

Examining Gaps between Students' Expectations and Experiences in a Private University

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Abstract

This study examined students' expectations and experiences of academic and social life in a private university. This study employed a survey research design in which a set of fixed-response and open-ended questionnaire has been used. The questionnaire contains five main areas, namely (1) conducive campus facilities and learning environment; (2) good support services; (3) attractive co-curricular activities; (4) positive socio-relationship with university staff and lecturers; and (5) socio-relationship with local community. A total number of 540 university students were randomly selected to participate in this study. Numeric data collected was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Narrative data collected was used to expand the views regarding the areas explored. Results indicated that there is a significant difference between students' expectations and their experiences with regards to the academic qualities and social life. Results in this study revealed that most of the students' expectations were not met. This is alarming for the survival of private universities as it would affect the university's reputation and students' unwillingness to recommend for others. This study also found that improvement on campus facilities and socio-interaction with university staff are the most important aspects for students. Therefore, a prompt action to improve and upgrade those aspects is vital. This paper recommends a specific action to overcome gaps between expectations and experiences by using a holistic approach.

Keywords: expectations; experiences; gaps; social life; student's satisfaction; private university

1. Introduction

Students are the most important stakeholders for the survival and development of private universities. Without constant student enrolment, private universities may have difficulties to survive or improve their services. As private higher institutions are dependent on student enrolment, students' satisfaction and their ability to complete their studies are essential. However, in Malaysian context, far too little attention has been paid to explore students' experiences in private higher education institution compared to those in public universities. This may be due to a strict policy in most private higher education institutions. The most relevant research in this area was conducted by Baharuddin (2003) who investigated the students' expectations and perception on services provided by private colleges in Malacca. The study revealed that most students have high expectations towards those colleges. However, the study did not explore students' social life in private higher education, which is one of the areas to be researched in this proposed study. In addition, most studies in the past, particularly in Malaysian context, tended to focus on academic achievement rather than their

experiences at the university. As a result, there is unclear evidence to comprehend students' experiences in higher education institution.

Students have many choices for their tertiary education as there are 469 private higher education institutions in Malaysia that offer various academic programmes from certificate to doctoral levels. Thus, the institutions need to be more proactive by offering attractive schemes to be more competitive and popular among prospective students. These institutions were observed to advertise the positive aspects of their institutions in various ways. Some of them highlight their strengths in infrastructure and facilities, accredited academic programmes and quality services. However, students' perceptions towards these elements are unclear. Indeed, it is unknown to what extent students' expectations towards those matters are met. Our general observation revealed that more international students were not satisfied with the services provided and felt unhappy with the academic and social life environment. As a result, this has negatively affected the university reputation and poorly impacted on students' well-being. It should be noted that students' recommendation has been found to be a powerful marketing strategy. Empirical research shows that most students recommended certain universities for two reasons: the universities' reputation, and their experiences while studying in those universities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). As students have first-hand experiences on academic programmes and social-life, their participation in this research is vital. A lot of studies in the past, particularly in a Malaysian context, have tended to focus on academic achievement rather than students' experiences. As a result, there is insufficient evidence to support views on students' experiences in higher education institution.

2. Academic and Social Life in University

Extensive past studies highlighted the importance of conducive learning ecology for improving students' satisfaction in campus life and their academic performance. For instance, a study carried out by Tessema, Ready and You (2012) revealed that students' satisfaction and happiness in both campus life and academic life have a significant relationship with five factors namely quality of instruction, capstone experience, academic advising, overall college experience and preparation for career. These five factors describes students' life and its effects on their feelings towards support system provided by the educational institution. Detailed analysis of their study revealed that gender plays an important variable determining the satisfaction level. The study found that students' satisfaction level differs by gender where female tended to feel more supportive than male (Tessema, Ready and You, 2012). Indeed, many empirical studies revealed that there are differences in expectations between genders towards educational support system (Delaney, Harmond & Redmond, 2010) which has influenced their satisfactory level (Umbach and Porter, 2002). Dee (2006) has analysed and critically discussed the influence of genders affecting student-teacher interaction and students' engagement in the lesson. Empirical research carried out by Umbach and Porter (2002) on university alumni (n=1300) revealed that students' satisfaction in academic and social life is dependent on the quality of social interaction between peers and university staff.

