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Service Excellence in the Malaysian Public University: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This pilot study is an ongoing study on a part of actual respondents. The importance of pilot study was highlighted as 'the pilot study lies in improving the quality and the efficiency of the main study' (Hazzi and Maldaon 2015, p.53). This pilot study was aimed into various objectives as follow, (i) to evaluate on the respondent's ability to understand the questionnaires; (ii) to test the validity and reliability of instruments used and; (iii) planning for data collection strategies and methods for actual study. Therefore, the adjustment to the developed questionnaires can be made based on the respondent's feedback and also from the statistical result of this pilot study. Furthermore, the overall outcome of this pilot study process, taking into account the data that was collected from two data sources which represents the actual respondents' groups for actual research, has highlighted some of the key points such as, 1) found that different approaches to different personalities are important and; 2) reconciliation of instruments such as selection of words, modification of sentences and structure of questionnaires has been implemented. Data analysis includes descriptive statistics and reliability test of instrument items. The results of this pilot study process have been used *to improve instruments and strategies to carry out actual studies will be used.*

Key words: service excellence, service delivery, public university, higher education industry, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Service excellence is a must for any organisation in this digital economy era regardless whether they are selling products or services. This is because, 'service excellence' performance was proven in many profitable industries in increasing their profit, improving customer's satisfaction, remaining competitive in the global market, gaining competitive advantage and leading their competitors (Sekhon et al. 2015; Al-Eisawi 2014; Bartl 2012; Dobni 2002). Moreover, in the technological advancement era, every aspect is taken into account and easily raises or reduces any organisation's reputation with the power of 'words of mouse'.

Therefore, customer demand for excellent services provided with the latest information and transparency is a priority. In fact, nowadays a customer not only will leave the organisation in case of dissatisfaction but also will spread their bad words of mouse to their community known as netizens which will tarnish the organisation's reputation (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan 2017). In other words, the service provider must move forward and consider the customer's trend in order to be trending in the market and gaining customer's attention towards increasing the organisation's profit. Therefore, the service excellence performance is the solution for organisations in any industries to sustain their competitiveness in the globe.

Similarly, in the era of highly competitive educational business which provides a variety of services because of its responsibility in producing the best human capital in the world (Wahab, Mahmood, and Bakar 2015). Thus, the service excellence performance is no longer an alternative but must be adapted into the higher education industry (Khan and Matlay 2009). At the moment, there were bundles of studies in the higher education industry that were focused on academic matters compared to only little attempts on non-academic matters (Davis 1996). The above-mentioned situation contradicted with the increasing numbers of headlines regarding complaints related to non-academic services in the higher education industry due to incompetent services provided by the organisation. Moreover, the perspective clients in the globe were connected and notifying each other on every single good or bad things which affected the institution's reputation.

Consequently, the focus on non-academic services provided in the institutions under the higher education industry must be established as a major focus in order to balance to the quality of the academic activities as both dimensions are crucially important to any of higher education institutions (Jain, Sinha, and Sahney 2011; Davis 1996). Thus, the service excellence performance was proven in increasing profits and competitive advantage in any other industry which stated that 'service excellence leads to positive customer experiences, resulting in increased customer loyalty, word of mouth advertising, value creation, and business profitability' (Asif 2014, p.764). Therefore, an empirical study is crucially needed in the higher education industry to test its impact on institutions in the industry.

However, there are very little studies on the service excellence performance in the field of knowledge (Asif 2014). Therefore, this pilot study was carried out in one of Malaysian public university prior to the launch of an actual study to test the validity and reliability of instrument to be used. Thus, feedback from this pilot study will be applied to improve the questionnaires and strategies in the real study towards producing good result.

THE SERVICE EXCELLENCE PERFORMANCE

There are various discussions in defining the service excellence performance since the 1990th. Previous studies agreed that delighting the customer by fulfilling their needs beyond their expectations on times was considered the excellence service performance (Roy and Mukherjee 2017; Bartl 2012; Dobni 2002; Cina 1990). Somehow, there is a contra on the idea of delighting customer which relates to the service excellence performance. Johnston (2004) mentioned that it might not be suited to all businesses and is also costly. The author defines the service excellence performance with some simple words as "easy to do business with" and further described it as "quick and easy, and they were really helpful" (Johnston 2004).

