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Comparative analysis of student perceptions: Impact on satisfaction
among International postgraduate students from China, India, Indonesia
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Abstract

The paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the gap in student expectations and perceptions on key service quality factors influencing the choice of Australia as a study destination by international postgraduate students of Asian origin and their relationship with student satisfaction. Based on the theoretical framework of expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, the paper examines the differences in student perceptions of the level of service quality related to the key factors of choice among four groups of students from China, India, Indonesia and Thailand using structural equation modelling, ANOVA and MANOVA. It concludes with strategic implications for universities.

Introduction

This paper is a comparative analysis of student expectations and perceptions of the choice of a study destination by International postgraduate students from Asia and their impact on student satisfaction. The analysis is focused on the key factors of choice of Australia as a study destination and how students perceive the importance of these factors in their decision making and in influencing their satisfaction. Improving student satisfaction remains the key strategy of the universities to meet the challenges of the highly competitive education market. Internationalisation of education has posed many challenges to universities all over the world with the increasing mobility of students, competitive market environment and the changing pedagogical demands of students as a result of their significant cultural diversity (Wright and O’Niell, 2002). In addition, the reforms on financing and governance of higher educational institutions have resulted in new types institutions, curriculum reforms, and technological innovations to allow marketing of the institutions to prospective international students (Salmi, 2001). Marketing education with the application of market driven strategies in the international context has therefore received considerable attention among universities which has led to an increasingly competitive and dynamic educational environment. USA, U.K, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have taken the lead in this process targeting markets primarily in Asia such as China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong and the Middle East. With the competitiveness of the industry, universities will need to focus on creating additional value to services that have significant influence on student satisfaction (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998)

While internationalisation of educational services has become a necessity for many universities to compensate for the loss of revenue from government funding they are equally challenged by the need to improve service quality and student satisfaction in the current market environment (Wright and O’Niell, 2003) This paper argues postgraduate education as a professional service and based on the core marketing concept of customer satisfaction through value creation and superior service quality, postgraduate students become *customers* and recipients of a service who expect universities to satisfy their needs following the *service-recipient* paradigm (Havarnek and Brodwin, 1998). This argument based on the nature of the relationship that is developed between students and the university in the educational product/service exchange process and is also compatible with the measurement criterion of customer satisfaction. There is greater clarity in the concept of satisfaction when students are considered as *customers* because satisfaction reflects the outcome of the relationship

between students and their instructors. Another argument for treating students as *customers* is that the institution's concern for satisfaction could encourage instructors to continually improve teaching and as Guolla (1999, p.6) states "*students as customers allows an instructor to perform diagnostic research to improve teaching*". It is further justified on the basis that postgraduate students usually have had prior experience in a university service environment and therefore are able to evaluate an educational service.

One of the key characteristics of internationalisation of education is the continued increase in the mobility of students around the world. This mobility has resulted in a significant growth in the international education market which grew by 41% between 1999 and 2004 accounting for 2.5 million students in over 200 countries in the world (UNESCO, 2006). The growth is expected to continue as the global demand for higher education is estimated at 100 million tertiary students by 2010, more than double the level in 1990 with more than half of the growth in demand originating from the developing countries particularly Asia, Arab and Africa (UNESCO, 2006). The inability to meet the increasing demand for higher education due to capacity constraints in local educational systems, increase in income levels and skill needs with the expanding economies in the developing world are expected to contribute further towards the growth in the mobility of students and the international education market. Although many Asian and Arab countries have embarked on expansion programs to absorb more tertiary students in the local systems, it is highly unlikely that any significant change in the education infrastructure particularly in terms of increases in physical capacity, the number of trained academics and administrators would be possible in the medium term. Several Asian countries have made considerable investment into education infrastructure during past few years, particularly in the provision of local private education services for tertiary students, but the impact to-date on the outflow of students into foreign country institutions has been minimal (Sohail & Saeed, 2003).

According to UNESCO (2006) international students represent 18% of the Australia's tertiary enrolments during 2002/2003 – highest among all other international education service providers in the world. Currently Australia commands 7% market share of the global education market behind USA (23%), U.K (12%), Germany (11%), and France (10%) (UNESCO, 2006). While Australia continued to maintain a steady growth in the international education market overall with increasing student enrolments from India (45.2% increase between the years 2002-03) and China (33.9%), a downward trend in enrolments from some of the key traditional markets such as Indonesia (-9.5%), Singapore (-9.5%) and Hong Kong (-2.5%) have been reported (AEI, 2006). It is interesting to note that in 2005, higher education enrolments in Australia grew by 8.3% overall which indicated a trend of softening in growth since 2002 when the average growth stood at around 15%. Moreover, Australia's major markets for student enrolments - India and China – also reported a downward trend in the growth compared to previous years.