As students are capable to decide and choose the tertiary education institution they want to apply for admission, a clear understanding of the influencing factors is essentials. In addition, the liberalization of higher educational institutions around the world has given great opportunities for students to choose for themselves the universities and areas of studies. Therefore, university reputation and peer recommendation is important. Word-of-mouth marketing (also known as WOM marketing) via information communication technology is a powerful engine for building reputation. Dissatisfaction among students will open a huge platform for damaging a university's reputation. To understand this situation, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1994) may be able to provide a clear picture. The theory considers the entire ecological system of an individual, in which growth occurs, as the pillar for human behaviour. This system theory is divided into five subsystems, namely: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem which are interconnected with each other. The current study focuses on chronosystem which deals with students' expectations before enrolling to the university, and the experiences that they gained after studying at the universities. It examines students' expectations and experiences of academic and social life. Narrative data collected would be used to explain about their experiences in academic and social life.

3. Research Methodology

The survey research design was employed in this study. Instruments used in this study was a set of fixed-response and open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire contains five aspects including campus facilities and learning environment, student support services, co-curricular activities, relationship with university staff and lecturers, and relationship with outside community. A five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaires to allow the students to express their level of satisfaction, where the score of 1 indicates the highest level of satisfaction, whereas 5 the highest level of dissatisfaction.

In order to validate the instrument, a pilot test was carried out in one of the universities in Malaysia. The Cronbach's alpha values for all items were more than 0.80 which informs that the items are acceptable. The actual data collection was held in one of the private universities in Malaysia. This university was chosen due to enrolment fluctuations in the number of students' intake which may have an impact on its reputation. In addition, this university has just been upgraded to a full-fledged university after the Malaysian government satisfied with the quality of graduates produced. A total number of 540 university students participated in this study. They were randomly selected by considering their willingness to participate in this study. Numeric data collected was analysed by using SPSS, whereas narrative data collected was analysed manually. Narrative data was used to expand the students' views on academic and social life.

4. Findings and Discussion

The majority of respondents participated in this study were Muslim (n=329), followed by Buddhist (n=72), Hindu (n=71), and Christians (n=41). A number of 386 males and 154 females participated in this study. 417 were Malaysians and 123 were foreign students. 350 were bachelor's degree students and 190 were diploma students. 171 lived in hostel, whereas 369 lived outside. Overall results demonstrated that half of the students in this study reported that they were happy studying at the university. They reported that most academic programmes offered by this university are relevant for the job market and most courses were taught by expert lecturers. In terms of social life at this university, nearly half of students (47%) reported that they were happy and enjoy with the campus ethos.

The current study found that there is a big gap between students' expectations and experiences in six areas investigated namely: campus facilities and learning environment (mean difference = 0.987); student support services (mean difference = 0.742); co-curricular activities (mean difference = 0.682); relationship with local community (mean difference = 0.659); and relationship with university staff and lecturers (mean difference = 0.500).

4.1 Campus facilities and learning environment

Overall results show that there are significant differences between expectation and experience among respondents with regards to seven areas. Table 1 shows that most respondents had a higher expectation than what they experienced. This means that their expectations towards learning environment, relaxing spaces, hostel condition, campus life, laundry services, campus, and appreciation of culture are not being fulfilled. As private universities are more likely to depend on the students' enrolment, dissatisfaction towards these aspects may affect the university's image and reputation. The importance of students' satisfaction has been highlighted by authors of several past studies such as Shadrack (2013) and Tam (2011). Based on these findings, strategic actions to upgrade facilities and promote positive learning environment are really needed.

Detailed investigation on each component within campus facilities and learning environment revealed that students expected the campus to be conducive for learning, have sufficient space for relaxing, good hostel conditions and superior laundry services. However, students reported that their expectations were not met. Most students reported that they were not satisfied with most of the facilities at this university. Most students stated the biggest gap in their expectations about the hostel condition as they felt dissatisfaction with the hostel condition. This is something important to be explored in future research as past empirical research revealed that the occurrences of many critical issues and incidents in the hostel are the contributing factors to students' dissatisfaction. These include bullying and social discrimination. It has been reported in the past that there is a tendency of bully behaviour in hostel and outside the educational institution (Tjavanga & Jotia, 2012; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Engels & Gmel, 2007). It might be linked with negative behaviour such as drinking habit and substance use.

