UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community Perception on Service Quality
at an International Higher Education Institution: A Case Study

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This paper reports on the exploration on community perception of higher education institution service quality from three dimensions namely academic, administrative and facilities. Focus group discussions were used for data collection involving three groups of neighbouring communities from both urban and rural areas. The objectives include to better understand issues and concerns facing the community; and in doing so highlight the aspects of services needing urgent attention. Thus, findings from the research exercise are grounded on empirical evidences promoting and recognizing community engagement and inclusiveness. It is hoped that by developing such mutual relationships the Institution could respond to the real community needs and expectations in delivering useful services as an effort to retain its relevance to the society. The findings from this study could inform the enhancement of management practice at the Institution. In this respect, there would be community engagement in taking the university forward as well as imparting the university's role in transforming the lives of the community. While this study was useful in bringing some service quality issues to light, but it was only for a particular period. The Institution ought to continuously engage its stakeholders in dialogues on how things could be better as an effort to deliver seamless and painless services.

Keyword: *academic service quality; administrative service quality; facilities service quality; international higher education institution; community engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

The current practice in the higher education management advocates for community engagement and inclusiveness.[1] The relationship between the two however is mutual in that the former offer services and the latter offers feedbacks and evaluates the quality of services received. As a matter of fact, there should also be a more pragmatic relationship in which the community participates directly or indirectly in the improvement of governance, management,

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[1] Refer to conference proceedings contain presented papers discussing on the research and development initiatives to advance community engagement entitled *Community Engagement In Higher Education* http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000153/HEQC_Conference_Community_Engagement_HE_2007.pdf, and *Higher Education Collaborative For Community Engagement and Improvement* http://www.thenationalforum.org/Docs/PDF/Wingspread_05_Final_Monograph.pdf.

process, service and quality of the institution.[2] Such a pragmatic relationship can be realized through the sharing of community creative and innovative ideas with the institution, or the sharing of community perception, evaluation and expectation on the institution.

Having said the above, a case study on community perception on the service quality at an international university in Malaysia has been conducted. Three major themes have been identified under which the service quality has been examined namely academic service quality, administrative service quality and facility service quality. Such a case study is necessary for three main reasons; first, to represent and to realize community inclusiveness in the management of a university, second, the findings to be used as general guidelines for quality improvement and policy making at the university as much as enhancing mutual relationship between the community and the university and third, to advocate for a research-based inquiry strategy on matters pertaining to service quality and management practice at the higher education institution.

THE METHOD

An international university in Malaysia has been chosen as the subject for the study. For collecting the data, three community groups, one from rural and two others from urban area have been identified and therefore interviewed. Each group consists of a minimum seven respondents and a maximum of sixteen. Focus group discussion[3] method and in depth interviews have been used as means of gathering the data. The three groups have been interviewed separately but with a standard sample of question and a standard protocol for conducting the interview which include acquiring permission for recording, confidentiality undertaking and briefing on the research and finally the conduct of the interview. The interviews were recorded and later on were transcribed for analysis purpose.

The preparing of the interview report consists of three stages, preparing the raw data report, descriptive report and finally the interpretive report.[4] The raw data report helps in selecting

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[2] Indeed such a pragmatic relationship has been underscored by one of the best definition of community engagement which articulates that it involves the use of institutional resources "to address and solve challenges facing communities through collaboration with these communities. Refer to Gelmon SB, (2005) "Building Capacity For Community Engagement : Institutional Self-Assessment" in *Community-Campus Partnership For Health,* WA: Seatle, or refer to http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pdf_files/self-assessment-copyright.pdf

[3] For useful guidelines on Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method refer to http://ricehoppers.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/focus-group-discussion.pdf, http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/focusgroups.PDF

[4] Arthur Richard & A. Krueger, *Analyzing &Reporting Focus Group Results,* London: Sage Publication, 1998.

the relevant issues in the interviews. The descriptive data report is used to describe the pattern unto which the responses were given in the interview. Finally the interpretive data report assists in making advance analysis on the descriptive report. The reports have led to research findings to be presented in the following discussion.

