Comparing Commitment to Service Quality Among Academic Staffs' in Private and Public Malaysian Universities

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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the disparity on the state of commitment to service quality among academic staff in public and private Malaysian Universities. It has been argued that excellent service quality performance is one of the key factors in building niche and having competitive edge that separates one from its competitors nationally and globally. Total useable questionnaires were 387 with a response rate of 36 percent from both private and public universities. The results revealed that commitment to service quality among public universities academic staff at the Malaysian universities were higher than their counterparts in the private universities. This study implies to the policy makers and academic leaders at both university types should consider enhancing service quality as the university mission through ranking service quality as the number one priority through their academic staff commitment. Future study should consider alternative modes of enquires such as employing the longitudinal method of data collection design and a nationwide survey covering samples from the whole population of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia that would be more significant in making generalizations .

INTRODUCTION

The recent globalization and liberalization of the educational sector has inevitably helped to propel the transnational educational developments in Malaysia. The realization of the importance of private universities in assisting the public universities in producing the much needed professionals for the nation's human resource is crucial especially where the students' total enrolment is expected to reach 2,267,800 by the year 2020 and the quest for 100,000 foreign students to be achieved by year end 2010 (Economic Planning Unit, 2006). Since the corporatisation of public universities, these institutions are now seen to become less financially dependent on Government funds and have to seek their own sources of revenue from the private sources (Kaur, 2008) especially through consultancy, research and expert services (Morshidi, 2006). As such, the public universities will have to operate like private enterprises. Their leaders need to have an "entrepreneurship mindset", by being innovative, creative, willingness to accept risks and most importantly be concerned about profits which is comparable to their counterparts in the private universities (Bajunid, 2008). Employing the lowest price strategy will not be sustainable unless the public university has the cost advantage. In this case it may not be quite possible especially if there are escalating costs in keeping up with the quality of programmes, research and development and the operation costs.

Therefore, academic leaders from the Malaysian public universities may have to change their mind set, mainly in strategizing to build relationships with students and other stakeholders and be more market oriented. Teaching and research will not suffice even though that accounts for their main roles and responsibilities at the universities. A third role of importance has been identified, that is promoting institutional service quality (Majumdar, 2004; Terpstra & Honoree, 2009). In order to achieve this goal, the academic leaders have to empower their academic staff to provide the best customer service possible to meet students' satisfaction. This should resemble the service culture which is practiced by the private enterprise (Emery & Barker, 2007). Private universities on the other hand are less bound by the government and bureaucracy regulations and procedures but often than not, are sometimes faced with severe financial constrains (Morshidi, 2006). Thus, they have to be creative in seeking their own funds by enhancing quality programmes, providing the delivery of high service quality and also actively seek to export their education services to target countries such as China, Middle East, Africa and Vietnam.

The main distinction between the public and private universities has always been associated by its method of funding. The public universities derived much of their funds from the public whereas private universities are forced to find creative ways in getting private funds mainly through student fees (Arokiasamy et al., 2007). However, the gap between the private and public universities is becoming narrower, especially as public funded universities have to seek at least 30 percent of their revenue from private sources. This is the spirit of an enterprise culture that has already seeped into the Malaysian public universities. Noticeably, the distinction gap in the operations does not seem to be that wide. This new phenomenon has in fact being created by what Mok (2008) has noted as an "internal competition" between the public and private universities where students will have an array of universities to choose from. Past studies have indicated that some of the reasons for the choice of a place of study could be for the quality of curriculums (Honingh & Oort, 2009), service quality (Taner & Antony, 2006), and the physical environment as well (Britner, 1992). In some countries, it has taken a different direction. Takakura (2008) reported that in Japan, even though the government provides financial aid to private universities, this does not stop them from charging higher fees, a factor that may deter potential students from choosing selected private universities over public universities. However, potential students perceive that the private universities were providing equally excellent services, reputable quality programmes, and they do not have to compete to get a place in one of the public universities (Takakura, 2008).

