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Can't Get No Satisfaction:

Australian universities have very successfully marketed themselves to international students since their late entry to the global education market in the 1990s. Several years ago, Australian universities had the largest proportion of international enrollments of any country in the world, and seven per cent of the overall market. Yet students from some of our major Asian markets – Thailand, India, China, and Indonesia – are not all that happy with the service that they get from Australian universities. They come with high hopes and seem to be quickly let down. So if Australian universities want to keep international students from Asia, and keep them coming, what needs to be done?
International Students at Australian Universities

Rodney Arambewela and John Hall

Take a moment and imagine that you are an international student trying to choose a university. You’re from one of the countries that universities target, like China, India, Indonesia or Thailand. What would you be looking for? Running your finger around a globe covering off one of the English speaking developed countries offering highly competitive universities in a truly globalised marketplace, the country where you plan to spend your university days could be as important to your choice as the university itself. While you might see yourself as a prospective student, in fact you are a customer of a global education market.

If you were a typical prospective student, you’d be talking to graduates who’d been educated in a particular country, or university, or asking members of your extended family what they’d heard on the grapevine. On the phone, you’d be making appointments to see local agents of Australian universities – or universities from the US, UK, Canada or New Zealand – the leading tertiary education market ‘producers’, attending their information sessions and reading their literature. You might be finding the process of applying for a student visa complicated and, and thinking about your future, how you’d fit in your chosen country or university, what kinds of teachers you’d have, how good they would be, whether the lecturers would give you time and talk to you about your work or what was bothering you. You might also be thinking about where you’d be living and whether there’d be a chance to get a casual job.

In our work, we looked at 274 postgraduate students from Thailand, China, India, and Indonesia, to see if their expectations matched their perceptions (perceived performance of university services) to try to work out how satisfied they were. The results were sobering, particularly given the level of reliance by Australian universities on international students as an income stream.

What International Students Want from Australian Universities

For universities, customer satisfaction – or student satisfaction – is the key outcome of good customer service. For ‘traditional’ campus-based universities to survive at a time when it is predicted that open and online universities will overtake them, they need to work out how to maintain a competitive edge. They can do this by giving their students, or customers, better value.

We drew up a list of qualities that international students value in a university; the things research tells us determine students’ satisfaction. We divided these qualities into three groups: one group related to teaching and learning, a second to social and cultural support, and a third to infrastructure and administrative support. We were interested to see if students from Thailand, India, China, and Indonesia had different views about these qualities – did they have higher expectations? and after they’d been taught on campus at Australian universities, what did they think?
THE STUDY METHOD

SURVEY

We conducted a survey by mail of postgraduate students from China, India, Indonesia, and Thailand at five Australian universities. We wanted to see if there was a gap between their expectations and perceptions so that we could measure their levels of satisfaction. In a questionnaire, students were provided with 36 statements about expectations of university operations and services, and their perceptions about their desired choice and their actual choice when they were at university. The gap between expectations and perceptions was used to measure student satisfaction with each item.

We received 576 responses, a 24 per cent response rate. We reduced the number of responses to 274 to ensure equality of variance across groups from different countries.

ANALYSIS AND MODELLING

In technical terms, we used exploratory factor analysis to identify the important constructs, followed by confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. The constructs identified in the 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 regressions using AMOS 5. The difference between expectations and perceptions between countries of origin and measured variables was also examined using t-tests, ANOVA, and MANOVA.

RESULTS

Overall, we found significant levels of dissatisfaction across the board with teaching and learning, social and cultural support, and infrastructure and administrative support. High expectations of universities’ services were common among all four country groups, despite minor variations, but the perceived performance of universities on these services differed substantially between student groups.

In ranking students’ satisfaction, we found Indian students were the most dissatisfied, with somewhat higher levels of satisfaction among Thai, Indonesian, and Chinese students. In some cases, there were important variations, but overall the pattern was consistent between the countries. Indian students had higher expectations than students from any other country across the qualities we looked at. These included: 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, availability of casual jobs, accommodation, and transport. Indian students’ perceptions, based on their experience at Australian universities, were nearly always lower than students from the other countries. They had the highest expectations of the university services and the lowest perceptions of how universities had performed on these services.

