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Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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EBES - Eurasia Business and Economics Society

EBES is a scholarly association for scholars involved in the practice and study of economics, finance, and business worldwide. EBES was founded in 2008 with the purpose of not only promoting academic research in the field of business and economics, but also encouraging the intellectual development of scholars. In spite of the term "Eurasia", the scope should be understood in its broadest term as having a global emphasis.

EBES aims to bring worldwide researchers and professionals together through organizing conferences and publishing academic journals and increase economics, finance, and business knowledge through academic discussions. Any scholar or professional interested in economics, finance, and business is welcome to attend EBES conferences. Since our first conference in 2009, around *11,460* colleagues from *98* countries have joined our conferences and *6,546* academic papers have been presented. EBES has reached *2,105* members from *84* countries.

Since 2011, EBES has been publishing two journals. One of those journals, ***Eurasian Business Review*** - *EABR*, is in the fields of industrial organization, innovation and management science, and the other one, ***Eurasian Economic Review*** - *EAER*, is in the fields of applied macroeconomics and finance. Both journals are published quarterly by ***Springer*** and indexed in ***Scopus***. In addition, EAER is indexed in the ***Emerging Sources Citation Index*** (*Clarivate Analytics*) and EABR is indexed in the ***Social Science Citation Index (SSCI)***. EABR was recently assigned an Impact Factor of 2.143 (2018 JCR Impact Factor) which puts it in the top quartile among "Economics" journals.

Furthermore, since 2014 Springer has started to publish a new conference proceedings series (***Eurasian Studies in Business and Economics***) which includes selected papers from the EBES conferences. The 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th (Vol.2) EBES Conference Proceedings have already been accepted for inclusion in the ***Conference Proceedings Citation Index - Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH).*** The 20th (Vol.1), 21st and subsequent conference proceedings are in progress.

On behalf of all EBES officers, I sincerely thank you for all your support in the past. We look forward to seeing you at our forthcoming conferences. We very much welcome your comments and suggestions in order to improve our future events. Our success is only possible with your valuable feedback and support!

I hope you enjoy the conference and Lisbon.

With my very best wishes,

Klaus F. ZIMMERMANN
President

We are excited to jointly organize our 29th conference will take place on October 10th, 11th, and 12th, 2019 at the *ISCTE-IUL Instituto Universitário de Lisboa* in Lisbon, Portugal with the support of *the Istanbul Economic Research Association*. The conference will be hosted by *ISCTE-IUL Instituto Universitário de Lisboa*. We are honored to have received top-tier papers from distinguished scholars from all over the world. We regret that we were unable to accept more papers. In the conference, *311* papers will be presented and *548* colleagues from *52* countries will attend the conference.

We are pleased to announce that distinguished colleagues **Amine Tarazi** from the *University of Limoges,* France and **Robert William Vivian** and **Christo Auret** from *University of the Witwatersrand,* South Africa will join the conference as the keynote speakers.

Throughout the years, EBES conferences have been an intellectual hub for academic discussion. Participants have found an excellent opportunity for presenting new research, exchanging information and discussing current issues. We believe that our future conferences will improve further the development of knowledge in our fields. In addition, based on the contribution of the paper to the field, the *EBES Award Committee* has selected one of the papers for the *Best Paper Award*. The *Best Paper Award* winner will be announced during the conference.

On behalf of EBES, I would like to thank to *the ISCTE-IUL Instituto Universitário de Lisboa* for their hospitality and our sponsor *Istanbul Economic Research Association*, all presenters, participants, board members, and keynote speakers.

I am looking forward to meeting you in person in Lisbon and seeing you all again at the upcoming EBES conferences.

Best regards,

Ender Demir, PhD
Conference Coordinator

- **Sagi Akron**, *University of Haifa*, Israel
- **Hasan Fehmi Baklaci**, *Izmir University of Economics*, Turkey
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Communicating Quality Audit Indicators for Inbound Tourism: A Qualitative Insight from Malaysian Travel Agencies

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ABSTRACT
Quality assurance is fundamental to all business activities in the tourism sector as it is advantageous to market recognition and competitiveness. Awareness of the importance of quality assurance certifications is already in place in Malaysia however it is still under-researched. Thus, this study aims to investigate how local travel agency operators perceive suitable levels of quality audit indicators for inbound travel agencies. A semi-structured interview was conducted to explore the views and experiences of key industry players from five travel agencies involved in both inbound and outbound tourism businesses in the country. A content analysis of data acknowledged the industry's increased awareness of quality service delivery and the importance of rationalising key quality audit indicators in assuring the lifelong survival of inbound Malaysian travel agencies. Also found was the need for systematic monitoring of the inbound travel agency's certification plan that continually reflects the demands of the clientèle and uplifts national productivity as outlined in the initiatives undertaken by the Tourism Productivity Nexus, an industry-led establishment under the Malaysia Productivity Blueprint 2016-2020. The study finally outlines specific entrepreneurial strategies that will enhance productivity operations at the enterprise level.