Previously it was very difficult indeed to get the internal customer's pledge towards commitment to service quality culture (Gronroos, 1984). Nevertheless, past studies have supported the concept of the fulfilment of the students' satisfaction through augmentation of service quality and quality academic staff, which would be the key factors in building differentiation strategy and also being able to contain the competitive advantage over others (Kusku, 2003; Taner & Antony, 2006). What more, if past studies have suggested that some universities in Malaysia were losing students because of their standard of service quality which was not to the expectations of the students (Jain et al., 2004; Latif et al., 2009; Firdaus, 2006). Overall the level of service quality at the Malaysian universities was reported to be only between moderate to slightly above the moderate level (Jusoh et al., 2004; Sim & Idrus, 2004; Hasan et al., 2008, Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). As such, academic leaders face the major challenge in providing the visible leadership in ensuring academic staff acceptance on the importance of commitment to service quality. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is paucity of research on this subject in the Malaysian context. Past research has not been able to capture precisely the distinctions on academic staffs' commitment to service quality in the public and private higher education sectors despite the facts that commitment of the academic staff to service quality is vital in ensuring the long lasting effects on the monetary sustainability of the education organization and students future recommendation as a place of study to others (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009; Firdaus, 2006). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to elucidate information on the disparity between private and public universities on the academic staff commitment to service quality in Malaysian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Commitment to Service Quality

Studies on the commitment to service quality in education literatures follow the same footpath as the general definition of affective commitment. Affective commitment is defined by Meyer and Allen (1991) as "an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization". Commitment to service quality is defined and understood as "conformity to a specification" (Martin 1986; Witt & Steward, 1996; O'Neil & Palmer, 2004) and in achieving "excellence" (Peters & Waterman, 1982). It is also about commitment to meet the students' needs and their expectations (Witt & Steward, 1996), and about building relationships between a customer and the organisation (Kandampully, 2002). Accordingly, the most important basis for the assessment of quality is the individual's experience of a service that comes from the internal quality service of the internal customer (all the organization's employees). Their commitment and willingness to serve is in the best interest of the customers, which incidentally is a prerequisite for achieving service quality (Kandampully, 2002). Clark et al. (2009) defined commitment to service quality as the "dedication of employees to render service quality and the willingness to go beyond what is expected of them".

Past findings have also established that employees who are committed to the organization will remain loyal and are inversely related to turnover (Hartline et al., 2000); Clark et al., 2009; Elmadag et al., 2008). In such conditions, employees were known to spend more time and energy in assisting the organization realize its goals and they also put their own self interest aside (Porter et al., 1973; Tsai, 2008; Sohail & Shaikh, 2004; Yiing & Ahmad, 2008). They would subscribe to the idea of being a citizen of the organisation and be fully committed to the goals of the organisation (Rashid et al., 2003).

It has been established that academicians remain committed to their chosen vocation and continuously demonstrate commitment to their students despite undertaking increasing workloads, administrative duties and conducting researches, (Houston et al., 2006). The importance of academicians as the primary internal customers and students as the secondary internal customer have been emphasized in some literatures such as in Oshagbemi's (1997) study on the level of satisfaction of academic staff and Yeo's (2008) research in the quest for excellent education service quality in Singapore.

It has also been reported that the academic staff were known to place emphasis on service quality besides their primary role of teaching and research. Terpstra and Honoree (2009) reported that the academic staff in 1,400 colleges and universities in United States of America were given equal priority for the three activities but the degree of their priority would depend on the size of organization. Smaller organizations would place emphasis on teaching which is slightly higher than conducting research and service delivery. Larger institutions tend to place importance on research than teaching. Similarly, public institutions have the tendency to focus more on research rather than teaching. Private institution would prominently place teaching over research. However, the study found that it is also common among smaller or private institutions to allocate equal weight for these three activities.