Attracting and retaining students require considerable effort by universities in the current competitive market environment. Given the differences in social, cultural and educational backgrounds, international students have had exposure to a variety of learning styles which impact on their own learning wherever they continue to study (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001). The rising expectation of students in relation to education outcomes, increasing cultural diversity together with varied learning styles

and orientations of the student population have produced many challenges to universities. These include, providing a high quality educational environment with changes in curricula and pedagogy (Coldrake, 2001) to negotiate the cultural and linguistic diversity and the resulting expectations of students. Meeting student needs and expectations and delivering what is important to students therefore has become important for universities to influence student choice of university. Student satisfaction has become a key variable in the present competitive environment as it impacts on student motivation, student retention, recruiting efforts and the fund raising capacity of the universities (Elliot & Shin, 2002).

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to evaluate student expectations and perceptions on key factors of choice of Australia as a study destination and their relationship with student satisfaction. These factors represent both educational and non educational variables.

The study is guided by the following research questions.

- Are there differences in the expectations and perceptions of the key factors of choice of study destination?
- How significant are these differences to infer student satisfaction?
- What are the strategic implications of these differences to university management?

The specific objectives of the study therefore are to:

- Identify the key factors influencing choice of study destination and their importance to target students;
- Examine the gap between expectations and perceptions of students on the key factors of choice and the associated variables;
- Use structural equation modelling, ANOVA and MANOVA to test the relationship of the factors with student satisfaction
- Examine from a marketing point of view, the actions and strategies that university administrations should take in order to improve the levels of satisfaction among students.

Literature Review

The internationalisation of higher education is an outcome of globalisation, a phenomenon influencing almost every industry in the contemporary world economy. Globalisation has facilitated the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service of the institution (Knight & Calantone, 2000). The driving force of globalisation is competition and with education being an intangible, highly professional service, universities, in their pursuit of competitive advantage, need to understand the special problems associated with the marketing of its services.

Student satisfaction is the barometer of service quality in education and it has attracted greater attention of the higher educational institutions in their pursuit of competitive advantage. The competitive environment of the international education market has prompted the continuous improvement in the quality of service delivery in all areas of the educational offering. Seeking competitive advantage was not a concept encountered in higher education prior to the 1990s, but higher education institutions are now aware that they are in a market (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). The challenge for the institutions would be to understand and to address the key sources of student satisfaction in their service delivery initiatives. By addressing relevant service quality elements that provide value to international students universities are able to improve

student satisfaction, a key factor contributing to benefits such as student retention, positive word of mouth communication, and competitive advantage (Townley, 2001; Guolla, 1999).

The concept of “value” in marketing directly related to satisfaction is interpreted as something perceived by customers rather than objectively determined by a seller. These perceptions involve a trade-off between what the customer receives (eg. quality, benefits, worth, utilities) and what the customer gives up to acquire and use a product or service (eg. price, opportunity cost). Porter (1985) emphasized the importance of value addition in competitive strategy and offered three alternative ‘generic strategies’ that a firm can follow to improve its competitive advantage. In order to determine a firm’s relative cost position, Porter (1980) introduced the ‘*Value Chain*’ concept, which identifies activities, functions and business process that have to be performed in designing, producing, marketing, delivering and supporting a product or service. However, Porter’s work has been criticised for being too system driven, concentrating on the company, its industry and its location and suffers from the absence of a people perspective. The direction of strategy now focuses much more on what firms should do internally to enhance competencies or capabilities and to enhance customer value.

