

REEXAMINATION OF THE DETERMINANTS OF MASTER STUDENT SATISFACTION

**Dr Nik Kamariah Nik Mat
Dr Nor Hayati Ahmad
Rusmawati Ismail**

Abstract:

In pursuing world class university objective, UUM is continuously enhancing the quality standard of its programs. One of the ways to increase quality of higher education is through identifying the student satisfaction determinants. Previous study conducted in similar topic (Nik Mat, Ahmad, & Ismail, 1999) shows that lecturer, language and administration contributed significantly to overall master student's satisfaction while language, administration and core curriculum significantly influenced recommendation. The objectives of this study are (i) to determine the factors contributing to the students' satisfaction and recommendation and (ii) to compare the results of this study with the previous study. The study investigates the relationships between five predictor variables (infrastructure, core curriculum, lecturer, language and administration), and two criterion variables (satisfaction and recommendation). A three- page questionnaire was distributed to 150 masters' students. 71 responses (47% response rate) were obtained. The findings indicate that the overall satisfaction towards the Masters programs is determined significantly by infrastructure and administration. Administration is again found to be significantly related to recommendation. The implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic changes in global market require managers to be more knowledgeable, multi-disciplined and versatile. These changes create a high demand for graduate management education. Higher learning institutions (HLIs) globally are striving to capture this highly profitable market segment. Realizing the earning potential of this segment, many universities are gradually changing their role from being education providers to profit-oriented organisations. They adopt market-oriented approach in marketing their programs by offering education programs that have competitive edge and are customer-focused (Doyle, 1992). Kohli & Jaworski (1990) said that marketing is the responsibility of all departments and Narver and Slater (1994) expand the concept of market-orientation into customer-orientation, competitor orientation and inter-functional co-ordination. In the context of education, HLIs should provide high quality programs that are customer-oriented to give value and satisfaction to students who are their customers.

Customers' satisfaction is vital for winning customers, gaining their loyalty and sustaining business. Like in other businesses, HLIs are facing stiff competition to secure sufficient number of students entering into their programs and graduating with high and quality qualifications. Due to this severe competition posed by various public and private HLIs, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) needs to produce programs that have quality, provide competitive edge and meet its customer's satisfaction. In response to this need, UUM is continuously improving the quality of its Masters programs in line with its vision of

achieving a world-class university status in 2005 and a contribution to the Nation's Vision 2020.

One way of improving the quality of university programs is to periodically evaluate the satisfaction level of the students (Hurley & Litamaki, 1995). Nik Mat et al. (1999) found that Masters students' satisfaction is significantly related to lecturers, administration and the language used. Additionally, this study shows that good core-curriculum is important for program recommendation to others. Hence, the objectives of this study are (i) to determine the factors contributing to the students' satisfaction level in 2004 and (ii) to compare the results of this study with that of 1999.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework and past studies followed by Methodology in Section 3. Section 4 presents the findings while the implication and conclusion are discussed in Section 5.

THEORY AND PAST STUDIES

Quality in Higher Education

The issue of quality has become a dominant theme for both private and public sector education. The concept of customer-driven service quality is a meaningful one for educators who wish to develop measures of the quality of education in tertiary sector (Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Guolla, 1999; Athiyaman, 1997).

Market orientation and customer orientation

Market orientation is a term used to describe a focus on customers. (Doyle, 1992). Customer orientation is a set of beliefs that customer needs and satisfaction are the priority of an organization (Deshpande, Farley, & Webster, 2000). Hence, market orientation and customer orientation has been used interchangeably (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Deshpande et al., 2000). Many universities and colleges practice customer-driven approach, whereby the students are "customers" and education is the "product" or "service" offered (Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Berger and Wallingford, 1996; Licata and Franwick, 1996). Teaching quality of master's program is often associated with the service quality (SERVQUAL) (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1986). The five dimensions of SERVQUAL: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy appears to have merit to evaluate the performance of tertiary education institutions. Empirical findings indicate that SERVQUAL could be an significant predictor of satisfaction (Soutar & McNeil, 1996; Hittman, 1993; Ping, 1993; Shostack, 1977).

Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as a person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance (or outcome) in relation to his/her expectations (Kotler, 2003). If the performance falls short of expectations, the customer is dissatisfied. If the performance matches the expectations, the customer is satisfied. If performance exceeds expectations, the customer is highly satisfied or delighted.

(Kotler, 2003) postulates that by giving customers satisfaction, organizations can win customers. Customer-oriented companies aim at market engineering for sustainability. However, customers are faced with many choices in the market causing them to estimate offers, which will deliver most value. Higher learning institutions need to be especially concerned today with their customer satisfaction level because the internet provides a swift

and an effective communication tool for consumers to spread word of mouth to the rest of the world. Satisfied customers are likely to become loyal customers and provide good recommendation. Accordingly, market-oriented HLIs are intent on developing stronger bonds with their customers or customer relationship management with the aim of maximising customer loyalty.

Hennig-Thurau & Klee, (1977) view customer satisfaction with an organisation's products and services as the key to a company's success and long-term competitiveness. Customer satisfaction has been identified as an important marketing outcome. As such, firms should continue to track and assess customer satisfaction (Conrad, Brown, & Harmon, 1997). On the other hand, Martin & Bray (1997) find that program's infrastructure and core academic courses offered contribute to the quality enhancement.

Components of Student's Satisfaction

Martin & Bray (1997) identify two components of students' satisfaction: infrastructure and program's core curriculum. Infrastructure includes students support services, physical facilities and overall grading practices while core curriculum refers to major courses required by all students. Studies had found that program's infrastructure and core academic courses offered contribute to overall satisfaction of master's students (Colbert, Levary, & Shaner, 2000; Pitman, Motwani, Kumar, & Cheng, 1995; Martin & Bray, 1977). Nik Mat et al. (1999) include infrastructure, core curriculum, administration, language, and lecturer as the determinants of master's students satisfaction. They found that lecturer, administration and language are significant predictors of overall satisfaction of master's students.

Betts(2003) study on 2000 students at five different institutions in the USA revealed that the top ten most critical factors impacting overall students satisfaction are attractiveness of campus, variety of courses, academic quality of students at college, quality of instruction in selected majors, quality of instruction in introductory courses, academic support from faculty, course registration process, dining services, college/student orientation program and academic support from administrators. Mavondo, Zaman, & Abubakar (2000) researched on 152 undergraduate students attending summer courses in a University in Australia found that the determinants of student satisfaction are academic reputation, quality of lecturers and provision facilities. Survey undergraduates' satisfaction level shows that on average 60% of students are satisfied with curriculum and 40 % are satisfied with books and learning, 42% are satisfied with quality and quantity of lecturer's attention (*The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa*, 2001).

Recommendation

Studies have shown that satisfaction is highly correlated to recommendation. For example, highly satisfied students recommend programs, return as graduate student, recruit prospective students or regularly donate as alumni (Davis & Swanson, 2001); (Guolla, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

Population and Samples of respondents

The total population of the UUM Masters program at end of May, 2004 is 1916 students (source: HEA and EDC UUM). The breakdown of the student population by programs is shown in Appendix 1. Based on this population size, the sample is determined using the formula introduced by (Aaker, Kumar and Day, 1995) as illustrated below.

$$n = \frac{(z^2 \times \sigma^2)}{H^2}$$

where z = confidence level (at 5%, z =2)
 σ = standard deviation
 σ^2 = standard variance
H =sampling error or desired precision

