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New Insights to The National HEIs Rating System: Exploring the attributes of Student Experiential and Engagement Value Index (SEEVI)

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Abstract

University education is a rare purchase and an increasingly important as well as expensive decision in one's life. Students and their families are searching for pertinent information that will help them make informed choices in the selection of a university and/or an academic program to enrol. Although numerous ranking systems or league tables for higher education have been established, but they are often disputed and argued on their credibility and functionality. It was criticized generally because the ranking systems were not proficient as an informative and constructive tool to infer the quality of the academic institutions. It was noted recently that there has been a cultural change towards revitalizing the importance of teaching and the student experience. In response to this issue, the primary goal of this paper is to identify the students' experiential value (extrinsic and intrinsic factors) and the engagement value (attributes). Focus groups are used to collect a broad qualitative understanding of perceptions and to gain richer insights pertaining to core issues of student experiential and engagement values on their current university enrolled. There are four groups of respondent, group A were UiTM students from Science and Technology cluster, group B were UiTM students from Social Science cluster, group C were non-UiTM students from Science and Technology cluster and group D were non-UiTM students from Social Science cluster. The outcomes of the findings link directly to the design of learning activities and the future direction of the research.

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Keywords: Experiential Value, Engagement Value, Student Quality, Quality Education, Higher Education;

1. Introduction

In the past few years, many countries have witnessed significant transformations and reforms in their higher education systems. As the revolutions keep on happening, we can see the demand for higher education is on the

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rise not only in Malaysia but throughout the world. Therefore, many countries want to develop world class universities in order to grasp the opportunity that will allow them to attract consumers from world over which can contribute to their economic growth (Janiffa Saidon and Azhar, A.K.M., 2008). In contrary, Ooi Poh Ling, et. al (2011) argued that not all HEIs suit to aims to be a world class status. What matters most are the implications of being one. This is also supported by Hans de Wit (2011) professor of internationalization of higher education.

When the competition between higher institutions in order to attract customers occurs, then the ranking of higher institution plays an important role. Many would say universities or colleges with good infrastructural facilities like library and the impression from campus visit, are to be name as a quality university. But surprisingly, customers (students) expect quality in education as their priority rather than quantity. The cost or distance or international recognition is not the main factors that influence ones choice of study destination.

Indicators referred to research and scientific productivity from university academic staff has a prominent role across all academic ranking approaches (Munoz, 2006). Finnie and Usher (2005) emphasize on characteristics, attributes and abilities of incoming students, learning inputs (resources and staff), learning outputs (attributes of graduates, student retention and completions rate) and also on the final outcomes (employment rates, good citizen) as to measure the quality performance.

University rankings promote an elite league, either nationally or internationally. The higher the rankings, the better the chances are for a university to have the comparative advantage over rival institutions. The ranking system keeps universities on their toes. It makes them want to aspire to be always better and to improve in their academic standards. But unfortunately, both professional and non-professional groups remain questioning rankings credibility with no real equality.

2. Background to the study

Tertiary education in Malaysia has undergone remarkable changes with the emergence of the first university in Malaysia (University Malaya) in 1949, now there are 515 universities/ colleges in total. The Ministry of Higher Education is committed to transform the landscape of tertiary education and aspire to put the Malaysian education on the global map as a centre of academic excellence. With this vision in mind, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan has been launched in 2007 (Chapman, Chew and Tan, 2007). It sets forth the vision for transformation of higher education in Malaysia from 2007 to 2020 and beyond. Such transformation according to the plan is to enable Malaysia to achieve the status of an excellent centre of higher education and produce human capital with first class mentality. The plan comprises of seven thrusts: widening access and enhancing quality; improving the quality of teaching and learning; enhancing research and innovation; strengthening institution of higher education; enculturation of lifelong learning; and reinforcing the ministry's delivery system. The first phase of the plan (Laying the Foundation, 2007-2010) has ended. The second phase (Strengthening and Enhancement, 2011-2015) which is starting this year would lead to identify prioritize areas that need improvements. It is clear that a radical move was reinforced to re-energize and revitalized the quality and academic excellence of higher education institutions in Malaysia. As the transformations keep on advancing, concurrently the demand for higher education is also on the rise not only in Malaysia but throughout the world. It was noted that as Malaysia progresses further on the economic and social fronts, more international students are expected to apply for places in Malaysian universities (Janiffa Saidon and Azhar, A.K.M., 2008). It was observed that as market competition among HEIs becomes more intense both within and across countries, governments are increasingly adopting strategies of information provision as a means of assuring academic quality. Undoubtedly, HEIs will adopt ranking systems or league tables which compare the performance of different institutions based on various performance indicators. The ranking systems could be an effective means of providing relevant information to students in searching for the most suitable higher institution to enroll.