ACADEMIC SERVICE QUALITY

The issues raised in the interview on the academic service quality revolved around the questions of lifelong learning education, the quality of academic program, the quality of academic staff and graduates, the staff and the students community engagement and the general perceptions towards the university.

    a) Lifelong learning education program

One of the most established university engagement programs with the community is lifelong learning education to the public. However, it is found that many of the respondents from urban and rural area were unaware of such programs. Some of them were quite informed but prefer similar programs organized by other institutions. There are two major reasons that influence their choice of preference; the fees and the medium of instruction used in the program.

The respondents were generally in the impression that life-long learning programs organized by the university are profit-based. They acknowledged that such programs may imparted on them relevant knowledge and skills as well as reliable credential. However, some of them insisted that lifelong learning education should be regarded as university corporate social responsibility and thus the fee should be minimal. They recommended that the university to establish a community college that does not focus on profit thus making lifelong learning education program affordable.

The other issue was the issue of language used as the medium of instruction. Most of the respondents including the community from urban area do not prefer the used of second language (English language) as a medium of instruction. The university was persuaded to consider the first/local language (Malay language) be given priorities when organizing lifelong education program with the community. Otherwise the program may risk lesser number of enrolment for English language is not the first language and therefore it is not spoken widely by the public in Malaysia particularly those with lower education background.

Being an international university where English language is the official language does not seem to be an advantage when it comes to positioning the university within the community. Thus the university therefore may have to review its language policy to encourage more participation from the community in the lifelong learning education program.

Having discussed the two hurdles (the fee and the language), the respondents agreed that the university should continue to play her role in empowering society with knowledge. As neighbouring community, the respondents expected that the establishment of an international university in their neighbourhood should be instrumental in transforming them into knowledgeable society.

    b) The academic staff and student engagement with the community

The three community groups shared their expectation that the academic staff to participate more in informal activities with the community rather than well-structured and organized program. Such informal engagements have been positively reported by the community group from rural area in comparison to the community group in urban area. This means that improvement measure should be made to encourage more participation among the academic staff with the community at urban area.

Such informal participation as expected by the community however is not a complex endeavour. In fact it is as simple as making presence during congregational prayer held at the local mosque. The community group from rural area compliments the academic staff who have offered various type of support informally through individual engagement effort ranging from financial help, expertise and knowledge, man power etc. In fact it is vital that the university to learn that community engagement need not all the time to be formal and official. Indeed, it is through informal encounter with the community that the university presence is more felt and appreciated.

With regard to the students, it is interesting to note that the community group form rural area reported positive feedbacks in comparison to the community from urban area. The community from rural area have had fruitful engagement activities with the students through informal programs. One of the soft skills exhibited by the students is the speech skill when delivering religious talk, motivational talk as well as knowledge based speech; in this case it refers to medical students who imparted their knowledge and skill on health and wellbeing to the

community. The community group from urban area however expected that the students to engage more with them particularly in religious oriented program organized by the local mosque. Based on the responses it is learnt that the community from rural area have had better engagement with the university students in comparison to the community from urban area.

There was also complaint forwarded by the community in urban area on students who fail to exhibit positive personality in which they have not only tarnished the university image but also offended the community. From the interview, it is learnt that that the three community groups show their great concern and were very critical towards the qualities of the graduates. Apart from the academic achievement, the community has a very high expectation on the students' balance personality and morality.

It is important to note that even though disciplinary offences were committed only by minority number of students and have not been taken as representing the general quality of the students, nonetheless the university should also focus on enhancing students disciplinary. The students' misbehaviour can offend the community feeling apart from tarnishing the image of the university. Moreover, the community, being one of the stakeholders have the right to put the university's reputation and good name under consistent critical examination and evaluation.

c) General perceptions towards the university

When asked about the general perceptions for the distinctive criteria which make positive impression on the university, the communities listed down the following; the Islamic orientation, good academic programs, an international environment, and the physical landscape of the university main campus.

