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A Conceptual Framework on International Students' Adjustments and Service Quality Towards Student Satisfaction in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract: Student satisfaction has been one of the core and main factors in retaining and attracting international students to educational institutions. Internationalization is a complex phenomenon in the field of higher education. Besides that, it is one of the important transformation processes of developing countries towards globalization. Generally, Malaysia is fast becoming one of the main education attractions among the international students from other countries around the world. International student enrolments make a vital economic contribution to universities in the whole region of the world. However, adjusting to a new culture can be so challenging and stressful experience for international students. Racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial problems, and loneliness are the common and unique problems that they faced when they were in the host countries. Besides that, service quality in the field of higher education can be known as “the difference between student expectation and perception against their actual experience”. Delivering the high level of service quality is critically important in order to generate and maintaining loyal customers. Thus, exceptional levels of service quality lead to satisfy customers that may recommend the product or service among their friends. Student satisfaction has been one of the ‘core’ factors in retaining and attracting international students in the context of educational institutions. Highly satisfied customer are expected to spread a positive word of mouth (WOM) about the institution, thus attracting new applicants with lower marketing cost. However, to satisfy the customers from different background and different culture will be even more difficult. Therefore, this paper specifically focuses on topic that links international students’ adjustments and service quality towards students’ satisfaction in Malaysian public universities. Implication for future research, discussion and overall conclusion are also presented at the end of the paper.

Keywords: International students’ adjustments, service quality, student satisfaction, Malaysian public universities.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the developing country in South East Asia, that challenges with the globalization and internationalization of education. Moreover, Malaysia government has been confronted with this challenge by attracting international students to study in public higher education institutions in this country (Amran *et al.*, 2012). Realising the importance of international students to the national income, Malaysian government has been set up the Strategic Plan of Malaysian Higher Education in order to achieve the goals, vision and mission for Malaysia to become a hub of educational excellence of higher education by the year 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) 2007-2020, gave emphasis to comprehensive internationalization efforts capable of making Malaysia as a regional hub with 200,000 international students' enrolment by the year of 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). Given this large number of international students, greater attention has been directed toward the adjustment of students from abroad to Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Morshidi, 2008; Yusliza, 2010; Yusliza & Shankar, 2010; Yusliza, 2011). Based on this strategic plan, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is planning to increase the number of international student enrolment by monitoring international students' perception of the quality of academic and services provided by Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011).

Accordingly, the aim of Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has been successful in increasing access to higher education and it should emphasis quality and improvement of its standards of higher education. This has caused a surge of transformation in delivery system among most of higher education institutions in Malaysia. Following to the Malaysia determination to attract more international students to come and study in Malaysian Universities, therefore, the study of international students must be conducted in order to determine their adjustments towards students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. Clearly, the transition to higher learning institution life among the international students can be stressful period in which many changes are taking place. Due to this view, international students can face challenges such as culture shock, lack of support, homesickness, limited social skills, prejudice, stereotyping and many more. A study on sociocultural by Maria *et al.*, (2015) have mentioned that many research and studies have been carried out on campus adjustment of international student in the western countries but, only few studies have been carried out in Asian countries like Malaysia. As the number of international students entering Malaysian universities increasing from year to year, the need to understand their sociocultural adaptation and adjustments to this Malaysian country become more important (Yusliza and Shankar, 2010). Recently, Malaysian universities and colleges are still attracting many international students from different part of the world. Accordingly, to become a major player and enjoy the benefits of having international students, Malaysia essentially need to understand the adjustment problems faced by international students and try to provide them with the best services and right support. Furthermore, although the number of international students in campuses continues to increase, only limited numbers of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia country (Yusliza, 2011).

Service quality is one of the most important topics for the past few decades (Galiffa & Batalle, 2010). The service quality in the field of education and higher learning institutions particularly not only essential and important, but it is also known as an important parameter of educational excellence. It has been found that positive perceptions of service quality have significant influence towards student satisfaction. However, it is remarkable to identify the applicability of service quality in education sector, which implied that there

is appropriate to apply it in higher education sector. The service quality which is also known as 'SERVQUAL' is an effective instrument for the higher education sector. It is very useful guidance for changing the shortcomings as well as to prevent weakness and improve to be more strength as there were many extensive of proven evidences in higher education literature suggested (Angel *et. al.*, 2008).

