

The Importance of Student Support Services and Students' Satisfaction at Universitas Terbuka

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ABSTRACT

An organization needs to provide the best services to its customer, especially when the same services are also given by others. As a consequence, the provision of services should be evaluated regularly in order to improve the services. This article discusses the findings of Importance-Satisfaction survey on student services of Universitas Terbuka (UT) in 2014. Data was gathered from 22 Regional Offices of UT. The number of respondents was 1099 students. The results showed that there were no significant differences found between the means of Importance and Satisfaction levels of the services provided. The results of a quadrant analysis indicate that there were only five items (out of 47 items) in Quadrant-4 (important but not satisfactory) where the percentage of the gap analysis was almost 10%. The gaps between the levels of Importance and Satisfaction for the rest of the items (42 items) in Q-4 were much lower than 9%.

Keywords: Support services, student satisfaction, open and distance learning, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

A corporate organization should provide quality services to its customer if they intend to survive in the business. According to research, services influence satisfaction and customer loyalty (Mohzan, et al, 2011; Chandrashekar, et al, 2007). As a consequence, companies should do their best to provide quality services to their customers in order to avoid their customers moving to other organizations. Regardless of the kind of services provided, a company must evaluate the provision of its services to ensure that it satisfies the customers. The company needs to find out which indicators of the services are important to the customers and which indicators are satisfactory to the customers. The focus of the evaluation should be to learn which indicators are valued as the most

important by the customers. The most important indicators of services reflect what the customers need.

A survey of importance-satisfaction can be conducted to learn about the customers' assessment of the services provided. In such a survey, customers give a score (ranging from the least to the most important level) which describes how they rate the importance level of a service. Then, the customer should score how satisfied they are with the provision of the same service (ranging from very unsatisfied to very satisfied). It is expected that the assessment data will show the frequencies of the importance and satisfaction levels for each indicator of the services being evaluated. Therefore, the gap between the mean values of importance and satisfaction levels for each indicator can be computed through a gap analysis. In addition, a quadrant analysis may also be performed. This quadrant analysis can describe the position of each indicator of services being evaluated (Meng, Nishi, Philip, 2011). By using a quadrant analysis, an organization can find out which indicators of services are appreciated as important and satisfactory by its customers; important but not satisfactory; not important but satisfactory, and which ones are valued as important but not satisfactory. The quadrant positions are shown in Figure 1.

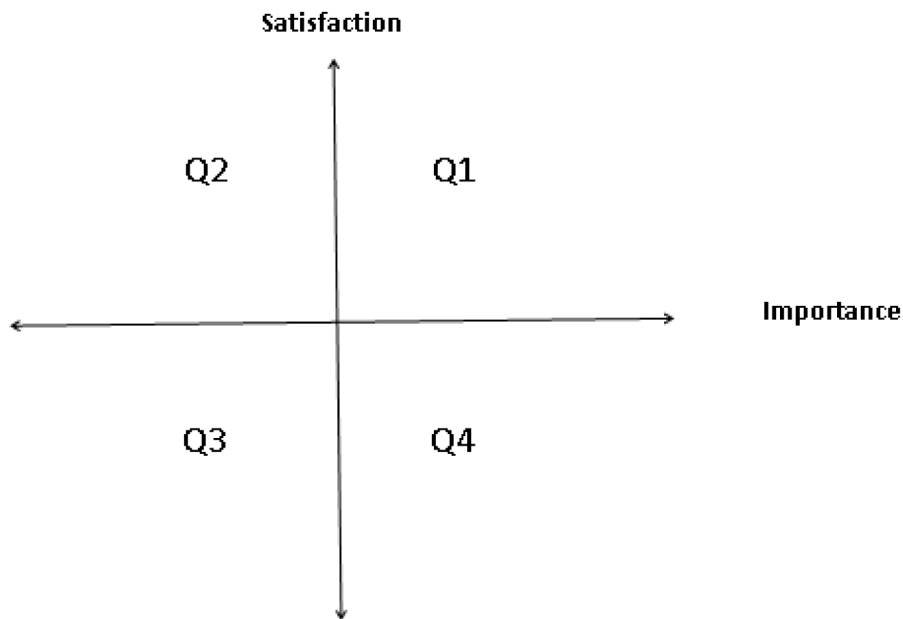


Figure 1: Quadrant position in importance-satisfaction survey

Quadrant-1 (Q1) shows the position of services or indicators of services which are rated as highly important as well as satisfactory. Meanwhile Quadrant-2 (Q2) shows the position where the importance levels of certain services are considered low but satisfying. Quadrant-3 (Q3) shows the position where importance level of a service is scored low and satisfaction is also low. Last but not least Quadrant-4 (Q4) shows the position where importance level is high but satisfaction level is low. In any Importance-Satisfaction Survey, the researchers should pay attention to Q4 as this quadrant shows that some indicators of important services are not satisfying the customers. The results should be then analyzed to suggest how to improve the related service(s).