Keywords: *certifications, inbound tourism, quality assurance, quality indicators, travel agency*

1.0 Introduction

The Malaysian tourism industry has been experiencing exponential growth in recent years. In 2018, tourists' arrival was 25.83 million with MYR84.1 billion tourist receipts, a number that has considerably increased by 41% from what it was just 10 years ago (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). Through a well informed travel agent, tourists are introduced to the right attractions of a country based on their personal interests and preferences. Although the internet has become the main source of information for potential tourists, the tourism sector has remained sustainable largely through the real human involvement and caring interactions of inbound travel agencies. In 2018, local travel agencies were identified as one of the main sources of information for inbound tourists to Malaysia, while between January and March 2019, their important role was confirmed by the Departing Visitors Survey as they recorded 32.3% of the responsibility for bringing in the tourists into the country (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).

Quality assurance for inbound tourism from the perspective of the tourists can be measured by the services that they are given. Singh, Dash, and Vashko (2016) are of the view that certification standards could have a significant impact on promoting sustainable tourism development. Mak's (2015) review of China and Hong Kong's perception of ISO 9001 found that travel agencies agreed on the positive returns of certification standards both financially and non-financially. In Malaysia, current policies regulating business activities carried out by all travel agencies in the country come under one of the initiatives (Tourism Productivity Nexus, 2019) outlined by The Malaysia Productivity Blueprint 2016-2020. Efforts at developing standards for travel agencies are therefore undertaken by an industry-led establishment, called Tourism Productivity Nexus. All the aspects and stages involved in developing industry standards and certification programmes for tourism products and services in Malaysia have been adapted from a document published in 2003 by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO). These are recommendations made by WTO to interested governments when they support and/or establish national certification systems for sustainable tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2003). The document proposes the necessary steps and guidelines for building a certification programme based on criteria, sub-criteria, and indicators.

The initiative started only recently in April 2019 when two major players in the practices of certification and accreditation in Malaysia were consulted to assess the tourism industry's current situation on standards and certification as well as accreditation. While the Department of Standards Malaysia is responsible for national-level standards and certification and accreditation, the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia, also known as SIRIM Berhad functions as the key organisation in industry-level standards. Both organisations, under the Government of Malaysia, agreed on the inadequacy of standards, certification programmes, and accreditation for the country's tourism industry. Out of 6000 national-level standards listed by the Department of Standards (Department of Standards, 2019), only14 national-level standards are specific to the tourism industry; while the Malaysia Tourism Quality Assurance (MyTQA), a ministerial level initiative, serves as the only body that certifies quality tourism products based on industry level standards in Malaysia. Current low subscription for standards and certification from tourism enterprises for various reasons such as high cost, lack of awareness, and stringent requirements have led both organisations to be even more proactive with the industry in getting them to move forward with tourism standards and certification programmes.

1.1 Malaysia Productivity Blueprint 2016 - 2020 and Tourism Productivity Nexus

The Malaysia Productivity Blueprint 2016 - 2020 was launched by the country's Prime Minister with the aim of achieving an annual labour productivity growth of 3.7% by 2020 (Azahar, 2017). The Blueprint focuses on addressing challenges related to workforce talent, technological adaptability, incentive structure, business environment, and productivity mindset at the national, sectoral, and enterprise-level.

At the sectoral level, the blueprint identified nine priority sub-sectors which cumulatively contributed to 30% of Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP), and 40% of total employment (Azahar, 2019). These are retail and food and beverages (F&B); electrical and electronics (E&E); chemicals and chemical products; agro-food; professional services; tourism; information, communication and technology (ICT); machinery and equipment; and private healthcare. Sectoral level initiatives under the nine sub-sectors are undertaken by the establishment of Productivity Nexus respective to the sub-sector and are led by industry players supported by the Malaysia Productivity Corporation, an agency under Malaysia's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI).

Tourism Productivity Nexus is one of the nexuses established to assist businesses to enhance productivity, increase innovation, and capture development opportunities within the tourism industry in Malaysia. At the sectoral level, Tourism Productivity Nexus' priority initiatives as stipulated in the Blueprint are to:

  i.   strengthen cooperative efforts between industry and academia to match industry needs;

  ii.   establish a certification/accreditation programme for tourism products;

  iii. review the pricing system;

  iv.   review industry standards and regulations based on industry's input; and

  v.   aligns marketing strategy according to market segments.

Initiative number two, which is to establish a certification/accreditation programme, commenced its developmental stages in April 2019. Engagements with major stakeholders in the tourism industry and certification in the tourism industry have unveiled key issues in the certification of tourism products and services. One of the challenges is the inadequacy of standards or certification which tourism product and service owners can subscribe to in Malaysia. This is especially true for small and medium tourism enterprises and micro-companies.

