



# The Strategic Management for Sustainable Agrotourism Development: A Case Study of Maejo University's Agrotourism Learning Centers

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**Abstract.** This study determines the nature of the relationship between strategic management and the organizational performance, the relationship between service quality and visitor satisfaction in the agrotourism sector. The study employed the modified SERVQUAL instrument that was distributed using a convenience sample technique to visitors of Maejo University's Learning Centers to determine their perceptions of service quality and satisfaction. While a structured strategic management questionnaire was administered to, 25 employees purposively selected as respondents of the learning centers. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to discover the underlying attribute of services and correlation analysis as well as descriptive analysis to analyze the data collected. The results showed that strategic management had significant effects on the operational performance of the learning centers. This proved that there is a strong and positive relationship between strategic management practices and the learning center's operational performance ( $F=53.690$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). In addition, it showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between strategic management and the learning center's ability to compete and satisfy tourists ( $r=.844$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Moreover, results indicated that the 7 attributes were significant that included responsiveness, tangibility, reliability, empathy, tangible sustainability, assurance, and sustainable practices. These 7 attributes positively influence the perceptions of service quality, tourist's satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. This study concluded that the practice of strategic management is positively related to boosting the learning centers performance and would eventually resonate to visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism industry is becoming one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Considering its significance in the economy of many countries, the research in tourism is growing as well. Achieving to develop tourism industry, tourist satisfaction becomes a considerable goal for many countries. In recent years, Thailand has become attractive to many tourists because this green country has a variety of spectacular attractions. Currently, the tourism sector is an important contributor to the economy, bringing large amounts of revenue into the country. In fact, tourism, which is an asset to the economic growth of Thailand, is recognized as one of the major sources of foreign exchange. Furthermore, Thailand's agriculture is considered as the backbone of the country. In order to gain a great amount of income from tourism, locals have to set up the idea of agrotourism based on the philosophy of sustainable development. With an increasingly competitive worldwide tourism market and the

importance, tourism plays in Thailand's national economy, destination managers, and tourism agencies in Thailand need to understand how specific site conditions and characteristics contribute to visitor satisfaction at both a site and destination level. It is imperative for individuals involved in the planning, design, and management of a destination to understand how to design and manage destinations that create positive, satisfying, and memorable experiences for those that visit.<sup>[1]</sup> If a visitor is satisfied with their experience, they are more likely to become Repeat Visitor and/or tell friends and family about their experience, which is the least expensive yet most powerful form of advertising available.<sup>[2]</sup>

There is a clear evidence based on researches, on the potential of Thailand particularly Chiang Mai in terms of agrotourism. Since agriculture is one of the most important occupation in Thailand including Chiang Mai hence, there is need to do some innovative activities in the agriculture, which will help the local people. This study is a descriptive research that seeks to evaluate the potential of sustainability of Maejo University agrotourism learning centers. The purpose of this study is to evaluate its sustainability in terms of service quality through the SERVQUAL model and examine its strategic management practices and its effect on employee performance and its ability to satisfy tourists. The researcher would like to point out the opportunity to create Maejo University's abundant agricultural resources with its strength of being the leading and become a high quality agrotourism destination in Chiang Mai and Thailand as a whole.