Student satisfaction in a higher education setting reflects the quality of services provided by the institution. Ali & Ahmad (2011) stated that students' satisfaction toward a higher education institution is affected by how they enjoyed their learning experiences in the institution. A student satisfaction survey is becoming important in higher education as the results can describe the quality of learning in a specific institution (Webster, 2012). Student satisfaction toward the support services provided as well as how they rate the importance of the services at Universitas Terbuka (UT) are important to study since it is the only university in Indonesia that offers open and distance learning (ODL).

In order to learn whether UT has provided important and quality services for its students, this study poses the following research questions: (1) What services are considered as most important by students? (2) What services are considered most satisfying by students? (3) Are there any gaps between the importance levels of services and their satisfaction levels perceived by students? And (4) which student services at UT need to be improved as a result of the quadrant analysis?

The instrument was a 47-item questionnaire adapted from the Importance-Satisfaction Analysis (ISA) used collaboratively by five Open Universities in Asia, namely UT, Open University Malaysia (OUM), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Hanoi Open University (HOU), and University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU). The instrument used in this study was the Indonesian version of the ISA specifically adapted to meet the students' needs and requirements at UT.

The students' perceptions of the importance and satisfaction levels were analyzed using frequency analysis. The gap analysis uses descriptive statistics such as the mean value and standard deviation. In addition, t-tests were used to compute whether there were any significant differences between the mean values of the importance and satisfaction levels for each indicator of student services. Meanwhile, a quadrant analysis was carried out using frequencies of responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The population was UT's students who registered in the first semester of 2014 (semester of 2014.1). The sample was taken purposively from UT's Regional Offices (ROs) in Indonesia. The respondents were the students who came to UPBJJ with the intention of solving cases. They were asked to fill out the Importance-Satisfaction Questionnaire, in which they had to rate how important were the student services at UT and how satisfied they were with the services provided. Data were collected by an RO staff assigned by the Head of the ROs to help with the data collecting and coding. Data put in an Excel file from the ROs were then sent to the Head Quarter to be analyzed together by using SPSS version 22.

RESULTS

22 ROs out of 38 returned the filled questionnaires back to the researchers. These 22 ROs represented the western and central parts of Indonesia. One RO from the eastern part of Java in Mataram was included in the central RO category. The total number of respondents was 1099. Table 1 shows the mean values, standard deviations and the

number of respondents. However, some respondents did not complete a few items in the instrument.

RQ1: What services are considered as most important by students?

Out of the 47 items, students rated the quality of UT course contents as the most important service, followed by the availability of a comprehensive student handbook, and the quality of the learning materials—called modules—and the study guide (Table 1).

Table 1: Student Perceptions of the Most Important Services at UT

Statements	Levels of Importance		
	\bar{X}_i	SD	n
2) The contents of the courses I am taking are valuable to me	4.58	.647	1066
20) Learner's Handbook provides helpful information on rules, regulations, and policies	4.50	.710	1054
24) Modules and study guides are of good quality	4.49	.755	1052

RQ2: What services are considered most satisfying by students?

In terms of student's perception on the most satisfying services at UT, students indicated that the three most satisfying services at UT were the value of the content of the courses, the clarity and requirements of the courses, and the availability of a comprehensive student handbook (Table 2).

Table 2: Student Perceptions on the Most Satisfying Services at UT

Statements	Satisfaction		
	\bar{Y}_i	SD	n
2) The contents of the courses I am taking are valuable to me	4.17	.780	1089
10) The major requirements of the courses are clear and reasonable	4.10	.785	1086
20) Learner's Handbook provides helpful information on rules, regulations, and policies	4.22	.808	1075

RQ3: Are there any gaps between the importance levels of services and their satisfaction levels perceived by students?

The respondents were reasonably satisfied with the student services provided at UT, although they rated the importance of the services higher than they valued their satisfaction as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Means and SDs of Students' Perceptions on Importance and Satisfaction Survey (5-Scale).