O'Neil (2000) in his study in higher education concurred on the importance of internal customer commitment to service quality as a means of gaining competitive advantage. Satisfied external customers, for example the students, were reported to spread by "word of mouth recommendations", which is a powerful tool in marketing (Cuthbert, 1996). Commitment of the highest level would mean emotional attachment to the organisational and this bondage is synonymous to "partnership" with superiors and colleague who would tender the academic staff's intention to continue their tenures at the university (Narimawati, 2007; Rego & eCunha, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Target Population

The target population for this study consisted of academic staff from two public universities and four private universities in Malaysian. The survey took approximately three (3) months with a total of 387 responses. For this study a combination of on-line and self administered questionnaires were distributed to collect individual data on the respondents (academic staff). Overall the response rate was 36 percent which was slightly better than what was reported generally in the Malaysian context (Othman et al., 2001).

Measurement of Study Variable

The instruments were designed for individual level unit of analysis based on one respondent group. consists of a list of 9 items to measure the variable related to commitment to service quality. The original instrument for commitment to service quality items is drawn from two studies, mainly from quality management and from the organizational commitment scale by Mowday et al. (1979). A recent modified version by Clark et al. (2009) was adapted in this study with slight modifications make in order to complement the study context. Using a 5-Point Likert-type scale, the respondent indicated their intensity of agreement anchored by 1, "strongly disagree" through to 5, "strongly agree" with items phrased.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile characteristics under investigation include the gender, age group, education level, number of teaching years, job aspects (time spent most at the university) and faculties. The sample also indicates that female respondents represented a slightly higher percentage of total samples (59%) when compared to the male respondents (41%). The majority of the respondents possessed Master degrees or others of similar level (71%) while 29 percent had completed their doctorate degree. Majority of the respondents were middle age of between 30 to 40 years of age (43%) followed by those between 40 to 50 years old (25%). About 18 percent of the academicians were from the younger group age of between 20-30 years. With reference to their experience in teaching, the sample showed a balance between those who had teaching experience of between 1 to 5 years (33%), 5 to 10 years (28%) followed by 10 to 15 years (17%) and above 20 years (14%). More than 47 percent of the respondents were from business faculty followed by faculty of information technology (12 %).

Reliability and Validity Analysis

To assess the reliability of the measurement items of all the variables, an internal consistency check was carried out. To remain consistent with previous studies, Clark et al. (2009) had retested the measurement scale for commitment to service quality. The Cronbach alpha from the test yielded a record of 0.82 which is far above the cut-off line of reliability as recommended by Nunnally and Berstein (1994) and Nunnally (1978). To further check the reliability of the scale, internal consistency confirmation of the scale was carried and was reported to have an excellent reliability coefficient of 0.846.

Content validity that is used to assess for the measurement instruments was done in the pre-tested stage by soliciting the expert opinions of two professors from a university who are research specialists in quantitative methodology, organizational behaviour and service management disciplines. The scale was then pre-tested on 31 respondents who were the academic staff that have similar characteristics to the target population as suggested by Davis and Consenza (1988).Factor analysis (FA) was also performed on the construct under study. Factor extraction was executed and any Eigenvalue that is greater than one (1) will be adopted. To further simplify the interpretation and seek a simpler structure, the Orthogonal technique and the Varimax rotation was then performed. The varimax rotated principal components factor revealed one structure factor that resulted in a total variance of 56.60 percent. The factor loading recorded loading of between 0.547 and 0.836. Given all the items extracted were recorded above 0.3, no items were deleted. The nine (9) items loaded on a single factor were labelled as commitment to service quality.

Descriptive Statistic for Respondents' Commitment to Service Quality

An Independent sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there are any significant differences in the mean scores of the respondents' commitment to service quality according to the types of organizations they work in (public and private universities). As shown in Table 1 below the overall result of the test indicated that there is a significant difference in the scores between the public universities (M=4.165, SD=0.546) and private universities (M=3.957; SD=0.467). The computed t value was at 3.863 and was significant at 0.001 level. Therefore, the public universities academic staff were more committed to service quality than their private universities counterparts.

