SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY IN RELATION TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract: India is a study abroad destination of international students with a high degree of appeal. There has been a steady increase over the years in the international student's mobility for Indian higher education but it is not satisfactory if we take into consideration the trends in international student mobility or the growth of the higher education system within India. Students are the direct recipients of the facilities and services of the universities. If they are satisfied then their education can be taken-up as quality education. So, the assessment of student satisfaction is very important in helping the administrators and policy makers to explore the areas that need improvement for ensuring quality education. International students have to face socio-cultural and psychological difficulties of adaptation which could lead to poor academic engagement and may turn into dissatisfaction with the service quality of educational institution. The present research would provide a thorough understanding of the contributing variables that intertwined to ensure the international students experience satisfactory with the Indian higher education, ultimately leading to student loyalty towards these educational institutions. These findings are important as they may assist higher education administrators in developing appropriate marketing strategies to improve quality of services ensuring student satisfaction.

Keywords: Satisfaction, Loyalty, Engagement, Socio-cultural adaptation, International students.

INTRODUCTION

India is emerging as the service hub of the global knowledge economy. India is a study abroad destination of international students with a high degree of appeal and potential, given its long history and increasing prominence in the world economy. International student's mobility in India for getting higher education is not satisfactory if we take into consideration the trends in international student mobility globally. The growing number of international students in Indian universities and colleges does indicate the internationalization of universities vis-a-vis higher education in the country. About eighty per cent of the students come for under-graduate studies, about eighteen per cent for post-graduate studies and approximately two per cent for research. Only about thirty percent of the students are in liberal education and the rest are enrolled for professional programs. India must recognize this opportunity and promote an efficient regulatory environment to unleash the potential of the higher education sector in India. Initiatives to attract international students in the present times are being observed as part of a larger process of internationalization as well as the most important factor in the internationalization of higher education. Students are the direct recipients of the facilities and services of the universities.

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If they are satisfied then their education can be taken-up as quality education. So, the assessment of student satisfaction is very important in helping the administrators and policy makers to explore the areas that need improvement for ensuring quality education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Service quality has significant positive relationship with student satisfaction (Hassan et. al., 2008). There is need to know service delivery aspects for international students by Indian higher education institutions. Numerous studies have been conducted to measure the student satisfaction at university level in developed part of the world. Previous researches reported about the predictors of student satisfaction like teaching expertise, courses offered, learning environment & classroom facilities (Butt & Rehmann, 2010), faculty credentials (Faruky, Uddin & Hossain, 2012), academic involvement and excellence of campus climate (Awan & Rehman, 2013), education, safety, image & prestige of institutions & students preparation before going abroad (Songsthaphorn, Chen & Ruangkanjanases, 2014), role of teaching & factors of university experience (Jurkowitch, 2006). Student satisfaction is one of the important factors that need to be given serious attention to ensure students loyalty to the university and enrolment of new students. Satisfaction is a precondition of student loyalty. Many researchers reported student satisfaction as major driver for student loyalty (Thomas, 2011, Mohammad & Awang, 2009, Moore et. al, 2012, Dib & Alnizer, 2013, Kumar & Yang, 2014). Student satisfaction is one of the important factors that need to be given serious attention to ensure students loyalty to the university and enrolment of new students.

International students face the challenges of living in a foreign culture including racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness etc. Adapting to a new country can cause a lot of pressure, caused by difficulties such as finding work or learn a new language. Many researchers explored socio-cultural adaptation of international students (Yang, 2010, Wilson, 2011). Socio-cultural adaptation refers to student's ability to manage or negotiate effective interactions in new culture and is closely linked with culture-learning skills and social skills. It can be measured in terms of student's ability to perform daily-tasks such as making friends, participation in social activities, performance in social activities, performance in academic activities, language skills and ability to manage everyday life-issues.

Student engagement is essential to most effectively achieving the overall purpose of the university, its measurement can provide evidence for an institution's fulfillment of its commitment. It can be used for institutional planning, and it provides a tool for assessing the degree to which engagement is aligned throughout the university. Undergraduate student engagement is increasingly on the agendas

of Universities. Engaged individuals have a sense of personal attachment to their work and organization: they are motivated and able to give of their best to help it succeed – and from that flows a series of tangible benefits for organization and individual alike" (MacLeod, 2009).