Importance			Statements	Satisfaction		
<i>n</i>	\bar{X}_i	<i>SD</i>		\bar{Y}_i	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
1064	4.46	.697	1) The Regional Office (RO) staff are caring and helpful	3.92	.850	1088
1066	4.58	.647	2) The contents of the courses I am taking are valuable to me	4.17	.780	1089
1061	4.40	.698	3) The quality of instruction I receive in my classes is good	4.04	.793	1090
1060	4.38	.726	4) The fees I have to pay for my studies are reasonable	4.06	.863	1090
1054	4.31	.784	5) Academic advising/ counseling services adequately meet the needs of learners	3.81	.898	1085
1055	4.32	.785	6) Information about events happening in my Regional Office is easily available	3.82	.945	1088
1053	4.34	.771	7) Admission staff provide personalized attention prior to my enrollment to UT	3.97	.920	1086
1058	4.38	.780	8) I receive the learning support I need at UT	3.80	.938	1089
1058	4.39	.766	9) The RO staff are easily accessible via telephone or e-mail	3.82	1.062	1087
1052	4.42	.726	10) The major requirements of the courses are clear and reasonable	4.10	.785	1086
1057	4.40	.772	11) Facilitators / Tutors are knowledgeable in their fields	3.89	.854	1076
1051	4.30	.813	12) Staff in the Head Quarter are easily accessible via telephone/e-mail	3.64	.999	1077
1057	4.40	.768	13) My online courses are easily accessible	3.76	1.075	1084
1047	4.24	.801	14) The library resources are meeting my needs.	3.72	.929	1079
1057	4.43	.718	15) There are adequate resources about how to be independent learners in the UT Website	4.01	.846	1081
1049	4.31	.786	16) My enquiries and complaints are dealt with by the RO staff without delay	3.75	.969	1071
1049	4.33	.739	17) There is a good variety of courses provided in the programme I am taking	4.01	.793	1082
1054	4.34	.777	18) Facilitators / Tutors are concerned about my academic progress	3.81	.939	1081
1051	4.36	.758	19) Policy on payment of fees is flexible	3.98	.938	1084
1054	4.50	.710	20) Learner's Handbook provides helpful information on rules, regulations and policies	4.22	.808	1075
1056	4.41	.754	21) I have been able to access the learning materials from UT Website when I needed to	3.90	.990	1081

Importance			Statements	Satisfaction		
<i>n</i>	\bar{X}_i	<i>SD</i>		\bar{Y}_i	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
1053	4.34	.789	22) UT provides the academic mentoring I need	3.78	.923	1081
1049	4.29	.839	23) My RO provides learning resources	3.73	.964	1080
1052	4.49	.755	24) Modules and study guides are of good quality	4.03	.877	1081
1047	4.28	.827	25) Facilitators / Tutors are easily contacted	3.69	.982	1079
1054	4.42	.845	26) Various scholarships for learners are available	3.91	1.009	1076
1043	4.32	.781	27) The virtual library at UT provides adequate learning materials I need	3.79	.922	1074
1049	4.44	.720	28) The university provides learners with online registration every semester	4.03	.838	1079
1048	4.40	.783	29) My RO is quite representative and easily accessible	3.99	.925	1082
1045	4.45	.736	30) Course assessment are appropriate	3.98	.875	1080
1046	4.24	.815	31) Electronic Customer Relationship Management (eCRM) is efficient in resolving learners enquiries and complaints	3.67	.916	1070
1047	4.35	.800	32) Facilitators / Tutors serve as my academic advisors/counselors	3.80	.891	1078
1049	4.41	.775	33) Academic calendars is available	4.08	.916	1080
1045	4.29	.823	34) Digital Library is easily accessible	3.75	.959	1078
1045	4.40	.760	35) UT provides a comfortable spaces for student services	3.93	.962	1077
1042	4.30	.818	36) Facilitators / Tutors provide timely and constructive feedback to learners	3.73	.928	1078
1050	4.38	.855	37) Scholarships is available for learners	3.90	1.013	1075
1050	4.44	.724	38) UT staff are caring and helpful	3.93	.891	1076
1055	4.39	.765	39) Facilitators / Tutors interaction with learners through online forum is helpful	3.87	.885	1074
1053	4.41	.769	40) UT staff deal with my enquiries and complaints without delay	3.85	.928	1083
1050	4.30	.813	41) There is active participation in the online forum among facilitators / tutors and learners	3.69	.988	1080
1051	4.34	.822	42) Faculties' provides timely feedback on learner progress in a course	3.69	.969	1078
1050	4.25	.884	43) Study orientation for new learners is useful	3.80	.983	1081
1033	4.33	.761	44) RO staff provides academic counseling to learners	3.76	.936	1068
1037	4.36	.785	45) Regulations on learners' codes of conduct and discipline are fair	3.96	.858	1072