The Australian higher education sector has undergone significant reforms and changes and the ‘quality’ of teaching and learning is high on the agenda among the key issues that has emerged from these policy developments. While universities and teachers have responded to the challenge of improving the quality of the learning environment of students with various internal reforms, strategies and practices, the task represents a major challenge requiring continuous adjustment to the increasing internationalisation of higher education characterised by the diversity of the student population as mentioned earlier but also the changing demands of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. There is a concerted effort by the government and individual educational institutions to promote Australian education offshore in an acknowledgment of the significant economic, political, social and cultural benefits accrued through the internationalization process. This is also supported by an increasing focus on the internationalisation of education as a key objective of university strategic plans. These trends have given additional impetus to industry rivalry spurred by greater autonomy at an institutional level with regard to the internationalisation process. With cutbacks on federal government funding, institutions are paying greater attention to international student programs as an additional source of revenue. It can be argued, however, that some marketing strategies adopted by universities in pursuit of higher enrolments of international students can have negative outcomes such as high student expectations and course delivery. Some scholars maintain that universities should adapt teaching methods and curricula to suit the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. However, other scholars such as Holbrook (2005) are critical of the persuasive advertising and promotion campaigns conducted by universities leading to high expectations of the services that some universities are incapable of delivering and additionally the loss of academic freedom of individual scholars to select pedagogical methods and course content according to their own beliefs and professional orientation. It is argued that the latter is the result of teaching orientation towards attaining organisational cost objectives and desired level of student satisfaction rather than achieving superior academic outcomes (Holbrook, 2005). The increasing tendency towards allowing

students and administrators to determine the content of courses in higher education is therefore being challenged as an exercise leading to “mis-education at the expense of the integrity and honesty of the professoriate” (Holbrook, 2005, p.3)

The factors of choice of study destination as perceived by international students have been investigated by a number of researchers and particularly how post-experience perceptions of country of origin (in our case the country that provides the service) impression are formed after the consumption of services (Knight and Calantone, 2000) and the word-of-mouth recommendations are the outcome of the perceptions. Post-experience perceptions therefore play a vital role in creating good quality perceptions and satisfactions from the consumers (Lin-Wei, 2005). This study has focused on three constructs – Teaching and Learning, Social and Cultural Support, and Infrastructure, and the associated variables that postgraduate international students consider most important in terms of their choice of study destination which are discussed briefly.

International students consider *feedback from lecturers*, on their academic progress, as an important part of their learning experience, which would pave the way for successful study outcomes. Harvey (2001) and Geall (2000) provide evidence of how feedback to students is an important variable influencing student satisfaction. In their academic life, lecturers remain the regular point of contact for all international students. The interaction with lecturers is therefore considered an important part of the study process and experience. Students therefore expect regular access to lecturers to discuss not only their academic issues but also (sometimes) personal problems even before they consult a student counsellor.

The *teaching quality* is another important variable in the construct of teaching. Many researchers in the past (Townley 2001, Bureau of Industry Economics 1989; Burke 1986) have presented this variable in different interpretations such as the quality of the course, academic quality and, high standard of course. Geall (2000) interprets and discusses the variable under three sub categories: *teaching staff*, *teaching methods*, and *degree programs*, thereby confirming its importance to student satisfaction.

In regard to *social activities*, postgraduate students appear unwilling to spend much time on such activities unless they provide a valuable learning experience. Many international students consider interaction with students of other nationalities, including Australian, university lecturers, administrators, and the local community as part of their learning experience. The nature of the social activity and the timing are important considerations, in view of the time constraints (Kohut, 1997).

Many Asian international students go through stress and adjustment difficulties during the initial period of their enrolment at a university. This could be due to various reasons including cultural differences. During the initial period at the university, students are likely to face a ‘culture shock’ given the new environment in the university chosen (Dunn, 2001). There is evidence of postgraduate students going through adjustment problems related to both living support and language (Houston and Rees, 1999).

Universities recognize the fact that a *closer working relationship* between the university and students is essential to facilitate satisfactory solutions to student problems. Such interaction builds trust and confidence. Student advisors as

representatives of the university are given the responsibility to build this relationship. Students expect student advisers to be very impartial, understanding and accessible when advice is required. The interaction between international students and the university student advisers are considered, in general, to be a normal feature within a university environment, Houston and Rees (1999), however, found the relationship between postgraduate student and the university to be very complex, which requires greater attention of universities. This complexity is based on the fact that postgraduates are considered both co-producers and customers of the university at various points of time. They have recommended that in order to provide better support, the precise nature of the relationship needs to be further clarified.

Student orientation programs are high on the agenda of student support activities of Australian universities. Some universities run special international student orientation programs at least once a year before the academic year begins. Some of these programs are run throughout the year providing students with skills and support to participate effectively in their courses. Most of the international students from Asia consider such programs to be of value and are eager to participate, given the opportunity. It is critical that students are motivated to participate in these programs.

