

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH AND CHALLENGES FROM THE LEARNERS PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Successful educational institutions tend to focus on the needs of their learners and continuously seek to improve the quality of the services they provide to them in order to enrich their learning experiences. In this regard, Importance-Satisfaction (I-S) Matrix has been used by many learning institutions to assess the quality of the services they provide to their learners in which quality is measured by using two dimensions: the level of satisfaction derived by learners in using the services and the degree of importance they attach to the services. In the past, quality is measured only in terms of the former. However, for greater impact and accuracy, satisfaction should be viewed within the context of learner expectation or level of importance (Noel & Levitz, 2003).

OUM is the first open and distance learning university in Malaysia. It began operation in August 2001 by admitting 753 learners in 4 academic programmes. As at the end of September 2007, OUM had more than 68,000 learners in 51 academic programmes. This phenomenal growth in enrolment in a relatively short period of time is one indicator of the success of the university.

There are many factors that had led to this accomplishment. One of them is the quality of the services that OUM provides to meet the needs of its learners. OUM is able to do this effectively because it continually makes a serious effort in assessing what are the services its learners deem important and then provide them to their satisfaction. In this regard, I-S Matrix has been instrumental in assisting OUM to pinpoint which services should be introduced, enhanced, reduced or terminated. Since 2004, OUM had conducted importance-satisfaction surveys with the objectives of identifying what processes and activities are important to our learners and which provides a high level of satisfaction to them. This initiative is part of OUM's continuing effort to improve the quality of services to its learners, with a view to improving their success and persistence.

OBJECTIVE OF PAPER

The objective of the paper is to analyse the results of the Importance-Satisfaction Survey conducted in both 2006 and 2007 and using the Importance-Satisfaction Matrix to direct the institution in making improvements in the areas that matter most to learners. The combination of importance and satisfaction data is very powerful, allowing institutions to review satisfaction levels within the context of what is important.

LIMITATIONS

The importance-satisfaction survey is a broad, comprehensive overview of learners' experiences that provides gross indicators of how well OUM is doing in meeting learners' needs. General questions about satisfaction do not provide the university with data on how to improve its services and/or what aspect of an area learners expressed either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Further efforts are needed to provide greater depth and meaning to the survey findings. Focus group interviews will be embarked upon to gain further insights into the actual issues faced. Finally, inherent to survey research are limitations of imprecision, such as biasness associated with the wording and ordering of questions and with sampling error. Given the nature of sampling, certain groups may be over or under represented in the sample. Another important factor to note is that the respondents to the 2006 were not the same to the 2007 survey. The implications of this include the potential for other factors, such as changes in the demographic make-up and varying preferences of the 2007 sample compared to the 2006 sample in explaining the changes in ratings between the two time periods.

METHODOLOGY

The research instrument

The study employed the survey method and the instrument used is a set of questionnaires similar to that of Noel-Levitz Students Priority-Satisfaction Inventory. The questionnaires comprise of 3 sections: Section One consists of questions on learners' demographic, socio-economic and academic information and Section Two consists of 70 service-related items, each expressed as an item of *expectation*. Learners were requested to rate the service items based on their degree of importance as well as the level of satisfaction using a 7-point Likert Scale with 1 representing the lowest degree of importance or level of satisfaction and 7 representing the highest. This results in three sets of scores for analysis. They are the Importance Score which reflects how high the expectations are (the higher the score, the more important it is to a student, hence the stronger the expectation); the Satisfaction Score which shows how satisfied the learners are (the higher the score, the more satisfied the student); and the I-S (Performance) Gap Score which measures the difference between the importance score and satisfaction scores, which indicates how well the expectations have been met (A large performance gap score for an item (e.g., 1.5) indicates that students' expectations are not being met. A small or zero gap score (e.g., 0.50) indicates that students' expectations are being met. A negative gap score (e.g., -0.25) indicates that students' expectations are being exceeded). Finally, Section Three consists of general questions that relate to quality, choice, and pride of institution and learners intention as to whether they will continue their study in OUM.