Importance			Statements	Satisfaction		
<i>n</i>	\bar{X}_i	<i>SD</i>		\bar{Y}_i	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
1039	4.37	.746	46) UT provides adequate administrative and academic guidelines for learners	3.94	.848	1074
1040	4.45	.729	47) UT are providing helpful academic support	4.06	.872	1074

Figure 1 shows the mean values of the importance and satisfaction levels for each item of the student services. Even though the importance levels seemed to be higher than the satisfaction levels, the results of t-tests did not yield any statistical differences ($p < .05$).

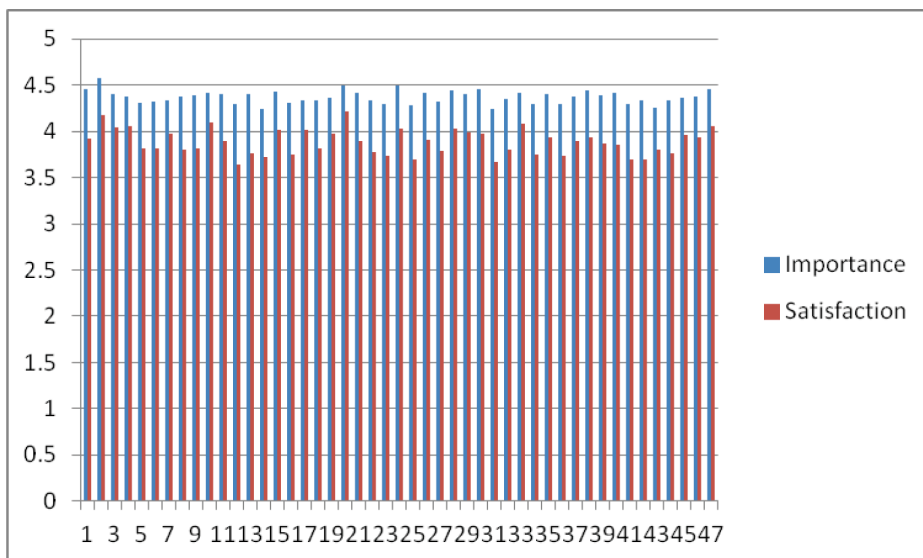


Figure 2: Importance and satisfaction means value

RQ4: What kinds of student services at UT need to be improved as a result of the quadrant analysis?

In order to answer research question 4, a quadrant analysis was conducted. In this analysis, the frequency of each quadrant is presented in Table 4. The percentage of responses was only presented in Q4 since any improvement of the services would be based on the results shown in this quadrant.

Table 4: The Results of Quadrant Analysis

Statements	Quadrant				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4 & (%)	
1) The Regional Office (RO) staff are caring and helpful	999	23	4	9	0.9%
2) The contents of the courses I am taking are valuable to me	1027	2	4	20	2.0%
3) The quality of instruction I receive in my classes is good	1016	3	3	28	2.6%
4) The fees I have to pay for my studies are reasonable	1003	2	5	40	3.8%