Furthermore, those satisfied students would attract more students through positive word of mouth communications (Alves & Raposo, 2010). Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), agreed that service quality is one of the basics of customer satisfaction. In addressing the relationship between service quality and satisfaction, they studied a model which was developed by Oliver (1993). The outcomes showed that service quality is antecedent to satisfaction. Moreover, most students will rate based on quality as a function of the satisfaction that students have experienced with the education service matter. The measurement of service quality dimensions of student satisfaction is basically will judge and comparing between what they want and perceived what they expected. In addition, they are trying to look upon on what they are really getting from the service staff. In the other words, it means that the expectation is evaluated by the first time of student experience.

However, there are little literatures on customer satisfaction among international students in developing countries (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Joseph *et. al.*, 2005; Hasan *et. al.*, 2009). Previous studies have shown that improving service quality has always been as an internal goal for service providers of higher education, however, the perceptions of students are still not clear defined (Sultan & Wong, 2013). Other than that, there are many literatures available regarding customer satisfaction among international students but, majority of the researchers are conducted on customer satisfaction among international students in developed countries like United Kingdom, Australia, United States of America and New Zealand. Furthermore, regardless of the quantity of the researchers done, only limited literature is available regarding education and quality within Malaysian universities (Wei & Ramalu, 2011).

Therefore, this paper aims to develop a conceptual framework on international students' adjustments and service quality towards student satisfaction in Malaysian public universities for future research. Moreover, this paper intended to contribute to the Malaysian literature pertaining to this issue and researcher also hope that this conceptual paper will provide useful insight for the universities management in managing international students in this country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of higher education sector is a top priority for the Malaysian Government whereby education has been identified as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs). Malaysia also is trying to position itself as a stable, safe and relatively cheap place for overseas students to further their study (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). It has been rightly pointed out that analysing students' perceptions of service quality with a marketing approach may assist in attracting and retaining students (Sultan & Wong, 2016). As such, universities in Malaysia have to consider various preferences and needs of international students in order to satisfy them.

There is a large body of literature on the concept of customer's satisfaction. Furthermore, the growing importance of studies regarding customer's satisfaction is a result of worldwide business competition. Customers are the 'lifeblood' of any organization either in public sector government or in the private

sector business management. In addition, satisfaction is particularly important in relation to organization that deliver services rather than goods (Nicholas & Gilbert, 1998). Student satisfaction plays an important role in the success of the university and can act as an essential tool in enhancing its perceived service quality (Abdullah, 2006). Furthermore, student satisfaction is a key determinant for attracting more customers to educational providers (Arambewela, Hall & Zuhair, 2005; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). The students' expectation may go as far as before they even enter and engage in the higher education. Student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in life on campus. Helgesen and Nettet, 2007; Gruber *et al.*, (2010) in their study has resulted and revealed that students who are satisfied may attract new students by engaging positive word of mouth (WOM) communication in order to encourage their friends to further their study in the same university. Developing satisfied customers amongst international students should therefore be a primary goal of higher education (Petrussellis, D'Uggento & Romanazzi, 2006). It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to national economy. Therefore, if Malaysia wants to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in this very competitive industry, it is crucial that the management of Malaysian universities must develop a thorough understanding of the university services that can bring the greatest impact on student satisfaction (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithmal, 1988; Yeo, 2008a).

According to DeSheilds, Kara and Kaynak (2005), it is important for universities to develop strategies in order to differentiate their services from others. For the purpose of resource allocation, the universities must set up their strategies to ascertain the key determinants of student satisfaction as to help universities prioritise the services they provided them (Doughlas, *et al.*, 2006). In the context of the competitive Malaysian higher education sector, further research must be done in order to identify what are the services that management of the Malaysian universities can provide to international students. Furthermore, what are the actions or indicator must be taken in order to help the international students for their satisfaction and adjustments? Previous study by Tian and Wang (2010), they mentioned that cultural differences have direct influence on the level of students' satisfaction regarding their perception of the services. Other than that, they also mentioned to satisfy the customers with the same cultural background is not that easy. Accordingly, to satisfy the customers with different background will be even more difficult. Thus, ignoring the nature and importance of service quality may prove to be perilous for service providers' in the higher education industries. Therefore, Malaysian universities have to consider various preferences and needs of international students in order to satisfy them.