In another study, the service excellence performance was also justified as a value-added service and as a strategy to attract and retain the customer (Umar, Kasim, and Martin 2013). However, consistently until today, service excellence was defined as a process or strategy in improving business performance by delighting customer, to be the best actor in the market for business longevity and competitive advantage (Roy and Mukherjee 2017; Chuwiruch, Jhundar-Indra, and Boonlua 2015). Additionally, the service excellence performance should be sustained and standardised (Asif 2014; Pritchard 2013).

Somehow, studies on service excellence performance are immature, previous studies have pointed that, most previous studies related to service excellence performance has been implemented in high profit-taking companies such as in the financial services and hotel industry (Sekhon et al. 2015; Asif 2014; Pritchard, 2013; Johnston 2004; Dobni 2002). It has been found that only one study related to the excellence of services undertaken in the higher education industry is aimed at improving the performance of service delivery in institutions of higher learning (Khan and Matlay 2009). The study was a grounded study that has been done in United Kingdom but there is none of an empirical study in the industry. Furthermore, the situation has caused the factors on the service excellence performance as immature in any industry (Asif 2014; Aziz and Wahiddin 2010).

In addition, there are lots of things regarding the service excellence performance that was not well explained. The situation has caused many businesses to be unsuccessful in driving the service excellence performance because of the uncertainty of key factors in achieving it since there is only little evidence available on the service excellence performance (Aziz and Wahiddin 2010).

Therefore, based on the above discussion, further study is needed in attending the gaps in defining the best factor in performing the service excellence performance, specifically in the higher education industry. Presented in Table 1 below are proposed key factors for the service excellence performance from previous study.

Table (1): Factors on the service excellence performance from previous studies

No.	Journals	Author(s)	Model's attributes/antecedents
1	Journal of The Japanese Society for Quality Control	Kano N., Seraku N., Takahashi F., Tsuji S.(1984)	Kano's model of customer satisfaction: Proposes six categories of customer requirements: must-be, one-dimensional, attractive, indifferent, reverse, and questionable (Gouthier 2012)
2	Services Marketing	China (1990)	Five steps to service excellence: know your moments of truth inventory your moments of truth assess performance of each contact establish a service management discipline implement your action plan
3	Financial Services Marketing	Dobni (2002)	Leadership Technology Structure people
4	Managing Service Quality	Johnston (2004)	delivering the promise, providing a personal touch, going to extra mile, dealing well with problems and queries
5	Education + Training	Khan & Matlay (2009)	workforce successful competitive strategy
6	Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts	Aziz & Wahiddin (2010)	service process service environment employee performance customer participation positive emotion negative emotion
7	Proceedings of the Academy of Strategic Management	Chuwiruch, Jhundra-indra, & Boonlua (2013)	customer learning focus, service creativity concern, service diversity concentration, service response orientation, customer relationship awareness
8	Bank Marketing	Sekhon, Al-Eisawi, Roy, Pritchard (2015)	reputation financial value innovation technology
9	Conference Paper	Hariandja (2016)	Marketing Communication Service Innovation Capability

THE SERVICE EXCELLENCE PERFORMANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INDUSTRIES

In common, there are various types of services involving the higher education industry, namely students' enrolment, accommodation services, managing students' facilities such as internet, sports center and classrooms. In fact, the services happen everywhere in the industry, regardless of either academic or non-academic activities. However, a previous study by Davis (1996) has classified the services in higher education industry into two specific dimensions which is, (i) academic matters that engaged in teaching and research and; (ii) non-academic matters that relates to administrative and support staff. The study justified that, these two divisions were distinguished in terms of job structure and supervision which have implications for management approaches. Furthermore, both dimensions are important and equally weighted to achieve competitive advantage (Jain, Sinha, and Sahney 2011; Mills, Weatherbee, and Colwell 2006; Davis 1996).

In addition, the higher education institutions that facilitated with intellectual capital and appropriate facilities which lead to service excellence performance will improve the client's intentions, retention and motivation of people within the organization (Abdul, Razak, and Zohora 2013). Hence, the aforementioned indicated that the service excellence performance plays an important role as a medium of interaction with the customers which required greater integrity and openness in any business including higher education (Abdul et al. 2013). In addition, today's business environment which has been powered by technological advances enable good or bad experience on the services encountered to be circulated rapidly on the globe (Abdul et al. 2013). Thus, the service excellence performance to be implemented in the higher education industry is no longer an alternative.