Statements	Quadrant				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4 & (%)	
5) Academic advising/ counseling services adequately meet the needs of learners	970	5	12	57	5.4%
6) Information about events happening in my Regional Office is easily available	961	10	7	67	6.4%
7) Admission staff provide personalized attention prior to my enrollment to UT	971	8	7	57	5.4%
8) I receive the learning support I need at UT	968	7	8	68	6.5%
9) The RO staff are easily accessible via telephone or e-mail	932	5	10	99	9.4%
10) The major requirements of the courses are clear and reasonable	1016	4	4	18	1.7%
11) Facilitators / Tutors are knowledgeable in their fields	980	10	7	43	4.1%
12) Staff in the Head Quarter are easily accessible via telephone/e-mail	918	5	12	102	9.8%
13) My online courses are easily accessible	930	7	7	101	9.6%
14) The library resources are meeting my needs.	960	4	11	62	5.9%
15) There are adequate resources about how to be independent learners in the UT Website	1006	2	3	32	3.1%
16) My enquiries and complaints are dealt with by the RO staff without delay	937	3	11	80	7.7%
17) There is a good variety of courses provided in the programme I am taking	1008	4	3	24	2.3%
18) Facilitators / Tutors are concerned about my academic progress	964	5	7	69	6.6%
19) Policy on payment of fees is flexible	973	4	11	54	5.2%
20) Learner's Handbook provides helpful information on rules, regulations and policies	1007	4	2	23	2.2%
21) I have been able to access the learning materials from UT Website when I needed to	952	8	6	76	7.3%
22) UT provides the academic mentoring I need	962	8	8	63	6.0%
23) My RO provides learning resources	928	11	16	83	8.0%
24) Modules and study guides are of good quality	985	8	8	36	3.5%
25) Facilitators / Tutors are easily contacted	913	11	10	101	9.7%
26) Various scholarships for learners are available	955	12	12	60	5.7%
27) The virtual library at UT provides adequate learning materials I need	953	6	8	65	6.3%
28) The university provides learners with online registration every semester	997	3	5	33	3.2%
29) My RO is quite representative and easily accessible	968	7	13	49	4.7%
30) Course assessment are appropriate	976	4	9	45	4.3%
31) Electronic Customer Relationship Management	922	8	13	85	8.3%

Statements	Quadrant				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4 & (%)	
(eCRM) is efficient in resolving learners enquiries and complaints					
32) Facilitators / Tutors serve as my academic advisors/counselors	961	10	8	56	5.4%
33) Academic calendars is available	970	11	11	44	4.2%
34) Digital Library is easily accessible	939	10	13	71	6.9%
35) UT provides a comfortable spaces for student services	949	6	12	67	6.5%
36) Facilitators / Tutors provide timely and constructive feedback to learners	938	11	12	72	6.9%
37) Scholarships is available for learners	945	11	14	65	6.3%
38) UT staff are caring and helpful	972	3	7	52	5.0%
39) Facilitators / Tutors interaction with learners through online forum is helpful	967	9	6	55	5.3%
40) UT staff deal with my enquiries and complaints without delay	963	6	8	64	6.1%
41) There is active participation in the online forum among facilitators / tutors and learners	922	12	9	95	9.1%
42) Faculties' provides timely feedback on learner progress in a course	934	6	16	84	8.1%
43) Study orientation for new learners is useful	937	16	19	68	6.5%
44) RO staff provides academic counseling to learners	939	4	8	69	6.7%
45) Regulations on learners' codes of conduct and discipline are fair	970	9	7	38	3.7%
46) UT provides adequate administrative and academic guidelines for learners	971	5	11	41	3.9%
47) UT are providing helpful academic support	981	3	6	38	3.7%

In quadrant analysis, the researcher usually will pay special attention to Q4 which indicates the number of respondents who evaluated services as important, but they were not satisfied with the services provided. In this case, the organization should improve the related services immediately if they intend to maintain their customers.

The organizations will expect that most customers fall in this quadrant and wish that the number of respondents in Q4 will be low. In this study, Q1 showed the largest number of respondents (93%). This means that the majority of the respondents perceived the student services at UT were important and satisfactory to them. Overall, the number of respondents that fall in the Q4 was quite small (means=58). This implies that only about 5% of the respondents did not feel satisfied with some student services provided at UT. Table-4 indicates that there were five items of services that belonged to Q4 whose percentage almost reached 10% (Item number 9, 12, 13, 25 and 41). Even though the number of respondents in Q4 was quite small (less than 10%) in this study, UT must pay attention to these to improve the services which were categorized as the less satisfactory services.

DISCUSSION

Two of the most satisfactory student services at UT reflected the most important services, which were related to the value of the content of the modules and the comprehensive information contained in the student handbook. This finding is understandable since students in the ODL system should study the learning materials independently most of the time. In an ODL system, good format or structure of instruction is very important in helping the students to learn (Herring & Smaldino, 2001). Students in the ODL system also need a comprehensive student handbook as their reference to be able to comply with the regulations, rules and policies of the university. The quality of these two services should be maintained by UT in order to meet the needs of the students.

The gap between the importance and satisfaction levels resulted in no significance difference in all indicators of student services. The higher number of students who responded to the satisfaction variable compared to those responded to the importance variable may indicate that the students' were more concerned with services that satisfied them than services were most important to them. Thus, UT needs to try its best to provide quality services to all students although some services may not be considered as the most important for them.