1.2 Quality Assurance Certifications

Many countries regulate and strategise their tourism industry through certification schemes, particularly as a way of encouraging sustainable services (Medina, 2005). Certification is a workable market-based tool that rallies tourism industry players to work together towards implementing specific standards to enhance the sustainable development of the tourism industry (Font, 2005). In Australia, for example, the certification and accreditation of tourism products and services are centralised within it's Quality Tourism Framework (Quality Tourism Australia, 2019). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia (MoTAC) has developed 13 MyTQA categories (Table 1) for the same purpose.

Table 1. *Thirteen Main Areas under MyTQA*

1. Culture and Heritage	8. Parks and Gardens
2. Nature and Adventure	9. Agro Parks
3. Man-Made	10. Theme Parks
4. Sports and Recreation	11. Tourism Restaurants
5. Shopping	12. Places of Worship
6. Cruise and Sails	13. Traditional Market Bazaar
7. Islands and Beaches	

Source: http://www.motac.gov.my/en/services/registration/mytqa

However, since MoTAC was launched in 2019, its official website noted that only 39 companies have voluntarily subscribed to MyTQA, while no reference has been made to any specific quality assurance standard and certification for travel agencies. The national level standards, which carry the coding of MS XXX, currently include 14 standards specific to the tourism industry. Table 2 is a list of these national standards that may be applicable to the tourism industry, although none specifically refers to the travel agency.

Table 2: National Standards Applicable to the Tourism Industry in Malaysia

No.	Standards	Tourism Products
1.	**MS 1926: 2006** - Tourism Services - Hotels and Other Types of Tourism Accommodation - Terminology (ISO 18513:2003, MOD)	Tourist Accommodation - Terminology
2.	**MS 2446: 2012** - Accommodation Premise - Classification - Criteria and Requirement for Hotels	Tourist Accommodation - Hotel

3.	**MS 2447: 2012** - Accommodation Premise - Classification - Criteria and Requirement for Hotel Apartments	Tourist Accommodation - Hotel Apartments
4.	**MS ISO 11107: 2011** - Recreational Diving Services - Requirements for Training Programmes on Enriched Air Nitrox (EAN) Diving (ISO 11107: 2009, IDT)	Recreational Diving
5.	**MS ISO 11121: 2011** - Recreational Diving Services - Requirements for Introductory Training Programmes to Scuba Diving (ISO 11121: 2009, IDT)	Recreational Diving
6.	**MS ISO 24801-1**: 2008 (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Safety Related Minimum Requirements for the Training of Recreational Scuba Divers - Part 1: Level 1 - Supervised Diver (ISO 24801-1: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
7.	**MS ISO 24801-3: 2008** (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Safety Related Minimum Requirements for the Training of Recreational Scuba Divers - Part 3: Level 3 - Dive Leader (ISO 24801-3: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
8.	**MS ISO 24801-2: 2008** (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Safety Related Minimum Requirements for the Training of Recreational Scuba Divers - Part 2: Level 2 - Autonomous Diver (ISO 24801-2: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
9.	**MS ISO 24802-1: 2008** (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Safety Related Minimum Requirements for the Training of Recreational Scuba Instructors - Part 1: Level 1 (ISO 24802-1: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
10.	**MS ISO 24802-2: 2008** (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Safety Related Minimum Requirements for the Training of Recreational Scuba Instructors - Part 2: Level 2 (ISO 24802-2: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
11.	**MS ISO 24803: 2008** (Confirmed: 2013) - Recreational Diving Services - Requirements for Recreational Scuba Diving Service Providers (ISO 24803-2: 2007, IDT)	Recreational Diving
12.	**MS ISO 25639 - 1: 2011** - Exhibitions, Shows, Fairs, and Conventions - Part 1: Vocabulary (ISO 25639-1: 2008, IDT)	Meetings, incentives, conferencing, exhibitions (MICE)
13.	**MS ISO 25639 - 2: 2011** - Exhibitions, Shows, Fairs, and Conventions - Part 2: Measurement Procedures for Statistical Purposes (ISO 25639-2: 2008, IDT)	MICE
14.	**MS 2610: 2015** - Muslim Friendly Management System is applicable to Muslim hospitality facilities, products, and services.	Muslim Hospitality

Source: Department of Standards Malaysia, 2019

1.3 Problem Statement

Studies (Mak, 2015; Singh, Dash, and Vashk, 2016) have shown that travel agencies unanimously agree on the potential increase in the predictive power and positive implication of certification and standardization on the management, marketing, and finances of the travel business. However, this is not the case in Malaysia, where there appears to be a dearth of standards and certification programmes for inbound travel agencies. Although these agencies are MoTAC compliant and their activities observe the policies, rules and regulations in bringing in inbound tourists into the country (MoTAC, 2019), there is no specific standard or certification programme that they can refer or subscribe to in standardising the management of their operations. In addition, these rules and policies are in place in so far as they are fundamental to the legal foundation of a travel agency's operations, though still lacking set specifications on how activities and services may be performed.