Suggestions and recommendations from the studies could help and provide better understanding as well as the best guidelines for the management in Malaysian universities. Matzler, Wurtele and Renzl (2006) mentioned that further research must go beyond merely by identifying the determinants of student satisfaction in term of students' behaviours such as positive word of mouth, their personal recommendations and re-enrolment or loyalty towards their educational institutions. All of these dimensions will help the management of the universities to determine their economic growth, profitability as well as their performance in providing services.

a) Students' Satisfaction

Students satisfaction has been one of the main factor in order to retain and attracting international students to educational institutions (Arambewela *et al.*, 2005; Kamil Anil & Eti Icli, 2013).

In the context of higher learning industry, 'students' are the major customer for the universities. Therefore, success or failure of an institution is largely depending on its student satisfaction. The concept of student as customer is not new. However, this customer relationship is not as clear cut as some other service relationship, given that students are also "partners" in the learning process (Douglas *et al.*, 2008). According to Guolla (1999), researchers who have studied student satisfaction will take the role of students as customers even though there are many debates about the role of students for example, they can be as customers, clients, producers and also as products. Satisfied students will help to attract more potential future customers (new students) to the institutions/universities through positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, increased students' loyalty and the good image of the higher education institution (Arambewela, 2003; Arambawela & Hall, 2006; Slethaug & Manjula, 2012). Slethaug & Manjula (2012) has mentioned in their study that with positive word of mouth, student will likely recommend highly to their family members and friends to pursue at higher education/universities that they are satisfied with. This positive recommendation will eventually improve students' retention and growth for the university as well as to lead for better branding reputation of the university (Arambewela, 2003). Atheeyaman (2000) confirmed that there is significantly strong relationship between satisfied students with positive word of mouth and student retention. Accordingly, it is a must for universities to deliver their service very well in order to satisfy their customers (students) with the services that provided to them. Therefore, students' satisfaction is a key strategic variable in maintaining the stiff competition in international higher education (Arambewela, 2003; Arambewela *et al.*, 2005). Besides, it will be increasing the number of student enrolment, reduce student attrition and enhance students' experience. No doubt that such measure of student satisfaction is important for universities as it tells students need expectations. Accordingly, such investigations should be considered as the basis of optimal characteristics of the service provided by universities (Arambewela, 2008).

According to Usman (2010), most of the well-established high learning institutions focus highly on strategic issues like providing excellent customer services. It is important because by doing so they would be able to make and build good relationships with clients which are actually very important by determining their future in the industry. Higher learning institutions are like other service based firms which is dependent on its customers' perceptions (among their students) and one of the most effective and powerful marketing strategy in this regard is through positive word of mouth (WOM). Students are likely to be satisfied in their educational institution when the service provided fits their expectations. Furthermore, the students will be very satisfied when the service is beyond their expectations when they received the services more than they expect. On the contrary, students are dissatisfied with the educational institution when the service is less than their expectation. In addition, when the service they received is less than their expectations and when the gap between perceived and expected service quality is high, they tend to communicate the negative aspects (Petrussellis, Uggento & Romanazzi, 2006).

According to Tian and Wang (2010), they argued that satisfaction is the function of the congruency between the perceived performance and esteemed benefits resulting from consumer personal values and the configuration of customer values is affected by central cultural values. They also mentioned that cultural differences have a direct influence on the students' satisfaction regarding their perception on the services they received. Besides that, to satisfy the customers is not easy, and then to satisfy the customers with different cultural background will be even more difficult. Numerous studies have been conducted on

customer satisfaction in the marketing as well as management field. Unfortunately, limited study has been done in education field especially in higher education institutions/universities (Ilias *et al.*, 2008).

