Internationalization of higher education: Iranian students case

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Abstract This article seeks to offer a research design for assessing the perception of service quality in higher education on Iranian students with considering internationalization of higher education as theoretical framework. Iranian postgraduate students in Malaysian universities will construct sample of this research design. This article first tries to understand the phenomenon for Iranian students to change their preference from studying in universities in the West to those in the East, particularly Malaysia. In addition, this article tries to offer a sequential method for assessing their perceptions of service quality in the new educational environment based on semi-structured interviews and a modified SERVQUAL instrument. In-depth semi-structured interviews have been proposed followed by a gap analysis to measure tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Stratified sampling has been suggested for selecting international postgraduate Iranians studying at the top five public universities in Malaysia. Subsequent analysis will be conducted starting with Miles and Huberman analysis of qualitative data followed by inferential methods including factor and reliability analyses.

KEYWORDS *higher education, Iranian postgraduate students, service quality*

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Introduction

There is no consensus on definition of internationalization of higher education (Teichler, 2002;Callan, 1998; Knight, 2003). Knight and De Wit (1999) suggested four approaches to internationalization of higher education and De Wit's (2002) offered five approaches to this phenomenon. One of the approaches that is common in both Knight and de Wit's classifications is 'process approach'. The process approach amalgamate of all facets of post secondary education, i.e. the mission statement, organizational policy, decision making processes and delivery strategies and evaluation plans. As De Wit's (2002) pointed this approach is the most inclusive approaches to internationalization. In this line, in the following content, this procedure definition was selected for internationalization.

The idea that internationalization is affecting higher education in developing countries merely because this group of countries will experience the bulk of higher education expansion in the coming decades has been anticipated by some of researchers in the first years of this decade **(e.g.** The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). Since the 1980s, universities had witnessed greater interest in international education programs, as indicated by curricula taking up international subjects, incorporating international comparative approaches, and increasing their offerings of international areas studies. However, it is particularly since the 1990s that internationalization is seen to be relevant across traditional programs or disciplines (Kreber, 2009;Siah, 2009).

Malaysia, as one of the most advanced developing countries in South East Asia, is affected with the challenges of globalization and internationalization of education. One of the most essential responses to these challenges from the Malaysian government has been to allow international students to study in local public higher education institutions (Acuma Incorporated, 2009). Furthermore, realizing the important contribution of education services to the national economy, the government is seeking to turn Malaysia into an international hub and centre of excellence in education.

The number of international students in Malaysia is crucial for the national economy, particularly if considered as provider of higher quality education in the global market. In other words, higher education in Malaysia has the potential to be a major revenue earner through the offering of world class academic programs (Jimenez, 2007). This is in line with Malaysia's plan to differentiate its export products and services, by developing the export potential of its education services (Prime Minister's Office, 2008). The targets identified include China, Iran, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Middle East. Accordingly, the aim of the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia is to attract 95,000 international students to study in Malaysia by 2010 (Sirat, 2006). Since Malaysia has been successful in increasing access to higher education, the next logical emphasis is quality assurance and improvement of its standards of higher education particularly with regards to post-graduate studies. Graduate student enrollment in the early years of graduate education in Malaysia was made up mainly of Malaysians and they were few in number. Their number grew gradually as more graduate schools were set up, but still, with few international students. Lately, however, the scenario has changed. The early groups of international graduate students to arrive in Malaysian came from neighboring countries less developed than Malaysia. In the recent past, however, more international students were arriving from further afield - from countries on the Indian subcontinent, the Middle-East, and even some African countries (Ayob & Yaakub, 2000). However, the influx of students from Iran has been phenomenal. Iranian students who used to make America and Europe their top destination for further studies are now coming to Malaysia by the bus load. What could be the reasons?

The Iranian Factor

Shafieyan (1983) investigate the psychosocial, educational and economic problems of the Iranian students in the United States before and after the Iran-America crisis and the effect of the crisis on these Iranian students. For this study, 180 Iranian students (124 males and 56 females) attending various American colleges were studied. The result showed that the difference between the two groups (before and after the Iran-America crisis) in the subtest concerning educational problems. Data coming from clinical interviews confirmed the results of this research and showed that the basic problem for Iranian students after the crisis was economic, and this, in turn, aggravated other problems of non-economic types, especially psychological problems.

During the hostage crisis, the Carter administration decided to deport students who were in violation of their visas in the United States. The hostage crisis prompted a presidential order referred to as the "Iranian Control Program." The program screened, on a case by case basis, almost 57,000 students to make sure that they were legally in status. During this period, (M. Bozorgmehr & Sabagh, 1988) reported that after holding a total of 7,177 deportation hearings, 3,088 students were ordered to leave the US, and the departure of 445 was verified.