It is therefore timely that the initiative to establish a tourism certification programme be extended to services provided by travel agencies through standards development true to their operations. These industry level standards for inbound travel agencies are expected to strengthen and standardise the operations of travel agencies, enhance their service quality, and expand their businesses to the next level. Despite all these benefits, the general lack of indicators required for specific certification in the travel agency is paramount. Therefore, this study investigates what constitutes suitable quality audit indicators for inbound travel agencies in Malaysia from the perspective of local travel agency operators.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Inbound Travel Agencies

Inbound tourism refers to bringing in tourists into a destination for particular tourist activities other than for business purposes. Activities at these sites are important and usually include those that the tourists prefer, supporting activities at the chosen destination, availability of reasonable local services and other additional offers that will benefit them. A travel agency or bureau is often engaged in selling and arranging transportation, accommodation, tours, and trips for travellers (Merriam Webster). Nowadays, the agency business has found its niche in offering tourists an experience of a destination rather than just seeing it. The travel agent is the host and their job is to make every important aspect of the tourist experience a little bit better. Inbound tour operators are extremely tourist-centric as they are the local

tour operators that promote local destinations with little details that delight the tourists while also increasing the visibility of these destinations.

2.2 Quality Audit Indicators

A quality assurance certification is the outcome of quality performance indicators which are set as the measurement for improving service delivery through standard, evidence-based measures, and for highlighting quality improvement over time. Good, quality indicators are therefore useful in assisting decision-making, risk awareness, business forecast and performance measurement (Xin & Chan, 2014). According to the World Tourism Organisation (2004), based on a monitoring system or certification that can be developed for continuous improvement, indicators give stakeholders access to crucial information which enables them to be accounted for in the business.

For a green hotel to operate in Taiwan, Teng et al. (2012) reported 11 indicators that make up the common standards for their certification programme. These indicators must have the following criteria: compliance to water, energy, waste, corporate environmental management, staff involvement, guest information, indoor environmental quality, hazardous substances, social involvement and communication, purchasing, transport and food and beverage. A study by Xin and Chan (2014) at the Kinabalu National Park of Sabah in Malaysia specifically looked at the tour operators' perspectives on developing responsible tourism indicators. They found four indicator themes and 17 core indicators, including "destination management (sustainable tourism public policy; high participation; customer satisfaction; information and communication; properly developed site), economic value (tourism contribution to the local economy; quantity of employment; quality of employment; tourism supply chain management), ecological (stress; reducing transportation impact; landscape and biodiversity management; conservation; waste management), social (satisfied residents; improvement of infrastructure) and cultural (protecting and enhancing cultural heritage, local identity and assets)" (p.33). Their study took into consideration the importance of obtaining stakeholders' input when developing quality indicators for tourism's sustainable development.

Norway's tourism industry is principled on sustainability and the green environment (Green Travel, 2019), in which certification is seen as crucial. Its recent national certification scheme on green travel options, for example, saw over 100 strict indicators set for Ecotourism Norway: environmental performance, host-role, local community integration

and purchasing. In the case of Star Rating Australia, their indicators for quality accommodation were determined by more than 200 indicators which were ranked by travellers. These indicators reflect cleanliness, quality, and condition of facilities (https://www.starratings.com.au/). Finally, in the United Kingdom, Mellina and Reino (2019) found that the online review rating or the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) played a significant role in the classification of hotels.

3.0 Research Methodology

This research has a qualitative approach via focus group interviews. Focus groups are collaborative, "as the outcome is dependent on the interactions of group members as well as interactions with the facilitator" (Cater & Low, 2012, p. 354). The interview is also very useful in getting a deeper understanding of a topic that has differences in perception, attitude, impact, behaviour and practice (Picken, 2017). These variances are seen between groups of people (like stakeholders) or between individuals. Semi-structured interview questions were employed to elicit insightful opinions of respondents and develop a descriptive content of inbound tourism quality criteria and indicators. The open-ended questions were formulated based on available literature on quality indicators in tourism. This also enabled the interview to be more inductive, reflexive and flexible to allow for possible content to emerge. Basically, the interview addressed questions on the nature, scope and guiding principles in developing the indicators for Malaysian inbound travel agencies as well as the future of quality service monitoring in the sector.