Although universities are not directly involved with *student visa formalities* in their home country, the local agents or consultants associated with universities facilitate the visa application process. The delays involved in obtaining an Australian student visa and the rigorous application procedures applicable to Asian students and particularly those from “high risk countries” (countries that have a history of having students overstaying their visas) exert enormous economical and psychological pressures on prospective students even before they commence studies. Most students who participated in this study complained about their inability to obtain their visas on time and consequently missing out on the orientation programs of the university. China and India were in this category but a recent amendment to the regulation has exempted these students from going through the tough visa formalities, in view of the long-term market potential it offers to Australia. Student feedback also indicates that students expect universities to assist them with the renewal of their visas when due. Recent amendments to overseas student visa regulations, particularly the visa restrictions on South Asian students have placed universities in an unenviable position with the student population in implementing changes to student visas and, are at the receiving end of students’ displeasure. This variable therefore has an important effect on students’ satisfaction in Australia.

Australia, like most other service provider countries, allows international students to work up to 20 hours a week and almost all international students take advantage of this facility. However, securing a *part time/casual job* is not easy for many students, particularly for newly arrived students. Burke (1986) found that the lack of opportunities for part time casual jobs is a concern to many students. This appears to be a concern among the postgraduate students. Most of the postgraduate students have been in the workforce in their own countries and therefore expect to find a part time/casual jobs in the area of interest in which they are professionally qualified. The negative experience resulting from the failure to secure such positions impacts on the overall satisfaction of students.

In regard to *accommodation*, International students expect student accommodation to be made available by universities or by private agencies to comply with minimum

standards of comfort. It is also an expectation that such student accommodation is available when required. Few studies make direct reference to accommodation as a factor. Townley (2001) identifies accommodation with food and not as a separate factor while Harvey (2001) rates it as an important factor influencing student satisfaction. It is believed that other studies have considered accommodation as part of the overall facilities provided by the university.

There appears to be a general consensus of opinion among international students that *transport services* are extremely high in developed countries compared to their own and hence Australia is no exception. While students are prepared to accept higher costs, they would expect the services to be efficient and costs to be reasonable. One of the key comparative standards they use is the experience of past students (Harvey 2001)

Methodology

The data used in this study was derived from a mail survey conducted among international postgraduate students from China, India, Indonesia and Thailand studying at five Australian universities. The questionnaire was an adaptation of the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) and was designed to measure the gap between student responses on expectations and perceptions of the university as a study destination on a seven point bi-polar scale. The theoretical foundation for the instrument is based on the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm which postulates that customer satisfaction is related to the size and direction of disconfirmation which is defined as the difference between an individual's pre-purchase (pre-choice) performance of the product or service as perceived by the customer (Anderson, 1973).

The responses were sought on 36 statements representing student expectations of the operations and services of the university under desired choice and their post-choice perceptions. The gap between expectations and perceptions was used as indices to measure student satisfaction in each of the items.

Altogether 573 responses were received which represented a 24% response rate. Using random sampling method, the sample in the study was reduced to 274 to ensure equality of variance across all nationality groups. Exploratory factor analysis was then used to identify the important constructs, followed by confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. The constructs identified in factor analysis were considered as factors influencing student satisfaction. These constructs formed the latent variables of the model. The relationship between these latent variables and the measurement variables was then examined by conducting a set of separate multiple regression using AMOS 5 (Holmes-Smith, Coote & Cunningham 2005). The difference between expectations and perceptions between countries of origin, and measured variables was also examined using T-tests, ANOVA and MANOVA.

Data analysis and Results

Reliability of the independent scales was assessed and found to be very satisfactory with Cronbach's alpha coefficient at 0.70 or above for all factors (Hair 2006; Zikmund 1998) namely, Teaching 0.94, Social Orientation 0.93, and Infrastructure 0.76. The path model's fit indices indicate a good fit of the model to the data (CMIN/DF= 1.48, DF = 50, P=.01, GFI= .96, TLI = .98, CFI = .99, RMSEA=.04) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Fit statistics for student satisfaction

χ^2	df	χ^2/df	P	SRMR	RMSEA	GFI	TLI	CFI
74.3	50	1.48	.01	.06	.04	.96	.98	.99

The fit statistics are sufficient basis for the model's acceptance. The Standardised Regression Weights (SRW) and Critical ratios indicate that there are significant relationships between Total Satisfaction and the three latent variables with scores for Teaching 0.19 (2.62), Social Orientation 0.19 (2.40) and Infrastructure 0.52 (6.30). The Squared Multiple Correlations (SMC) indicate acceptable statistics with all variables showing correlations above an acceptable level of 0.30 (Holmes-Smith et al. 2005) (See Table 2). All regression coefficients were significant. This is an important finding in regard to policy development in Australian universities.