However, in the real situation, market demand and services provided in the higher education industry seems to be mismatched. According to Abdul et al. (2013) the monastery metaphor which is referring to an internal focus of higher education industry differs from the actual market demand. In other words, the determination of the academic degree, curriculum and requirements offered were based on the expertise of higher education management, while the market metaphor has their own expectations related to the industries and economy requirement. Therefore, the services offered was not tailored to the demand in the market which contributed to the mismatch (Abdul et al. 2013). The study stressed that an immediate response by service provider to react to the ever-changing market demands will benefit each other.

Similar to other countries, the quest for the service excellence performance in higher education industry in Malaysia was received with high intention. However, it contradicts with the study by Abdul et al. (2013) which cited several reasons for the Malaysian Higher Education Industry to transform namely, i) processes are extremely slow; ii) processes are failing to meet the needs of those they serve; iii) processes involve multiple hierarchies (delay the process); iv) complaints requires individuals with authority to intervene and; v) poor documentation. In addition, the study also reported that the services provided by Malaysian private higher institutions were good compared to the Malaysian public higher institutions, which urged public universities to improve their service performance. The study also noted that the condition happens due to the lack of an empirical study on service delivery in the Malaysian higher education industry. Therefore, this study will attend the gap in enhancing the field of knowledge in providing a guidance to Malaysian public universities in improving their non-academic services.

METHODOLOGY

The data gathered for this study were collected from two sources, which is from the service provider and the clients of the organisation. Thus, there are two types of respondents involved in this study; the managers/administrators group representing the non-academic unit/department of public university, and the customers/clients of public university represented by the staff or students as an internal client. Therefore, a total of 22 questionnaires were personally distributed to the representative the non-academic units/departments, however, only nine out of eleven units/departments responded to the questionnaires after various approaches such as follow-up via phone calls and email were implemented. Eventually, all distributed questionnaires to the customers/clients were returned.

In fact, the pilot study procedures were started earlier prior to the distribution of the questionnaires. The pre-test of the questionnaires towards the typical respondent for face and content validity was taken at the end of January 2019 and the questionnaire's draft was initially submitted to an expert in February 2019. The actual data collection for this pilot study took place upon getting an approval from the top management of a particular public university.

The entire process of this pilot study was completed within three months, January to March 2019. The details are as follows;

a. Study area

The area undertaken under this pilot study was focused on one of the public universities in Malaysia. A survey method with questionnaires was used in collecting the primary data from eleven of non-academic units/departments of the particular public university. The eleven of non-academic units/departments involved in this study were as follows;

1. University bursary department
2. University registry department
3. University sport center
4. University clinic/medical center
5. University accommodation/ residential center
6. Student affairs department
7. Post graduate center
8. Academic management department
9. Information and technology department
10. Development department
11. Security department

b. Source of data

There are two main sources of data collected from two types of respondents namely the administrators/managers group and the customers/clients of non-academic units/departments of the public university. Respondents under this study are similar to the actual respondents in future study with aims in increasing the instrument and strategies to be applied in data collection. Briefly, the administrators/managers group have completed the questionnaire on the performance of service excellence provided in their units/departments.

Meanwhile, the other group of respondents has completed the questionnaire on the performance of service excellence presented by the concerned units/departments of the particular public university. The advantage of employing two sources of data serves as a counter mechanism to reduce evaluate apprehension as well as counterbalancing the answer given by the other party (Podsakoff et al.

2003). The method is purposely to check and balance with target to improve the quality of research result.

c. Sample size

Sample size for pilot study is very important as it will represent the actual sample to be decided in the actual study since it will influence the statistical analysis. Unfortunately, there is very little discussion in the literature on the correct sample size for pilot study (Johanson and Brooks 2009). According to Johanson and Brooks (2010), the number of participants recommended for a pilot study is less straightforward and the study stated that various studies in social science literature has suggested between 10 and 30 participants. Thus, this pilot study applied similar range of participants as suggested by Johanson and Brooks (2010).

d. Questionnaire design

The questionnaires design under this pilot study was developed by adaptation and adoption from various studies than structured into two versions. One set of questionnaires was designed for the administrators/managers of the non-academic unit/department in Malaysian public university. Meanwhile, another set of questionnaires were designed to be answered by the clients of the non-academic units/departments in Malaysian public university. Based on these pilot study objectives, the questionnaires were first reviewed by an expert in the research field, and followed by a pre-test fulfilled by an actual category of respondents. Thus, both set of questionnaires were improved based on the expert's comments and suggestions as well as pre-test results, suggestions and opinions. The data collection process only took place after the processes ware done.