## 2. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

According to Asubonteng, et. al. (1996), due to intense competition and the hostility of environmental factors, service quality has become a cornerstone marketing strategy for organizations.<sup>[3]</sup> This highlights how important improving service quality to organizations for survival and growth since it could help tackle these challenges they face in the competitive markets.<sup>[3]</sup> This means that service-based companies are compelled to provide excellent services to their customers in order to have a sustainable competitive advantage. There is however, a need for these organizations to understand what service quality is in order to attain their objectives. Strategy is a very useful concept for an organization, this helps to manage the organization. Strategic management helps an organization to determine its mission and objectives through creating and sustaining competitive advantage.<sup>[26]</sup> Successful implementation of strategies requires effective change in an organization's culture and it is almost impossible to change an organization without a concentrated effort by management aimed at continuous improvement, open communication, and cooperation throughout the organization.<sup>[24]</sup> Strategic management is a holistic management philosophy that strives for continuous improvement in all functions of the organization and it can be achieved only if the concept is fully utilized from the acquisition of resources to tourist's service.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, Dimba (2010), mentioned that management of performance within organizations is widely accepted as being crucial in the achievement of various significant outcomes related to organizational success, including the productivity and quality of employees, their commitment and job satisfaction and consequently forms a key component of human resources management strategy and practice.<sup>[4]</sup> In today's management practices, all business functions try to link their work methods and practices with the firm's strategy to achieve higher organizational performance. Organizational performance is described as an organization's ability to acquire and utilize its scarce resources and valuables or expeditiously as possible in the pursuit of its operational goals.<sup>[5]</sup> Globalization and its forces have also led to increased awareness and made customers to put pressure for better value products and services thus necessitating development of service quality strategies through the understanding of quality as perceived by the consumers of the services and products.<sup>[4]</sup> A service is produced by the integration of various tangible and intangible components, and involves several employees working with a purpose to satisfy the varying wants of potential customers (guests, visitors, travellers, internal customers, and so on). Hence, a service system can be conceptualized as a production system in which various inputs are processed, transformed, and value-added to produce outputs, which provide benefits to customer.<sup>[6]</sup> Evaluations of service quality embrace not only the service delivered, but also the way it is delivered. Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) proposed the following three quality dimensions: physical quality, corporate quality, and interactive quality. It states that physical quality relates to the technical

aspects of the service, the latter two dimensions emphasize the corporate image of the service organization and the interactive processes that occur between the hosts and the tourists.<sup>[7]</sup>

In this study, service quality can be defined as the tourist's expectation for service performance prior to the service encounter and their perception of the service received. Tourist's expectation serves as a foundation for evaluating service quality because, quality is high when performance exceeds expectation and quality is low when performance does not meet their expectation.<sup>[3]</sup> If the tourist's perception of service quality is the same as the expectation, then the tourist will be satisfied. If the tourist's perception of service quality is greater than expected, then the tourist will be very satisfied. If the tourist's perception of service quality is lower than the expectation, then the tourist will be dissatisfied.<sup>[8]</sup> Managing perceived service quality means that the paramount concern of tourism service providers should be to create consistency between the expected service and the perceived service to meet the tourists' expectations. Hence, tourism service providers should try to provide the tourists with such a high level of quality that it be beyond the tourists' perceived expectations. In this case, the visitors are satisfied and amazed by the quality of the perceived service, which creates a "wow" syndrome among them.<sup>[14]</sup>

The literature suggests that correlation exists between quality of service, visitor satisfaction, and a visitor's choice to re-experience a product. The higher one's satisfaction level, the more likely he/she is to experience the product again and/or provide positive word-of-mouth advertising to friends and family.<sup>[8]</sup> By identifying various visitor characteristics and understanding their motivation for visiting a destination in conjunction with how and what destination characteristics contribute to higher levels of visitor satisfaction, destinations operators and managers can become better informed to develop and maintain higher quality destinations that would promote repeat visits and the long-term success of the destination.<sup>[9]</sup> Organizations that consistently satisfy their customers enjoy higher retention levels and greater profitability due to increased customers' loyalty.<sup>[10]</sup> This is why it is vital to keep tourists satisfied, this can be done in different ways, and one way is by trying to know their expectations and perceptions of services offered by service providers. In this way, service quality could be assessed and thereby evaluating customer satisfaction. Based on the previous marketing researcher suggestion, suggested two popular indicators: the intention to repurchase and the intention to provide positive recommendations in measuring the future behavioral intention construct.<sup>[11]</sup>

Service quality in the tourism industry receives growing consideration and a majority of tourism studies use the SERVQUAL instrument to measure service quality.<sup>[12]</sup> SERVQUAL has been utilized to measure service quality in different sectors of tourism industry such as sport tourism<sup>[13]</sup>, hotel<sup>[14]</sup>, restaurant<sup>[15]</sup>, and airline tourism<sup>[16]</sup>. In SERVQUAL multiple-item scales, five dimensions are identified to measure service quality, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. However, previous studies have shown that SERVQUAL does not cover all dimensions of the tourism services that are important to tourists.<sup>[17]</sup> Apart from the five dimensions by Parasuraman et. al., scholars have debated the need for the sustainability dimension to be incorporated when measuring service quality in the context of tourism and the need to consider sustainability as one of the key factors that attract tourists to a tourism destination.<sup>[18]</sup> Tourists who have recently become more concerned about the environment are demanding environmental protection.

