

A Conceptual Framework on Cultural Intelligence towards International Students' Satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship of cultural intelligence towards international students' satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs. Cultural intelligence is still a relatively new concept especially with the international students who are pursuing their study in Malaysia IHLs. Based on the thorough review of previous studies, this paper intensely depends on the cultural intelligence towards international students' satisfaction on services that provided for them. **Design/Methodology** – This current study will discuss or focus specifically on international students' satisfaction who are pursuing their studies in Malaysia IHLs. The researcher will highlight the new interesting topic on CQ which is related with international students in this country. The implication for future research, discussion, and overall conclusion are also presented at the end of the paper. **Finding** – As the conclusion, the researcher has proposed the framework which conceptualizes the independent variable which is CQ and it's become the major contributor to the satisfaction among international students in Malaysia IHLs. Furthermore, the management also needs to know whether international students are successfully adjusted and fit with the pristine environment while pursuing their higher education in this country. Addressing the problem of cultural differences in the learning process is very important among international students. Hence, the cultural intelligence (CQ) can help and lead the international students to deal with cross-cultural complexities. Satisfied students will promote the IHLs by positive word of mouth (WOM) which will affect the institution's reputation. However, to satisfy customers from different background and different culture will be even more difficult. Therefore, it is very crucial for the IHLs in Malaysia particularly to identify whether the international students are fully satisfied with their needs and wants as well as the services that provided to them.

Keywords: Student satisfaction; Malaysia IHLs; International students; Cultural intelligence.



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1. Introduction

Education is very important in human life and its play a significant part for the development and advancement of once country. The success of any countries in the world depends on accomplishment and the progress of its educational system (Becket and Brookes, 2008). According to Brislin (1981), globalization and internationalization have encouraging more people to travel outside from their home countries in order to continue their life, to work or even to pursue their studies. Those people who are pursuing their study apart from their home country is known as international students. In other words, international students can be defined as individuals who reside in the host country temporarily to participate as international exchange students in an educational context (Paige, 1990).

Malaysia is one of the developing countries in South East Asia, that challenges with the globalization and internationalization of education. Moreover, Malaysia government has been confronted with this challenge by attracting international students to study in public higher education institutions in this country (Rasli *et al.*, 2012). Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has realized the importance of international students to the national income. Therefore, the Malaysian government has been set up the Strategic Plan of Malaysian Higher Education in order to achieve the goals, vision and mission for Malaysia to become a hub of educational excellence of higher education by the year 2020 (MOHE, 2012). The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) 2007-2020, gave emphasis to comprehensive internationalization efforts capable of making Malaysia as a regional hub with 200,000 international students' enrolment by the year of 2020 (MOHE, 2007;2011a;2013). Based on this strategic plan, MOHE is planning to increase the number of international student enrolment by monitoring international students' perception of the quality of academic and services provided by Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions (MOHE, 2011b). Accordingly, the aim of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has been successful in increasing access to higher education and it should emphasize the quality and improvement of its standards of higher education. This has caused a surge of transformation in the delivery system among most higher education institutions in Malaysia. Following to the Malaysia determination to attract more international students to come and study in Malaysia, clearly, the transition to higher learning institution life among the international students can be a stressful period in which many changes are taking place.

Students satisfaction has been one of the main factors in order to retain and attract international students to educational institutions (Arambewela *et al.*, 2005), (Kamil and Eti, 2013). According to Guolla (1999) researchers

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who have studied student satisfaction will take the role of students as customers even though there are many debates about the role of students, for example, they can be as customers, clients, producers and also as products. In the context of higher learning industry, students are the major customer for the universities. Therefore, success or failure of an institution is largely depending on its student satisfaction. To fulfill students' satisfaction as well as their expectations, the IHLs need to understand their perceptions entirely (Khan *et al.*, 2014). This is because the satisfied student can contribute in many ways for the organization especially IHLs success. This includes both financial and academic contribution as well as promoting the IHLs by positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, increased students' loyalty and the good image of the higher education institution which will affect its reputation (Arambewela and Zuhair, 2003; Arambewela and Hall, 2006; Katircioglu *et al.*, 2012; Slethaug and Manjula, 2012). However, to satisfy the customers is not easy, specifically to satisfy the customers with the different cultural background will be even more difficult. Numerous studies have been conducted on customer satisfaction in the marketing as well as management field. Limited study has been done in education field especially in higher education institutions or universities (Abu Hassan *et al.*, 2008). Other than that, there are many kinds of literature available regarding customer satisfaction among international students but, majority of the researchers are conducted on customer satisfaction among international students in developed countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States of America and New Zealand (Athiyaman, 1997; Joseph *et al.*, 2005; Oldfield and Baron, 2000). On the other words, there are few kinds of literature on customer satisfaction among international students in developing countries like Malaysia (Abu Hassan *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is very crucial for the Malaysia IHLs to identify whether the international students are fully satisfied with their needs and wants as well as the services that provided to them.