Quadrant analysis resulted in five services that need to be improved. Students thought that UT staff both in the headquarters and in ROs were not easy to contact via telephone or email. This reflects their needs to be able to communicate with staff at any time. In accordance with student support, it is very crucial to provide communication resources which students can access using various means of communication. There is a positive indication that the student's frustration will reduce when they receive an email or simple letter providing the essential information needed by students (Simonson, Smaldino, Allbright & Zvacek, 2012). In UT's case, when students encounter a problem, they usually go directly to the RO they are registered in because of difficulties in communicating via telephone or emails. Therefore, the staff in the ROs should address the students' problems in a timely manner. Slowness in response to students' problems will likely reduce their satisfaction. Likewise, students may also contact the headquarters to seek for some information or when they face difficulties. Staff in the headquarters should also provide excellent services and assistance.

Two services classified in the Q4 were the online courses and tutors/facilitators that were not as easily accessed. These two services reflect the needs of the students to engage in the tutorial sessions and interact with their tutors. Online tutorial was not easily accessed by 9.6% of the students. These students probably resided in either remote or hilly areas or did not have easy access to the Internet. Indonesia is among the Asian countries which has a low rate of internet penetration due to poor telecommunications infrastructure (InternetWorldStats, 2010). These students may need to go to another area where the Internet signal is stronger when they want to access the online courses. Moreover, 9.7% of students perceived that their tutors were difficult to be contacted. Ideally, tutors should dedicate a certain portion of their time for their students. Simonson et al. (2012) pointed out that it is necessary for tutors or facilitators and students to have a discussion on their expectations, including timeline, before the online course starts to reduce misunderstanding during teaching and learning. Failing to do so will reduce the students' satisfaction that may also have an impact on students' loyalty (Anthanassopoulos, Gounaris, & Sathakopoulos, 2001; Selnes, 1993; Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998).

Another indicator that was rated important but not as satisfactory by 9.1% in Q4 was active participation in the online forum among facilitators/tutors and learners. Student engagement in tutorials requires active participation from both the tutor and students. Students were expected to participate in online discussions while tutors must manage class discussion properly, respond to the students' questions, and provide constructive feedback for assignments. Tutor role in managing class discussion is not an easy task since the tutors must develop a good quality of interaction between tutor and students and between students and students (Song & McNary, 2011). In most dynamic online learning process, the tutors should provide a clear structure of instruction for the students so that they will be able to join the discussion with more depth (Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007). Similarly, students have to study the subject matter before attending tutorials to be able to engage actively in class activities.

Parasuraman et.al. (1985) and Zeithaml et.al. (1990) stated that a business oriented institution should provide quality services to its customer to stay successful in the business. Without quality services, customers will leave and seek other companies which provide similar products. The quality of the services will lead to the customers' satisfaction and loyalty (Ravichandran, 2010). With the same analogy, students will leave their higher education institution when they are not satisfied with the educational services provided. The failure in providing the best services will likely lead to the decreasing number of students (Alridge and Rowley, 2001).

On the other hand, satisfied students can play a role as a marketing agent for the institution. Satisfied students will feel proud to introduce their higher education institution to their families, friends, and colleagues. Customer satisfaction contributes to the long-term relationship between an organization – including higher education institution – and its customer (Ennew, Binks, 1999; Bolton, 1998; Olsen, Johnson, 2003; Egan, 2001; Garbarino, Johnson, 1999; Mittal, Katrichis and Kumar, 2001). Satisfied students can be expected to stay loyal to their higher education institution (Mohzan, et al, 2011, Chandrashekar, et al, 2007). On the contrary, unsatisfied students may become negative marketing agents if they inform their disappointments with the institution to others. Therefore, higher education institutions, including UT, should take the efforts to conduct continuous improvement for student services if they intend to increase their students' loyalty.

CONCLUSION

The success of ODL institutions is reflected in how satisfied the students are with the services. So, it is crucial for the ODL institutions to maintain the quality of student support services available to be easily accessible. Consequently, UT must regularly evaluate whether the university has satisfied the needs of its students. In this study, students were fairly satisfied with the provision of the student services. However, care should be taken to improve four areas of student services, namely (1) easy access to UT staff, both in the Head Quarter and in the ROs, (2) easy access to the online courses, (3) easy access to the tutors, and (4) the quality of student-tutor interaction in online forums.

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