## *2.1 Conceptual Framework*

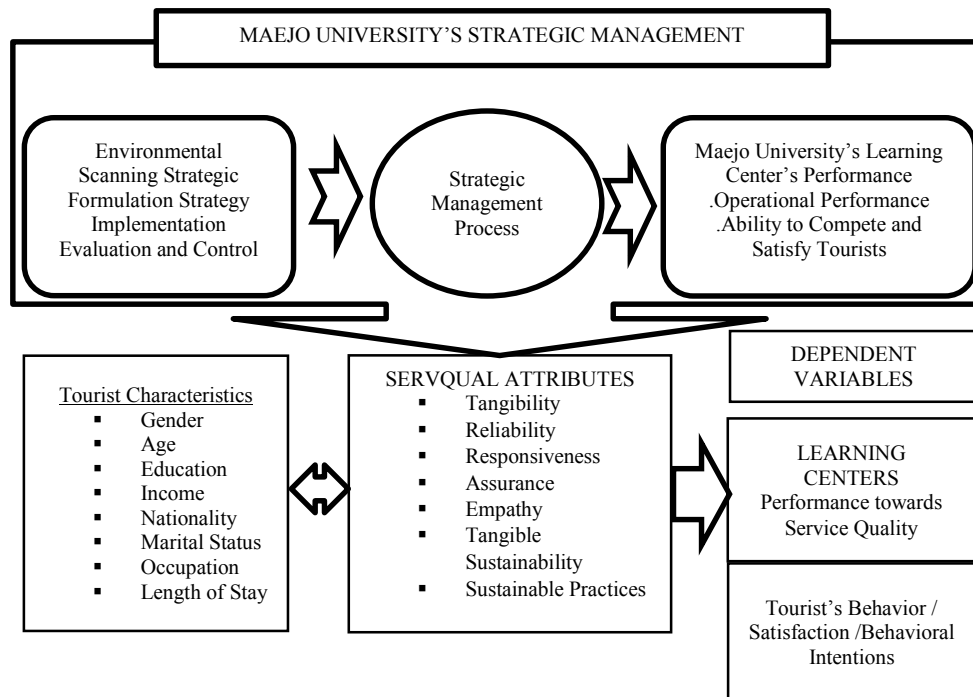


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) explains the underlying process, which was applied to guide this study. As discussed above, the SERVQUAL model is suitable for measuring service quality and tourists satisfaction of Maejo University's agrotourism learning centers. These learning centers offering agro-tourism services were evaluated using the service quality attributes, which was modified with the addition of tangible sustainability and sustainable practices. This is because one cannot use a generic SERVQUAL model in this context since it may not be adequate to assess service quality in agrotourism setting and will not provide a good measure of tourists' perceptions. This is in line with Yusof et. al. (2014) research on Measuring the Quality of Ecotourism Services: Case Study - Based Model Validation, where the researchers proved that tangible sustainability and sustainable practices are important measures of service quality. <sup>[19]</sup>

## 2.2 Hypotheses

Based on the above conceptual framework and objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated. The hypotheses proposed were tested. The constructs under study such as quality of service, quality of experience, overall tourist satisfaction, behavioral intentions, strategic management practices, and employee performance are all unobservable concepts, the measurement of which is dependent on manifested indicators.

- H1 Service quality positively affects tourists' levels of overall satisfaction
- H2 Overall agro tourism service quality is positively associated with tourist's behavioral intentions
- H3 Overall agro tourism satisfaction is positively associated with visitors' behavioral intentions
- H4 Strategic management has no significant effect on the learning center's operational performance
- H5 There is no positive relationship between strategic management and tourist's satisfaction