Table 1: Types of Organizations and Commitment to Service Quality

Types Organizations	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig.
Public Universities	4.165	0.546	0.045	3.863	0.001***
Private Universities	3.957	0.467	0.030		

*** $p < 0.001$

Comparative data on public and private universities academic staff is provided in the following Table 2. From the table, it clearly shows that six factors had significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the academic stiff's commitment to service quality of the public and private universities in Malaysia. They were; feel strongly about

improving service quality, enjoy discussing quality related issues, personal accomplishments in providing service quality, often discuss quality issues with outsiders, feel strongly about high service quality priority and putting in efforts beyond expectation in delivery of high service quality, at p<0.05.

The public universities academic staff's commitment to service quality was found to be higher than those in the private universities in terms of overall commitment to service quality. It is clearly shown that, all commitment to service quality factors except for; superior explains the importance of service quality, share similar feelings about high service quality delivery and really care about quality services, the mean scores for the public university was significantly different from the private universities academic staff's commitment to service quality. Table 2 and Table 3 indicate high correlations between the mean scores and the percentages of respondents' responses to the various commitments to service quality factors indicating their agreement, moderate agreement or total disagreement.

The public universities academic staff's were in agreement with almost all the factors related to commitment to service quality with a mean score that was greater than 3.5. The top five highest score of more than 4.2 were mainly related to; feel strongly about high service quality priority, efforts beyond expected in the delivery high service quality; feel strongly about improving service quality, care about quality service and personal accomplishments in providing service quality. The lowest being "often discuss quality issues with outsiders" with a mean score of 3.78. In general, more than 70 percent of the respondents from the public universities indicated that they were in agreement with all the eight out of nine factors except for the factor related to the lowest score item; "often discuss quality issues with outsiders". For this commitment factor, 68 percent agreed, only 12 percent expressed their disagreement while 20 percent agreed moderately.

It can also be seen from Table 2 that the private universities academic staff's mean scores based on their commitment were above 3.5. The two highest mean scores above 4.2 were "feel strongly about high service quality priority" and the "care about quality services" of their university. As shown in Table 3, more than 70 percent of the respondents indicated that they were in agreement with the seven (7) commitment service quality factors namely; feel strongly about improving service quality, enjoy discussing quality issues, personal accomplishments in providing service quality, feel strongly about high service quality priority, efforts beyond expected in delivering high service quality, share similar feelings of high service quality delivery and care about quality services. "Often discuss quality issues with outsiders" has been identified as slightly lower in agreement with only 60 percent of the respondent in agreement, 30 percent moderately agreed while less than 11 percent were in disagreement. However, over 91 percent academic staff of both the university type was in agreement that they do care about quality of services given by their universities.

Table 2: Comparisons: Public and Private Universities (Commitment to Service Quality)

	Mean		Std. Deviation		t-value	Sig.
	Public	Private	Public	Private		
Feel strongly about improving SQ	4.327	4.021	0.640	0.685	4.452	0.000***
Enjoy discussing quality issues	4.087	3.882	0.704	0.744	2.727	0.007**
Personal accomplishment in providing SQ	4.313	3.996	0.677	0.648	4.572	0.000***
Superior explains importance of SQ	3.927	3.692	0.970	0.772	2.504	0.009
Often discuss quality issues with outsiders	3.780	3.578	0.947	0.853	2.122	0.030*
Feel strongly about high SQ priority	4.380	4.232	0.720	0.652	2.041	0.037*
Efforts beyond expected in delivery high SQ	4.240	4.089	0.672	0.680	2.149	0.032*
Similar feeling about high SQ delivery	4.067	3.886	0.946	0.849	1.950	0.052
Care about quality services	4.367	4.236	0.781	0.620	1.819	0.070

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; SQ: Service Quality*

Table 3: Comparisons: Public and Private Universities (Commitment to Service Quality in Percentage)