The three community groups also shared their views that there should be changes in the community life quality due to the existence of a university in the neighbourhood. With regard to their own experiences, the three community groups were grateful in that the establishment of the university has brought a lot of improvements in the physical infrastructure, value of property and economic status which has also improve their quality of life. It is therefore concluded that the establishment of a university can led into positive changes in the socio-economic and physical development of the neighbouring community. Such positive changes

seem to be accidental. However, they are predictable and the university to make the most of them to contribute greatly to the community thus fulfilling her social responsibility.

ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICEQUALITY

The issues raised under this theme generally refer to the respondents' experiences in dealing with the university administration. It is found that only a few of them have had encounter with the university administration which make evaluation possible. Majority of them, particularly the community from rural area never had any contact with the university administration thus they can only offer their expectation rather than perception.

a) General perception on the administration

The respondents who have had experience dealing with the university administration were satisfied with the services received. However they have raised up two matters which needed improvement; front desk services and security officers' professionalism.

Front desk services are advised to put customer as the utmost priority. Thus entertaining personal and unimportant call in front of the customer and keeping the customer into an unreasonably longer waiting time, are the example of negligence that require for university's solution. Such behaviours have been reported by a potential customer of lifelong learning education program who finally withdraw his decision. Indeed front desk services contribute greatly in shaping the community perceptions on the university-community positive engagement.

The security officers who are the front liner of the university are advised to uphold to their professionalism. Being the front liner, the manner in which the public is treated provides the first impression. There should be for example, a standard operating procedure on greeting the visitors/public for they deserved to be treated with respect. A positive experience at the main entrance of the university campus for example will motivate involvement with the university. In this connection, the university is to take the necessary measure to equip the security officers who are physically presence at the university main entrance with relevant communication skills. Indeed, feedbacks from the community underscored their negative impressions resulting into the tendency of withdrawal. The contributing factor for the withdrawal is lack of professionalism exhibited by the security officers.

b) General expectation on the administration

It is found that the community in rural area have lesser connection with the university. The main reason for that is mainly because they are not aware of the type of services that the university provides to the public (community). In their impression, there is a big gap between the university and the public. Such impression has been a conventional but misguided belief among the public. Should it continue, the aspiration of university-community relationship will not be materialized.

With regard to their expectation on the university, majority of them admired the Islamic orientation and the commitment towards spiritual enhancement slogan adopted by the university. Due to the slogan, the university have secured more trust from the community compared to other universities and higher education institutions in Malaysia. Nonetheless, the university is expected to be committed in realizing rather than merely capitalizing on the slogan. Taking from such expectation, the university should honour the community trust on her with great responsibility and hard work.

FACILITY SERVICE QUALITY

The university has been equipped with many types of facilities ranging from sport, health, public amenities, mosque, learning support system, counselling, research, accommodation, lecture rooms and theatre, library, IT lab and wireless system, child education centre and many others. In Malaysia, there is still a strong belief that such facilities are meant for the exclusive use of university's students and staff. The three community groups interviewed generally are not informed that such facilities are open for the use of public. Although they appreciate the idea but it is very new to them that they are unconfident if it can be materialized. Looking into the physical landscape of the university in Malaysia, it is not surprising that there is physical gap that divide the parties thus become the hurdle for a positive engagement between a university and the community. Most of the university in Malaysia is built in exclusive vicinity surrounded with high fencing in addition to the strict security examination at the main entrance. The university library for example, is not open to the public. Using of university facilities are possible. However there are necessary bureaucracies to satisfy as well as high rental charges to meet. Such has deprived the community from using the university's facilities thus impede the relationship between them. The university therefore, has to determine whether such exclusiveness should continue to be upheld or there should there be ground-breaking changes that make the university accessible to the public.