Table 2 Results of the Student satisfaction model.

Latent Variable	Measured Variable	SRW	SMC
Teaching & Learning	Valuable feedback from lecturers.	.93	.86
	Good access to lecturers	.96	.92
	High standard of teaching with quality lecturers	.85	.72
Social & Cultural Support	Counselling services	.90	.82
	Social activities	.90	.81
	Close working relationships with all students	.82	.68
	International orientation programs	.87	.75
Infrastructure & Administrative Support	Efficient Visa process	.70	.50
	Casual jobs	.62	.38
	Transport services	.60	.35
	Accommodation	.81	.66

All variables loaded with Critical Ratios > 2, therefore significant above .05

Our analysis was also extended to the gap between expectations and perceptions of students in regard to measured variables within the composite constructs. T tests between expectations and perceptions showed significant differences among all countries. MANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between countries in terms of the overall constructs. All constructs were influential towards student satisfaction. ANOVA was conducted on each variable to determine whether there are significant differences between expectations and perceptions. The results indicated that there were significant differences in all variables except for perceptions regarding teaching quality.

As table 3 shows there were variations in regard to expectations and perceptions of students in relation to key variables influencing satisfaction. For example students from India had very high expectations for almost all key variables: teaching quality, feedback from lecturers, access to lecturers, counselling services, social activities, and close relationships with other students, international orientation programs, assistance with visa process, and availability of casual jobs, accommodation and transportation while students from China had the lowest expectations compared to other students. The interesting feature was that students from Indian had the lowest perceptions on the experience in relation to the actual performance on each of these measures making them the most dissatisfied customers.

Table 3. Expectations and Perceptions – ANOVA and MANOVA analysis

Constructs/Variables	E/P	China	India	Indonesia	Thailand	Total
Teaching & Learning ***						
Teaching Quality	E	6	6.8	6.5	6.6	6.5***
	P	5.2	5.0	5.5	5.2	5.2 ns
Valuable Feedback	E	5.5	6.7	6.5	6.4	6.3***
	P	5.2	4.9	5.5	5.1	5.2***
Access to Lecturers	E	5.7	6.8	6.5	6.4	6.3***
	P	5.1	5.1	5.6	5.2	5.3***
Social & Cultural Support***						
Counselling	E	5.2	6.5	6.1	5.9	5.9***
	P	4.9	4.7	5.5	4.8	5.0***
Social activities	E	5.2	6.4	5.7	5.9	5.8***
	P	4.9	4.6	5.2	4.8	4.9***
Relationships	E	5.4	6.5	6.1	5.9	6.0***
	P	4.7	4.3	4.7	4.2	4.4***
Orientation Programs	E	5.4	6.5	6.0	5.9	6.0***
	P	5.3	5.1	5.5	5.1	5.3***
Infrastructure & Administrative Support***						
Visa Process	E	5.3	6.5	5.7	5.6	5.8***
	P	4.5	4.9	4.5	4.5	4.6***
Casual Jobs	E	4.7	6.4	5.5	5.5	5.6***
	P	4.2	4.4	4.0	4.7	4.3***
Transport	E	5.4	6.5	6.3	6.2	6.1***
	P	5.0	5.4	5.7	5.4	5.4***
Accommodation	E	4.9	6.2	5.8	5.6	5.6***
	P	4.5	4.7	5.0	4.5	4.7***

E=Expectations, P=Perceptions; *** denotes highly significant

In general, students from China and Indonesia appeared to be more satisfied with services than other Indian and Thai students. Another interesting finding was that students from Thailand were more satisfied in relation to the availability of casual jobs.

Conclusions and Implications

The focus of the paper was the key factors of choice of study destination and how postgraduate international students from Asia perceive the importance of these factors in their decision making and their influence on their satisfaction. Based on the core marketing concepts of creating value, satisfaction and quality by meeting consumer needs, wants and demands, the paper has argued that postgraduate students as *customers*, which is compatible with the measurement criterion of customer satisfaction, and postgraduate education as a professional service, students become recipients of service expecting universities to satisfy their needs following the *service-recipient* paradigm (Havarnek and Brodwin, 1998). This argument is based on the nature of the relationship that is developed between students and the university in the educational product/service exchange process.

