

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: A GAP ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION

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Abstract

Students' experience and satisfaction influence student retention rate and contribute directly to the building of good reputation of a university. The student retention rate is likely to be high if their expectations are met. Thus it is not surprising that universities continue to conduct regular surveys concerning students' expectations and perceptions as part of their quality improvement exercise. This study looked at the various aspects of undergraduate students' experience pursuing an economics program in a public university in Malaysia. Gap analysis was employed to examine the difference between students' expectations and satisfaction level for a given statement related to academic as well as non-academic life. The two most important aspects ranked by the students concern lecturers' knowledge in their respective field and the students' sense of pride about the faculty are also the aspects in which they are most satisfied. Generally the students' expectation of the faculty is very high and the gap scores indicate statistical significance for all items related to teaching and learning, faculty life as well as facilities and support services.

Key words: *undergraduate study, economics program, expectations, satisfaction, gap analysis.*

Introduction

Students enter universities with a certain set of expectations about university life although the ultimate goal is to graduate with the required paper qualification. It would be reasonable to argue that when these expectations are met, the student retention rate is likely to be high. Memorable experience and high level of satisfaction among students contribute directly to the building and maintaining of good reputation of a university which in turn helps promote interest from potentially able applicants seeking entry into institutions of higher learning. Thus it is not surprising that universities conduct regular surveys concerning students' expectations and perception as part of their quality improvement exercise because those involved in higher education want the services they provide to be of the highest quality. Although different stakeholders in academic institutions view quality quite differently they share a common concern that there is mounting pressure for the university to improve its academic programs and related services (Gibbs, 2004). Hashim and Awang (2005) posit that quality in higher education also takes on different forms between, as well as, within institutions because of the different shared values and emphases in certain core activities and disciplines.

In addition to providing an excellent curriculum with a more market approach, an equally good support system is needed to ensure that the best students continue to enroll in the program. Numerous student satisfaction surveys have been carried out by universities to examine the perceptions of students concerning their academic disciplines, support services as well as campus experiences (Bean and Bradley, 1986; Morgan, 1990; Hampton, 1993; Gibbs, 2004; Sun, Liu and Lacost, 2004; Smith and Rust, 2007). However, these studies tend to be large scale focusing on providing information to the university as a whole or on a particular discipline across a nation. For example, Sun, Liu and Lacost (2004) examined key predictors of college student satisfaction using comprehensive survey data from a mid-western university while Morgan (1990) conducted a survey of textile and clothing department students at 16 universities across the United States. Similarly Harwood and Bydder (1998) focused their study on the university libraries in New Zealand. It is the interest of this paper to examine the level of expectations and satisfaction among undergraduate students pursuing an economics program in a public university in Malaysia to identify strengths and weaknesses with respect to the academic and support services provided.

Methodology of Research

Participants

The participants for this study comprise undergraduate students attending one core course in each level of study in an economics program in a public university in Malaysia. A total of 800 students were registered in year one, two and three during the second semester of 2008 academic year. However, not all students were present during the week of the study as some of them were involved in other curricular activities, leaving a total of 336 completed forms available for analysis.

Instrument

Data for this study was obtained using self-administered survey questionnaire designed to collect information on the background characteristics of the students as well as information related to their expectations and satisfaction. According to Juillerat (1995) student satisfaction can be defined by the positive and negative gaps in the expectation level and perceived reality. The section on expectation and satisfaction contains 52 statements covering student centeredness, support service effectiveness, instructional effectiveness, security and safety, faculty life and faculty image. Some of the items were adapted from Noel-Levitz (2004) as well as Elliott and Shin (2002). Students were asked to rate all items on a 7-point Likert scale with respect to their expectations and satisfaction with 1 representing the lowest level of expectation or satisfaction and 7 the highest level of expectation or satisfaction.

Statistical Analysis

T-tests were performed to compare the difference between expectation and satisfaction mean for each variable. The variables with the greatest gap indicate areas of concern needing immediate attention from faculty management and those involved.

Results of Research

Background of Students

More than 68 per cent of the respondents are females and most of them are aged 19 to 22 years. In terms of ethnicity Malay students comprise nearly 60 percent, followed by Chinese 30 percent and Indian students 11 percent. These are the three main ethnic groups of the population of Malaysia. In terms of the level of study, about 45 percent are still in the first year, 23 percent in the second year and 30 percent are in the final year. The data suggested that majority of the students reported a cumulative average (CGPA) of at least 3.0 out of the total four point system and only three percent of the students are with CGPA between 2.0 to 2.5. About two-thirds of the students live in campus accommodation. Others reported living in rented rooms or shared accommodation and a small percentage of students live with their parents.

