

Perceptions on differences of customer services between public universities (UAs) and private higher education institutions (IPTs) in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The development of globalized knowledge economy profoundly impacted on the role and value of higher education. Thus, this study seeks to assess the perception of differences of customer services between public universities (UAs) and private higher education institutions (IPTs) in Malaysia in three main areas: employee's attitude, facilities and evaluation. A quantitative method was adopted for the study with 400 respondents including students and lecturers from the UAs and IPTs, using questionnaire consisting of 5 points Likert Scale. ANOVA and T-test were used in data analysis for the study. The findings of the study showed that there are significant differences between both the students and lecturers on physical facilities whereby the UAs provide good facilities and technology compared to the IPTs. Whilst there are significant differences between the students' and lecturers' perceptions of customer services provided by their institutions in all elements of customer service under study for both the UAs and IPTs. In meeting the competitive demand from their customers, the higher institutions need to assess their customer service and consider some complaints put forward by their customers in upgrading its service performance.

Keywords:

Perceptions, Customer services, Public universities (UAs), Private higher education institutions (IPTs), Malaysia

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1. Introduction

Higher education is constantly being commercialized and privatized. Thus the institutions of higher learning are under pressure to restructure and seek diverse sources of revenues instead of relying totally on the government funding. The restructuring of higher education is a significant global trend in meeting customers' demand through cultural diffusion and institutional isomorphism.

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However, this does not mean that all higher education systems are the same since their response to the global forces are varied depending on the political, economy, national culture, and the structural features of the particular education system.

As the demand for higher education continues to grow, and the Malaysian Government acknowledges that its role in promoting economic development, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that higher education system in Malaysia is managed in an effective way so that the task of managing and monitoring of this sector is becoming more specialized. The management of very complex academic communities cannot be done effectively by remote civil servants as practiced before. The task should be left to institutions themselves; giving them autonomy in recognizing that their management needs are different hence allows them full exercise of their academic freedoms. In such a complex system as higher education, the diverse needs of customers and the process of satisfying them could be a major issue. It is, therefore, important to understand the bottlenecks/barriers present in education systems so as to successfully managed and overcome these barriers.

Private institutions are perceived to give support in providing education, especially in this age of internalization of education coupled with the inability of public institutions to cater for high demand for advancement in education. According to Altbach [1] the demand usually occurs where a government cannot or is not willing to give the necessary support for the growth in education, thus private institutions would close the gap especially in the growth of higher education. Previous researchers [2-6] had conducted on the service quality of the higher learning institution, but none of these studies compared the perceptions of differences of customer services (students and lecturers) between public universities and private higher education institutions in Malaysia. As such, this study seeks to fill in this knowledge gap in this area of study through comparative analysis. The main objective of the study is to determine differences in customer service perceptions between public universities (UAs) and private higher education institutions (IPTAs) in Malaysia. While the specific objectives are as follows:

1. To determine the difference in perceptions of customer services between public universities (UAs) and private universities (IPTs) in Malaysia.
2. To determine the differences in the perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of the public universities (UAs) in Malaysia.
3. To determine the differences in the perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of the private universities (IPTs) in Malaysia.

1.1 Overview of higher educational services in Malaysia

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is a government ministry that is responsible for determining the policies and direction of higher education in Malaysia. According to Lee [7] on January 1, 1998, the oldest university in Malaysia, University of Malaya was corporatized. Hence in due course Malaysia has passed legislation making all of its public universities autonomous and “corporatized”; technically they become not-for-profit companies limited by guarantee. Besides the move to corporatize public universities, the Malaysian government also has relaxed restrictions on the establishment of private institutions of higher learning. The 1990s saw a rapid expansion in the number and types of private colleges, in student enrolments, and in the scope of courses offered. In an effort to exercise some quality control over private higher education, the Malaysian government requires all private colleges to register with the Ministry of Education and to obtain ministry approval for any new programs. Like in many other countries, higher education in Malaysia has undergone massive expansion due to ever increasing social demand. As a result, the Malaysian Government has

expanded the existing universities and has built many new higher educational institutions. As in 2015, there are 20 public universities, 47 private universities, 24 private colleges, 32 polytechnics, 27 teachers' training colleges and 91 community colleges that surveyed by MOHE [8].