Adjusting to innovative culture and unfamiliar environments or surroundings bring challenge and stressful experience, particularly for those with no experience living in the host country. It is vital for the international students to prepare themselves well in adjusting or adapting to new cultural such as cultural morals, standards, and customs amongst their original country and the host country (Ang L. D. and Liamputtong, 2007). Based on the study by Yusoff and Shankar (2010), international students can face challenges such as culture shock, lack of support, homesickness, limited social skills, prejudice, stereotyping and many more. During intercultural interactions, international students with cultural intelligent will have the capability to select and exhibit opposite behavior to effectively 'fit' into the new environment. Consequently, developing the sensitivity of cultural intelligence or CQ among the university management is important, where the international students can contract and cooperate well with individuals from a dissimilar background of cultures (Ang S. *et al.*, 2007). Hence, this paper aims to develop a conceptual framework for cultural intelligence toward international student satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs for future research. Moreover, this paper intended to contribute to the Malaysian literature pertaining to this issue and it's also will provide useful insight for the Malaysia IHLs management in managing international students in this country.

2. Internationalization in Higher Education Sector

Internationalization in higher learning education sector has become an increasingly very important issue around the world which is not exceptional for Malaysia too. It is one of the important transformation processes of developing countries towards globalization. Moreover, globalization and democratization of higher education in Malaysia have elevated much interest among the educators as well as the researchers to understand this phenomenon (Mohd. Yusoff and Nadarajah, 2010). Education has been identified as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) and internationalization of higher education sector is a top priority for the Malaysian Government. Malaysia is trying to position itself as a stable, safe and relatively cheap place for overseas students in pursuing their study in this country (MOHE, 2011b). In the context of today's internationalization in higher education, many more students pursuing their study away from their home countries. In Malaysia, international student enrolment is an important goal to the country's higher education for national economic growth as well as for nation's society (Mohd Yusoff and Othman, 2011). Ye (2006) defined international students as an evolution group of peoples who live in an overseas country in order to further their studies and to achieve the educational goals. Recently, Malaysian universities and colleges are still attracting many international students from different part of the world. Accordingly, to become a major player and enjoy the benefits of having international students, Malaysia essentially need to understand their satisfaction and adjustment problems faced by international students and try to provide them with the best services and the right support. Furthermore, although the number of international students in Malaysia IHLs campuses continues to increase, only limited numbers of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia country (Mohd Yusoff and Othman, 2011; Yusoff and Othman, 2011).

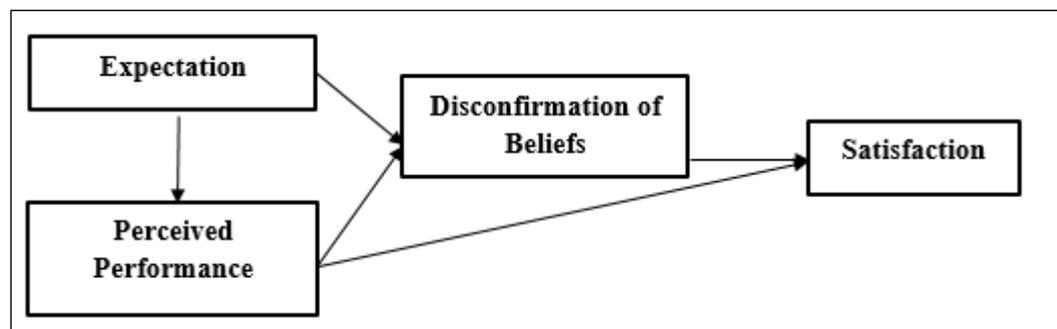
Student satisfaction plays an important role in the success of the university and can act as an essential tool in enhancing its perceived service quality (Abdullah, 2006). Furthermore, student satisfaction is a key determinant for attracting more customers to educational providers (Arambewela *et al.*, 2005; Schertzer and Schertzer, 2004). The universities must set up their strategies to ascertain the key determinants of student satisfaction as to help universities prioritize the services they provided them for the purpose of resource allocation (Douglas *et al.*, 2006). Helgesen and Nasset (2007) in their study has resulted and revealed that students who are satisfied may attract new students by engaging positive word of mouth (WOM) communication in order to encourage their friends to further their study in the same university. Developing satisfied customers amongst international students should, therefore, be a primary goal of higher education (Petruzzellis *et al.*, 2006). It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to the national economy. As such, universities in Malaysia have to consider various preferences and needs of international students in order to satisfy them. According to DeShields *et al.* (2005), it is important for universities to develop strategies in order to differentiate their services from others. The previous study by Tian and Wang (2010), they mentioned that cultural differences have a direct influence on the level of students' satisfaction