3. Method

This paper is focusing on the first phase of the study which is a qualitative phase that used the focus group free elicitation to achieved the research objectives in identifying the values and attributes relevant to the subject being studied. Later, in the future study (second phase) which draws upon the results in this phase 1 will unravel the underlying dimensions of experiential and engagement value. Important indicators will be identified and measurement scale will be developed in the form of survey instrument. 150 samples per each public HEI undergraduate students from public HEIs that have been established over ten years 9 (estimated 10 universities) will be the targeted respondents.

3.1 Focus Group

Content analysis in the form of focus groups interviews are done to gather information about the salien attributes of university quality based on various dimension. The interviews are conducted in a special studio and the session are recorded and transcribed. There are four groups of panels group A were UiTM students from Science and Technology cluster, group B were UiTM students from Social Science cluster, group C were non-UiTM students from Science and Technology cluster and group D were non-UiTM students from Social Science cluster. Two focus group session are organised according to specific profile of the panels. Each session comprises of 20 panels, thus 40 panels are anticipated. Each session are held for 2 hours in an informal mode with a professional moderator and three facilitators to assist in putting inputs into writing. Focus groups are perfect for 'filling in the gaps' of the study and this approach aimed to generate the concept and hypotheses of the study (Malfetti, J., 1989).

3.2 Free Elicitation

It is a word-association, where the respondents gave their responses when asked to describe what experiential value they would like to obtain from their learning experience. This method allowed the panel to describe more salient attributes on communication and interaction with various important touch point in HEIs. Important attributes of engagement value are also discussed among panels.

Stage 1 : TO UNEARTH CAMPUS LIFE AND CURRENT STUDENT EXPERIENCE	70 minutes
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Objective: To exhaust experiential values with the elements i.e. the facilities, lecturers, program/ course, admin/ support staff, management, etc.

Let's talk about YOUR CAMPUS OR UNIVERSITY LIFE...

- When I say "CAMPUS OR UNIVERSITY LIFE"...
 - Quickly what comes to your mind?
 - How do you feel?
 - How would you describe your campus life or university right now?
- Check on current University life experience
 - Are you satisfied? In 10 points scale, how satisfied are you with your current university life? (0= totally dissatisfied, 10 = totally satisfied)
 - What are the things or experiences that you are SATISFIED / FEEL GOOD/ HAPPY about your university? Please be more specific.
 - What are the things or experiences that you are DISSATISFIED / UNHAPPY about your university? What is it that you are not happy with? Please be more specific.
- Probe current experience (if not mentioned above) :
What do you think of...? How do you find the quality or experience with..?

- YOUR COURSE / PROGRAM
- LECTURERS – Research vs teaching focused, student learning / consultation time.
- FACILITIES – Recreational and learning facilities
- ADMIN / SUPPORT STAFF e.g. lab assistant
- MANAGEMENT (VC, DEANS). How important is the VC?
- Most memorable moment in the university.
If you could select and share the MOST MEMORABLE moment / experience (it could be positive or negative moment) in the university what will that be? Why?
- Self-description, let's talk about yourself at the university
 - Do you notice any changes in you (in terms of attitude e.g. maturity, behavior, critical or creative thinking) before and after you enter university?
 - How would you describe yourself before versus after you enter university?
 - What would possibly change or unchanged?
 - What contribute to the changes? (Check the role of university)
- Concerns & Measures taken to address concerns
 - Is there anything that worries you at the moment?
 - What have YOU done to overcome the concern?
 - What has the UNIVERSITY done to overcome this concern?
- Ideal university
[Moderator write down all attributes on white board]
 - When I say an "Ideal University", what are the criteria you expect should have in an Ideal University? (Be specific)
 - Let's rank order, which of these criteria is the most to least important for you as student.
[Moderator gets respondent to rank order individually on A4 paper]

Stage 2 : TO BRAINSTROM NEW EXPERIENCE OR ENGAGEMENT VALUE	50 minutes
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Objective: To explore and unearth new experiential values and engagement values in their perceived total students experience. To identify the possible student engagement behavior, in order to enhance their loyalty to the university.