Commitment to SQ	*% Disagree		**% Mod. Agree		***% Agree	
	Pub	Pri	Pub	Pri	Pub	Pri
Feel strongly about improving SQ	1	2	7	15	92	84
Enjoy discussing quality issues	3	3	13	24	85	73
Personal accomplishment in providing SQ	1	1	8	19	91	81

Superior explains importance of SQ	9	7	17	26	75	68
Often discuss quality issues with outsiders	12	11	20	30	68	60
Feel strongly about high SQ priority	1	1	10	10	89	89
Efforts beyond expected in delivery high SQ	0	1	13	14	87	85
Similar feeling about high SQ delivery	7	5	11	19	81	75
Care about quality services	2	0	7	9	91	91

Note: ***Incorporate respondents whose CSQ score ≥4.21, **Incorporate respondents whose CSQ score ≥3.4 to 4.20; *Incorporate respondents whose CSQ score ≤ 3.4

Note: SQ: Service Quality, CSQ: Commitment to service quality, Pub: Public university, Pri : Private university

CONCLUSION

The result of the test found that there was a significant difference in the scores of the overall commitment to service quality between the public and private universities. The overall findings reveal that the academic staff at the public universities have a higher level of commitment to service quality. The comparative data on the commitment of the public and private universities academic staff to service quality also found that the academic staff's commitment to service quality is significantly different. They were significantly different in the following aspects; feel strongly about improving the service quality, enjoy discussing quality issues, personal accomplishments in providing service quality, often discuss quality issues with outsiders, feel strongly about high service quality priority, and efforts beyond expectation in the delivery of high service quality. The public universities academic staff were found to be in agreement with these factors as compared to their private universities counterparts. There are a number of possible explanations. Firstly, public universities in total agreement with commitment to service quality may link this to their intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of their job which leads to the achievement of overall job satisfaction because of the inclusion of the incentives and benefits (Hashim & Mahmood, 2010). The perks and job security may also be the possible reasons for the academic staff at the public universities to have a high sense of commitment. Secondly, the scenario at the private universities is quite different. Due to the shortage of qualified academic staff, especially with doctoral qualification, private universities not only took in part-timers but also employed retired academic staff from public universities. Past studies have indicated that part-timers or commonly known as contingent academic staff were not given the opportunity to contribute to the teaching and learning development because of their marginalization and they are not required to be committed to the university unlike the full time academic staff (Anderson, 2007). Thirdly, since this study is based on self assessment, the possibility of a common method bias may have cause the direction to be in favour with the public universities' academic staff. Public universities although being structurally bureaucratic, derive much of their funds from the public for their teaching, research and other facilities. At the same time, by admitting more top scoring students, public universities would definitely present a better self review than the private universities. This may have been the cause for the high self assessment by the public universities academic staff on their level of commitment.

However, it is interesting to note that a high percentage (over 91 percent) of the academic staff of both types of the universities were in agreement that they care about quality services in their universities. This may indicate that the academic staff from both universities type were not only aware but were fully concerned about the importance of service quality. Thus, policy makers and the academic leaders at the universities should consider embracing service quality as the university's mission and place it in ranking as priority one.

Contribution and Limitation

This research has its theoretical implications on the key area related to addition of new knowledge in the literature of academic staff's commitment to service quality. This study also examines empirically the role of the academic staff's commitment in enhancing excellence in service quality that has not been extensively studied in the past, specifically in both the private and public universities in a developing country like Malaysia. From the managerial perspective, this study provides invaluable inputs for academic leaders and policy makers at the universities in Malaysia by building their market niches or competitive advantage over the other players either nationally or globally through their commitment to service quality. This study also has its share of limitation in the sampling frame which only considers a particular group of institutions of higher education (selected universities only) and therefore the results cannot be

generalized to the whole education industry. Future studies should also consider alternative modes of enquires such as employing the longitudinal method of data collection design (e.g. experiments, archival data, observations or interviews) and a nationwide survey covering samples from the whole population of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia.

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