### 3. Research Methodology

The locale of the study is Maejo University. There were two sets of respondents for this study, (1) tourists who have visited the learning centers and (2) the administrators and employees of the learning centers. The tourist respondents were selected from the list of tourists who have visited the learning centers. Participants were both domestic and international tourists. On the other hand, employees and heads directly involved in the operations of the learning centers were included in the study. Random sampling was used in selecting tourist respondents while purposive sampling was used for the employees of the learning centers and heads of Maejo University. The study employed a descriptive statistics that seeks to describe the relationship between variables. A survey questionnaire was conducted to collect empirical data from the different Maejo agro-tourism learning centers. The SERVQUAL attributes were main variables that were used in this study. Demographic information was also collected from respondents. Furthermore, a specially designed instrument was used to obtain the respondents' perceptions of the overall management aspect of the learning centers. It contained questions pertaining to the management strategy being applied by the heads of the different learning centers that leads to the quality of service rendered by the employees of the learning centers and their performance. This includes how the learning centers implement strategies and the extent of their practice of strategic management.

### 4. Analysis and Results

The sample population in this study were tourists who had taken a trip and visited Maejo University learning centers in the past 12 months. To carry out the study, 300 questionnaires were emailed to those who have visited Maejo University and distributed to those who were visiting Maejo University's learning centers. The draft of the questionnaire was tested with 30 randomly selected visitors at the learning centers. The questions content, wording, sequence, and instructions were tested. The responses from the pre-test were coded and analyzed with minor changes based on the results of the pre-test; the final version of the questionnaire was developed. 200 questionnaires were returned from both self-administered questionnaires and those sent through email representing 66.66% rate. This was considered an adequate sample size since other scale developers in marketing and management areas have used a sample size of 200 to analyze group data.<sup>[8]</sup> The final sample size for this research was 200 respondents.

The demographic profile was also collected from respondents. The largest groups of respondents were Asians specifically the Bhutanese, since they were undergoing training in the university. Most of the respondents were first time in Maejo University. Moreover, majority of the respondents (66%) were male while female covered 34%. The highest level of education was bachelor's degree with 46%. About 70% of the respondents were married and 22% were single. The respondents were mostly between the ages of 18 to 30 years old with 31%. Most of the respondents are government employees with 71% and an earning of less than 20,000 Thai Baht a month with 59%. In addition, most of the respondents stay in Chiang Mai for 2 weeks at the average due to training.

The cronbach's alpha values were found to be internally reliable as the values exceeded the minimum standard value. The obtained alpha value of the instrument was .931. A coefficient alpha of .50 or higher is considered adequately reliable for group data purposes.

#### *4.1 Hypotheses testing of service quality, overall satisfaction, and behavioral intentions.*

In testing the hypothesis of this study, relating to the effects of the constructs, correlation, regression analysis, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and t-test were undertaken to test for significant relations between the variables.

##### *4.1.1 Hypothesis 1 – Service quality positively affects tourists' levels of overall satisfaction.*



**Table 1.** Service Quality on its Relationship with Tourists Level of Overall Satisfaction.

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Test Value = 3		
			Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
39.032	199	.000	1.25266	1.1894	1.3159

Table 1 shows the relationship between service quality and tourists' levels of overall satisfaction. According to the results on Table 1, learning centers service quality demonstrates a direct effect on the relationship with visitor satisfaction. The Sig (2-tailed)/2 equals to 0.000 is less than the level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ), which rejects the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). Therefore, service quality positively affects tourists' levels of overall satisfaction. The hypothesized relationship were supported, service quality was a significant predictor of visitor satisfaction. Furthermore, all 7 attributes have a significant linkage with visitors overall satisfaction. However, the strongest linkage was with the empathy attribute with an r square of .509. This attribute had a much stronger linkage with satisfaction than did the other 6 attributes. For this interrelationship leading to satisfaction, it modelled service quality as a direct determinant. The results consistently supported the hypothesis, as service quality in the overall sample was significant prediction of satisfaction. The parameter estimate for the relationship of the service quality and visitor satisfaction is strong and consistent with the proposed direction in the hypothesis. Past studies have suggested that service quality directly and significantly influences satisfaction.<sup>[20]</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Hypothesis 2 - Overall agro-tourism service quality is positively associated with tourist's behavioral intentions.

To support the foregoing findings, an analysis looking at the behavioral intentions among the visitors of the learning centers was undertaken.