From the pilot test, z =2, σ =0.41, H = 0.095 and n is calculated as follows:

$$N = \frac{(2)^2 \times (0.41)^2}{(0.095)^2}$$

$$= 74$$

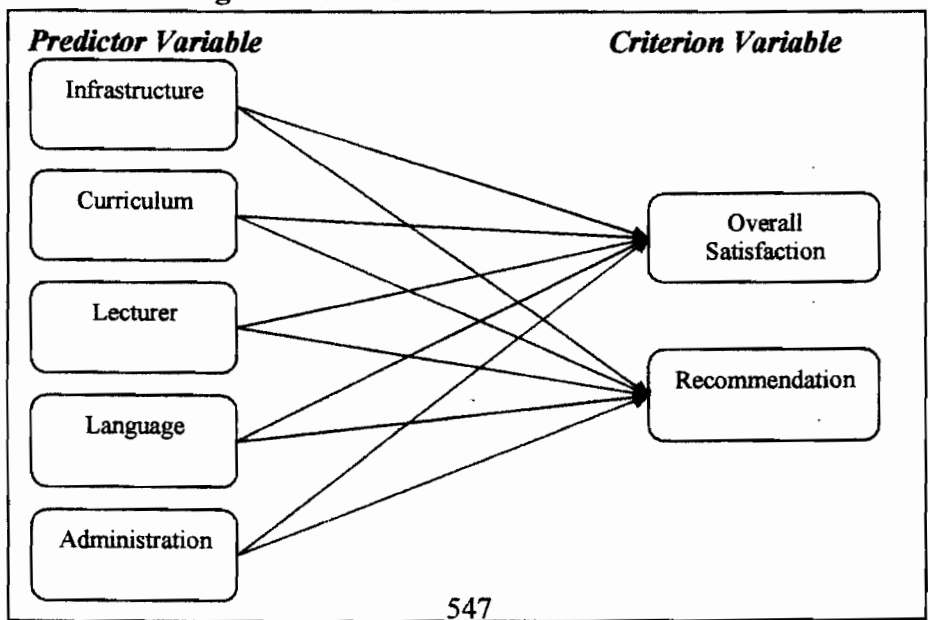
Therefore, the sample size is 74 students.

Conceptual Framework
Predictor and Criterion Variables

From the literature reviewed, this study has identified five main predictors of customers' satisfaction as shown in Figure 1. Infrastructure refers to the students' satisfaction towards physical facilities (computer services, library, classroom, and accommodation) (8-item). Curriculum is the students' satisfaction towards the variety and choice, grading, textbooks, sources, and type of courses and electives that are required in the program (7-item). Lecturer is the students' satisfaction towards the person, teaching, supervision and hours of association with a lecturer (4-items). Language refers to the students' satisfaction towards the medium of instruction used in the classrooms and the textbooks. Language could be a differentiating factor because this country is a multi-lingual society (3-item). Administration is the students' satisfaction towards the students' registration experience, fee structure, career development counselling and the entire academic administration (4-item).

All predictor variables are measured using 5-point Likert scale- "Very dissatisfied" (1) to "Very satisfied" (5). Customers' satisfaction is measured using overall satisfaction and evaluation of the components of satisfaction according to students' expectations (6-item). Satisfaction is measured by 5-point Likert scale- "Much more worst than expected" to "much better than expected" (5). Recommendation is measured using the "very unlikely (5) to "very likely" Likert scale of recommending the masters program to others (5-item). All the measures of variables are summarized and itemised in Appendix (Table 1).

Figure 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Y1: Overall Satisfaction	71	6	0.76
Y2: Recommendation	71	6	0.74
X1: Infrastructure Satisfaction	71	8	0.73
X2: Curriculum Satisfaction	71	7	0.73
X3: Lecturer Satisfaction	71	5	0.81
X4: Language Satisfaction	71	3	0.73
X5: Administration Satisfaction	71	3	0.80

The conceptual model is mathematically expressed as:

$$Y_{1,2} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{INFASAT} + \beta_2 \text{CORESAT} + \beta_3 \text{LECSAT} + \beta_4 \text{LANGSAT} + \beta_5 \text{ADMINSAT} + \epsilon$$

Please refer to Appendix 2 detailed descriptions of each variable.

Method of Analysis

Each item is checked for its reliability (Cronbach alpha). These items are further analysed using descriptive statistics. Stepwise multiple regression technique is used to identify the determinants of masters’ program satisfaction. A comparison is between current results and the 1999 results is made to find out for any differences in the satisfaction determinants over the 5 year period (1999-2003).