The Sample

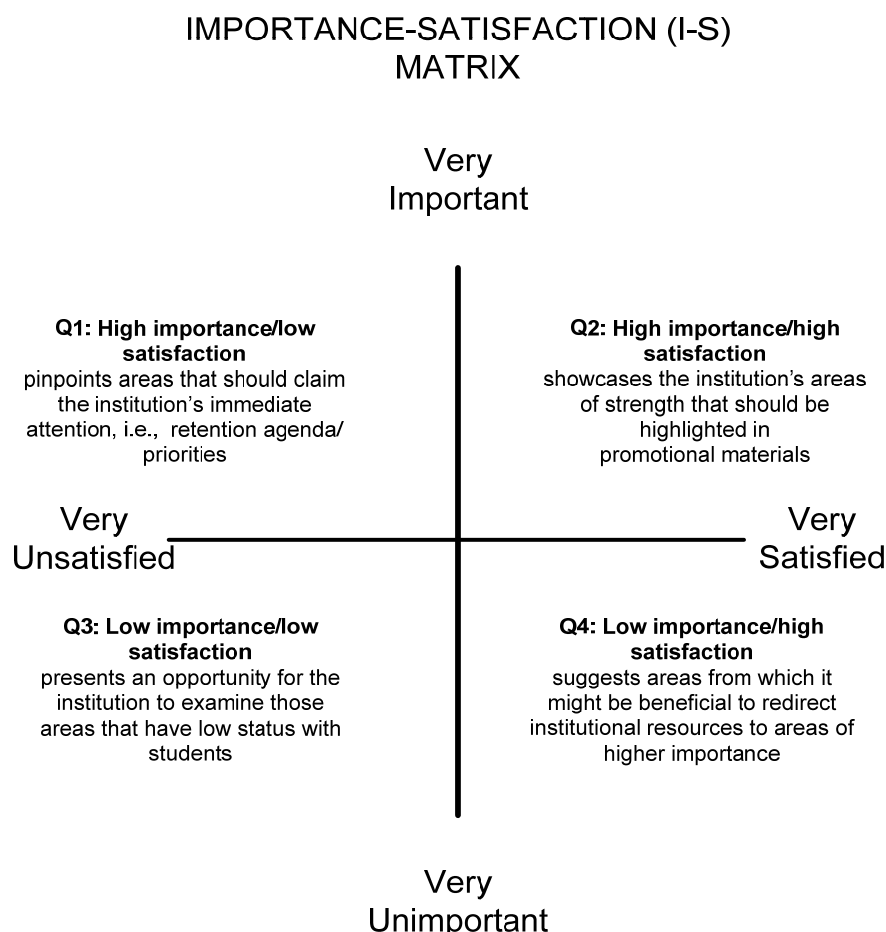
The hard-copy Questionnaires were sent by mail to 36 learning centres and were distributed to learners in the last tutorial session of the May 2007 semester. Of the total 4,500 questionnaires distributed to learners, 2,994 were found usable for data analysis.

The Analysis

An Importance-Satisfaction Matrix was developed based on four quadrants which are defined as follows (see Figure 1):

- Quadrant 1: High-Importance-Low-Satisfaction (HILS) for items with a mean importance score more than 5.0 and a mean satisfaction score of less than 5.0.
- Quadrant 2: High-Importance-High-Satisfaction (HIHS) for items with a mean importance score more than 5.0 and a mean satisfaction score of greater than 5.0.

Figure 1



- Quadrant 3: Low-Importance-Low-Satisfaction (LILS) for items with a mean importance score less than 5.0 and a mean satisfaction score of less than 5.0.
- Quadrant 4: Low-Importance-High-Satisfaction (LIHS) for items with a mean importance score less than 5.0 and a mean satisfaction score of more than 5.0.

The service-related items were grouped into 6 service dimensions as follows:

- i. Student Record Management which examines the effectiveness of activities conducted to enhance the efficiency of learners data base management;
- ii. Registration and Orientation which examines the effectiveness of activities conducted to assist new learners in to familiarise with OUM's learning environment;
- iii. Learner Centeredness which measures the effectiveness of OUM's effort towards caring for our learners;
- iv. Student Affairs Management which assesses the effectiveness of programmes conducted by OUM's Centre for Student Affairs;
- v. Teaching & Learning which measures the services relating to the enhancement of a learner's academic pursuit; and
- vi. Assessment which measures the effectiveness of services relating to the conduct examinations, tests, and continuous assessments.