Though the crisis was back in 1980, the situation has taken for a turn worse. Iranian students and immigrants have been subjected to discrimination and prejudice in the U.S. Although anti-Iranian sentiments and “Islamophobia” have subsided over time, they flare up every time Iran engages in an anti-American activity (Mehdi Bozorgmehr, 2001). At the same time, the perception of prejudice among Iranians is quite high, and as such they often interpret anti-immigrant sentiments as uniquely anti-

Iranian. In addition, some Iranians experience adjustment problem which is related closely to psychopathological measures such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, homesickness, and low self-esteem (Hojat & Herman, 2006).

The repercussions of these unfortunate incidents result in Iranian students shifting their radar towards countries which can provide affordable quality education in English. Where did the Iranians go to? From 1992 to 2003, the number of degrees granted to Iranian students in Canada increased from 40 to 140 (350%), while in the U.S. it declined from 203 to 68 (-67%). However, claims of discrimination in Canada in the form of refusal to grant visa to parents, siblings, student friends, and resident students' spouses and children, despite their legal and moral eligibility are on the rise (Mahalat, 2008). This trend of arbitrary visa refusals to Iranian citizens and prospective students, namely on the subjective ground of "limited ties to Iran", has significantly increased since 2004.

Malaysia's affordable costs and a high standard of living have made Iranians especially the middle-class, to turn their backs on the West and head to the East instead (Associated Foreign Press, 2008). There has been a high growth in the number of Iranians continuing their graduate studies in Malaysian universities during the last decade. Malaysian education officials put the number of Iranian students in Malaysia at between 10,000 and 11,000 today, saying the figure was only 900 in 2006. The influx of international students is due to the success of Malaysia Education Promotion Centre organized in the Middle East and North African countries by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. In addition, Malaysia also attracted more international students from these areas after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York (Associated Foreign Press, 2008).