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the results of reliability test. The minimum Cronbach alpha value is 0.70 for all measures which indicate an acceptable level of reliability and internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 1: Reliability Coefficient

Y1: Overall Satisfaction	71	6	0.76
Y2: Recommendation	71	6	0.74
X1: Infrastructure Satisfaction	71	8	0.73
X2: Curriculum Satisfaction	71	7	0.73
X3: Lecturer Satisfaction	71	5	0.81
X4: Language Satisfaction	71	3	0.73
X5: Administration Satisfaction	71	3	0.80

Table 2 highlights interesting and marked differences in the profile of respondents between the two sample periods. There are now more female graduate students in 2003 compared to in 1999 with a younger average age of 27. In 1999, the average age of Masters’ student was 33 years old. This statistics suggests that there are more fresh graduates doing their MBA or MSc right after their undergraduate studies. In contrast, the higher average age of 33 in the 1999 sample may indicate that those students have some working experience before continuing their graduate studies. The 1999 study indicates the average number of working

experience is 9 years compared to 4 years for the 2003 respondents. This probably explains why there are more single Masters' students now compared to 1999.

Table 2: The Profile Of Respondents

	1999 sample	2003 sample
Gender - Male	72 (65.5%)	31 (43.7%)
Female	38 (34.5%)	40 (56.3%)
Marital status -Single	37 (33.6%)	53 (74.6%)
-Married	73 (66.4%)	18 (25.4%)
Program -MBA	68 (61.3%)	34 (47.3%)
MSc	42 (38.7%)	37 (52.7%)
Qualifications -Degree	109 (99.1%)	71 (100%)
Professional	1 (0.9)	0 (0%)
Type of study -full time	62(56.4%)	51(71.3%)
-part -time	48 (43.6%)	19 (28.7%)
Average age (years old)	33.35	26.85
Average work experience (years)	9	4

The descriptive analysis also highlights that the students are satisfied with most of the courses offered in the Masters programs. (See Appendix 2).

The next section discusses the analysis of the factors influencing the satisfaction level of Masters' students towards the UUM graduate programs. Five predictors as identified in the conceptual framework were analysed, first in terms of their correlation analysis and secondly, the regression results.

Table 3 shows the correlation between the satisfaction predictors and the overall satisfaction (Y1) and program recommendation (Y2). In both models, the average *rho* value of each variable is less than 0.6 except for one variable, lecturer satisfaction ($r = 0.753$). The latter statistic indicates that satisfaction towards lecturer (lecturer satisfaction) is highly correlated to curriculum satisfaction. The overall correlation results indicate that the variables are not highly correlated and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.192 suggests low multicollinearity. Graph 1 also displays a linear distribution. Both statistics thus suggests that regression assumptions are met and we can proceed with the regression analysis.

Table 3: CORRELATION MATRIX TABLE

Y1: Overall Satisfaction	1.00					
Y2: Recommendation	0.471*	1.00				
X1: Infrastructure Satisfaction	*	0.223	1.00			
X2: Curriculum Satisfaction	0.549*	0.231	0.550*	1.00		
	*	0.306	*	0.753	1.00	
	0.351*	**	0.446*	**	0.557*	1.00

X3: Lecturer Satisfaction	*	0.356	*	0.484	*	0.445	1.0
X4: Language Satisfaction	0.333*	**	0.364*	**	0.371*	**	0
X5: Administration Satisfaction	0.290*	**	0.401*	**	*		
	0.415*		*				
	*						

** . Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The regression result in table 4, based on stepwise procedure shows that satisfaction towards infrastructure and satisfaction towards administration of the UUM Masters program are significantly and positively related to the students' overall satisfaction.