The items were then placed in the appropriate quadrants based on their I-S mean scores. For example, items with high mean importance scores (above 5) but low mean satisfaction scores (less than 5) were placed in Quadrant 1 (HILS) while those with high mean importance scores and mean satisfaction scores were placed in Quadrant 2 (HIHS), and so on. The analysis is repeated for each item. The result is a distribution of items by quadrant which is also referred to as the Importance-Satisfaction (or Performance) Inventory. To determine whether OUM improved in the provision of its services compared to the previous year, the same procedure was repeated for the service items in the 2006 Survey.

An additional analysis was carried out to examine the distribution of items by dimension and quadrant for each of year 2006 and 2007. This is to enable OUM to have an overall view of the changes that have taken place and whether it is investing in the most appropriate areas.

The last section looks into the percentage of learners who answer YES or NO to questions related to quality of, choice of, pride in and loyalty to the university.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis by Dimension and Quadrant

The use of the 4-quadrants (Figure 1) provides a simple but easy to interpret summary of results. Items with scores falling in the upper left quadrant, Q1 are HILS items. This quadrant can be labeled "*Concentrate here*". Scores falling in the upper right quadrant, Q2 are HIHS items. This quadrant can be labeled as "*Keep up the good work*". Items falling in the lower left quadrant, Q3 are LILS items, and this quadrant is labeled as "*Low priority*" and finally items in the lower right quadrant are LIHS items, and this quadrant is labeled as "*Misallocation of resources*"

Table 1 shows the distribution of service items by dimension and quadrant. A simple analysis based on the distribution of items by the four different quadrants point to the following observations:

- 1) The 4 LIHS items in 2006 disappeared to nothing in 2007 (a decrease from 7% to 0%); this implies that OUM has managed to shift its resources from items of low importance to those of higher ones; indicating no *misallocation of resources*.

- 2) Similarly, 20 LILS items (*low priority* quadrant) has been reduced to 5 from 2006 to 2007, (a decrease from 35.1% to 7.1%) again indicating that OUM has managed to de-emphasise the items of lower importance in favour of the higher ones.
- 3) Items in the HIHS quadrant represent OUM's *strength* - "*Keep up the good work*" area. The more items that appear in this quadrant, the more effective is OUM in providing its support services to its learners. It is gratifying to note that the number of items in this quadrant has increased from 24 in 2006 to 36 in 2007, (an increase from 42.1% to 51.4%) indicating that, OUM has improved its quality of services in a number of areas within the two year period.

Table 1: Distribution of Service Items by Dimension and Quadrant in 2006 & 2007

DIMENSION	HILS		HIHS		LILS		LIHS		Total	
	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007
Student Records Management	3	3	5	6	2	1	0	0	10	10
Registration and Orientation	1	4	3	6	2	0	0	0	6	10
Learner Centeredness	2	8	1	1	7	0	0	0	10	9
Centre for Student Management	1	4	0	1	7	4	1	0	9	9
Assessment	0	3	9	13	0	0	0	0	9	16
Teaching and Learning	2	7	6	9	2	0	3	0	13	16
Total	9	29	24	36	20	5	4	0	57	70
	15.8%	41.4%	42.1%	51.4%	35.1%	7.1%	7.0%	0.0%	100%	100%

- 4) Finally, the area of greatest concern is the increase from 9 in 2006 to 29 in 2007 in the number of items in the HILS quadrant: *challenge quadrant* – “Concentrate here” area (an increase from 15.8% to 41.4%). This quadrant lists the service items that need to be improved upon since they are very important to learners but their expectations have not been satisfactorily met.

Observation 3 provides excellent guidance for areas to feature in promotional activities. If OUM is performing well in those highly valued areas, it would want to recruit learners who value the same things; it has a higher likelihood of satisfying new learners in those areas.

The results of the two year priority-satisfaction surveys can be viewed as positive in that there is no misallocation of resources; a reduction in the low priority items and an incremental increase in the percentage of “strength” items from 2006 to 2007.