Thai and Chinese students had lower expectations than Indian students. They were more satisfied than Indian students, but still dissatisfied. While Thai students generally had slightly higher expectations than the Chinese students, the perceptions of both Chinese and Thai students of their experiences at Australian universities were about the same. Indonesian students generally had similar expectations to Thai students, but higher levels of perceptions based on their experience. Therefore, overall, Indonesian students had relatively higher levels of satisfaction than students from the other groups.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Over the past decade, Australian universities have attempted to continuously improve the quality of teaching for international students, implicitly recognising that teaching quality is one of the most important factors in determining postgraduate student satisfaction.

Results from each country were consistent with the overall results, showing high levels of dissatisfaction across all international student groups.
FEEDBACK AND ACCESS TO LECTURERS

International students expected to be able to discuss academic and personal issues with their lecturer. They would prefer to consult a lecturer before a counsellor if they had a personal or cultural issue that concerned them. For international students, their lecturer is their most important and regular contact – and a big influence on student satisfaction.

QUALITY OF TEACHING

An important element in teaching and learning is the teaching quality. The quality of the course, its academic rigour and standards may all play a part, along with teaching methods, the type and nature of the degree program, and the academic staff who teach the students.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SUPPORT

Besides the teaching and learning issues, student satisfaction was determined by several non-academic factors. After enrolling, many Asian international students go through a period of stress and adjustment difficulties, a kind of ‘culture shock’ that may be triggered by cultural difference, and involve language and living support. It is at this point that social and cultural services provided by the university can play a particularly important role in student satisfaction.

COUNSELLING SERVICES

While Asian postgraduate students acknowledge the importance of counselling services, they are more likely to consult their lecturers about personal or cultural matters, which might otherwise be dealt with by counsellors, at least initially.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

International students were unwilling to spend time on social activities if they did not involve learning. Their understanding of ‘learning’ is fairly broad. If social activities involve students of other nationalities, lecturers, administrators and/or the local community – and offer an opportunity to ‘learn’ about other people and cultures – then they are likely to be seen to involve learning. However, some thought needs to be given to the types of social activities and when they are held. When would a social activity be most convenient for students, and what are they most likely to want to participate in?

CLOSE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALL STUDENTS

Universities have recognised the importance of close working relationships with international students and have appointed student advisers to build relationships, trust and confidence, and to solve problems. Students expect these advisers to be impartial, understanding, and accessible when advice is required. With postgraduate students, the relationships are often very complex and require greater attention than universities have currently given them. The complexity arises from two roles that postgraduates have in the university, sometimes as a customer, sometimes as co-producer (e.g., research output).

INTERNATIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

Orientation programs are important support activities for students, particularly international students. Universities generally hold the program at least once a year, before the academic year begins. In some universities, these programs are run throughout the year. Timing is critical. If students’ visas are delayed then they may miss the opportunity for orientation. Most Asian international students see these programs as valuable and are keen to participate if there is an opportunity. Universities have to address the barriers to student participation in orientation programs and time events to maximize student opportunity. Students also need to be motivated to participate in these programs through the appropriate promotion of the relevance of the programs. »
INFRASTRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

This was another important non-academic factor that had an influence on student satisfaction and included considerations such as visa processes, availability of casual jobs, transport services, and accommodation.

EFFICIENT VISA PROCESS

Our study indicated that students expect universities to assist them with renewal of their visas when due. Universities are not directly involved with student visa formalities, but the university agents or consultants facilitate the process in their home countries. Delays in obtaining an Australian student visa and the rigorous nature of the application process (particularly from countries where students have had a history of overstaying their visas) exert enormous economic and psychological pressure on prospective students. Many students in our study were not able to get a visa in time to participate in orientation programs. New visa exemptions for students from ‘high risk’ countries now apply, however, the issue remains important to student satisfaction.

CASUAL JOBS

Australia allows international students to work up to 20 hours a week. Almost all international students work and study. For newly arrived students, finding work can be difficult. This is a concern, particularly for postgraduate students who often expect to find work casually in Australia in occupations or areas of interest where they have been employed at home. If students are unable to find work that meets their requirements it affects their overall levels of satisfaction. Thai students were more satisfied with casual jobs than other students.

