take a more active role in learning about their international students' goals and aspirations, and incorporate such knowledge into their teaching strategies. This will help developing realistic expectations for both parties. Management by objectives (MBO), for example, can be implemented in this process to achieve the targeted performance.

**Academic advisory system:** The academic advisors should serve as a counselor to provide advice and guidance to the students on the principles of academic learning. This system provides an opportunity to probe to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind consumerism. Ways to reduce consumerism can then be determined based on individual cases. The academic advisor is required to take a much more active role—as a change agent—to change students' classroom consumer behavior.

In addition, the degree of consumerism should be assessed before an action plan is developed to lessen or to change this type of attitude towards higher education. We must first discover and understand how much the international students perceive themselves as "customers," then design a course of action to alter their expectations. Make it clear that they will not be treated as customers but as learning scholars with the right attitudes.

It should be noted that the samples used in the present study were small and more research studies are needed to determine the importance and performance of

educational services in Malaysia. Since convenience sampling may limit how well the research represents the intended population, the sample in this study may not be representative and the study results may not be generalizable (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010; Zikmund et al., 2010).

Future research should examine the perceptions of service quality of students from various other countries using much larger sample size. The importance-performance analysis should be investigated further on a particular group of students who are taking a particular course of program. For market segmentation purpose, it is also important to compare the perceptions of service quality by gender. In addition, future research should also examine the “push” factors that drive students to demand for international education.

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