Table 1. Students' expectations and experiences of seven main constructs

Constructs	n	Mean Score		Mean Difference	Standard deviation	t	Sig.*
		Expectation	Experience				
Conducive learning environment	540	3.931	3.169	0.763	1.212	14.629	0.000
Space for relaxing	540	3.846	2.781	1.065	1.426	17.347	0.000
Hostel conditions	540	3.659	2.267	1.393	1.568	20.642	0.000
Laundry service	540	3.615	2.463	1.152	1.462	18.312	0.000
Enjoyable campus	540	3.843	2.943	0.900	1.430	14.623	0.000
Culture of appreciation	540	3.835	3.190	0.648	1.222	12.323	0.000
Average means score	3240	3.789	2.802	0.987	1.414	39.732	0.000

Narrative data collected revealed that campus facilities and physical maintenance are the common issues raised by most students in this study. Expanding their feeling towards physical environment and campus facilities of this university, some students said that:

"I am not satisfied with the facilities.... Toilets are dirty" (Student 242, male, Malay, Bachelor's degree, aged 21)

One student highlighted his dissatisfactions towards the cleanliness of cafeteria and student hostel.

"Cleanliness of the cafeteria is totally bad" (Student 221, male, Indian, Bachelor's degree, aged 22)
"...the hostel is not clean ..." (Student 42, female, Indian, Bachelor's degree, aged 23)

The same student also raised issues of internet, parking lots and facilities for pedestrians.

"...the Wifi are slow, too much speed bump and less parking lot ... there is no covered-walkways to certain place, so when it rains it troubles for us" (Student 42, female, Indian, Bachelor's degree, aged 23)

Due to poor internet networking services, many students have a problem to get the latest information and references. He mentioned that the library books are outdated. One student reported that:

"The Internet surround the campus is very slow; sometimes we cannot connect it also ... books at the library is outdated as well" (Student 27, male, Chinese, Bachelor's degree, aged 22)

This leads to dissatisfaction among students.

"I dislike the environment (especially) classroom, lab and library" (Student 216, female, Malay, Bachelor's degree, aged 22)

"I am not sure about my feeling towards this university, but you can imagine where there is a lot of problems in terms of space for relaxing, cafe, discussion room and lab ..." (Student 42, female, Indian, Bachelor's degree, aged 23)

4.2 Student support services

Overall results indicate that there is a significant difference between the university students' expectations and their experiences with regards to three components of student support service. A big gap is found with regards to sports equipment based on the data obtained from most students that the university has insufficient sports equipments.

Table 2. Students' expectations and experiences of student support services

Aspects	n	Mean Score		Mean Difference	Standard deviation	t	Sig.*
		Expectation	Experience				
Sports equipment	540	3.669	2.535	1.134	1.455	18.106	0.000
Student involvement in sports activities	540	3.752	2.844	0.908	1.390	15.170	0.000
Support staff to solve social issues	540	3.761	2.837	0.924	1.430	15.019	0.000
Average means score	540	3.727	2.739	0.742	1.428	27.858	0.000

Although statistical data (Table 2) shows some discrepancies between expectations and experiences of students, there is insufficient narrative data to expand those differences. In-depth study to understand this matter is suggested to be explored in future research.

4.3 Co-curricular activities

Results from this study revealed that there are significant differences between students' expectations and their experiences with regard to co-curricular activities components. Many students expected that sports activities organised at the university are all attractive. However, their expectations were not met. The result showed the same for other components. There is insufficient narrative data to expand the students' views on co-curricular activities at the university (Table 3).