regarding their perception of the services. Other than that, they also mentioned to satisfy the customers with the same cultural background is not that easy. Accordingly, to satisfy the customers with different background will be even more difficult. In the context of the competitive Malaysian higher education sector, further research must be done in order to identify what are the services that management of the Malaysian universities can provide to international students. Therefore, if Malaysia wants to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in this very competitive industry, it is crucial that the management of Malaysian universities must develop a thorough understanding of the university services that can bring the greatest impact on student satisfaction (Yeo, 2008).

3. Students' Satisfaction

Guolla (1999) defined student satisfaction as the service quality's barometer in the context of education in competitive advantage purposes had attracted greater attention. Arambewela *et al.* (2005) and Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) in the study stated that student satisfaction can be defined as the key determinant of the educational provider to attract more students. Agreed by Yasin and Charles (2015) defined the student satisfaction can be level through the effectiveness, competitive of advantages and an opportunity to proactively react in business education. In the context of higher learning industry, students are the major customer for the universities. Therefore, success or failure of an institution is largely depending on its student satisfaction. According to Guolla (1999), researchers who have studied student satisfaction will take the role of students as customers even though there are many debates about the role of students. For example, they can be as customers, clients, producers and also as products. Slethaug and Manjula (2012) have mentioned in their study that with positive word of mouth (WOM), the student will likely recommend highly to their family members and friends to pursue their studies at higher education or universities that they are satisfied with. Arambewela and Hall (2011) indicated that the institutions need to consider the needs of the international student as they came from different cultural background and countries. Besides, it will be increasing the number of student enrolment, reduce student attrition and enhance students' experience. No doubt that such a measure of student satisfaction is important for universities as it tells students to need expectations. Other than that, such investigations should be considered as the basis of optical characteristics of the service provided by universities (Arambewela and Hall, 2008).

However, despite the importance of student satisfaction, there is a lack of consensus as to how student satisfaction should be defined and therefore measured (Navaro *et al.*, 2005; Yeo, 2008). One of the earliest efforts to define satisfaction, in general, came via the 'expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm' (Arambewela *et al.*, 2005). According to this approach, customer satisfaction is an effective outcome of a cognitive comparison between the service, the customer expected to receive (expectation) the service they actually received (performance). On the other words, expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm measures the customer's satisfaction from differences between customer's expectation and experience in perceived of products or services (Oliver, 1980; Spreng and Jr, 2003). Proposed by the theory, the level of satisfaction bring the difference result between the performance of the expectation and perceived (Oliver, 1980). Below is the illustration of the first model of EDT proposed by Oliver (1997).



First EDT Model (Oliver, 1997)
Source: (Oliver, 1980)

Researchers have used the disconfirmation theory in order to measure antecedents of satisfaction. In the other words, satisfaction as a function of the size and direction of disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is a function of the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions (Brady and Robertson, 2001). Basically, satisfaction is the result of direct experiences with products or services, and it occurs by comparing perceptions against a standard (i.e. expectations). However, in Malaysia, there is still little information about the satisfaction among international students, especially in Malaysia IHLs. Therefore, the dependent variable for this study is focusing purposely on international students' satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs.

4. Cultural Intelligence

According to Earley and Ang (2003), CQ is defined as an individual's ability to adjust efficiently to a new cultural context. Persons with a high level of culturally intelligent will have a solid sense of their own efficacy or ability to familiarize or to understand another culture (Earley and Ang, 2003; Earley and Peterson, 2004). On the other words, CQ referring to the capability by an individual to function effectively in a culturally diverse context. Ramsay *et al.* (1999) suggested that international students need to make greater efforts to face challenges when they

in a host country academic institution compared to domestic students. Adjusting to a new culture can be so challenging and stressful experience and may put international students at a greater risk than students in general. [Lin and Yi \(1997\)](#) have mentioned that international students face common as well as their own unique problems such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial problem, misunderstandings and loneliness. Furthermore, coming from diverse cultures, they (international students) cannot get rid or cannot escape from cultural shock and will be facing many astounding barriers.