Teaching and Learning

As one would expect, students placed a high level of importance or expectation on the knowledge of lecturers in their field, content of the program, good variety of courses provided in the program, excellence learning outcome of the program and fairness of lecturers in their treatment of students (Table 1). On the other hand, the five least importance items are the academic advisors' concerned about students' academic progress, availability of lecturers after class and during office hours, enhancement programs, academic advisor who are approachable and lecturer who are taking into consideration student's differences as they teach. In other words, students know that once they are in the university, they are required to be independent and less reliance on lecturers and academic advisors. They would also know that they should be treated as adults and as equal regardless of their background. It is interesting to note that the knowledge of lecturers in their field is not only an important item but also the most satisfied. The next most satisfied items are knowledge of academic advisor about requirements of the program, content of the program, commitment to academic excellence and a good variety of courses provided by the program.

Table 1 also shows the mean difference between expectation and satisfaction for each of the statements listed indicating the larger the gap score, the larger is the discrepancy between what students want and what they get. The gap value ranges from 0.4 which refers to the statement regarding knowledgeable academic staff to 1.02 which concerns academic advisors who are concerned about students' academic progress. The t-statistics shown in the last column indicate that they are all statistically significant.

Table 1. Level of expectation and satisfaction relating to teaching and learning.

No	Statements	Expectation Mean	Satisfaction Mean	Gap Score	t-statistic
1	Lecturers are knowledgeable in their field	5.73	5.30	0.40	5.481***
2	The content of the program is valuable	5.60	4.87	0.71	8.204***
3	There is a good variety of courses provided in the program	5.56	4.81	0.74	9.147***

4	Learning outcome of the program is excellent	5.56	4.78	0.76	9.996***
5	Lecturers are fair and unbiased in their treatment of students	5.56	4.60	0.93	10.798***
6	My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in the program	5.52	4.96	0.57	6.927***
7	There is commitment to academic excellence in this faculty	5.51	4.84	0.64	8.079***
8	I am able to experience intellectual growth here	5.49	4.73	0.72	8.851***
9	The program structure are clear and reasonable	5.42	4.67	0.73	9.209***
10	Lecturers provide timely feedback about student's progress in a course	5.40	4.58	0.81	9.054***
11	My academic advisor is concerned about my academic progress	5.38	4.38	1.02	10.461***
12	Lecturers are usually available after class and during office hours	5.35	4.50	0.83	9.621***
13	Enhancement programs (special classes and workshops other than regular classes)	5.26	4.33	0.93	9.695***
14	My academic advisor is approachable	5.21	4.51	0.70	7.111***
15	Lecturers take into consideration student's differences as they teach	5.09	4.43	0.65	7.603***
Average		5.44	4.69		

*** Significant at 0.01 level

Faculty Life

On average, students placed higher level of importance on teaching and learning (overall mean of 5.44) as compared to faculty life (overall mean of 5.30) and are more satisfied with teaching and learning as compared to faculty life. The gap analysis of experience and perception of students with respect to faculty life is presented in Table 2 indicating that each gap is also statistically significant.

The top five most important items to economic students in this faculty are feeling sense of pride about the faculty, reasonable add and drop policies and regulations, availability of a useful student's hand-book, faculty has good reputation within community and students having enjoyable experience in the faculty. These five items are also indicated as most satisfied among students at the faculty. It is also interesting to note that students also indicate that the highest mean satisfaction score is feeling a sense of pride about the faculty.

Items on the top five list of least important are "students know what is happening at the

faculty”, “students can easily get involved in the faculty activities”, “faculty staff are friendly and helpful”, “faculty cares about students as individuals” and “most students feel sense of belonging to the faculty”. These statements are related to the interaction between students and the faculty. Basically, students do not expect to have much interaction or involvement with the activities in the faculty.

The largest difference is related to the registration for classes. This is followed by services given by the staff at the photocopy shop. Together with an item related to “faculty cares about me as an individual”, the earlier two items had means satisfaction that are below satisfaction level of 4. In the mean while, the faculty’s good reputation within the community and students feeling a sense of pride about the faculty register the smallest gap between their expectation and satisfaction (0.54).

Table 2. Level of expectation and satisfaction relating to faculty life.

No	Statement	Expectation Mean	Satisfaction Mean	Gap Score	t-statistic
1	I feel a sense of pride about my faculty	5.61	5.04	0.54	6.935***
2	Add/drop policies and regulations are reasonable	5.55	4.57	0.94	10.680***
3	The student handbook provides useful information about structure of the courses	5.55	4.83	0.70	8.654***
4	This faculty has a good reputation within the community	5.52	4.96	0.54	7.575***
5	It is an enjoyable experience to be a student in this faculty	5.50	4.87	0.60	8.072***
6	I am able to register for classes I need without much problem	5.42	3.76	1.62	13.470***
7	Faculty responds to prospective students' unique needs and requests	5.37	4.37	1.00	10.940***
8	Staff at the faculty photocopying service are helpful and approachable	5.36	3.88	1.47	12.695***
9	The personnel involved in registration are helpful	5.34	4.38	0.94	11.298***
10	Administrative staff are knowledgeable	5.30	4.41	0.86	10.628***
11	Administrators are approachable	5.29	4.35	0.91	9.834***
12	Library staff are helpful and approachable	5.29	4.45	0.82	9.220***
13	Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available	5.29	4.18	1.10	12.072***
14	New student orientation services help students adjust to faculty	5.29	4.43	0.85	9.075***
15	Students are made to feel welcome	5.27	4.36	0.89	9.568***