The main target groups for the standards and certification programme developed by Tourism Productivity Nexus were small-medium tourism enterprises and micro-companies. These enterprises account for about 85% of tourism businesses in Malaysia (Set, 2013). Currently, there are 4790 registered travel agencies in Malaysia and around 80% of them are small and medium companies (MoTAC, 2019). The sample interviewees included a Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, Director and General Manager of four distinct Malaysian travel agencies as well as one Secretary-General of the Malaysia Tourism Council. They have been the major players in the tourism industry with more than 20 years experience, therefore justifying the sample selection. The focus group interview was digitally-recorded and conducted in English. Data were transcribed and translated into English in cases where interviewees spoke in Malay. The interview lasted for approximately 120 minutes. Table 3 shows the background information of the interviewees.

Table 3: *Background Information on Participating Organizations*

Interviewees		Background of Organization	Job position of interviewees
1)	Interviewee A	Local company which was established in 1985 dealing with tourism and hospitality business services. A member of the Malaysia Association of Tour & Travel Agents (MATTA), the International Airlines & Tourist Association (IATA) and the Malaysian Bumiputra Travel Agent Association (Bumiputra Malaysia).	Chairman
2)	Interviewee B	A licensed, private limited travel & tours company established in 1986 for inbound and outbound tours, by the MoTAC Malaysia. It is an accredited agent of IATA and member of MATTA. It is also an authorised agent for ticketing by several airlines including Malaysia Airlines.	CEO
3)	Interviewee C	A licensed, private limited travel & tours company established for more than 20 years for inbound and outbound tours. It is an accredited agent of IATA and a member of the Malaysia Inbound Tourism Association (MITA).	Director
4)	Interviewee D	Committee for Tourism Productivity Nexus (Industry-led Establishment under Malaysia Productivity Corporation)	General Manager
5)	Interviewee E	Malaysian Tourism Council (MTC), the main registered tourism association in Malaysia.	Secretary-General

They were named as Interviewee A, B, C, D and E respectively for anonymity purposes. Data were subjected to systematic content analysis in which the transcripts were read several times for overall understanding. This reflexive, non-linear and reiterative process is needed to identify and establish codes or categories while ensuring the meaning is retained (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Coding of data was conducted by identifying themes or categories based on the predefined categories from the literature. Inter-rater validity and reliability of data analysis and interpretation were established by coming to a consensus for the findings to minimize or reduce bias.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Suitable Quality Audit Indicators for Inbound Tourism Travel Agency Operators

The first quality criterion is the first impression of the agency. This is about the travel agent's ability to strike the right chord at the outset that may give the agency the first and lasting impression to the inbound tourist. The impression has

to be good; whether it is clear and well-written signage at the agency's entrance (sub-criterion 1) or a clean, attractive and welcoming office (sub-criterion 2). Everyone agreed that the signage and direction to the agency and its various departments should be clearly "labeled" (Interviewee A) and displayed, "well-maintained" (Interviewee 3), and in "good condition" (Interviewee A). Also mentioned by the interviewees are indicators like "cleanliness", "orderly" and "welcoming" entrance and office. The importance of proper information and communication of a company's site is also mentioned by Xin and Chan (2014). This result indicates that in a highly competitive business, the first impression does matter. Travel agents are expected to be experienced and knowledgeable as to best match the personality of the clients to the most suitable options and destinations, and as they sell travel services on behalf of the operators for hotels, airlines, tours, cruise lines, and other travel providers, they have no control over many situations. But what they can make sure is that physical and virtual information like signage, reservation and itinerary are realistically set to avoid potential problems so that customers will have the least amount of difficulty or stress.

The second criterion refers to business information put together by the travel agency to market their services. The first sub-criterion is answering telephone inquiries promptly like "…maybe telephone inquiries should be picked up at three rings" (Interviewee B) and then mentioning the company's name while displaying a wide knowledge of company products and tour packages. The second sub-criterion is information placed in leaflets and brochures that inform tourists of agency's offerings as well as of interesting events, great food and places. This information should be accessible on the agency's website too, while a strong social media presence is recommended as a means of staying in touch with anyone interested in the information. These indicators usually have a higher value when images, suitable graphics and/or photographs describing products, activities and facilities are inserted for example, as "there is a need to focus on images that represent the attraction's unique selling point" (Interviewee A). Also, details like telephone number, website, email, social network services, QR Cod, addresses, as well as "information on location, opening hours… contact details should be displayed. Everything should be there, including location map" (Interviewee C).

There are other information indicators that the interviewees thought would be useful for all travel agencies. Interviewee B wants more information on the "availability of transport service" but since "we offer other services too", we should give input on availability of other products and services too". Interviewee D believes that the use of a suitable language for the target market is part of marketing and says that, "A foreign language is very important as staff needs to be fluent in English and other languages if possible. Most Arabs speak Arabic and most Koreans speak

Korean", so having someone in the office speaking any or even both of these languages would be added value to the agency. The interviewees also approved other business information sub-indicators like data on privacy protection and provision for customer review and frequently asked questions (FAQs), which concurs with the findings of a study by Perramon, Bagur-Femenias, and Amat (2015) on the importance of customer review.