- WORLD GAME : [Moderator draw & write on mahjong paper]
Now, let's play a game. Lets us all imagine that we are in an Imaginary University called "A TOTAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE UNIVERSITY", try to be as imaginative as possible, but at the same time realistic.
 - How does the world look like? What do you see? Describe the people there i.e. students, lecturers, etc.? What were they doing?
 - What sort of EMOTIONS / MOOD / EXPERIENCE like in this world?
 - What is GOOD about this world? (Be specific)
 - Will you withdraw or stay longer in this world?
 - How to make you STAY LONGER OR LOYAL in this world? What would you do?
 - What you expect the university do in order for you to stay loyal in this world? Any suggestions? (Be specific on the engagement value e.g. blogging, WOM, club community)
- Dreams / Aspiration / Goal Now and Future.
 - Check Current Goal
 - What are your GOAL FOR NOW? What will be your needs and wants?
 - How far have you reached? What have you done to achieve the goal?
 - How far the university has done towards achieving your goal? What you expect the university should do?
 - Check Future Goal i.e. After graduate
 - What are your DREAMS/ ASPIRATION/GOAL AFTER YOU GRADUATED from the university?

- How far have you reached? What have you done to achieve the goal?
- How far the university has done towards achieving your goal? What you expect the university should do?

4. Findings

4.1 *University life*

Based on the focus group inputs collected during the focus group sessions, as for University life, the UiTM students were aware of the challenges such as too pack credit hours and too class oriented syllabus / teaching approach which they have to struggle to strike balance between study, societal activities and personal needs. Despite the challenges, the non-UiTM students were found more mature and positive in handling and managing life in the university. According to non-UiTM panels, the role of university is to provide experiences and exposures that will help to unleash students' self-potential and create added-value in students. However, according to UiTM panels it is the role of the students to optimize the experiences and exposures for personal development.

Generally, students' satisfaction levels with current university are mediocre to slightly high. Despite high satisfaction (7-8 points), there were some grievances surfaced. The key issues are revolved around inadequate learning facilities, lecturer / teaching quality i.e. teaching style / approach and amenities i.e. parking issue.

4.2 *Students' Education Experiences*

The research has revealed that students' education experience involves interaction with physical elements and social / human factor which related to interaction. The issues on inadequate and outdated learning facilities were registered in both groups. However, higher grievances were felt among the UiTM students due to strong perception that the quantity of students more than quality/ quantity of the facilities provided. Thus, it arouses skepticism on the capability of the university to achieve the target of 200,000 students and tendency of the students to compare against other universities. Insufficient parking is the common issue faced by students. Many sought alternative mode of transportation example motorbike, internal / external bus or commuters.

Other factors such as negative experiences with lecturers' teaching approach were also registered in both groups. Attributes such as lecturers are not creative, reading from slides, not following syllabus, share un-related information on subject which later affect timing, lacks application to the real world, and lacks two way students-lecturer communication / teaching approach. Lecturers' attitude or characteristics have an effect on students' experience, hence students' expect lecturer to educate, rather than teach, to guide and mentor, to provide support and encouragement, to understand students' limitation or condition, and must be approachable.

Program quality is said to be moderate to high when it fulfils Students' expectation such as provide exposure on future career prospect from beginning, provide overall picture on the courses' learning style or process, more industry training or exposure, course syllabus are more adaptable or relevant with real industry.

Both groups share somewhat similar negative experiences when comes to administrative or support staff. Negative experiences found with admin / support staff such as slow, lacks urgency, lazy, in active, not responsive, lacks effort – avoid extra work, create many excuses, lacks accountability – pass work to other, too bureaucratic – affect timing and burden the students, provocative and biased – treat Student Representative Council (MPP) better than regular students. While, negative experiences found with lab assistant are such as unavailable – have to adhere to their time and do not follow lecturer, wants to follow their own way of doing things. Overall, all panels claims having good relationship and engagement between the Top Management i.e. VCs, Deans with students.