2. Literature review

2.1 Customer service

According to Lovelock [9] service is defined as 'an act or performance offered by one party to another'. There are four main features of service, intangibility, perishability, inseparability, and heterogeneity that mentioned several researchers [10-11]. Customers in this study referred to students and lecturers of universities and higher institutions of learning [12-14]. In a university, its fundamental customers are the college students. Ling [15] argued Students' fulfillment ought to be considered by the university because of escalated rivalry among universities, internationalization spirit, higher expectation of customers to the higher educational institution, expansion in the educational cost charge, and the arrangement of training as a marketable service.

Letcher [16] indicated that 'psychologists have found that students' satisfaction could help in building self-confidence, which in turn could help students to develop useful skills, acquire knowledge'. On the other hand, students' dissatisfaction could result in negative students' performance. For example, students with poor scores could result in an unpleasant relationship between the students and the staffs, lecturers and peers stated by Athiyaman [17], Taking into account the above explanation, it is imperative to examine the components which determine students' satisfaction. Other studies showed that, there are two elements that have been demonstrated experimentally as consumer loyalty determinant, i.e. Customer perceived service quality and perceived price [18].

As the consumers of higher education become more aware of their rights due to modern technology like the internet, hence they tend to be more likely to demand the high quality of customer service in higher institutions. In today's highly competitive world, higher education deemed to look more closely at improving customer service on campus since the customers of education become more aware of their rights, so they would be more likely to demand the same service of educational institutions as they do in commercial businesses. Thus higher education system needs to investigate what business has been doing in the area of customer service and apply it in the education environment.

The corporate image dimension relates to the overall picture of an organization perceived by their customers. The students tend to evaluate the physical facilities and technology provided by their institutions besides the attitude of the employees in meeting their needs during their study on the campus. Hence the interaction between students themselves becomes important, which is certainly true for higher education in considering the influence of one student to the others. Since most quality attributes cannot be seen, felt or touched in advance, hence the image of higher institutions totally depending on the perceptions of their customers on the outcome of the service and the internal process involved. Ghobadian [19] differentiate between dimensions which are associated with the quality of the final product or outcome of the service and those which relate to internal processes within the organization. They are called "outcome" and "process" dimensions respectively. The importance of the process dimensions from the customers' point of view depends on the extent to which they participate in the process. In the case of higher education, students and lecturers participate a great deal in the processes, but other groups like employers deal mainly with the final product of the system, i.e. graduates. Hence it is very important for the higher institutions to produce high quality graduates besides providing good internal processes. High quality graduates of the

institution could be measured based on the percentage of the employability of its students while good internal processes could be based on the feedback given by its students and lecturers.

Hasan [20] examined the relationship between service quality dimensions and overall service quality among 200 Bachelor Degree students from two private universities in Malaysia. They found that service quality has a significant positive relationship with student satisfaction. Their results also showed that two dimensions in service quality i.e. empathy and assurance are the most critical factors in explaining students' satisfaction.