Proper booking and confirmation procedures make up the third business information sub-criterion that will help ensure customer services that are reliable and trustworthy. Eight indicators were mentioned, including an "organised" and systematic booking procedure, in which "*the booking procedure is an indicator*" and where "booking and confirmation come under one title" (Interviewee E); a "comprehensive itinerary" (Interviewee C), including time and place to meet and depart, what to do, as well as activities according to age, medical fitness, suitable attire/ apparatus for activities, "level of difficulty, possible hazards, safety precautions and regulations that apply to their conduct on the tour" (Interviewee A).

Other information indicators were mentioned as crucial for travel agencies; customers' confirmation of booking via email/social media and the use of social media as a way of communicating with customers on their visa application services, for example. "Actually, social media *like Facebook is something we fully utilize to communicate with customers*" (Interviewee B).

Hence, the findings indicate that business information is another important quality audit indicator that reflects a customer-driven company. As such, travel agencies must adapt to the demands of the market, which currently requires a complete and more efficient information system to monitor work performance, cost-benefit analyses, and benchmarking or identifying new business opportunities.

The third criterion for inbound travel operators refers to facilities like technology and transportation at the travel agency as quality indicators. All registered travel agencies or operators follow guidelines set by the MoTAC. According to Interviewee C, "To register as a travel agent, you must have an office. *This is all set in MoTAC's rules or terms and conditions,* like how many square meters for the office and signboards too". A clean office also helps build a good first impression of the business. As confirmed by Interviewee A, cleanliness of the premise also reflects the quality of the business and for that purpose "we go on local requirements for cleanliness because we deal with

inbound customers. *You can't charge too high a price but not clean. So services include clean offices. This shows quality.*" The mention of facilities and their condition as indicators echo important findings by Perramon, Bagur-Femenias, and Amat (2015). The second sub-criterion refers to technology and how travel agents should leverage digital marketing technology to promote their business and services. This understanding seems to relate to the need to have easy access to product digital application for customers, as stated by Interviewee B, "I meet this Maybank guy "do you have our apps? Give me your phone" he said. He downloaded the app and gave it to me. So, now, I don't need to type www.maybank.com.my. So, I just go to Maybank, I get my Maybank." Unlike other industries like manufacturing, for example, the tourism and hospitality industry is highly dependent on information service management, a point emphasised by the interview participants and is in line with the findings of a study by Buhalis et al. (2019). Such accurate systems and the quality training of staff on this system should, therefore, be in place at these travel agencies.

Interview findings on sub-criterion 3 (transportation) reveal the need for accessible and functional safety equipment at the premises which must also be regularly inspected. Interviewee C spoke of "a valid bus permit and road tax combined together with insurance and inspection by a local vehicle inspection authority like PUSPAKOM". Interviewee A, on the other hand, highlighted the need to have a clean record and valid driving license, "At least *the bus driver must have a clean record*. If he has a summons, he can't drive surely." In sum, the indicator of facilities like the office, technology, and transportation are basic to an inbound travel agency.

The fourth criterion for quality indicators is linked to the staff's code of conduct with four sub-criteria agreed upon by the interviewees. The first is staff attitude with indicators like polite, courteous, patience, friendly, integrity, enthusiastic, proactive, and attentive. Above all, Interviewee C said, "Honesty is very important for us, while staff must be "polite, warm, enthusiastic, honest, passionate, attentive, and equipped with the Do's and Don'ts". The second sub-criterion is self-appearance and self-presentation of the staff. This includes being "well-dressed, clean and tidy as well as being recognizable by others. Neat and tidy. Easily recognised by clothing, name-tags" (Interviewee B). The third important sub-criterion is communication skills with indicators such as being an effective listener, accuracy in addressing customers' needs and requirements apart from being fluent in English and other important foreign

languages. Quality of employment is thus vital for the performance of travel agencies, as mentioned by Xin and Chan (2014). The importance of competent employees is also covered in the next criterion.

The final sub-criterion is the tour guide's job and also the staff on duty. In the travel business, "the tour guide is under the law" (Interviewee D), where the tour guide must possess a legitimate license from MoTAC and certification of appointment by the agency. Interviewee B insisted on checking if "the tour operator is taking the right guide for a tour and as long as the tour guide has got a license, that's sufficient." The tour guide should also assume an animated, lively and friendly persona besides being clean and presentable. He also needs to be able to explain attractions clearly and properly. As for the presence of staff on duty, indicators such as availability and attentiveness of the staff to the customers are deemed crucial. The staff should also be "alert, friendly and obliging at all times" (Interviewee E). Also pertinent to the inbound travel agency is the quality and expertise of their local guides. As emphasised by Tarantino, Falco, and Scafuri (2019), the travel agency needs to make sure their guides are abreast with issues pertaining to the travel business, changing rules and regulations, and trends for absolute customer satisfaction. In recent developments, which are in line with IR 4.0, interactive electronic guides have been introduced to help upgrade the tourism business.