The above positive performance is reinforced by the favourable response from learners to the last section of the questionnaire. The results reveal that learners’ general perceptions on matters related to quality, choice, pride and loyalty of the university are indeed very favourable (see Table 2). It is most satisfying to note that more than 90% of learners are loyal and proud of being an OUM learner. Learners who are at their first choice institution tend to feel more satisfied with their educational experience.

However, observation 4 is the most critical outcome of this study; these areas need to be discussed, explored, prioritised and responded to. If due attention is not given, OUM runs the risk of increasing learner dissatisfaction and ultimately impacting learner retention.

Table 2: Student Responses to Issues on Quality of, Choice of, Pride in and Loyalty to OUM

NO.	STATEMENT	% YES
1.	OUM is a University that is equivalent to other higher learning institutions in terms of quality	91
2.	If I am given the chance to go through the learning process again, I will choose OUM	92
3.	I will encourage others (eg. family, members, and friends) to study in OUM	95
4.	I am proud as OUM's student	97
5.	I will continue my study in OUM until I graduate, whatever the situation may be	98

Items in the HILS quadrant and their Importance-Satisfaction Gap Scores

From the above, it is pertinent that efforts be made to try and move the items in HILS Quadrant (*Concentrate here*) to HIHS Quadrant (*Keep up the good work*). In order to do so, we need to examine each of the items in the HILS quadrant. Table 3 gives a list of the items by dimension and I-S Gap Scores. Learner-Centredness tops the list with 8 items with I-S Gap Scores greater than 1.0, followed by Teaching and Learning (5 items), Student Affairs Management (2 items), Student Record Management (1 item) and Assessment (1 item).

Under “learner-centredness”, caring and problem-solving are the main items that are least satisfying to the learners. OUM has to attend to these issues in order to improve on its performance in these areas. The other dimension that requires a closer examination is “teaching and learning”. In this dimension, learners are not satisfied with learning centre facilities, quality of modules, CD-ROM as supplementary learning material, Guidance on project-based courses and Digital library services. As before OUM has to enhance its performance in these areas to improve further.

OUM’S INITIATIVES

Successful universities realise that it is very important to retain learners rather than concentrating on attracting new learners. One reason is that through learner satisfaction a competitive advantage can be gained (Elliott & Shin, 2002) and they can be marketed as the university’s marketing tools. Elliott and Shin also argued that satisfaction is a worthy variable to study because it has a number of learner and course related benefits including increase in motivation and lower attrition rates. In another study carried out by Washburn & Petrosius, 2004, they found that the perceived benefits associated with attending a particular institution, for example its location, facilities, reputation, curriculum, quality of services, etc. have a strong influence on learners’ decision.

Table 3: Importance-Satisfaction Gaps of Service Items in High-Importance-Low-Satisfaction (HILS) Quadrant: 2007

NO	DIMENSION	ITEM SERVICE	IS GAP	QUADRANT
1	TL	The facilities at Learning Centres	1.42	HILS
2	TL	Quality modules	1.20	HILS
3	TL	CD-ROM as supplementary learning material	1.06	HILS
4	TL	Guidance on project-based courses	1.03	HILS
5	TL	Digital library services	1.00	HILS
6	TL	Additional tutorial sessions	0.79	HILS
7	TL	Modules in English	0.48	HILS
8	SRM	Credit transfer information	1.03	HILS
9	SRM	Duration for credit transfer process	0.92	HILS
10	SRM	Staggered fee payment	0.72	HILS
11	SAM	Examination Clinics	1.37	HILS
12	SAM	Learner Services Centre (LSC)	1.08	HILS
13	SAM	Learning skill workshop for new students	0.97	HILS
14	SAM	Dialog sessions	0.81	HILS
15	RO	Students' handbook (soft and hard copy)	0.83	HILS
16	RO	New student registration at PPW/T	0.75	HILS
17	RO	Registration briefing for new learners	0.72	HILS
18	RO	Online entry application	0.72	HILS
19	LC	OUM HQ staff are caring	1.22	HILS
20	LC	Student affairs staff are caring	1.22	HILS
21	LC	Learning Centre staff are caring	1.16	HILS
22	LC	Faculty staff cares about my performance	1.16	HILS
23	LC	Support staff are caring	1.09	HILS
24	LC	Problem solving by PPW/T staff	1.08	HILS
25	LC	Problem solving by Faculties	1.08	HILS
26	LC	Problem solving by support staff	1.05	HILS
27	A	Conduciveness of exam hall	1.16	HILS
28	A	Re-marking of assignment/examination scrips	0.97	HILS
29	A	Mid semester examination	0.42	HILS