2.2 Differences in customer service perception

Patrinos and Balán [21- 22] stressed that the real merit of private higher education has been reacting vigorously in meeting the market's needs. They provide courses such as engineering and medicine and courses that are of high benefit to society but at times the quality of these courses failed to meet their customers' expectations, similarly [23-25] in their study carried out in Japan revealed that public higher education comes with good facilities that are related to quality than the private higher institutions, with students - teacher ratio in public universities eight to one and private universities twenty-six to one. The situation was worse in Indonesia and the Philippines whereby the ratio in private institutions was found to be triple of the public universities and found to be more than double in Thailand introduced by Malakul [26]. However, customers perceived supportive and approachable teachers in private institutions of higher learning than in public universities because they can participate and feel more supportive than those of their peers from public universities [27]. This could be due to their nature of business whereby the private higher institutions are more profit oriented compared to the public institutions. Customers mean income to their organizations; hence they need to provide a better service especially between students – teacher's interactions. This also could be explained based on their size whereby most of the private universities are much smaller compared to public universities hence the students and lecturers will be able to be cordial and build rapport [28]. As found by Khaldi [29] findings' on students' perception of the learning environment in Kuwait, it reminds that higher education institutions are essentially service providers; hence they should focus on their customers' satisfaction. This becomes even more important in private universities where university budgets depend totally on fees paid by students. So, in order to ensure that the need for business education services is met effectively, it is important to provide a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. However, in terms of quality, in contrast Chang [30] found that customers perceived better services with public universities where they employed qualified lecturers with established research and able to provide better teaching facilities than the private institutions. This could be due to the fund provided by the government in enhancing the image of its public universities. Furthermore, public universities charged much lower fees than those of private higher institutions due to government subsidies. Thus it is the main aim of this study to assess the perception differences of customer services besides comparing the difference in the perceptions of customers (students and lecturers) services between public universities (UAs) and private higher education institutions (IPTAs) in Malaysia. Variables considered as customer services in this study include employees' attitude, physical facilities and evaluation.

2.3 Research hypotheses

There are two main groups of customers served by the management of a university. They are the students and lecturers. Thus the management of a university needs to consider the perceptions of

these two main groups of customers whenever they wish to upgrade their customer services. Thus we have postulated three main research hypotheses. They are as follows:

H_1 = There is no significant difference of customer services between Public Universities (UAs) and Private Universities (IPTs).

H_2 = There is no significant difference in perception of customer services between lecturers and students of Public Universities (UAs).

H_3 = There is no significant difference in perception of customer services between lecturers and students of Private Universities (IPTs).

3. Methodology

The population for this study was all students and lecturers of public universities and private higher institutions based in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. A total of 400 structured questionnaires were distributed through a convenience sampling technique. The 400 questionnaires were equally distributed (200 each) to respondents from UAs and IPTs to solicit their response towards the services provided by their institutions. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section deals with respondents' demographic data like gender, status, highest education level attained, the total number of years in the institution and their ethnic background. While the second section focuses on their perceptions towards services provided by their institutions.

The questionnaire consists of 14 statements, whereby the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on general information pertaining to their institution. The survey was conducted through self-administered questionnaires on students and lecturers from two different types of universities i.e. the UAs and IPTAs. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire by indicating their level of agreement or disagreement in the Second Section, using a five point Likert Scale where 1 indicates strongly disagree and at the other end, 5 indicates strongly agree on the variables such as employee's attitude, physical facilities, services and overall evaluation. While the Third Section consists of 2 open ended questions requesting the respondents to list down the benefits of services provided by their institutions besides giving some suggestions to improve the service. A pilot study was carried out among 20 randomly selected respondents in ensuring that the instrument used is reliable. The result of the Cronbach's Reliability Test is 0.922, which confirms that the set of questionnaires is reliable. All of these 400 questionnaires were filled and returned. ANOVA T-test was used to test the hypotheses.

4. Results and findings

Table 1 above shows that 36% of our respondents are males and 64% are females. 80% of the respondents were students and 20% were lecturers. Among the students, 9% of them were Diploma/STPM students, 67% were degree students, and 24% were postgraduates. In terms of a number of years in the university, the majority of them had been there between 1 to less than 3 years (42.25%). Most of our respondents were Chinese (55%).

4.1 Hypotheses testing

4.1.1 Hypothesis 1

H_0 = There is no significant difference of customer services between Public Universities (UAs) and Private Universities (IPTs).

H_1 = There is a significant difference of customer services between Public Universities (UAs) and

Private Universities (IPTs).

Hypothesis one stated that there is no significant difference of customer services between Public Universities (UAs) and Private Universities (IPTs). To test this hypothesis, we used T-test.