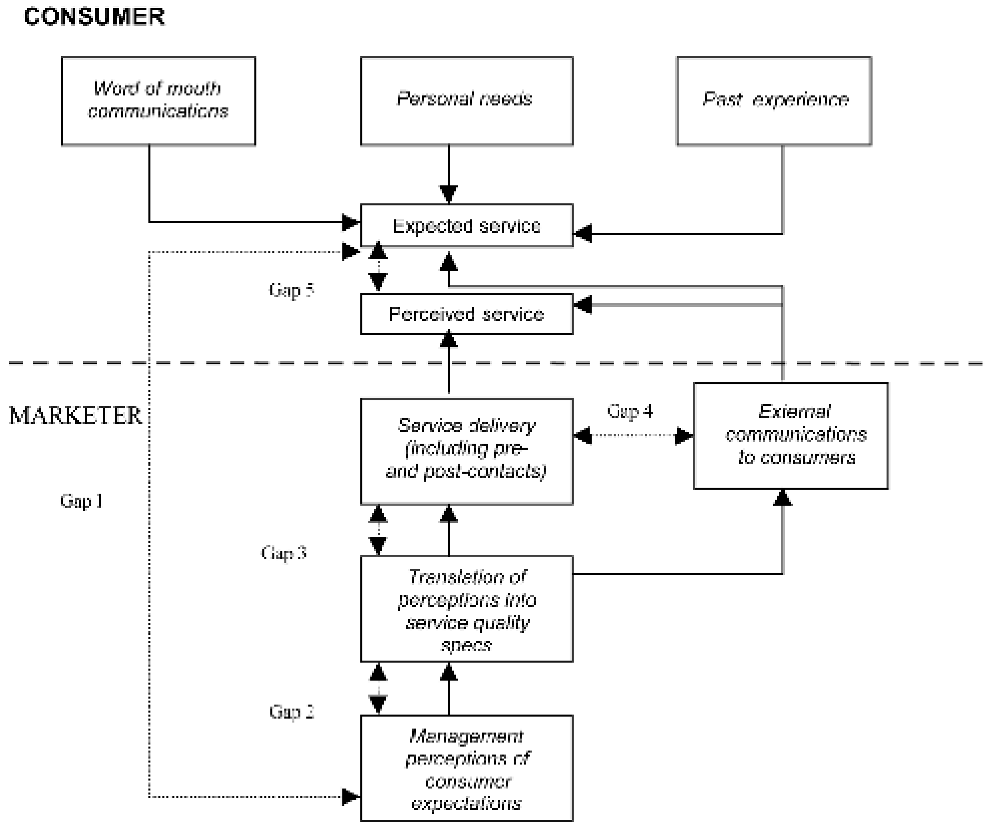
Literature Review

There are many evidences on the importance of service quality in education institutions in the literature (Angell, Heffernan, & Megicks, 2008; C. L. Ham, 2003b; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Yeo, 2008). Measuring service quality in higher education is increasingly important for attracting and retaining tuition-based returns. Nevertheless, whilst service quality of undergraduates has been extensively measured, postgraduate-based research, particularly regarding international students, has been negligible (Angell *et al.*, 2008). This void is surprising as there is intense competition for postgraduate students who not only bring in more income but also improve a particular university's ranking (Toncich, 2006). Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the educational service quality of selected Malaysian universities based on a modified service quality (SERVQUAL) instrument which was specially developed for international post-graduate students. The students' perceptions and expectations of education services were measured and a gap analysis was conducted to determine where and how gaps in educational service quality exist and the extent of their impact. Collected data were coded, sorted, analyzed, and then classified by gap category.

The first version of SERVQUAL was developed in 1985, based on a series of studies by Parasuraman and his colleagues who conceptualized service quality as the gap between customer expectations and perceptions (CArrie Leugenia Ham, William Johnson, Art Weinstein, Richard Plank, & Pamela L. Johnson, 2003; C. L. Ham, W. Johnson, A. Weinstein, R. Plank, & P. L. Johnson, 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm views customer satisfaction judgments as the result of the consumer's perception of the gap between their perceptions of performance and their prior expectations (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1994). Disconfirmation is positive when service performance exceeds expectations and negative when the opposite is the case.

Since then, the SERVQUAL instrument has been the predominant method used to measure consumers' perceptions of service quality. According to Ham *et al.* (2003), SERVQUAL has five generic dimensions or factors: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The difference between expected and perceived services is defined as a gap. Expectations are viewed as "normative expectations", which means desires or wants of customers, i.e., what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer (Buttle, 1995). Based on this premise, the use of perceptions in confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm is related to perceptions of performance. As such, Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) developed a service quality model (Figure 1) which for the purpose of this study seeks to address the following five types of gaps:

Gap 1:	The difference between what the students expected and what management perceived about the expectations of the students.
Gap 2:	The difference between management's perceptions of student expectations and the translation of those perceptions into service quality specifications and designs.
Gap 3:	The difference between specifications or standards of service quality and the actual service delivered to students.
Gap 4:	The difference between the services delivered to students and the promise of the institution to students about its service quality.
Gap 5:	The difference between students' expectation and perceived service.



Source: Parasuraman *et al.* (1985)

Figure 1: Gaps-model framework

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) proposed that service quality is a function of the gap based on the quality dimensions and their attributes. There has been considerable debate within the literature on the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. (Bitner, 1990)), (Bolton & Drew, 1991)), and Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) argued that customer satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality, while others believed that it is service quality that leads to customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Carrillat, Jaramillo, & Mulki, 2009; Chia, Hsu, & Hsu, 2008; Molinari, Abratt, & Dion, 2008; Ott, 2008).

The importance of student satisfaction will be apparent when responding to the question: “What are the consequences of students who are dissatisfied?” When the environment is highly competitive, dissatisfied students tend to withdraw or transfer (Hayes, 1977). However, while dissatisfied students may remain in the institution for lack of alternative options, they may not speak well of the institution to other potential students and may not be supporters of the institution after graduating (Wince & Borden, 1995, May).

There are three common elements in theories on satisfaction: type of responses (emotional or cognitive), if the response concerns a particular focus (e.g., expectations and consumption experience), and if it occurs at a particular time (Giese & Cote, 2000). However, there is no general consensus on the definition of satisfaction. One of the most interesting of satisfaction theories considers the student as a consumer (chadwick & Ward, 1987; Christensen & Philbrick, 1993; Franklin & Shemwell, 1995, Novamber). Another school of thought uses the disconfirmation paradigm to measure antecedents of satisfaction, i.e., satisfaction depends on the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is a function of the person's initial expectations (Brady & Robertson, 2001; Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Henning-Thurau, 2001; Powers & Valentine, 2008; Tse & Wilton, 1988).

According to (Brady & Robertson, 2001; CArrie Leugenia Ham *et al.*, 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1997), information on service quality gaps can help managers to diagnose where performance improvement can best be targeted. Identifying the largest negative gaps, combined with assessment of where expectations are highest, facilitates prioritization of performance improvement. Equally, positive gap scores will imply expectations are not just being met but exceeded. This information will allow managers to review whether they may be 'over-supplying' this particular feature of the service and whether there is potential for re-deployment of resources into features which are underperforming (Shahin, 2008).