The theory of confirmation/disconfirmation developed by Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985) suggests that satisfaction as a dependent of the confirmation and anticipation. The same idea was supported by Hon *et al.*, (1999), which imply that emotional/mental outcome derives from the comparison between the actual and the expected service quality. Thus, the customer satisfaction can be summarized as an overall assessment of the organization's performance with regard to the outcome and the process of reaching satisfaction in the conceptualization of building the relationship. In the context of higher education, student satisfaction, as a driver of student loyalty, has been one of the strongest influencers in retention of customers. Researchers have used the disconfirmation theory in order to measure antecedents of satisfaction. In the other words, satisfaction as a function of the size and direction of disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is a function of the 'gap' between customers' expectations and perceptions (Brady & Robertson, 2001). A study by Yusoff *et al.*, (2013) has put forward a definition in an oversea students' context, which is a feeling that the international students may or may not achieve the expectations of faculty with regards to issues they faced such as university culture or living in the host country. Petrick (2004) found in the meta-analysis that the disconfirmation paradigm is the best predictor of customer satisfaction. Ekinici *et al.*, (2004) cites Oliver's updated definition on the disconfirmation theory, which states "Satisfaction is the guest's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that product or service feature, or the product or services itself, providing a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment including levels of under or over fulfilment."

Basically, satisfaction is the result of direct experiences with products or services, and it occurs by comparing perceptions against a standard (i.e. expectations). Mattila and O'Neil (2003), discussed that amongst the most popular satisfaction theories is the 'disconfirmation theory', which argues that satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that occurred as a result of comparing service performance against expectation. Research also indicates that how the service was delivered is more important than the outcome of the service process and dissatisfaction towards the service often simply occurs when guest's perception do not meet their expectations. The ability to know the level of student satisfaction is by promoting and alleviating factors which can add a competitive advantage. In the other words, it is considered a prime opportunity to act proactively in business education sector. However, in Malaysian higher education sector, there is still little information about the level of satisfaction among international students especially in Malaysian public universities. Therefore, the dependent variable for this study is focusing purposely on students' satisfaction among international students in Malaysian public universities.

b) International Students' Adjustments

What is adjustment? Adjustment is a complex and multi-faceted concept. According to Ramsay, Jones & Barker (2007), adjustment refers to the dynamic processes that can ultimately lead to achievement for an appropriate fit between the person and the environment. Millen & Berger (1997) mentioned in their study that the period of transition (Baker & Siryk, 1999). Most researchers who study regarding adjustment would advocate that all such indicators can be used simultaneously to ensure that more comprehensive picture of a student's adjustment can be obtained (Tinto, 1996). Student adjustment to new academic settings affects their performance and satisfaction. International students encounter many cultural and

academic challenges during their stay in the host country. In conjunction due to this matter, they need continuous motivational support from their friends as well as in term of psychological adjustment (Yusliza, Mohd Yusof, 2012). Western international students have a higher level of social and academic adjustment in western universities when compared to domestic students. However, social adjustment for Western international students was negatively affecting their academic performance whereas, the non-Western international students had a more complex relationship with social adjustment (Rienties *et al.*, 2012). Most of the writers tend to approach the study by looking at two (2) domain proposed by Ward & Kennedy (1999) which in the university especially for students represents a separation from patterns and norms which is associated with experiences when the behavioural pattern of the university context have not been fully established. In addition, adjustment can be measured by students' personal/self-reports (from their personal application form) for their attachment to the university, academic performance, participation in extracurricular activities and psychological well-being. In fact, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaires (SACQ) is a self-report instrument has been created/designed purposely to capture and measured such a multifaceted view of adjustment known as sociocultural domain and psychological domain. Most writers hold the view that adjustment is a transitional process in which students learn on how to overcome psychological distress and how students can learn to make the necessary adjustment to the challenges that they encounter in their studies. Cross-cultural adjustment was redefined as the process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of fitness and compatibility in the new culture, including the adaptation of culture shock, psychological adaptation and interaction effectiveness (Kim, 1988; Chen, 1990). According to Anderson (1994), examination of adjustment among international students can best be described as the dynamic and interactive process, one which tries to find the "fit" between the person and the environment. Ramsay *et al.*, (1999) mentioned in their study that the contention of students' positive experiences will help them to facilitate the students' adjustment process in their new environment. In the other words, it can be described as an adjustment that fit between students and their academic environment.