Therefore, most of the international students facing inflexible challenges when they pursue higher education outside from their home countries and need to live with a new environment and unfamiliar surrounding differently from their home ([Ozturgut and Murphy, 2009](#)). During intercultural interactions, international students with cultural intelligent will have the capability to select and exhibit opposite behaviour to effectively fit into the pristine environment. Consequently, developing the sensitivity of cultural intelligence or CQ among the university management is important, where the international students can contract and cooperate well with individuals from a dissimilar background of cultures ([Earley and Peterson, 2004](#)). Moreover, when international students develop the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication skills and demonstrate appropriate behaviour with their daily routine and these factors improve life engagement and satisfaction with the services provided in the host country ([Ward and Rana Deuba, 2000](#))

Past studies have provided clear evidence that CQ positively influences international students' sociocultural adjustment ([Ward and Rana Deuba, 1999;2000; Ward et al., 2009](#)). CQ positively influences acculturative adjustment ([Wang et al., 2015](#)) and CQ positively influence international students' psychological adjustment ([Harrison and Brower, 2011](#)). CQ is a construct with many dimensions involve of meta-cognitive, cognitive, behavioral and motivational. All these four (4) multidimensional construct will be explained further in the next subtopic.

4.1. Meta-Cognitive CQ

The meta-cognitive CQ which is also known as Strategy CQ is defined as knowledge or control over cognitions leading to deep information process which relate to culture ([Ang S. et al., 2004](#)). They also indicate that meta-cognitive CQ is the individual's cultural conscious and awareness ability questioning cultural assumptions. Moreover, [Ang S. et al. \(2007\)](#) mentioned that people of high CQ strategy are more consciously of other people's cultural preferences of before and after. Thus, international students with high Strategy CQ will understand accurately on the role of behaviours by cultural diversity and ability to understand others better make quality decisions.

4.2. Cognitive CQ

The cognitive CQ reflected the norms knowledge, performs and conventions in culture differences which is expanded from the education formal, experience, and as culture-specific ([Ang S. et al., 2004; Ang S. et al., 2007](#)). International students with CQ high knowledge are perceived to interact better with others from different cultural society ([Ang S. and Van Dyne, 2008](#)) and can understand cultural similarities and alterations in the new environment or unfamiliar surroundings ([Brislin et al., 2006](#)).

4.3. Motivational CQ

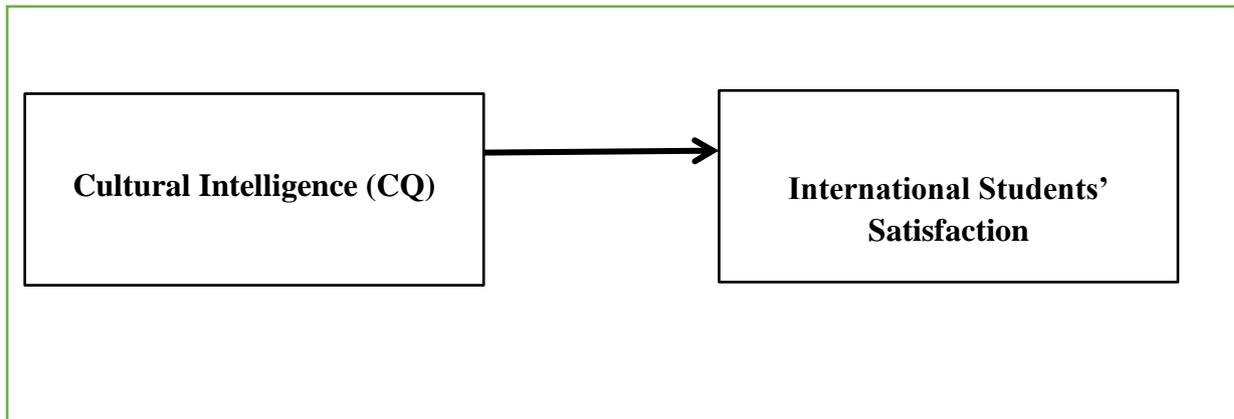
Motivational CQ drives beyond differences of culture that deal with the motivation behind cognitive processes and cognitive knowledge. Those with high motivational CQ have more motivation to seek out opportunities to interact and to engage in cross-cultural situations. According to [Ng and Earley \(2006\)](#) motivational CQ consists of three (3) primary motivators such as enhancement (wanting to feel good about oneself), growth (wanting to challenge and improve oneself) and continually(the desire for continuity and predictability in ones' life). These three (3) components will direct and motivate from an individual adaption to a new cultural setting Thus, high motivational CQ of the international students more conscious efforts to use information and knowledge which is related to the new culture.