Table 1
Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic variable	Types of higher educations		Total
	Public Universities	IPTS	
Gender			
Male	60	82	142
Female	140	118	258
Status			
Student	160	160	320
Lecturer	40	40	80
Education Level			
Diploma or STPM Degree	20	15	35
Postgraduate	119	149	268
	61	36	97
No of years respondents in the organization			
<1 year	51	42	93
1 to ≤3 years	74	96	169
3 to ≤5 years	38	42	80
5 to ≤7years	9	9	18
≥ 7 years	28	12	40
Ethnic background of respondents			
Malay	95	26	121
Chinese	69	150	219
Indian	13	19	32
Others	23	5	28

The significant difference is observed under physical facilities only. There are no significant differences observed for the evaluation, service and employees' attitude between customer services of UAs and IPTs.

Table 3 shows the overall summary of the descriptive statistical analysis on the respondents' perceptions towards services provided by their institutions. Overall the mean score for the UAs lies between 3.17 to 3.25, with the employee's attitude scored the highest and the evaluation scored the lowest. In contrary, the overall mean score for the IPTs lies between 2.91 to 3.11. Again the employee's attitude scored the highest, while the physical facilities scored the lowest. As service providers, the attitude of employees from both the UAs and IPTs managed to get the highest mean score hence able to satisfy their customers as suggested by Khaldi [29].

As for the low result on mean score for physical facilities from IPTs, this could explain their low satisfaction as suggested by Chang [30] finding. Table 3 also depicts the mean score for UAs on physical facilities is 3.20 while the mean score for IPTs is only 2.91. A possible explanation could be due to the nature of business whereby IPTs are profit oriented compared to UAs. IPTs tend to maximize the profit by saving the costs. Thus provide fewer facilities to minimize the costs. This result was in conformity with the study conducted by James [25].

Table 2
 Difference of customer services of UAs and IPTSs (N=400)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Test of hypothesis		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Physical facilities	Equal variances assumed	2.593	.108	-3.573	398	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.573	390.243	.000
Evaluation	Equal variances assumed	.082	.775	-1.917	398	.056
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.917	390.404	.056
Service	Equal variances assumed	4.338	.038	-.592	398	.554
	Equal variances not assumed			-.592	392.846	.554
Employees' attitude	Equal variances assumed	1.934	.165	-1.958	398	.051
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.958	397.996	.051

Table 3
 Descriptive statistical analysis on overall respondents' satisfaction towards services provided by their institution

	Mean	Median	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	statistic	statistic	statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error
Public Universities(UAs)						
Employee's Attitude	3.25	3.00	-.662	.172	.673	.342
Physical Facilities	3.20	3.00	-.143	.172	.353	.342
Evaluation	3.17	3.00	-.440	.172	-.011	.342
Private Higher Education Institutions(IPTSs)						
Employee's Attitude	3.11	3.00	-.245	.172	.350	.342
Physical Facilities	2.91	3.00	-.208	.172	-.484	.342
Evaluaiion	3.03	3.00	-.256	.172	-.011	.342

4.1.2 Hypothesis 2

H_0 = There is no significant difference in perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of Public Universities (UAs).

H_1 = There is a significant difference in perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of Public Universities (UAs).

Hypothesis 2 tries to search for the significant difference between lecturers' and students' from UAs perceptions on customer services provided by their institutions. A t-test was used to search for the results. Table 4 below provides the results of the above hypothesis. There are significant differences between lecturers' and students' of the Public Universities (UAs) perceptions on physical, evaluation, service and employees' attitude at 0.01 significant level.

