



Sustainability of Western branch campuses in the Gulf Region: Students' perspectives of service quality



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ABSTRACT

Using the widely used SERVQUAL model of service quality, this study examines the discrepancies between students' expectations and perceptions regarding the service quality dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy in the context of Western branch campuses in Qatar. A stream of higher education literature suggests that higher education has become an intensely competitive market where students look for evidences of service quality while making the uncertain and highly risky decision of choosing a university. Thus, universities, particularly that are faced with a chronic enrollment crisis can no longer ignore to listen to students and to facilitate students' participation in tracking and managing the service quality. Even though the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region has become a leading international education hub by establishing over 60 branch campuses of Western institutions, most of them are operating under capacity because of their inability to attract adequate number of students, which is becoming a rising threat for the sustainability of these branch campuses. Drawing from the customer value-based theory, it can be argued that by focusing on student-oriented service quality, branch campuses can create a better service value for students and, in turn can attract and retain students. Nonetheless, comprehensive empirical studies to assess all the salient dimensions of the service quality of branch campuses from students' perspectives are lacking. Unfortunately, regarding the issue of quality, branch campuses in the Gulf region are mostly focused on the traditional means of accreditation, course review, and students' feedback on course delivery. Analyzing a sample of over two hundred students representing branch campuses in Qatar, this study finds that students' perceptions of all salient dimensions of service quality are lower than their expectations. More specifically, branch campuses could not meet, let alone exceed, the service quality expectations of students in any of the significant dimension of the service quality—service processes, interpersonal contacts, and physical aspects. It appears that the mere transplantation of Western models of education in this culturally distinct host country is not enough to create a superior service value for students. As service providers, branch campuses in the Gulf region will be better off if they strive to align their service offerings as per students' expectation and values. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Scholars argue that since higher education is a service and students are required to pay for their educational services, higher education institutions have to focus on providing a student-oriented service quality in order to attract and retain students (Cheng and Tam, 1997; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Sultan and Yin Wong, 2012, 2013). Service quality has become an important

means for achieving a competitive advantage in an intensely competitive market in which customers look for a superior service value while choosing service providers (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Slater, 1997). Today, higher education institutions are in a market characterized by an intense competition, a shrinking support from the public purse, an increasing reliance on payments from students, and a relentless struggle to attract and retain students (Altbach, 2015; Ong and Nankervis, 2012; Sultan and Yin Wong, 2013). Traditional approaches of addressing the quality in terms of accreditation, course review, and student feedback on course delivery are not adequate (Altbach,

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2015). It is important for higher education institutions to look at what students want in all significant service dimensions they experience, including service processes, interpersonal contacts and physical facilities (Athiyaman, 1997; Oldfield and Baron 2000; Sultan and Yin Wong, 2013). Parasuraman et al. (1985) advance a comprehensive model of service quality, known as SERVQUAL model that looks at the discrepancies between customers' expectations and perceptions of five salient service quality dimensions, namely, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. In fact, compared to a few other models of service quality, scholars find SERVQUAL model to be more effective and useful in the higher education environment because it provides specific guidance for changing shortcomings in service quality dimensions to strengths (Angell et al., 2008; Harris, 2002; Wolverson, 1995; Yang, 2008). Thus, the SERVQUAL model of service quality can be a useful tool for higher education institutions to measure, track, develop and maintain a superior service quality and, in turn to remain viable by continually attracting and retaining students.