Student quality involves a balance between academic achievement and a set of student values. Student values comprise attributes such as wanting and willing to maximize self potential, requires self-initiative and self-

motivation. The presence of international students in university has registered mixed reactions among students. There has been poor engagement and lack of interaction between the local and international students. No effort made to build close relationship by both parties, therefore boundary exist. However, their presences have stirred some competitive spirit among the local students.

4.3 An Ideal University

Panels from UiTM perceived an ideal university as when the university has international linkages with top universities for student exchange program or student society's involvement such as organizing impactful event e.g. volunteering to Palestine that could uplift university's image. On the other hand, panels from non-UiTM percept an ideal university as when the university is internationally recognized, able to produced marketable educated graduates, guided by philosophy of establishment – “ilmu & iman” (spiritual & knowledge) and achieved research university status.

4.4 Students' Goal and Aspiration

Generally, all students are ascertained in their dreams and goal-directed. There is emerging spirit of entrepreneurship among some of the students. In fact, the spirit and enthusiasm to own a business extends to owning a corporation and expansion of business internationally. There is strong emotional attachment with the university, many wish to contribute or serve back to the university.

4.5 Experiential Value and Engagement Value

The research has revealed that students' education experience involves interaction with physical elements and social / human factor. University life offer challenging yet invaluable experiences and exposures to students. Challenges build students' character, where it teaches students life lesson. With positive attitude and survival spirit, students will succeed. Knowledge and experience are important elements in lecturers' quality. Research-focused lecturers are perceived to be more updated with new information or knowledge, hence students will benefit by learning new things or exposure. Lecturers from industry are perceived to be more experienced and will help to provide greater exposure to students.

Overall Students' Experiential Value comprises of Physical / Extrinsic Value and Social factor / Intrinsic Value. We can conclude that factors such as amenities/ facilities / social interaction quality, learning quality, program quality and environment are the extrinsic or physical factors that will influence the students' experiential value. On the other ends factors such as lecturer quality, admin/ support staff, Top Management, Industry connection – lecturer/ training, student quality, university's image and international students are the intrinsic or social factors that will also influence the students' experiential value.