4.4. Behavioural CQ

Behavioural CQ involves the competence in engaging adaptiveness behaviours in accordance with cognition and motivation on cultural values of specific things. Basically, behavioural CQ regulates the action and interaction pattern of a student by that behaves toward the cultural differences' situation being manifested ([Ang L. D. and Liamputtong, 2007](#)). Thus, international students with high behavioural CQ are more flexible and successfully on adjust and modify their behaviours to adapt to the diverse cultural situation.

5. Conceptual Framework Development

A diagrammatical model that demonstrates the cultural intelligence towards international student satisfaction is presented in below:



Based on the discussion above, a graphical explanation is drawn as the above diagram in order to depict the proposed conceptual model. The development of the proposed framework on cultural intelligence towards international students' satisfaction was derived from previous literature on students' satisfaction and cultural intelligence as well and adopted theory on customer satisfaction which is known as expectancy disconfirmation theory. Drawing on an in-depth review of the past studies, this framework suggests that the independent variable is the key factor that will sustain and improved the international students' satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs.

6. Future Recommendations

The higher education institution in Malaysia is now experiencing a competitive and commercial environment due to increasing the number of international students' enrolment who are pursuing their studies in this country. As students have more choice, it is imperative that the higher education sector in Malaysia not only aim to attract new students but also retain the current ones. It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to the national economy. Therefore, it is crucial for the Ministry of Higher Education to pay greater attention to the adjustments and transition issues as well as the satisfaction among international students. Based on the thorough review of previous studies, this paper intensely depends on the cultural intelligence (CQ) towards international students' satisfaction on services that provided for them. Hence, the researcher has proposed the framework which conceptualizes the independent variable which is CQ and it's become as the major contributor to the satisfaction among international students in Malaysia IHLs. As we know, it is not easy in assessing students' satisfaction with their educational experience but, it can be very helpful for the university to build a strong relationship with their existing and potential students.

Malaysia is receiving a huge number of international students from year to year. In conjunction due to this matter, Malaysia IHLs need to ensure that the campus structure, system and environment have to support international students' learning needs and development. Besides focusing on academic studies, it's very important for international students to sharpen their intercultural competence equally. Cultural intelligence is also known as CQ is the capability for an individual to adapt or to make the adjustment to a new cultural context effectively (Earley and Ang, 2003). Therefore, developing the sensitivity of CQ among international students can help them while dealing, interacting as well as communicating with other people from different cultures. CQ is still a relatively new concept especially with the international students who are pursuing their study in Malaysia IHLs. Limited study about CQ among international students in Malaysia especially on the awareness of CQ still in the early stage.

Malaysia educational sector needs to require cultural programs and structured support system as well to the international students who are pursuing their studies in this country. Even though it is a crucial moving and it will be one of the challenging tasks for them (the management of Malaysian education industry) but it will help the international students to adapt and make their adjustments with Malaysian learning environment smoothly. The researcher recommends for future studies could include other possible dimensions or new variables which suitable in order to extend the proposed model further purposely for international students' satisfaction in Malaysia IHLs. In addition, the findings of future research will bring a better understanding among future researchers in concerning this interesting topic. Moreover, the findings also will serve the guidelines for the Malaysia IHLs management in order to improve the quality of services and amenities for the students' conveniences and being the starting point for future studies specifically on the acculturation in Malaysia IHLs context particularly.

7. Practical Implication

The findings of this study will serve the guidelines for the Malaysia IHLs management in order to improve the quality of services and amenities for the students' conveniences and being the starting point for future studies specifically on the acculturation in Malaysia IHLs context particularly. Malaysia IHLs could design specific action plans in order to improve their services towards international students to have a positive learning experience while pursuing their study in this country. Therefore, this study can be a useful reference for Malaysia IHLs to understand on how they can help the international students increase their satisfaction with the services provided and adjusted the sociocultural life while pursuing their study in this country.

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