Table 3. Students' expectations and experiences of co-curricular activities

Aspect	n	Expectation	Experience	Mean Difference	Standard deviation	t	Sig.*
Attractive sports activities	540	3.713	2.655	1.058	1.489	16.523	0.000
Proactive SRC	540	3.739	3.120	0.619	1.309	10.981	0.000
Participation in various extracurricular activities	540	3.702	2.983	0.719	1.356	12.312	0.000
Many socio-religious activities	540	3.724	3.124	0.600	1.272	10.964	0.000
Cultural activities	540	3.819	3.404	0.415	1.276	7.557	0.000
Average means score	540	3.739	3.057	0.682	1.358	26.090	0.000

4.4 Co-curricular activities

Table 4 shows that the students' expectations were higher than their experiences. This means that their expectations were not fully met. The highest mean score for students' expectations is on the item "supportive lecturers". The students hoped that their lecturers could support and help them in their studies.

Table 4. Students' expectations and experiences of the interaction with staff and lecturers

Aspect	n	Expectation	Experience	Mean Difference	Standard deviation	t	Sig.*
Friendly admin staff	540	3.796	3.006	0.113	1.420	12.937	0.000
Supportive admin staff	540	3.785	2.931	0.854	1.413	14.044	0.000
Helpful admin staff	540	3.793	3.028	0.765	1.364	13.045	0.000
Friendly lecturers	540	3.959	3.563	0.396	1.249	7.372	0.000
Supportive lecturers	540	3.956	3.498	0.458	1.203	8.836	0.000
Helpful lecturers	540	4.011	3.624	0.387	1.127	7.983	0.000
Expert lecturers	540	3.994	3.465	0.529	1.124	10.953	0.000
Average means score	540	3.899	3.302	0.597	1.289	28.479	0.000

Students also expected that the university staffs were friendly and supportive. Expanding their views on this matter, some students reported that they had problems with some administrative staff. For instance, one student said that:

"Staff at one of the administration section is arrogant" (Student 242, male, Malay, Bachelor's degree, aged 21)

Another student reported that some staff members were rude.

"Some staffs from one department are rude to students" (Student 23, female, Indian, Foundation course, aged 18)

One student asserted that some lecturers were racist.

"The lecturers are racist and careless" (Student 7, male, Libyan, Bachelor's degree, aged 23)

A lack of socio-interaction opportunities across genders and cultures are found to be an issue for some students at this university. One student stated that:

"I am not satisfied here because there are no social connection between genders and culture" (Student 242, male, Malay, Bachelor's degree, aged 21)

Many students involved in this study expected that they would gain much experience by interacting with lecturers, international students and people from different ethnicity.

"It was a good experience to see the new culture here" (Student 4, male, Malay, Bachelor's degree, aged 24)

"The life in this university is good especially when you have friendly lecturers and friendly friends" (Student 25, male, Iraqi, Bachelor's degree, aged 24)

4.5 Relationship with the local community

Table 5 shows that the average mean score for students' expectations were higher than their experiences, indicating that the students' expectations were not met.

Table 5. Students' expectations and experiences of their relationship with local community

Aspect	n	Expectation	Experience	Gap	Standard deviation	t	Sig.*
Involvement in community services	540	3.789	3.135	0.654	1.208	12.577	0.000
Suitable community service	540	3.802	3.139	0.663	1.244	12.380	0.000
Effective inter-agency partnership	540	3.824	3.165	0.659	1.251	12.248	0.000
Average means score	540	3.805	3.146	0.659	1.234	21.488	0.000

However, there is insufficient narrative data to expand the students' views on their relationship with local community.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the current study found that students' expectations were not fully met. The biggest gap exists in terms of Campus Facilities and Learning Environment and Student Support Services. This might affect student's enrolment to the university. Due to this situation, students may choose to live outside campus which may possibly affect their commitment to academic and co-curricular activities. It would be more possible negative implication when the students' expectations were not met. In order to minimise those gaps, improvement of the hostel management is vital. As students are the most important stakeholders for the university survival, their voice should be heard. In fact, their feedback should be treated in a very positive manner.

The key recommendations to bridge the gap between students' expectations and their actual experiences are as follows:

- appointing qualified and well experienced personnel in the relevant areas and fields,
- increasing budget and recognising the need to put more emphasis on co-curricular and sports activities,
- providing adequate training to staff and personnel who are required to handle and provide student support and counselling services, and
- making the university staff realise that the university is responsible for producing well-rounded, qualified and healthy individuals who have close relationship with the community

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