The idea that international students experience transition and adjustment difficulties when engaging in educational education is not new. International students found adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language challenges within the United States higher education system as their three most significant challenges (Zhai, 2004). The idea that international students experience transition and adjustment difficulties when engaging in international education is not new. As the example, studies on attitudes and social relations of foreign students have been conducted by previous researchers as early as the year of 1963 (Selltiz, Crist, Havel & Cook, 1963). Adjusting to a new culture can be so challenging and stressful experience and may put international students at a greater risk than students in general. Lin and Yi (1997) has mentioned that international students face common as well as their own unique problems such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial problem, misunderstandings and loneliness. Furthermore, coming from different cultures, they (international students) cannot get rid or cannot escape from cultural shock and will facing many astounding barriers. In addition, they are concerned about the well-being of their families besides they worry about securing employment upon graduation. Based on Pedersen (1995) study, he mentioned that "culture shock" is the process of initial adjustment to unfamiliar environment. The term of culture shock was coined in the academic literature by anthropologist 'Ober' in the year of 1960s. He invented the expression in order to define the kind of uncertain and troubled feeling, which generally occurs when people are faced with difficulties while organizing their routine schedule in a new cultural environment.

According to Tseng and Newton (2002) summarized the key adjustment problems faced by international students into four categories: (a) general living adjustment, (b) socio-cultural adjustment, (c) personal psychological adjustment and (d) academic adjustment. General living adjustment include such areas as adjusting to weather/climate, transportation systems, paying bills, health care systems, food and housing arrangements. Socio-cultural adjustment refers to experiencing culture shock, discrimination, and getting used to new values, norms, holidays, and customs. Personal psychological adjustment refers to depression, feeling of isolation, homesickness and frustration whereas academic adjustment is having difficulty with learning a new educational system, lack of language proficiency and acquiring new learning strategies. Further, Pandian, A. (2008) mentioned that, pattern of studies on international students' adjustment usually highlights issues of culture shock, intercultural experiences, academic performance, personality traits, cultural background and social interaction. A better understanding of how international students make the necessary adjustment is imminent in view of the ever growing international students' population in universities across the country each year. However, despite the large number of international students in Malaysian universities, Pandian, A. (2008) has pointed out that this does not necessarily translate to better intercultural interactions and understanding. Furthermore, the literature on international students' adjustment is mostly littered with research from overseas with focus on its antecedent variables (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Li & Gasser, 2005; Poyrazli *et al.*, 2002; Polek *et al.*, 2008) as well as the adjustment its outcomes (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

Sociocultural adaptation is best explained within social skills or cultural learning paradigm (Akhtaruzzaman & Monami, 2011). There are many authors have identified different domains of sociocultural adaptation. Black & Stephens (1989) were amongst the previous researchers who have researched intercultural adjustment in the management field. They defined sociocultural is known as the behavioural which is referring as an ability to fit in whereas psychological adjustment is the emotional which is referring to well-being, anxiety depression and fatigue. Thomas and Althen (1989) have added that the international students can suffer from a variety of adjustments issues. There are depression/helplessness, hostility toward the host country, anxiety and over identification with the home country, withdrawal, homesickness and loneliness. According to Ward & Kennedy (1999) explained that sociocultural adjustment is viewed from a social learning perspective, predicted by variables related to cognitive factors and social skills acquisitions whilst psychological adjustment can be best understood in term of stress and coping framework, predicted and explained by personality and social support variables and life changes. Using the dimensions of psychological adjustments by Searle and Ward (1990), it offers a simultaneously understanding of the unpredictability and variability of this variable (psychological adjustment). Accordingly, using the dimension by Ward & Kennedy (1999) will make us be more understood about the reliability of the sociocultural approach to adaptation. It has also included more theory driven contributions by Berry (1997) on acculturative stress and associates (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1994) on psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

As a social issue, a number of researchers have paid attention on adjustment issues faced by overseas students (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). In order to adjust to a new environment is often a big issue for overseas students, not forgetting that this is a time consuming process. Normally, they were able to adjust to their host culture within 3 months, and majority of them needed more than 1 year. Therefore, universities are a major player in helping international students deal with academic challenges, social isolation and also

cultural adjustment (Lillyman & Bennet, 2014; Wu *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, Cho and Yu (2015) has emphasized the importance of university in order to support on psychological well-being of international students. According to Yusliza and Shankar (2010), study on international students' adjustment while studying in foreign environment is widely research in developed countries like United States and Britain. Furthermore, a growing body of research has been carried out to study its determinants. But, less attention is given is given on how the international students adjust successfully especially in Malaysian public universities (Yusliza & Shankar, 2010). Other than that, only several adjustment issues among international students who are facing obstacles that has been highlighted to adapt the changes (Saloma & Amran, 2014). Thus, from the previous literature about adjustments among international students, the researcher has decided to choose one of the independent variable for this study is about international students' adjustment in Malaysian public universities.