The data analysed using a number of statistical techniques including structural equation modelling found that *quality of teaching, social and cultural support and infrastructure and administrative support* to be most important factors in their choice of study destination and also those that influence satisfaction among the Asian international postgraduate students examined in this study. The results indicated that these factors are significant predictors of satisfaction

The study showed that students from different countries are significantly different with regard to their expectations and perceptions. It is important therefore that universities recognise that they are dealing with a diversified international student market and that they need to develop tailored marketing strategies for individual countries as the needs of the students from these countries vary significantly. A major implication for marketing practice is the greater emphasis on relationship marketing by universities to build trust, confidence and more importantly a collaborative orientation between students and the institutions.

Among several variables associated with teaching quality, the role of the teaching staff appeared to have a major effect on student satisfaction. It was evident that lecturers remained the primary contact of the students for both academic and non academic issues and the perceived role of lecturers were important findings of this study and could be used to enhance the attraction of Australian universities as study destinations for Asian postgraduate students. Students consider the lecturer's role to be a provider of student support besides teaching in that the guidance and support expected from the teaching staff are not necessarily confined to academic activities. This is an outcome of the longer hours of student-teacher contact experienced by postgraduate students, particularly in research-based programs. The potential for developing a strong student-teacher partnership in learning, can be harnessed for mutual advantage of universities and students. According to Coaldrake (2001), such relationships can lead to a greater understanding of the responsibilities of each party – students taking responsibility for their own learning articulating their desired goals clearly to the university and the academic staff ensuring that they are responding to students' needs, and discharging their professional responsibilities to keep up to date on educational theory and best practice. While the continuous review of academic programs in terms of their content and quality and the international research profile of the universities is a major requirement, it is clear that universities need to recognise the contribution made by the academic staff in terms of student retention and overall satisfaction with the study destination. The success of this endeavour lies with the high motivation of the academic staff whose support becomes very critical in achieving this objective. Proper recognition of their contribution to support their intrinsic goals is a necessity.

While universities have invested heavily on student support programs – counselling, orientation programs, and social activities the study reveals that the Asian international postgraduate students seem to display a different attitude towards these services. First they endorse that these services very important to them as was supported by the earlier work done by Kohut (1997) on student support programs in a Victorian university. Kohut (1997) identified a number of initiatives that would allow international students to interact socially with peers as well as the society at large with a view to enrich student experience. Many international students consider interaction with students of other nationalities, including Australian, university lecturers, administrators, and the local community as part of their learning experience. Second, as relatively more mature students than undergraduate student, the nature of the

counselling, orientation programs and other social activities and the timing are considered very important considerations by these students in view of the time constraints. It is therefore important for universities to tailor made these services to suit the postgraduate students with specialist staff.

Similar requirement is evident in the social and cultural support. There is a large body of literature on the adjustment problems and academic stress of international students who originate from different cultures dealing with a new environment and importance of adequate support to minimize the “cultural shock”(Dunn 2001). Past studies have indicated that university counsellors or advisers are not always their first choice of seeking advice and redress, rather they turn to the lecturers or their own friends and relatives (Arambewela, 2003). In this context, creation of a suitable environment whereby students are able to interact with their lecturers, friends and relatives will be important. It is useful to seek volunteers from senior students to be hosts of the new students who enter the university.

The quality of the university experience beyond the relationship with academic staff was another issue of contention that emerged from this study. Given the changing role of students and their relationships with universities as customers, clients or stakeholders or in the case of postgraduate students as co-producers of the services provided by the university, the challenge for universities would be to ensure that management and faculty expectations are closely tied to student expectations (LeBlanc and Nha, 1997). This study has found that the high expectations of university services is common among all four groups of students investigated despite minor variations but the perceptions of performance of universities differed substantially between student groups. While cultural, social and individual characteristics may have had an impact on the level of students’ expectations among various factors influencing choice of a university, it was evident that the information shared with students on the university, its teaching facilities other factors of choice such as infrastructure and administrative processes, the local agents and other representatives has contributed to the formation of high expectations among students. From a students’ perspective, overseas agents are an extension of the services provided by the universities to students. Universities, therefore, need to be cautious in raising unrealistic student expectations by promising what the institutions cannot deliver consistently, properly and profitably. In this context, it is necessary to formulate a more coordinated approach with the support of the overseas representatives to deal with this issue. Failure to do so would produce dissatisfaction among students.

Future Research

Future research is recommended on the basis of a longitudinal approach with the inclusion of a comparative analysis of a number of destination countries and the addition of more emerging markets in international education, such as the Middle East and South America.

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