16	I seldom get the 'run-around' when seeking information in this faculty	5.23	4.14	1.08	11.425***
17	This faculty shows concern for students as individuals	5.21	4.09	1.11	11.813***
18	I generally know what's happening at the faculty	5.20	4.29	0.90	10.711***
19	I can easily get involved in the faculty activities	5.18	4.19	0.98	10.289***
20	The faculty staff are friendly and helpful	5.13	4.12	1.01	9.366***
21	Faculty cares about me as an individual	4.90	3.83	1.07	10.216***
22	Most students feel a sense belonging to this faculty	4.89	4.29	0.58	6.887***
Average		5.30	4.35		

*** Significant at 0.01 level

Facilities and Support Services

The gap scores related to statements concerning facility and support are relatively larger compared to those aspects of teaching and learning and faculty life (Table 3). The largest gap is with regard to selection of food at the faculty cafeteria (2.0). This is followed by adequate parking space at the faculty, photocopy services, opening hours and adequacy of computer labs, adequacy of discussion area at the faculty foyer, library resources and services at the faculty library, career guidance and financial aids for enhancement program. The smallest gap relates to the opening hours of the office to assist students on administrative matters (0.59).

Table 3. Level of expectation and satisfaction relating to facilities and support services.

No	Statement	Expecta- tion Mean	Satisfac- tion Mean	Gap Score	t-statistic
1	Computer labs are adequate and accessible	5.60	4.41	1.18	11.999***
2	The faculty is safe and secure for all students	5.57	4.83	0.73	9.061***
3	The administrative office is open during hours convenient for most students	5.52	4.92	0.59	8.002***
4	On the whole, the faculty is well-maintained	5.49	4.67	0.81	9.483***
5	Discussion area at the faculty foyer is suitable for academic use	5.42	4.52	0.87	9.909***
6	Library resources and services at the faculty library are adequate	5.41	4.30	1.09	11.530***
7	There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career	5.37	4.29	1.06	11.516***
8	Discussion area at the faculty foyer is adequate	5.36	4.23	1.11	12.797***
9	Photocopying services are satisfactory	5.36	4.07	1.29	11.035***
10	Parking lots are well-lighted and secure	5.32	4.38	0.93	10.026***

11	Adequate financial aids for enhancement programs is available for most students	5.24	4.21	1.04	10.942***
14	Parking space at the faculty is adequate	5.17	3.41	1.74	13.877***
15	There is an adequate selection of food available in the FEA cafeteria	5.05	3.05	2.00	15.712***
Average		5.38	4.25		

*** Significant at 0.01 level

Discussion

The study reveals that students choose the program of study and the university because of its reputation and good image. It would be reasonable to argue that reputation and image are essentially the results of a long-term engagement of positive experience from previous satisfied customers, in this case, the alumni. Generally the students' expectation of the faculty is very high. It is interesting to note that the two areas of concern where students give most priority are also the areas they are most satisfied with. These relate to knowledge of lecturers and feeling a sense of pride about the faculty. This finding is in agreement with Bean and Bradley (1986), Juillerat (1995) and Elliott and Shin (2002) whose studies suggest that academic program and high teaching ability of lecturers are related to academic satisfaction. The five smallest gaps found in the study pertain to knowledgeable faculty, feeling a sense of pride about the faculty, good reputation of the faculty, sense of belonging to the faculty and convenient office hours for students which indicate that students are generally happy with the academic aspect of their lives. On the other hand the five largest gaps are related to support services covering cafeteria service, parking availability, registration procedures, photocopying services and computer facilities. Again the findings confirm that of Elliott and Shin (2002) although they concluded that important factors claimed by the students may not necessarily be the determining factors of overall satisfaction.

Conclusion

The gap score between students' level of expectation and satisfaction in this study ranges from 0.4 to 2.0 with the lowest being that lecturers are knowledgeable in their field while the largest gap concerns the limited variety of food served at the faculty cafeteria. The analysis of gap scores indicates statistical significance for all items included in the survey. The findings of this study provide some indication of the strength and areas for improvement on the part of the faculty in its efforts towards giving better services to the students. The strengths include the academic program, knowledgeable faculty, commitment to academic excellence by the faculty and the fact that they do take into consideration of student's differences as they teach. For the faculty to further improve its services to the students, particular attention should be given to support services provided with regard to cafeteria, parking, photocopying and computer facilities. Although these may not be regarded as highly important to the faculty management in particular and university management in general, they certainly add to the overall experience and satisfaction of their university education.

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