c) Service Quality

Service quality is one of the most important research topics for the last few decades (Galifa & Batalle, 2010). Highly satisfied customers are expected to spread a positive word of mouth (WOM) about the institutions in order to attract new applicants (students) and it's also having a significance influence on student satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2010). In Malaysia country, both public and private higher education institutions are striving to provide quality services to its students in order to develop and maintain their good reputation. According to Sohail *et al.*, (2003), in order to gain competitive advantages, the quality management system philosophy must be fast spreading within the higher education institutions in Malaysia. In the other words, universities should make similar approach as their survival, grow and prosperity is determined by students' satisfaction. The quality of education is even difficult to define (Macukow, 2000). Some of previous researchers believes that quality cannot be defined in any simple ways (Becher, 1994; Freeland, 1991). Due to this reason, researchers agree that there is no one best way to define and measure service quality (Clewes, 2003). However, there have been some early attempt (previous studies) made to define quality in higher education (Harvey *et al.*, 1992). This group of researchers has noted that higher education quality can be defined in many ways and that definition of quality in term of 'Higher Education' (HE) must be "stakeholder relative", "defect avoidance in the education process", "Knowledge is the total quality of education", "value addition in education", "the achievement of planned goals", "fitness of educational outcome", "experience of use" and many more. A growing debate on the definition of 'quality in higher education' has led to the suggestions that service quality should be defined based on student perceptions (Mai, 2005; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998).

Service quality in the field of higher education can be defined as "the difference between student expectation and perception against their actual experience". In the other words, it can be defined as "a form of attitude that is related to customers' expectations and perceptions" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). The students can be motivated or inspired from both academic performance as well as the administrative efficiency of their institution. According to Ahmad *et al.*, (2010), service quality is a key performance to measure the educational excellence and is a main strategic variable for universities to create a strong perception in consumers' mind. A service quality study by Tahar (2008), he mentioned that higher learning institutions performance measurement of service quality is strongly has the positive significance relationship between students' expectation and their experience of a particular service.

Parasuraman *et al.*, (1991) agreed that service quality is one of the important factors of customer satisfaction. Parasuraman and his friends have studied a model developed by Oliver (1981) in addressing the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. This model combines the two concepts and proposes that perceived service quality is prerequisite to satisfaction. In addition, the outcomes of the study showed that service quality leads to satisfaction. Service quality and customer satisfaction are basically two different issues but can be highly interrelated. Satisfaction is related to particular transaction while quality is seen as a general attitude (Gruber *et al.*, 2010). Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988) has viewed customer satisfaction as an antecedent to service quality whereas some other previous researchers claimed that perceived quality as an antecedent to satisfaction. However, majority of the paper published about this study believed that service quality is an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Carrillat *et al.*, 2007 & Zeithaml *et al.*, 2008). According to Gruber *et al.*, (2010), if higher education institutions look at their students and try to understand how they perceived the services provided to them, so that, they should be able improvise the quality of services provided better. A study by Wiers *et al.*, (2002) stated that higher education institutions support/provided facilities are important in student satisfaction assessment. As a result of highly competitive marketplace, service quality and customer satisfaction became no doubt at all about the two basic concepts that are at the core of the marketing theory and practice. Gao and Wei (2004) mentioned in their study that the key to sustainable competitive advantage depends in delivering high quality of service that in turn result to customer satisfaction.