In a survey to assess college students' satisfaction with respect to service quality, (G. M. Hampton, 1993) found a negative correlation between the gap scores and overall satisfaction, i.e., as gap increases, overall satisfaction decreases. These findings are similar to empirical research done by (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Dion, Javalgi, & Dilorenzo-Aiss, 1998). To further pursue the aforementioned studies, this research views service quality as an antecedent of satisfaction within the perspective of international postgraduate students in Malaysian universities.

SERVQUAL

Service organizations such as institutions of higher education understandably are under constant pressure to outperform their competitors in determining the antecedents, determinants, and consequences of service quality. The importance of service quality makes its measurement and its subsequent management of utmost importance. Academics have responded by providing measurement mechanisms such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988) and SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Both measuring devices have spurred numerous subsequent studies.

Traditionally, higher education institutions endeavored to deliver high quality service throughout their educational curriculums and administrative processes. In order to do so, these institutions must view students as their primary clients and seek to maximize their satisfaction based on educational services rendered (Sunanto, Taufiqurrahman, & Pangemanan, 2007). There is a substantial body of evidence in higher education literature suggesting that the SERVQUAL instrument is effective in measuring service quality in the higher education environment and is especially useful in offering guidance for changing shortcomings to strengths (Angell *et al.*, 2008; Harris, 2002; Wolverton, 1995; Yang, 2008).

Both SERVQUAL and SERVPERF have been cited extensively. Although both measures are not flawless and have been criticized by many, their contributions to our understanding of service quality are significant. SERVPERF (Service Performance) was developed primarily by (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), but recent academic endeavors have focused on the merits of SERVQUAL (L. Ham & Hayduk, 2003; Markovic, 2006; Ruby, 1996; Yang, 2008). Proponents of SERVQUAL such as Jain and Gupta (2004) believed that SERVPERF was incapable of diagnosing shortfalls in the desired levels of service quality, as a result of the absence of the "disconfirmation" approach. (Bearden & Teel, 1983; Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1981) emphasized the advantage of SERVQUAL based on the disconfirmation notion, i.e., the mental process consumers use to compare what is expected with what is actually received. Based on the SERVQUAL paradigm of disconfirmation, the gap between "expected" and "perceived" service quality will determine the customer's overall service evaluation.

Based on a study of higher education institutions in three countries by Lee (2007), the SERVQUAL instrument is rated as better than the SERVPERF instrument for measuring service quality in cross-cultural contexts. In addition, when applied to multinational contexts, an incorporation of the impact from the cultural differences seems to explain the variations of service quality more accurately (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). Interestingly, when expectations from a service are different across cultures, the cultural context must be incorporated into a universal theory (Farley & Lehmann, 1994). Based on the aforementioned arguments, the usage of SERVQUAL for this research is fully justified.

Methodology

Cresswell (2009) argued that the main aim of a research is exploring a phenomenon sequential exploratory strategy is beneficial. For this purpose he suggested a model that requires a first of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the first qualitative phase. This model has been shown in figure 2.

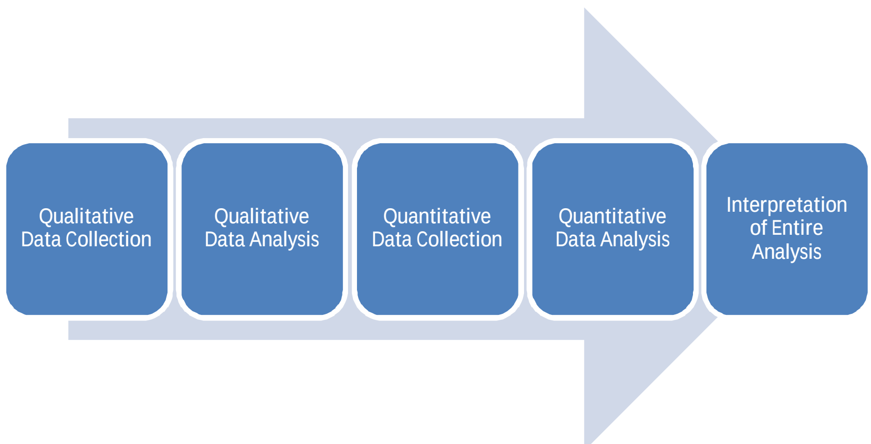


Figure 2: Sequential design, Source: Cresswell (2009)