The current severe enrolment crisis faced by Western branch campuses in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region is likely to be rooted in the perceived service quality of these institutions. Branch campus is a relatively new but growing phenomenon in the region. In their quest to reform their higher education programs in line with Western models of education, Gulf States are increasingly hosting Western branch campuses (Altbach, 2015; Knight, 2015a). In fact, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have already established more than sixty branch campuses from ten countries in North-America, Western Europe and Australia (G-Mrabet, 2012). Western universities are interested to open branch campuses because the General Agreement of Trades in Service (GATS) has made it easier to export education services by making education an exportable service and it is a way to recruit more students and reach out to students who cannot emigrate to Western countries for studying (Levatino, 2015). However, branch campuses are faced with several difficult challenges, such as, most campuses have not been able to recruit the break-even number of students, the student pool is largely comprised of expatriates who have attractive alternatives abroad, the financial losses are piling up, the struggle to maintain the same level of the education quality as that of in home institutions appears to be difficult, the home institutions are increasingly concerned about the damage that can occur to their academic reputations, the faculty of host institutions are generally reluctant to relocate to the region, which is authoritarian in its political orientation, branch campuses find it difficult to recruit quality academic and non-academic staffs, and Western higher education methodologies and best practices stemming from Western values often are in collusion courses with local dominant cultural values rooted in the religion of Islam (Becker, 2015; G-Mrabet, 2012). All these myriad challenges are likely to reflect upon the service quality as are perceived by students. Thus, by focusing on student-oriented service quality, branch campuses in the Gulf region may be able to attract and retain students on a sustained basis. Yet, a very little attention has been given to empirically studying the salient dimensions of service quality of branch campuses in the Gulf region from students' perspectives.

Utilizing the SERVQUAL model of service quality, the current research attempts to examine the gaps between the expectations and perceptions of five salient service quality dimensions from the perspectives of students of branch campuses in Qatar. More specifically, this study attempts to examine students' expectations as well as their perceptions of the tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy dimensions of the service quality of branch campuses in Qatar. The gaps between the expectations and perceptions of the service quality dimensions

will be assessed, which will indicate if the expected service quality exceeded the perceived performance of the service quality (high satisfaction), or appeared equal to the perceived performance of the service quality (merely satisfied), or performed less than the perceived performance of the service quality (dissatisfaction). The practical implications for branch campuses in the GCC region and policy implications for the policy makers of the Gulf States will be given.

In the following sections, a review of the related literature will be given, which will be followed by a description of the methodology. Then a discussion of the empirical results and a conclusion will be given.

2. Literature review

In the following, the related literature is reviewed along three categories: (1) a brief chronicle of Western branch campuses in developing countries, (2) the current state of Western branch campuses in the GCC region, and (3) students' perspectives of the service quality of Western branch campuses in the GCC region.

2.1. Brief chronicle of Western branch campuses in developing countries

Setting up of branch campuses by Western institutions in developing countries is rooted in the Colonial period when institutions from Western colonizers had established and operated branch campuses in their colonies primarily to educate and train natives for administrative and civil service jobs. Subsequently, Christian Missionaries from the West had set up branch campuses in order to provide a quality education to natives of developing countries. Yet, another form of branch campuses had emerged in U.S.-owned Canal Zones primarily to serve the U.S. military and civilian personnel (Romani, 2009). The current proliferation of branch campuses began in 1990s driven by the forces of globalization. For instance, by taking a market oriented approach, the General Agreement on Trade in Service (GATS) recognized higher education as an exportable service (Knight, 2015b). That is, higher education is considered a commodity that can be exported and imported by countries. Branch campuses are exports of Western institutions and imports for host developing countries. Developing countries are hosting branch campuses primarily to modernize and reform their education systems as per the best educational practices of Western institutions (Sperandio et al., 2009). On the other hand, Western institutions are setting up branch campuses overseas largely for profits (Al-Tikriti, 2010). As of 2015, the number of branch campuses around the world has risen to 282 and the leading export countries are the U.S. and U.K. Currently, the primary target regions of Western branch campuses are Africa, South-East and East Asia, the Middle East, and South America (Levatino, 2015; G-Mrabet, 2012).

However, how long this growth of branch campuses will continue is hard to predict because numerous challenges are also emerging. The biggest challenges are to attract and retain adequate number of students, hire high quality faculty members, find qualified non-academic staffs, maintain the education quality of home institutions, adapt to the unique culture of the host country, deal with the antagonistic public sentiment towards Western institutions, become financially viable, and compete effectively in an increasingly competitive market environment (G-Mrabet, 2012).

These challenges have already halted the 'Wild West' model of expansion and forced several Western institutions to become more focused and targeted. Several branch campuses have already been closed down because of the chronic enrollment and financial problems, while a number of others are on retrieval tracks. Some

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