Almost all respondents have had zero experience using the university facilities particularly the community group from rural area. Most of them are not aware that there are university facilities made available to the public. Based on the feedbacks, it can be concluded that the neighbouring communities have not benefit from the facilities provided on campus. The main reason for that are due to lack of knowledge on their behalf on the availability of the facilities and the knowledge on the necessary procedures needed as well as lack of promotion by the university.

A minority of them who were the users however recorded their satisfaction. One of the mostly used facilities is the university mosque. The most important feedbacks given are the khutbah delivery during the Friday congregational prayer. The users emphasized that the mosque administration to consider the community presence at the mosque and demand their right to benefit from the khutbah. The delivery of the khutbah in three languages (English, Arabic and Malay) for example is time-consuming and therefore it has to be changed. It has also been recommended that the content of the khutbah to address the community needs for spiritual enhancement.

Since the respondent learnt that they can also use the university's facilities, they recommended that the university to improve and promote the following services and facilities which include sport facilities to the ladies, medical training and health check-up, parking spaces for visitors, facilities for disabled, banking facilities and ATM machines.

Considering the feedbacks, it is therefore recommended that the university to take positively the recommendations from the public. If inclusiveness is a form of engagement with the community it should be transpired in the way a university is made accessible to the public particularly the neighbouring communities. Such, is new particularly in the management practice of the universities in Malaysia. Thus benchmarking survey with universities overseas that adopt openness policy with the communities should be carried out to learn constructively from their practices and experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The experience meeting the communities and asking for their perception on the university service quality has been a fruitful endeavour. All of them have shown a great appreciation on the effort taken in reaching out for their opinion. Since this effort has not been the general practice in Malaysia, most of the respondents are uncertain about how their views can be useful for quality improvement at the university. Nonetheless, the three interviews were successful and the respondents proved to be very concern with the university well-being and enthusiastic about advancing university-community relationship in a meaningful and practical manner.

Based on the interview it is learnt that the university-community engagement is still immature and much can be and should be improved. The community far from being an active stakeholder of the university has little clue on how their opinion matters to the university. Though they have shared useful information and responded well to the questions, many of the respondents have no contact at all with the university stating the gap that exists between them and the university. There has been no concrete platform altogether where the community can channel their views in a constructive and strategic manner. Due to this, the community in general were quite sceptical on how mutual relationship with the university can benefit each other.

With regard to the three selected themes, it is found that much more can be learnt from the community provided that they are familiar with university management and facilities. However, there is also useful information which requires the university management attention.

On the issue of academic service quality, lifelong learning education program requires further study from the university particularly on the fee structure and the medium of instruction used. The academic staff are also expected to engage more in informal activities with the public. The university is urged to look into students disciplinary as among the priorities for it largely shapes the community perceptions towards the university.

On the issue of administration service quality and facility service quality, it is found that majority of the respondents were not able to offer their evaluation. The main reason for it is because they neither have experience dealing with the university administration nor a user of university facilities. This implies the long existing gap between the community and the

university. The gap has to be removed if the university is sincere about engaging with the community.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating community's perceptions for service quality improvement at the university is possible provided that there is readiness and commitment for positive engagement. It should be continuous rather than one in a lifetime endeavour. On the part of the university, adopting inclusiveness may add to the complexities of her management practice particularly in meeting the needs and concerns of the community. Research based inquiry however have proved to be the most strategic approach in gathering and evaluating the relevant from the irrelevant feedbacks.

This paper is based on a case study which took from a single experience of a university. It is therefore suggested that such a case study to be regarded a pilot project for a more extensive research on university-community engagement at the national level. It is hoped that the research will contribute in developing mutual relationship between university and community in Malaysia. Thus the quest for quality improvement at the higher education institution is equally shared by the nation and so does its relevancy and sustainability.