In addition, both set of the questionnaires were only divided into two sections. The questionnaire for the administrators/managers group were comprised of 6 items regarding respondent's profile in section one and 33 items regarding independent variables undertaken by this study in section two. Similarly, the questionnaire set that was distributed to the clients were also divided into two sections which consists of 6 items on respondent's profile in section one and 10 items regarding dependent variable in section two.

The questionnaires were applied to the Likert scale, introduced by Rensis Likert (1931), consisting a set of identical numbers directed to be chosen to answer a set of items/questions on a particular subject in the question (Gliem and Gliem 2003). Furthermore, the administrator/manager in this pilot study were required to indicate the level of the service excellence performance provided by their unit/department by choosing the number from a seven Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to represent their answer on each items. The questionnaires were available in google form and hard copy.

The distribution to the administrator/manager group was conducted by email, face to face and via WhatsApp. Besides that, follow-up calls were made requesting for feedback, two weeks after the questionnaire was distributed. Whereas, the clients' group under this pilot study were required to indicate the level of service excellence performance provided by related unit/department by choosing the numbers from a seven Likert scale that ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied) to represent their answer on each item. The questionnaires were available in google form and hard copy. The questionnaires' distribution to the client's group was done by face to face and via WhatsApp

e. Sampling Technique

The selected public university for this pilot study was considering the location for time and cost saving. The purposive sampling is used for sample selection. Furthermore, the subject under this study which was from two sources of data applied a different sampling technique. Similar to sample selection, purposive sampling was used to determine the subject that represent the manager/administrator group since they are the best group to complete the questionnaire (Sekaran and Bougie 2013). A total of 22 sets of questionnaires were distributed to the manager/administrator group but only 18 sets were returned. There were two units/departments that fail to response to the questionnaire after many attempts. Thus, both of the units/departments were excluded from the analysis.

In addition, simple random sampling was applied while choosing the clients of the non-academic unit/department under study. The questionnaires were handed to eleven of the non-academic unit/department under this study. The respondents were pleased to fill in and return the questionnaire with ten questions at the same time. A total of 22 sets of questionnaires were distributed and collected from the clients.

f. Statistical Analysis

The SPSS version 22.0 was applied for data analysis under this study. The descriptive data were analysed and reported as respondents' profile and instrument reliability test were tested using the Cronbach alpha. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was employed to measure the internal consistency of the instrument.

g. Non-Response Bias

The response rate under this pilot study is considered good, as many attempts to approach the respondents have been done. The respondents have been approached in a face-to-face manner after an appointment via phone was made. The questionnaire will either be answered immediately or collected within a week. Apart from follow-up calls being made, alternatively, emails were sent as reminders to those who do not return the questionnaires. Based on this study's approach which focuses on the non-academic unit/department and represented mostly non-academic administrator/manager, fulfilling the questionnaire seems to be a more difficult task.

RESULTS

a. Respondent profile

This pilot study involved a sample of 38 respondents from two sources of data consisting 52 per cent of clients and 47 per cent of managers from various non-academic department of one public university in Malaysia. The respondents comprised of 65.8 per cent male and 34.2 per cent female with the majority being degree holders (50%). The respondent's profile was detailed in Table 2 below.

Table (2): Characteristics of the Respondents

Items	Respondent's Profile	*n*	Percentage of respondents
Gender	Male	25	65.8
	Female	13	34.2
Sources of data	Client	20	52.6
	Manager	18	47.4
Age	Below 30	11	28.9

	31-40	12	31.6
	41-50	11	28.9
	Above 50	4	10.5
Education level	Primary	3	7.9
	Diploma	8	21.1
	Degree	19	50.0
	Master	6	15.8
	PhD	2	5.3

Most of the respondents described the instrument applied in this study as good and did not take long to be completed. The questionnaire was divided into two sets, which has shortened its length, and therefore prevented the questionnaire from being lengthy and complex. The questionnaire's length will affect the participation in a survey study, thus indicating that longer questionnaires are associated with lower response rates (Bosnjak 2016).

b. Validity and Reliability Tests

(i) Content Validity and Face Validity

The instrument's validity is very important to ensure that the set of questions which represented by the questionnaire possess the ability to measure what is supposed to be measured. Therefore, the questionnaires in this study were reviewed together with an expert in a discussion on words used, content, layout and adequacy of the items. Upon completion of expert review, the questionnaires were improved with several items removed, many words replaced, and sentences were rephrased.