TRANSPORT SERVICES

There is an expectation, not unreasonably, that developed countries, like Australia, should have efficient, value for money, high quality transport services available to university campuses. Students frequently compare their own transport experiences with other — including former – students.

ACCOMMODATION

International students expect accommodation to be made available by universities or private agencies. Accommodation should meet their standards of comfort and be available when they need it.

TRUE BLUE UNIVERSITY

FIVE POINT PLAN TO INCREASE SATISFACTION OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

1 DEVELOP A ‘NEW’ INTERNATIONAL MARKETING STRATEGY

For each targeted country, universities need to develop a country-based marketing strategy that takes into account the differences between students’ expectations and perceived performance, and effectively manages expectations. There are significant differences in expectations and perceptions for postgraduate students from all of the countries we surveyed (India, China, Thailand, and Indonesia). But the gaps between perceptions and expectations vary from country to country, and for some countries there are specific issues that need to be addressed. Universities need country-based marketing strategies that address these differences and emphasise better relationship marketing to build trust, confidence and collaboration between the university and the students. In general, the strategies need to be better researched, more sophisticated and better targeted. They need to address the key sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and focus on the university services (access to teachers, good feedback, etc.) that students value. This will contribute to keeping international students at university, positive word of mouth from them, and a competitive edge for the university.

2 MAKE SURE THE UNIVERSITY WALKS THE TALK ON THE NEW STRATEGY

For international postgraduate students, the quality of their university experience outside their relationship with academic staff is.
also an issue. From a student’s perspective, experience of university management, faculty staff, and overseas agents, requires greater coordination. Students from all countries surveyed had high expectations —yet invariably their perceptions of the universities fell short. Local agents and other representatives contribute to creating high expectations among students. From a student’s perspective, overseas agents are simply an extension of the university’s service. Students’ expectations need to be properly managed, and overseas agents coordinated to deal with this issue. Otherwise, international student dissatisfaction will continue to damage relationships, and affect a range of things, from student retention to alumni program participation. In some cases, this may mean challenging the criticism of international education by academics who claim that the quality and approach to international education by universities undermines academic standards and freedom.

3 SUPPORT LECTURERS TO DO THE JOB STUDENTS EXPECT THEM TO DO

Accessible teaching staff who give good feedback are essential to creating a positive perception of teaching quality, and strongly determine students’ satisfaction. At postgraduate level, lecturers are the principal student contact point for academic, personal or cultural issues. Universities should provide appropriate support, recognition and training for academics in these areas, and focus on helping to develop strong student-teacher partnerships. These relationships can make a great contribution to student retention and satisfaction, which should be recognised in job design and descriptions. Academics need to be highly motivated to sustain these relationships and appropriate levels of support or recognition are not always provided. There could be potential benefits from stronger partnerships both to students’ learning and to academics’ teaching (by keeping up to date with educational theory and practice). Teaching staff who are accessible and provide good feedback, could feature in marketing to specific countries.

4 MATCH ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES TO STUDENTS’ NEEDS

Asian postgraduate students have complex attitudes to support services such as counselling, orientation programs, and social activities. They are important to students, particularly where they are seen to involve interaction with students of other cultures, and form part of their learning experiences. However, the services are not always available when students want or need them. With changes in timing, format and structure, these activities and programs could be better designed to meet student needs and to support their satisfaction.

5 CREATE NEW ROLES AND PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CULTURAL AND OTHER ISSUES

Counsellors may not always be the first choice of students for social or cultural support. Students are more likely to prefer lecturers or family and friends. Creating an environment where students can interact with their lecturers, friends and relatives is important and it may be helpful to seek volunteers from senior students to be hosts of new international students who join the university. Extending or creating flexible student orientation programs throughout the year, and motivating students to participate, is critical. Some attention should also be given to clarifying the complex and intertwined roles that postgraduate students have at university – as co-producers and customers—so that better service can be provided. Treating students as customers could potentially have a positive impact on continuous improvement of teaching.