In Indian context, few studies have been done till date on student satisfaction and loyalty (Thomas, 2011& Mehedipour & Zerehkafi, 2013). Thomas (2011) developed a model of student satisfaction for Indian universities while Phadke, 2011 developed a student loyalty model in Indian setting, Mehdipour and Zerehkafi, 2013 explored satisfaction of Osmania university students with services offered by universities. Many researchers conducted research to explore the predictors of socio-cultural adaptation for international students (Wilson, 2011, Mohammad & Mustafa, 2013). Wilson (2013) revised & reviewed the existing measure of socio-cultural adaptation by investigating the five domains namely ecological, interpersonal, personal interests and community environment, language and professional/work adjustment. Only few studies found which explored socio-cultural adaptation in relation with student satisfaction (Yang, 2010 & Ukomadu, 2010), but not in Indian context. A few researchers explored student satisfaction in relation with student engagement (Sahin & Salley, 2008, Korobova, 2012). From the review of literature, it can be said that no study found showing relationship of student satisfaction and loyalty with other variables like student engagement and socio-cultural adaptation. The researcher thus wants to explore the relationship among socio-cultural adaptation, student engagement, student satisfaction and loyalty to fill the identified gap in the literature. Also, it will facilitate the strategic objectives of the educational institutions effectively in Indian context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed research model will be explained in terms of the dependent and independent variables.

  A. **Independent variables:** Student engagement and socio-cultural adaptation are the independent variables in the present study.
  B. **Dependent variables:** Student satisfaction and student loyalty are the dependent variables in the present study.

  In proposed model, SERVQUAL is used to measure the student satisfaction with service quality by analysing the gaps in expected and perceived service in five service quality dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. NSSE benchmarks for student engagement (level of academic challenge, student –faculty interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment and quality of relationships) and Wilson (2013) framework of socio-cultural adaptation (having five domains namely ecological, interpersonal, personal interests and community

involvement, language and professional/ work adjustment) has been adapted in present study.
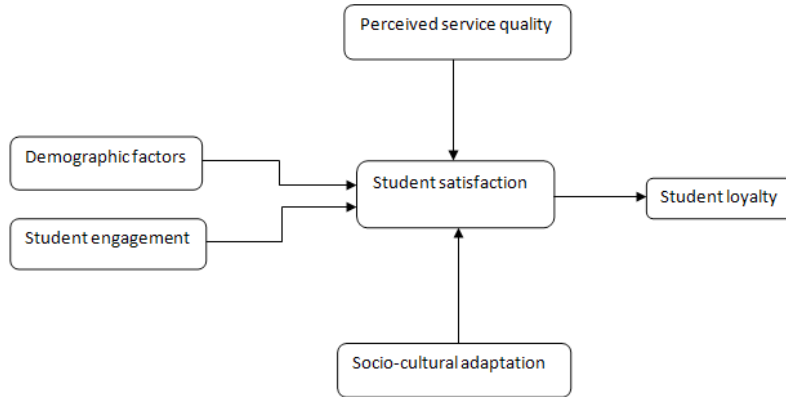
Figure 1: Proposed model for the present study

C. **Moderating variables:** In present study, the influence of following demographic and structural variables as moderators will be investigated:

(a) **Demographic variables:** Age, gender, nationality, prior exposure to multicultural experience are taken in present study.

(b) **Structural variables:** Type of Higher Education Institution (Public/ private), Accreditation status (Accredited/Non-accredited), locational advantage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

India is emerging as a service hub of global knowledge economy and it is a study abroad destination of international students. The source of competitive advantage comes from satisfied international student population with positive word of mouth and student retention and loyalty. It becomes imperative for Indian policy-makers and planners to work out an active strategy not only to attract international students but also to retain them in the campus of Indian universities. This research would provide service marketing literature an understanding of the individual variables that intertwined to make-up the international students experience satisfactory with the Indian higher education, ultimately leading to student loyalty towards these educational institutions. Further, this study will benefit marketers and administrators of higher education sector in policy making.

International students have to face socio-cultural and psychological difficulties of adaptation which could lead to poor academic engagement and may turn into dissatisfaction with the service quality of educational institution. Student engagement is an important measure of assessing student outcomes and it provides information to

accreditation agencies by assessing the impact of education institutions on students. Different ethnic sub-population may have different engagement patterns. Through collaboration among academicians student engagement interventions may be a part of the key to promote academic success of international students in Indian higher education. The present research aims at exploring whether socio-cultural adaptation has any mediating role in international student's satisfaction and loyalty in Indian higher education context. Research on student satisfaction and loyalty in relation to their engagements and socio-cultural adaptation will help better understanding of student expectations of services of higher education institutions. Also, it would be helpful in handling issues and eliminating factors leading to dissatisfaction of international students.

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