Table 4: Step-Wise Multiple Regression Influence on Overall Satisfaction

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.33$

Predictors	Unstd. Beta	R ²	ΔR ²	VIF
X1: Infrastructure Satisfaction	0.403 (t=4.252)**	0.301	0.301	1.192
X5: Administration Satisfaction	0.163 (t=2.175)**	0.346	0.045	1.192

The two predictors collectively explain 33 percent variation in the overall satisfaction. On an individual basis, a one unit change in students' satisfaction results in an increase of 0.4 unit change in the overall satisfaction, while a one unit change in satisfaction on administration leads to 0.16 unit change in the overall satisfaction. Based on the coefficient estimate and the t value, infrastructure appears to have a greater influence on the students' overall satisfaction on the UUM Masters programs.

Table 5 presents a comparison between the overall satisfaction predictors between the 1999 and 2003 sample period. The results show that there is a change in the satisfaction predictors. In 1999, the students' satisfaction was determined by 3 factors – lecturer, language and administration. These three factors are significantly related to the overall satisfaction and explain 44 percent change in the overall satisfaction. In contrast, two variables namely infrastructure and administration emerge as significant predictors of the overall satisfaction in 2003 sample. Administration is the students' satisfaction towards the students' registration experience, fee structure, career development counselling and the entire academic administration. Infrastructure refers to the students' satisfaction towards physical facilities (computer services, library, classroom, and accommodation).

Table 5: Overall Satisfaction Between Two Sample Period

Predictors	1999	2003
X1: Infrastructure Satisfaction	—	0.40 (4.25)**
X3: Lecturer Satisfaction	0.66 (9.19)**	—
X4: Language Satisfaction	0.15 (2.03)**	—
X5: Administration Satisfaction	0.19 (2.43)**	0.16 (2.18)**
R2	0.44	0.35
Adjusted R2		0.33
N	109	71

This result suggests that administration remains a very significant factor in determining the overall student satisfaction in 1999 and in 2003. However, lecturer and language are not significant in 2003 sample. The result shows that infrastructure, instead, is a new factor that has a significant influence on the overall satisfaction. The two criterion variables - administration and infrastructure satisfaction account for 33 percent change in the overall student satisfaction. These findings are consistent with Betts (2003) and Mavondo, Zaman, & Abubakar (2000).

**Table 6: STEP-WISE MULTIPLE REGRESSION
Influence on Recommendation**

$$\text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.43$$

Predictors	Unstd. Beta	R ²	AR ²	VIF
X: Lecturer Satisfaction	0.560 (t=3.556)**	0.358	0.358	
X5: Administration Satisfaction	0.229 (t=2.346)**	0.346	0.074	

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The dynamic changes in global market create a high demand for graduate management education such that education today becomes a highly profitable business venture. This trend has changed the traditional role of higher institutions from education providers to profit-oriented organisations. Market-orientation approach is used as a successful corporate business strategy to win graduates to enrol in graduate programs. This study is a follow-up of Nik Mat et al (1999) study on the assessment of students' satisfaction on Masters program in UUM. The objectives of the study is to determine the factors contributing to the students' satisfaction level in 2004 and to compare the results of this study with that of 1999.

The findings show that there are more unmarried, female students in UUM Masters' programs in 2004 than in 1999. The average age of graduate student is 26 years old as compared to 33 years old in 1999. This finding reveals that many Masters students are fresh from their undergraduate studies and the present average working experience of the graduate student is 4 years compared to 9 years previously. Satisfaction towards administration and satisfaction towards infrastructure are found significantly and positively related to the students' overall satisfaction to Masters' program. However, satisfaction towards administration has significant and positive influence on students' recommendation of UUM Masters program to others.

What are the implications of this result? This result implies that the students, which are UUM's customers, are very concerned with the quality of administration and infrastructure of MBA and MSc programs. This means that they would be satisfied with UUM graduate programs and would recommend the programs to others if they are satisfied with registration experience, fee structure, career development counselling, the entire academic administration and the physical facilities.

The possible reasons that these factors are identified as significant are (i) infrastructure and administration could be the areas where quality service is very essential and might possibly be the areas that provide competitive edge to satisfied customers. These are also areas to enhance market-orientation in promoting the graduate programs and (ii) the curriculum of graduate programs offered by other universities are generally homogeneous, thus the students are looking for programs that could provide them with added value.