Qualitative phase:

Qualitative phase started with qualitative data collection. Qualitative data collection does not dictate a certain desirable number of participants needed to obtain understanding. According to Yang (2008a), generally 9 to 20 in depth interview is enough to gain the most insight from the participants. In this research design it seems that 15 participants are sufficient to create a viable data set. Brayman (2008) argues that when the emphasis is on how the interviewee views and understands events, a flexible process of gathering data, like semi-structured interview is very beneficial. In this line, semi-structured interview was selected for gathering qualitative data. Every interview started with general questions and then narrowing down. General questions like “Why did you choose to go to this university?” and “If you were admitted at one of the universities in your country, would you attend?”, as well as the critical incidents in choosing your university produced more engaged discussion than the one elicited by close-ended or structured questions.

For analysis of data, Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative analysis method was selected as the leading framework in analyzing the qualitative data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a qualitative data analysis consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to "data reduction" as the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming data that appears in the researcher's reported notes. In the next stage, data display, the researcher tries to organize and compress assembly of available information that consents conclusion drawing. Finally, "conclusion drawing and verification" is involved with the emerging, and inducing of meanings from the data and testing them for their credibility, their robustness and their validity. Miles and Huberman (1994) maintained that because the process is rather continuous and iterative in nature, the analysis process needs to be well documented in order to enhance the validity and credibility of the analysis.

With regards to the qualitative data analysis process, Miles and Huberman (1984) proposed three levels of qualitative data analysis. These are:

1. First stage: This includes the identification of "reappearing of themes" and topics from the raw data, usually based on the literature review for their similar method of pattern coding as a way to identify an developing theme, pattern or explanation

2. Second stage: This includes the grouping of the reappearing themes and topics from the set of the analyzed interviews, personal notes and/or observational notes: and

3. Third stage: The classification of themes and topics into a few tentative major provisional headings for the aim of data reduction.

Quantitative phase:

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985, 1988) argued that in order to measure service quality, customers' expectations compared to perceive service quality levels should be evaluated. To gain a better understanding of service quality in an educational situation, this study seeks to examine international students' expectations and perceptions of educational services rendered by five Malaysian universities. Using stratified sampling based on gender and level of study, 522 international postgraduate students were selected to participate in this study.

A modified SERVQUAL questionnaire comprising 35 items was used as the survey instrument to collect data. The items were found to be consistent with findings from studies by (Boulding, Kolra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; C. L. Ham, 2003a; G. Hampton, 1993b; Herris, 2002). Subsequently, a panel of four professors in the faculties of education and management in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia conducted content validity on the instrument. The panel recommended several amendments which were incorporated into the finalized questionnaire. The instrument was administered to 30 postgraduate international students enrolled in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia to test the instrument for face validity.

The finalized instrument consists of an introduction and three sections. The cover letter provides information on the research. The second section consists of 35 items with two separate sub-sections to assess the respondents' expectations and perceptions. Each of the items in the first section is anchored on a five-point Likert scale to measure the respondent's agreement to the item posed. The third section contains demographic questions.

According to Buttle (1996), SERVQUAL gap can be determined based on three methods: (a) item-by-item analysis (e.g., P1 – E1, P2 – E2, ...P35– E35); (b) dimension-by-dimension analysis (e.g., (P1 + P2 + P3+ P4)/4 – (E1 + E2 + E3 + E4)/4), where P1 to P4, and E1 to E4 represent the four perception and expectation statements relating to a particular dimension); and (c) computation of an overall single measure of service quality [(P1 + P2 + P3 …+ P35)/35] – (E1 + E2 + E3 + … + E35)/35]). For purpose of this study, the first and second forms of SERVQUAL gap were selected.

Subsequently, for examining internal validity items of questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated item-by-item and dimension by dimension. Next, to verify the dimensionality of the education service quality construct in the SERVQUAL, a factor analysis, using the principal components extraction technique, was performed on students gap scores, calculated by perception-minus-expectation mean scores. The analysis made use of the Varimax factor rotation procedure in keeping with the original SERVQUAL study (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988)

Conclusion:

For better understanding impacts of internationalization of higher education on Iranian students, this research design was proposed. This research design proposes mixed method for gathering and analyzing data, respectively implementing quantitative method at first stage followed by qualitative data gathering and analysis. Implementing this cross sectional research can contribute to better understanding critical factors of service quality in the context of Iranian culture. Also results of this research can have some implications for reengineering of service design in Malaysian universities.

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