Furthermore, the revised questionnaire was set to go through another step for validity purposes. Pretesting is an important way to pinpoint any problem areas, reduce measurement error, reduce respondent's burden, to determine the respondent's interpretation on the questionnaire, and to ensure that the questions do not have an influence on the respondent's answer. In other words, pretest is a critical examination towards the instrument to ensure its validity and reliability to be applied in the actual study (Sekaran and Bougie 2010). Thus, the respondent's comments and suggestions from the pretest procedures was taken into consideration in improving the questionnaires, so that the questionnaire has been improved accordingly.

(ii) Reliability test

The reliability test in this pilot study is mainly to verify the internal consistency between items in one theme. In other words, this is to ensure into what extent the items "hang together as a set" which can measure the same concept to the extent that the items are correlated with one another. According to Gliem and Gliem (2003) an instrument that utilised the Likert-type scale must be calculated and report the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency reliability. Thus, by using SPSS version 22, the Cronbach alpha test was employed to test the inter-items consistency reliability (Sekaran and Bougie 2013).

Therefore, result from the analysis on this pilot study found that all the measures possess high reliability standard ranging from 0.879 to 0.952, which indicated that, a high level of internal consistency of scale measurement was applied. Subsequently, results of this pilot study reliability test show the Cronbach's alpha values for the constructs under investigation are all above 0.7. Thus, it was indicated that all the constructs are reliable. This is in line with the benchmark that the instrument with coefficient of 0.60 to have an average reliability while the coefficient of 0.70 and above shows that the instrument has a high reliability standard (Sekaran and Bougie 2010). Therefore, all items will be adopted for the measurement in the future study. Table 3 below shows the summary of the reliability results.

Table (3): Results of Measurement Model *(Summary of Constructs Validity and Reliability of the Latent Constructs)*

Construct	Measurement items	*Standard Deviation*	*Cronbach's alpha*
Managerial Competency	MC1	0.647	0.879
	MC2	0.539	
	MC3	0.767	
	MC4	0.840	
	MC5	0.752	
	MC6	0.895	
	MC7	0.461	
	MC8	0.832	
	MC9	0.752	
	MC10	0.767	
	MC11	0.539	
Productive Service Employee	PSE1	0.808	0.917
	PSE2	0.767	
	PSE3	0.575	
	PSE4	0.758	
	PSE5	0.943	
	PSE6	0.873	
	TI1	0.767	0.898

	TI2	0.725	
Technology Innovation	TI3	0.594	
	TI4	0.686	
	TI5	0.963	
	IM1	0.938	0.952
	IM2	1.290	
Internal Marketing	IM3	0.758	
	IM4	0.725	
	IM5	0.618	
	IM6	0.594	
	IM7	0.725	
	IM8	1.079	
	IM9	1.029	
	IM10	0.970	
	IM11	0.998	
	SE1	1.081	0.939
	SE2	1.099	
Service Excellence	SE3	1.031	
	SE4	1.234	
	SE5	1.268	
	SE6	1.240	
	SE7	1.309	
	SE8	1.020	
	SE9	1.152	
	SE10	1.372	

DISCUSSION

Based on this pilot study's findings, the clients of the particular public university are mostly happy and acknowledged the service excellence provided by the non-academic units/departments. The aforementioned was in line with the statements made by the administrators/managers group under this study. Generally, the results indicated that, the service excellence performance was employed by the non-academic units/departments of the university under study which was acknowledged by their clients. The overall result on the service excellence performance of the non-academic units/departments of Malaysia public university was receiving good response.

The instruments employed have passed all the validity and reliability processes by various parties with different capabilities, such as an expert in the research field, the typical respondents from both groups (manager/administrator and client) and the pretest for both the manual version and 'google form' version. Thus, the instruments were ready to be applied in the actual study.

Finally, the statistical analysis results on this pilot study shows that all items used to measure the construct are up to the reliability standard. None of the items need to be drawn. Furthermore, the results also indicated that, each item are strongly correlated to each other in representing the same meaning to measure the construct under study.

CONCLUSION

The advantages of the pilot study cannot be denied. The processes involved help to improve strategies to be applied in the actual study. This pilot study has achieved the study's target. Minor adjustment has been made to the instruments developed. Furthermore, the strategies applied under this pilot study failed to work for a certain group of respondents and have to be aligned for the actual study. Thus, it was indicated that, not all approaches were suited to all types of respondent. In other words, different respondents will require different approach. Certainly, the strategy in approaching the non-academic administrator/manager should be different to the strategy in approaching an academician, students or internal staff. Additionally, a wrong approach will only delay the research period. Therefore, good strategy can be arranged for the actual study by a run-through of the pilot study.

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