In OUM, priority-satisfaction survey is a tool that has been used to identify its strengths and weaknesses, with a view to continuously improve its services to its adult learners, so as to ensure that these satisfied learners persist in their studies despite of all challenges and difficulties. As part-time learners, more often than not, learners have to face the extra challenge of managing their time and organising their life schedules so as to avoid conflicts with work, family and study. Based on this premise, the university's leadership has at all times emphasised the critical importance of adopting "learner centred" approach in all our day-to-day interactions and decision making. OUM takes pride in embracing the five shared values: Caring, Innovative, Dedication, Integrity, and Professionalism. The Human Resource Department which emphasises capacity building for all staff involved in providing services to learners, particularly the front-liners has put aside substantial budget allocations for Customer Relationship Management (CRM) training. The Learner Services Centre which was established as a one-stop centre caters to learner enquiries and problems via its toll free number. Through OUM's e-learning platform myLMS, learners are free to interact and get connected to peers, tutors and staff, through emails and forums. They can channel their problems and inquiries through email, fax or even phones. Each department has a learner charter, which promises that all learner enquiries and problems be attended to within 48 hours. At every end of the month, customer care meeting is conducted to ensure all matters pertaining to learners are given due attention and action. In fact, OUM does subscribe to Elliott's (2003) observation who indicates that learner centeredness determines how satisfied learners are with their overall educational experience.

Similarly, the teaching and learning aspects have always been given serious attention. Learners have come on board with definite goals of achieving their degrees and diplomas for career advancement. To assist learners in going through their studies, numerous initiatives have been put in place. OUM has invested heavily in both its owned and rented learning centres, on appropriate facilities to create a conducive learning environment. Faculties and the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology have worked hand in hand to review, revise and improve on the quality of modules. Good modules will make it easier for learners to self manage their studies, and to further enhance their learning,

CD-ROMs are also provided for some difficult courses. Some faculties, for example, Faculty of Information Technology and Multimedia Communications introduce project-based course works, with the objective of giving greater exposure to learners on "real world" learning. Above all, OUM empowers its learners to be responsible in their own learning. The Digital Library is meant to be fully exploited and well used by learners to enhance their learning. However, Table 3 reveals that OUM has not been able to completely meet learners' expectations in these items.

It is particularly interesting to note that the findings of this study parallels that of Elliott and Healy (2001), who examined which aspects of a students' educational experience are most important in influencing overall student satisfaction. They found that only in 3 out of 11 dimensions, the discrepancies between importance and satisfaction predicted overall student satisfaction. The relevant dimensions include: "student centeredness" (which relates to the universities' effort to convey to students that they are welcome and valued), "campus climate" (which relates to the extent a university provides a sense of campus pride and belonging) and "instructional effectiveness" (which assesses a student's academic experience about the curriculum, quality of the curriculum and effectiveness of faculty staff).

CONCLUSION

The paper has identified the major strengths and weaknesses of OUM in providing its support services to its learners using the Importance-Satisfaction Matrix. Overall, the results indicate that OUM has improved in its provision of services in 2007 compared to 2006 in that it has managed to shift a number of service items from the low priority and low satisfaction quadrants to those of high importance and high satisfaction. This is reinforced by the positive response of learners on the issues related to quality, choice, pride and loyalty of the university.

However, one glaring weakness that was indicated by the movements of items in the I-S Matrix was in the areas of Learner-Centredness and Teaching and Learning. The appearance of 8 items of learner centeredness, and 5 items of teaching and learning, with I-S Gaps of more than 1.0 are definitely a cause for concern. OUM needs to improve in this aspect by showing greater care and concern and resolving learner problems and issues with greater urgency and promptness.

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