**Table 2.** Analysis of Variance of Overall Agrotourism Service Quality and Tourist's Behavioral Intentions.

	Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	25.897	1	25.897	383.288	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	13.378	198	.068		
	Total	39.274	199			

Table 2 shows the analysis of variance result of hypothesis 2. The results indicate that the service quality value path was consistently significant in the overall attributes. Since Sig (1-tailed) equals to 0.000 that is less than the level of significance, which is,  $p < 0.05$  that rejects  $H_0$ . Therefore, overall agrotourism service quality is positively associated with tourist's behavioral intentions. Although, the direct effect of the service quality on behavioral intentions is weaker. It is nevertheless significant and has the direction proposed in the hypothesis. The results favor hypothesis 2 as it indicated a significant path with the service quality, r square = .658 with behavioral intentions. The industry analyses yield similar results, as service quality was significantly related to behavioral intentions. Accordingly, several studies have showed service quality as an antecedent to behavioral intentions and found a significant link.<sup>[21]</sup> Much evidence has also been gathered in the field of marketing for the direct impact of quality perception on customers' behavioral intentions.<sup>[22]</sup> A significant link between service quality and behavioral intentions would imply that destination managers have a direct means of influencing visitors' post experience behavior, and thereby the ability to mitigate the possibly detrimental effects of external factors influencing visitor satisfaction.

#### 4.1.3 Hypothesis 3 – Overall agrotourism satisfaction is positively associated with visitors’ behavioral intentions.

**Table 3.** Level of Significance of Overall Agrotourism Satisfaction and Visitors’ Behavioral Intentions.

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Test Value = 3		
				Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Part 3	36.801	199	.000	1.32503	1.2540	1.3960

Table 3 shows the analysis of variance for hypothesis 3. The result shows that Sig (2-tailed)/2 equals to 0.000, which is less than the level of significance, which is,  $p < 0.05$ , which rejects the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). Therefore, overall agrotourism satisfaction is positively associated with visitor’s behavioral intentions. The effect of visitor satisfaction on behavioral intentions is strong. This therefore conclude that service quality and visitor satisfaction have significant correlation with behavioral intentions. Both constructs were directly related to behavioural intentions. Chi and Qu (2008) arrived at a similar conclusion that service quality attributes and overall satisfaction are both determinants of behavioral intentions and loyalty.<sup>[23]</sup> In other words, the relationship between quality and loyalty is partly mediated by overall satisfaction.

#### 4.2 Maejo University’s strategic management practices and employees’ performance.

The study of the strategic management aspect of the learning centers was done by conducting a survey with the heads and employees of the different learning centers of Maejo University. A structured strategic management questionnaire was administered to 30 employees. A total of 25 questionnaires were thoroughly filled and returned representing 83.33% rate. The data analysis began with the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The analysis showed that majority of the respondents (64%) was male while female covered 36%. The highest level of education was postgraduate degree with 60%. About 60% of the respondents were married and 40% were single. The respondents were mostly between the ages of 40 to more than 50 years old with 64%. In addition to their academic and professional qualifications, most of the respondents occupied top management positions with good years of service in the University with 60%. The reliability of the instrument indicates its stability or consistency over repeated measures. The scale adapted in this study has been previously used and tested for reliability in other research studies. The reliability coefficient was calculated to rule out any possible variations in the instrument’s scale. The obtained alpha value of the instrument was .988.

##### 4.2.1 Hypothesis 4 - Strategic management has no significant effect on the learning centers’ operational performance.

To test the hypothesis 4 of this study “strategic management has no significant effect on the learning centers’ operational performance, the level of practice of strategic management and the operational performance of the learning centers were regressed. From the analysis on Table 4, it showed that there was a positive relationship between strategic management process and the learning centers operational performance because Sig is equals to 0.000, which is less than the level of significance, which is  $p < 0.05$ . This rejects  $H_0$ ; therefore, strategic management has significant effect on the learning center’s operational performance. The results were consistent in the study of Monday, et. al. (2015), they concluded that strategic management had a significant effect on the firms’ business performance. In addition, strategic management had a positive relationship with the firms’ operational performance.<sup>[24]</sup>

**Table 2.** Level of Significance of Strategic Management Process and Learning Center's Operational Performance.

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	7.274	1	7.274	53.690	.000 <sup>a</sup>
Residual	3.116	23	.135		
Total	10.390	24			