The fifth criterion is the performance and management of inbound tours. Results revealed that there were 13 indicators developed altogether under this criterion. To start, all tour activities are bound by the regulations set by MoTAC. According to Interviewee E, "The highest level is MoTAC. Any activity conducted by the state will have to report to MoTAC. I'm sure they have their own activities. So while MoTAC allows them to promote their state, MoTAC will refer to the state for any activity." This goes to show that the ministry has the highest say in terms of regulations for inbound tourism activities by local travel agencies. Interviewee 2 said the following in support, "If MoTAC doesn't control, then, everybody will do their own thing. When they want to do activities, they must have the approval or green light from MoTAC." Other indicators include ensuring services or activities are detailed and clear in terms of itinerary, price, booking confirmation, the record of schedules, risks or hazards as well as safety information and precaution. "These are all important requirements by MITA" (Interviewee D) to ensure that the travel agency is in compliance with the standards given. The complying strategies able to lead travel agency implemented the best practice based on the regulations and standards set by the authority in the country. The compliance also has proven the control of the overall financial performance in the travel agencies (Perramon, Bagur-Femenias, & Amat, 2015).

In terms of performance criterion for inbound tours, the interviewees agreed that tour guides should be trained and certified as part of continuous quality improvement of the tours. However, as mentioned by Interviewee A, training should not just be for the tour guides but also for all those involved in the business, "But I think relevant training for the tour guide, staff and company are very important. *Besides training an individual in the company, the company itself must be trained like a rule of the engagement.* Like, what the company does when they meet people. The company must have some standards, the company itself, not the individual". Not only that, since the focus group aims to come up with a certification programme, in the end, the criterion set would be a standard for all travel agents to follow, "We will tell them the do's and the don'ts. *We have to tell them what the certification is all about, ensuring best practices and quality of services.* We have to explain. So there must be quality in our services" (Interviewee E). This also relates to the quality of the customer feedback process which is important for continuous improvement (Casielles et al., 2009).

Responsible tourism is also highlighted in terms of making sure that inbound tourism activities and tours uphold the preservation and conservation of local cultures and natural habitats. Sustainable practice is a social practice and is about the occupant behaviour engaged in the office building (King, 2019). This contemporary practice may associate with the design of the office buildings in relation to the technological, physical and economic aspects as well as to the social and psychological considerations (Hoffman & Henn, 2008). This is relevant to Tourism Productivity Nexus' aim stated by Interview A - "It is good that tours or activities ensure customers' satisfaction and needs, at all times, and also *observe the approved guidelines for interacting with the culture, natural environment and people of the community*". This finding supports the study by Xin and Chan (2014) on the tour operators' agreement that responsible tourism must be in a position to safeguard the ecological, social and cultural state of the destination. This is also foregrounded in the next criterion related to local guide quality and expertise. It highlights the need for guides to be sensitised to the tour experience and ground operators with regards to the protection and management of the environment, local people, values and cultural resources. The ambience of the travel business creates value co creation and enriches customer experience. These elements need to be consistent based on suitable sustainable best practices for the long-term survival of the tourism industry. The travel agencies that work on sustainability apparently score better on customer satisfaction, staff motivation and business efficiency, with positive effects for their competitive advantage (Chan, 2010).

This sixth criterion is different from the one mentioned earlier on tour guides in the sense that the local guide is the expert local or native of the destination. As stated by Interviewee E, "There's a tour guide and there's a local guide. The local guide is the one on-site and who knows the place at the back of his hand. So he should also be fit and licensed or certified". Interviewee B justified this by saying that the local guide must also be trained and knowledgeable about "sustainable tourism", where "he must know the place very well and is passionate in taking care of the place. His customer service and communication must be good …on local traditions and environmental protection matters." This parallels Chan's (2010) description of sustainable tourism as "the preservation of the tourist destination and the capacity to satisfy tourists" (p.30).

The seventh criterion mentioned is on safety management at the travel agency. Two sub-criteria were listed, namely equipment and general safety. Indicators posited under equipment involve providing adequate and practical safety equipment like fire extinguishers and first aid kits. Nevertheless, when it comes to safety, "this is the standard. You follow. Safety cannot be compromised. You have to follow the standard procedures" (Interviewee C). Usage of the alarm system and CCTV is also an important indicator under safety, as well as the prominent positioning of emergency exits or signs. Under general safety, which is the second sub-criterion, the importance of training staff in first aid to handle emergency cases or crises and observing safety measures is emphasised, "the staff needs to know how to handle emergencies… to be trained in first aid" (Interviewee B). Safety measure compliance and preparedness comply with findings by Som, Aun, and AlBattat (2015); that tourism and hospitality industry need to be fully ready to deal with such eventualities. Therefore, state government and industry players need to take a more proactive approach to crisis and disaster management. The safety indicator is crucial as in some unstable countries, tourists may face risks like political and social turmoil, unprecedented acts of terrorism, military conflicts, or epidemics while travelling even though some of these situations may have been predicted by the relevant authorities.