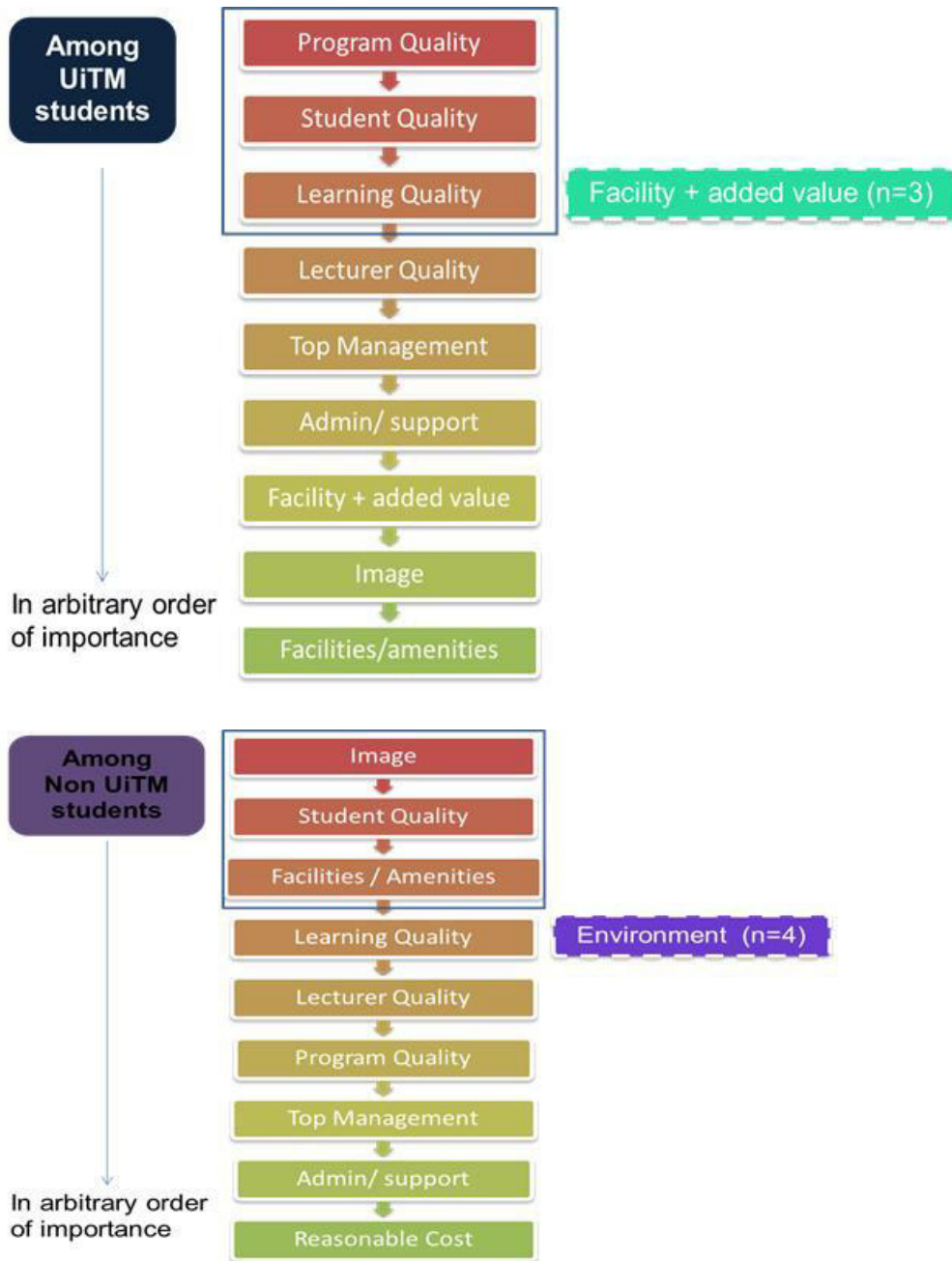


Fig. 1. An Ideal University Criteria – Relevancy and Importance to Students

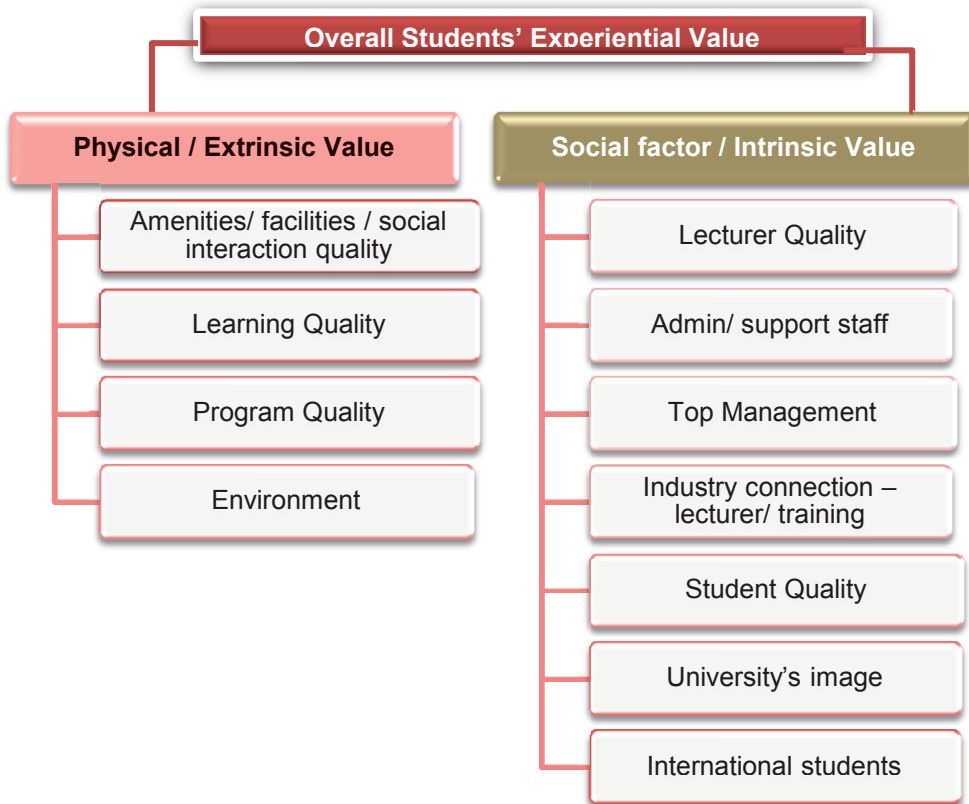


Fig. 2 Attributes of Experiential Value

The Overall Students' Engagement Value can be summarised as being influenced by factors such as lecturer, top management, industry connection – lecturer/ industrial training, admin/ support staff, society/ curricular activities / programs and also the alumni.