Furthermore, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) in Table 5, showed that strategic management practice had a significant effect on the learning centers operational performance ( $F=53.690$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). These results were consistent with previous similar studies by Covin and Slevin (1989)<sup>[25]</sup>, and Muogbo (2013)<sup>[26]</sup> which revealed that strategic management enhanced operational performance as well as the structural development of the organizations. Likewise, the results proved that there is a strong and positive relationship between strategic management and the operational performance of the learning centers ( $r$  square = .700). This implies that strategic management is directly related to the learning centers operational performance and that as the level of practice of strategic management increased, the operational performance of the learning centers increased.

*4.2.2 Hypothesis 5 - There is no positive relationship between strategic management and tourists' satisfaction and competition.*

**Table 5.** Test on the Strategic Management Process and Learning Center's Ability to Compete and Satisfy Tourists.

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.844 <sup>a</sup>	.713	.360	2.785

To test the hypothesis 5 of the study "there is no positive relationship between strategic management and learning centers visitor's satisfaction and competition," correlation analysis was ran (Table 6). The results showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between strategic management and the level of competition of the learning centers ( $r$  square=.713,  $p<0.05$ ). This implies that strategic management is directly related to learning center's ability to compete and satisfy tourists; that is, as strategic management practice increases, the level of the ability to compete and satisfy tourists also increases. As noted by Dauda et. al. (2010), strategic management process enhances firm's market share and competitive advantage.<sup>[27]</sup> Furthermore, since  $F = 57.185$  which is positive and Sig is equals to 0.000, which is less than the level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ), this rejects the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). Therefore, there is positive relationship between strategic management and learning centers ability to compete and satisfy tourists.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has presented a relationship model between service quality, overall tourist's satisfaction, and behavioral intentions for the Maejo University's learning centers and its strategic management practices. From the evidence, the analysis showed that service quality and overall tourist's satisfaction were found to have direct influences on tourist's behavioral intentions. This study also concluded that the practice of strategic management is positively related to boosting the learning centers performance and would eventually vibrate to visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Moreover, the findings showed that agrotourists distinguished between the 7 service attributes and showed a hierarchy of service quality perception. From the analysis result, it is clear that the learning center visitors were sensitive towards service quality. The service quality attributes were found to be significant and influenced the visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions. As seen in the results, service quality directly influences behavioral intentions (commitment, revisit intentions, and recommendations). Based on the results



tested for visitor satisfaction and its effect to behavioral intentions, it was found to be significant and influence the behavioral intentions. On the other hand, the analysis obtained from the respondents of Maejo University's heads and employees of the learning centers and the interpretation of the tested hypothesis, it was found that there was a significant relationship between strategic management and learning centers performance. In addition, strategic management was practiced to a significant extent in the different leaning centers of Maejo University. Although, the results were on the average compared to other similar studies that found high mean values, it is important for organizations to practice strategic management since it is a genuine tool for improving the performance of the organization and would eventually lead to visitor satisfaction and intentions. In the study of Monday et. al. (2015), they recommended that organizations, whether manufacturing or service, should give adequate attention to strategic management, as it is a critical success factor for improving performance.<sup>[24]</sup>

In summary, this study presents unique contributions to the existing body of knowledge on strategic management practices of agrotourism providers and the analysis on the quality of service they provide to visitors and its satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The study has answered the research objectives in evaluating the service quality, overall satisfaction, and behavioral intentions likewise the strategic management practices of the university and its effect on the employees providing services to tourists.

There are many other factors of interest that can be suggested for future research. It could explore on the support group or the tourists service center. Further study could involve the relationship among employees, heads and administrators. The research on impact of strategic management on the employee performance that would lead to quality service, overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions would assists the university administration to plan well on the strategies being implemented to the different learning centers. The study findings have implications for the resources planning. This should enable the university to build a trusting and committed workforce that will reap long-term benefits, which in turn, should provide higher productivity levels, improved financial performance, and overall learning centers enhancement. This study emphasizes on the importance accorded to strategic management practices in organizations. With respect to practical contributions, the findings of the study can be used as a guideline by the University management to improve the quality of service towards the tourists visiting Maejo University.

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