The final and eighth criterion is related to sustainability practices of the travel operators. This links to the one mentioned earlier on sustainable tourism in criterion 6 on the local guide's role. The indicators are based on socio-economic grounds like involving local communities in designing the itinerary of the tour, hiring them as local guides, hiring suppliers from the local community, promoting locally-made products, and delicacies. This is supported by

Interviewee B's statement, "Inbound travel agency describes the requirements for Tourism Productivity Nexus in the tourism industry which is to boost productivity through the sharing and promoting of resources, enhancing quality customer services and ensuring customer's trust, and all *types of sustainability practices for the local destinations*." This finding parallels Chan's (2010) argument on the need for more stakeholder input on how inbound tourism can benefit from sustainable tourism development.

As a whole, the results of the study revealed the interviewees' optimism towards developing standard indicators for better quality assurance certification for inbound tourism in general. As mentioned by Interviewee B, the development of the assessment for certification will benefit the competency of inbound tourism business, for example, "*The idea of the assessment is not only to gauge the competency in their business but also to give the benefits to the business*. If they follow us [follow the certification], definitely they'll be successful." They also agreed on the fact that any kind of early certification should be led by the industry for the industry and on a voluntary basis. Hence, the certification must be affordable, easy to implement and accepted by the small and medium industry players especially, for example, "Okay any application fees should be at a minimum cost. Application cost must be cheap" (Interviewee E). Findings also revealed the need for systematic monitoring of the inbound travel agency's certification plan that continually reflects the demands of the clientèle and uplifts national productivity as outlined in the initiatives undertaken by the Tourism Productivity Nexus, under the Malaysia Productivity Blueprint 2016-2020. As said by one of the interviewees, "This action requires continuous monitoring for quality services. First, the subject is *monitoring quality service. That means the person whom we have already given the inbound travel agency.*" This supports the World Tourism Organisation's (2004) stand on a monitoring system or certification that can be developed for continuous improvement based on the indicators.

Although these studies have highlighted some important criteria expected of travel agencies, there is still very little research on the development of standard indicators that can be used for inbound travel agencies as a whole. Hence the study aims to gauge suitable quality audit indicators for inbound tourism agents from the Malaysian travel agency's perspective as part of ensuring the future of continuous quality service in the sector for market recognition and competitiveness. From the interview, the findings of this study showed eight main categories established. Within these

criteria, sub-criteria were also mentioned as well as important indicators. Table 4 below presents the eight criteria and 83 emergent sub-criteria and indicators.

Table 4: *Total Number of Criteria, Sub-Criteria and Indicators*

No.	Criteria (Total Number of Sub-Criteria and Indicators)	Weightage (%)
1.	First Impression of the Agency (5)	5
2.	Information (20)	20
3.	Facilities (6)	6
4.	Staff (20)	20
5.	Performance and Management of Inbound Travel Agency (12)	24
6.	Local Guide Quality and Expertise (5)	10
7.	Safety and Security (10)	10
8.	Sustainable Practices (5)	5
	Total (83 Indicators)	**100**

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study discusses the possible quality indicators for Malaysian inbound travel agencies, and how important they are for quality improvement in the standardization of service delivery, from the perspective of Malaysian travel agency operators. Compliance with the minimum industry requirements and guidelines in the operation and management of the inbound travel agency help improve the overall business process. These quality audit indicators for inbound travel agencies have been presented to members of Tourism Productivity Nexus and Malaysia Productivity Corporation for review. Tourism Productivity Nexus is the owner of the standards and therefore the subsequent certification programme. Tourism Productivity Nexus has also chartered the general principles for the standards: (1) Target group: tourism small and medium companies and micro-players; (2) Minimum requirements for indicators; (3) Standards and certification programmes to be developed are from and by the industry and for the industry. The standards to be developed should prepare the companies for higher-level standards, for instance, the national level MyTQA, national-level standards, and international standards such as ISO.

Thus, it is expected that micro, small and medium enterprises especially can implement the standards and subsequently get certified. Findings can be regarded as entrepreneurial strategies that will enhance productivity operations at the travel enterprise level. Global government officials can also adopt the findings in terms of their impact towards cultural, economic, ecological and social outlooks. The recommendation from the key players is the establishment of an industry level national certification to be awarded to businesses and operators that hold high compliance level to the indicators set for certification. Inbound travel agencies must meet the requirements with regard to the suggested criteria of the quality audit by the industry experts as part of their positive contribution to the tourism business. As highlighted by the participants, the award will encourage the inbound travel agencies in the inbound business itself as has been practiced earlier by IATA for the outbound tour business.

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