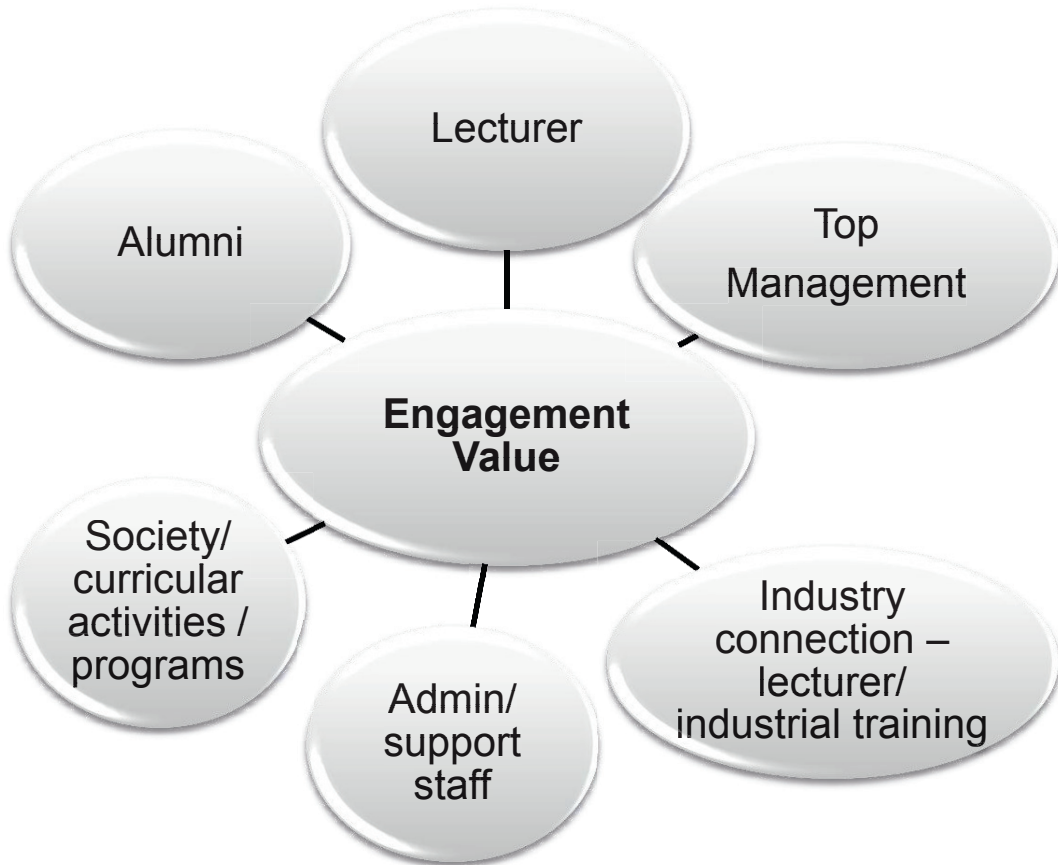


Fig. 3: Attributes of Engagement Value

5. Conclusion

The role of university from the panels' point of view is **only to provide a platform** or space for student to explore opportunities, whereas the role of students is to choose or make decision to grab and optimize the opportunities and exposures provided by university for self-development or added value. Therefore it appeared that student quality is the key driver of university excellence. To be a world class university it needs a world class / quality students - with the spirit or desire to maximize self-potential. This is in contra with findings from Nur Riza et. al, (2010) who claimed students did not significantly contribute to quality in teaching-learning. Nevertheless, this study is in line with many other studies who found students are seen as the primary customers whose needs must be fulfilled (see for example Marcoulides & Heck 2005; Oldfield & Baron 2000; Zhao 2003; Hill, Lomas & MacGrehor 2003; Athiyaman 1997; Joseph & Joseph 1997; Hill 1995). The next phase of our research is to develop a set of questionnaire and later to conduct a pilot study. The ultimate objective is to propose an index for student experiential and engagement value in rating higher education institution.

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