Table 4
 Difference of customer services between lecturers and students of UAs

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Test of hypothesis		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Physical	Equal variances assumed	.533	.466	3.071	196	.002
	Equal variances not assumed					
Evaluation	Equal variances assumed	.025	.876	4.600	196	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			5.184	71.101	.000
Service	Equal variances assumed	.568	.452	4.462	198	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			5.167	74.423	.000
Employees' attitude	Equal variances assumed	2.597	.109	4.492	198	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			5.942	97.460	.000

Table 5 above shows the descriptive statistical analysis on the students' and lecturers' of UAs perceptions towards services provided by their institution. Basically both the mean and median for the lecturers' perceptions scored much higher than the students. Both scored the highest for employee's attitude with 3.14 from students and 3.70 from lecturers. However, the students scored the lowest for evaluation (3.06) while the lecturers scored the lowest for physical facilities with a mean score of 3.43.

4.1.3 Hypothesis 3

Table 5
 Descriptive statistical analysis on students' and lecturers' of the UAs perceptions on services provided by their institution

	N	Mean	Median	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Public Universities (U As): Students							
Employee' Attitude	160	3.14	3.00	-.499	.192	.659	.381
Physical Facilities	160	3.13	3.00	-.028	.192	.663	.381
Evaluation	160	3.06	3.00	-.301	.192	.244	.381
Public Universities (U As): Lecturers							
Employee's Attitude	40	3.70	4.00	-.907	.374	-1.242	.733
Physical Facilities	40	3.43	4.00	-1.283	.374	1.534	.733
Evaluation	40	3.63	4.00	-1.323	.374	.864	.733

H_0 = There is no significant difference in perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of Private Universities (IPTs).

H_1 = There is a significant difference in perceptions of customer services between lecturers and students of Private Universities (IPTs).

Similar to Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 3 tries to search for the significant difference between students and lecturers' from IPTs perceptions on customer services provided by their institutions. A t-test was used to search for the results. Table 6 below provides the results of the above hypothesis. Again it is observed that there are significant differences between lecturers' and students' IPTs perceptions on physical, evaluation, service and employees' attitude at 0.01 significant level.

Table 6
 Difference of customer services between lecturers and students of IPTs

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Test of hypothesis		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Physical	Equal variances assumed	.079	.779	4.111	198	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			4.085	59.558	.000
Evaluation	Equal variances assumed	3.339	.069	3.023	198	.003
	Equal variances not assumed			2.751	54.099	.008
Service	Equal variances assumed	1.916	.168	4.940	198	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			5.592	71.611	.000
Employees' attitude	Equal variances assumed	.675	.412	5.013	198	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			5.653	71.183	.000

In respond to the benefits of services gained by lecturers from their institutions, most of them giving credit on gaining knowledge, able to build up soft skills, getting research experience and training, able to enjoy the facilities and technology in supporting their research work and teaching. While for the university students, they are able to get sponsorship for fees and allowance, good bus and hostel services and a good, efficient library service.

However, there were some complaints highlighted by our respondents. Some complaints from lecturers are the facilities and the working environment should be improved particularly their office and parking lots. While the students complained that their schedule of courses is not well organized, hostel's facilities should be improved, the management should encourage communication between students and its staffs, and finally the fees charged are rather expensive particularly for the IPTs' students. Thus the management of the university should look into its area of weaknesses and try to improve them as suggested by their students and lecturers in meeting their needs and wants hence able to satisfy their customers.

Table 7

Descriptive statistical analysis on students' and lecturers' of the IPTSs perceptions on services provided by their institution

	N	Mean	Median	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Private Higher Education Institutions(IPTSs): Students							
Employee`s Attitude	160	2.98	3.00	-.276	.192	.341	.381
Physical Facilities	160	2.79	3.00	.006	.192	-.215	.381
Evaluation	160	2.94	3.00	-.275	.192	-.109	.381
Private Higher Education Institutions(IPTSs): Lecturers							
Employee`s Attitude	40	3.60	4.00	.377	.374	-.656	.733
Physical Facilities	40	3.40	4.00	-1.436	.374	1.602	.733
Evaluation	40	3.38	3.00	-.636	.374	.758	.733

4.2 Discussion

In comparing significant differences on the customers' (both the lecturers' and students') perceptions towards customer service provided by their institutions (H1), it is only observed that there is a significant difference at 0.01 significant level under physical facilities only. However, there are no significant differences in the employee's attitude, evaluation and service at 0.01 significant level. The total mean score for all elements under study is much higher in the UAs compared to the IPTSs. As for the low mean score for the facilities for the IPTSs, this could explain on their low perceptiveness on the facilities provided by their institutions comparing to the UAs as argued by Chang [30].