During the past two decades, this topic became a major focus of researchers due to its strong impact on customers as well as the organizations (Ali & Chou, 2013; Seth *et al.*, 2005). The copious research available on the subject has resulted in various conceptualizations and little agreement on what constitutes a universally accepted and standardized definition of service quality (Sharif & Kassim, 2012). This difficulty in determining in service quality is also repeated in the measurement of service, as there is no general or widely accepted framework that can be operationalized to make precise assessment of service quality (Seth *et al.*, 2005). Perceived service quality is the result of comparing expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1998; Gronroos, 1994), however, this conceptualization was extensively criticized by Cronin and Taylor (1992) in terms of its applicability and generalizability.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

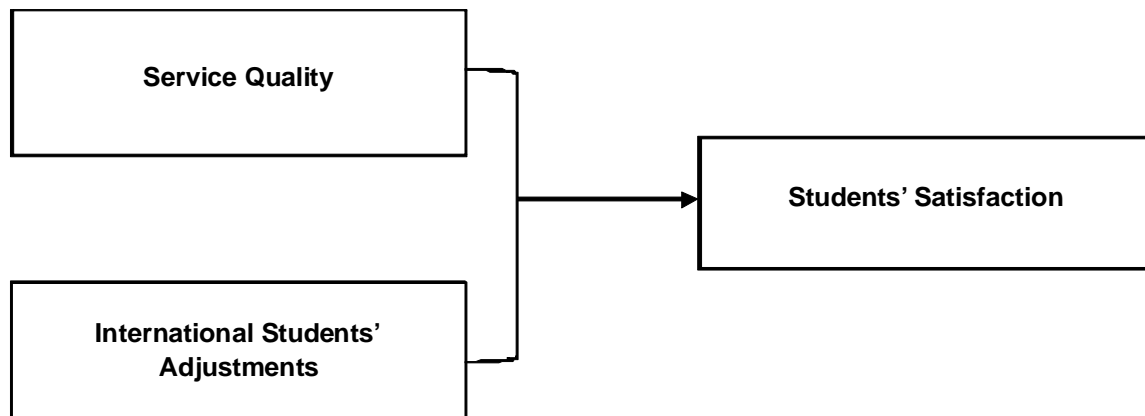


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the discussion above, a graphical explanation is drawn in Figure 1 in order to depict the proposed conceptual model. The development of the proposed framework on service quality and international students' adjustments was derived from literatures on students' satisfaction, service quality, international students' adjustments and adopted theory on customer satisfaction which is known as Confirmation/Disconfirmation Theory. Drawing on an in-depth review of the past studies, this framework suggests that the two independent variables are the key factor that will sustain and improved the students' satisfaction among international students in Malaysian public universities.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The higher education institution in Malaysia is now experiencing a competitive and commercial environment due to increasing the number of international students' enrolment who are pursuing their studies in this country. As students have more choice, it is imperative that the higher education sector in Malaysia not only aim to attract new students, but also retain the current ones. It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to national economy. Therefore, it is crucial for the Ministry of Higher Education to pay greater attention for the adjustments and transition issues as well as the satisfaction among international students. Based on the thorough review of previous studies, this paper intensely depends on the service quality and international students' adjustments towards students' satisfaction on services provided for them. Hence, the researcher has proposed the framework which conceptualizes that both of the independent variables (service quality and international students' adjustments) and it's become as the major contributor to the satisfaction among international students in Malaysian universities. As we know, it is not easy in assessing students' satisfaction with their educational experience but, it can be very helpful for the university to build strong relationship with their existing and potential students.

As the number of international students are increasing from time to time, the need to understand and to address their adjustments to this country become so important. An adjustment is indeed a complex process and students must quickly learn to adapt so that they can live comfortably in the host country. The Malaysia higher education/universities need to take on social responsibilities to go beyond attending to administrative matters but also they need to address intercultural adaptation. Less intention is given on how international students adjust successfully during their studying time in Malaysian universities. Furthermore, only several adjustment issues among international students whom are facing difficulties or obstacles has been highlighted in term of adapt changes in Malaysian universities. Moreover, limited effort has been made in order to conceptualize and explore international students' satisfaction in Malaysian higher learning institutions (universities).

In conjunction to the above matter, the Malaysia educational sector needs to require cultural programs and structured support system as well. Even though, it is a crucial moving and it will be one of the challenging task for them (the management of Malaysian education industry) but it will help the international students to adapt and make their adjustments with Malaysian learning environment smoothly. Researcher recommend for future studies could include other possible dimensions or new variables which suitable in order to extend proposed model further purposely for international students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. In addition, the findings of future research will bring the better understanding among future researchers as well as the academicians and postgraduate students in concerning this interesting topic, while highlighting the potential antecedents that may not only facilitate the achievement of international

students' adjustments and their satisfaction but also it will attract potential customers (new students) to pursue their study in this country (Malaysia).

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