The contributions of this study are firstly, an empirical investigation of the determinants of the Masters' students satisfaction level, which has not been widely studied in Malaysia before. Secondly, the findings of this study could serve as a basis for UUM to improve the competitive edge of its masters programs towards achieving its world-class university status.

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Appendix 1

Breakdown of UUM Masters' Students By Program

Program	Number of students
MBA	835
MSc (Management)	12
MSc (Management)	11
MSc (Management)	1
MBA	136
MBA (IT)	189
MBA (general)	10
MBA (arts)	27
MBA (accounting)	60
MSc (economics)	17
MSc (Education management)	222
MSc (International Accounting)	22
MSc (Intelligent System)	29
MSc (Tourism)	3
MSc (Decision Science)	35
MSc (Public Administration)	46
MSc (Finance)	36
MSc (Banking)	3
MSc (Accounting)	1
MBA (Professional Accounting)	11
MSc (Tourism and Hospitality Management)	12
MSc (Insurance and Risk Management)	2
MSc (Islamic Banking)	1
MBA (Finance)	31
MSc (Management)	112
Masters of Arts, Counselling and Psychology	20
MSc ICT	22
MBA (Management Education)	1
MSc-ICT by Research	1
MBA Executive	<u>8</u>
Total	<u>1081</u>

Table 6: SATISFACTION LEVEL OF STUDENT TOWARDS CORE COURSES

No	Course Code	Name Of Courses	% Satisfied	% Dissatisfied	Answer
1	EG 5013	Managerial Economics	93.8	6.2	Satisfied
2	PN 5013	Organizational Behaviour & Development	87.2	12.8	Satisfied
3	QP 5033	Decision Analysis	90.0	10.0	Satisfied
4	SK 5013	Communications For Managers	84.0	16.0	Satisfied
5	PU 6013	Legal & Ethical Issues in Business	88.9	11.1	Satisfied
6	KA 5013	Management Accounting	38.1	61.9	Dissatisfied
7	PM 5013	Marketing Management	80.6	19.4	Satisfied
8	PM 5023	Operational & Technology Management	95.7	4.3	Satisfied
9	PN 5023	Human Resource Management	93.8	6.2	Satisfied
10	WF 5003	Corporate Finance	81.5	18.5	Satisfied
11	PN 6023	Strategic Management	87.0	13.0	Satisfied
12	TM 5013	Information Technology For Managers	84.8	15.2	Satisfied
13	PM 5033	Project Management	88.9	11.1	Satisfied
14	PN 6033	Business Planning & Development	75.0	25.0	Satisfied
15	PN 6043	International Business	88.5	11.5	Satisfied
16	PN 6053	Entrepreneurship Development	73.7	26.3	Satisfied
17	PN 6213	Seminar In Total Quality Management	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
18	PW 5033	Investment Management	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
19	PZ 5996	Business Field Project (Optional)	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
20	PN 6033	Research Methodology	91.7	8.3	Satisfied
21	PN 5073	Management Science	75.0	25.0	Satisfied
22	WF 5013	Corporate Financial Management	83.3	16.7	Satisfied

23	WF 5023	Conventional & Islamic Fin Markets, Instruments & Institutions	88.2	11.8	Satisfied
24	WF 5033	Investment	86.7	13.3	Satisfied
25	WF 5043	Financial Reporting & Statement Analysis	84.6	15.4	Satisfied
26	WF 5053	International Financial Management	62.5	37.5	Satisfied
27	WF 6013	Seminar In Finance	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
28	WF 5063	Financial Risk Management	75.0	25.0	Satisfied
29	WB 5023	Treasury Management In Financial Institutions	87.5	12.5	Satisfied
30	WB 5043	Credit & Syndicated Loan Management	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
31	WB 5053	Islamic Bank Management	66.7	33.3	Satisfied
32	WB 5073	Bank Project Financing	33.3	66.7	Dissatisfie d
33	WB 5083	Marketing Of Financial Services	33.3	66.7	Dissatisfie d