However, when compared to lecturers and students from the same type of institution, there are significant differences between lecturers' and students' perceptions in all elements under study (H1). There are significant differences between lecturers' and students' UAs perceptions on physical facilities, evaluation, service and employees' attitude at 0.01 significant level (H2). Similarly, it is also observed that there are significant differences between lecturers' and students' IPTSs perceptions on physical, evaluation, service and employees' attitude at 0.01 significant level (H3). It seems that the total mean score for the employee's attitude for both categories (UAs and IPTS) are top in the list. This could be explained that as service providers, both the UAs and the IPTSs have played their role well in providing good service to their customers, as found by Khaldi [29] findings' on students' perception of the learning environment in Kuwait.

Table 8 and 9 below provide descriptive analysis on the satisfaction of students and lecturers on services provided by their institutions respectively. Relatively the total means score for both the students and lecturers from the UAs scored much higher compared to the IPTSs.

Table 8

Descriptive analysis on satisfaction of students on services provided by their institutions

	N Statistic	Mean Statistic	Median Statistic	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Public Universities(UAs): Students							
Employee's Attitude	160	3.14	3.00	-.499	.192	.659	.381
Physical Facilities	160	3.13	3.00	-.028	.192	.663	.381
Evaluation	160	3.06	3.00	-.301	.192	.244	.381
Private Higher Education Institutions(IPTSs): Students							
Employee`s Attitude	160	2.98	3.00	-.276	.192	.341	.381
Physical Facilities	160	2.79	3.00	.006	.192	-.215	.381
Evaluation	160	2.94	3.00	-.275	.192	-.109	.381

Education is an industry like any other industry, and the primary purpose of an industry is to satisfy its customers. As the demand for higher education continues to grow, the higher education institutions need to look more closely at improving customer service on campus since their corporate image dimension relates to the overall picture of the organizations perceived by their customers. Thus it is important for the management to consider some complaints put forward by their students in upgrading its customer.

Table 9

Descriptive analysis on satisfaction of lecturers on services provided by their institution

	N Statistic	Mean Statistic	Median Statistic	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Public Universities (UAs): Lecturers							
Employee's Attitude	40	3.70	4.00	-.907	.374	-1.242	.733
Physical Facilities	40	3.43	4.00	-1.283	.374	1.534	.733
Evaluation	40	3.63	4.00	-1.323	.374	.864	.733
Private Higher Education Institutions (IPTS s): Lecturers							
Attitude	40	3.60	4.00	.377	.374	-.656	.733
Physical Facilities	40	3.40	4.00	-1.436	.374	1.602	.733
Evaluation	40	3.38	3.00	-.636	.374	.758	.733

5. Conclusion

This study has consciously devoted itself to study the perceptions of differences of customer services between Public Universities and Private Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia. The study has diligently looked at the service delivery from the three areas: employee's attitude, physical facilities, and evaluation both from the students 'perspectives' and the lecturers 'perspectives'. The findings revealed that public higher education institutions have fared significantly better in all areas in comparison to their private counterparts.

In a nutshell, when giving customer service in universities or higher education, no special cases in any area must be made paying little heed to whether the supplier is public or private. For this situation, the providers of public education need to perceive the needs and urgency in enhancing their customer service quality and making it their top priority and also for the private educational institutions to pay special attention in servicing their customers to guarantee that they are able to sustain in the marketplace, hence both of these education providers remain relevant and competitive in providing higher education services in the ever-changing and fast moving higher education industry in Malaysia.

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