International Students’ Perceptions of Services and Supports Provided: A Case Study of a Mid-Sized University in the USA

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ABSTRACT

In a study of international students’ perceptions of services and supports offered by the mid-sized institution in which they are currently enrolled, consisting of 103 international students onshore in the USA, it was found that the majority of the respondents were fully aware of the International Student Orientation (ISO) that is made available to them via the Office of International Education (OIE). However, only close to 70% of the respondents had attended the orientation, even though the university claimed that attending the International Student Orientation is mandatory for all new international students. Respondents also claimed that services such as Immigration Support and Advising; International Student Organization; Cultural Events; Blackboard Communication; and Shuttle Service are all very helpful. However, some respondents wished to see more useful and relevant services that could be offered by the university such as job guidance, as well as assisting international students in their internship application.

KEYWORDS

International Students in a Mid-Sized University, International Students in the USA, Internationalization of Higher Education, Supports and Services for International Students

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, students have been seen as customers by many higher education institutions around the world (see Aliff, 1998; Baldwin, 1994; Delmonico, 2000; Ho & Ooi, 2009; Pitman, 2000). These include both state-owned and private universities, which, viewing tuition fees as their main source of income, have aggressively looked into different ways to increase student enrolment and revenue. Many of these institutions choose to focus on attracting more international students, as the overseas students’ tuition is typically much higher than that of the in-state students.

Since many universities are choosing to see their students as customers, these higher education institutions should also focus on how to make their customers ‘happy’ in order to minimize the likelihood of their students transferring to other schools. The purpose of this research is to investigate on-campus international students’ perceptions of the services offered by the mid-sized university at which they are currently enrolled in the USA.

To compete within this dynamic market, marketers need to better leverage their existing and potential customers’ perception of their institutions’ value through continuous improvement (Ho & Madden-Hallett, 2013). As pointed out by Onsman (2015), international students have become sources of necessary income for many higher education institutions in the United States. The ability to understand how these students perceive the services and supports that are currently offered to them will help the university administrators to develop better strategies not only to attract potential international students, but also to keep the existing ones.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization has been a common and important goal for many higher education institutions around the world for more than a decade. According to Knight (2008), university internationalization can be explained as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education” (p. 8). This definition is commonly used and accepted by many researchers within the higher education sector. In a similar vein, Childress (2009) proposed that university internationalization is the “process of integrating an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher education institution” (p. 289).

As pointed out by Parsons (2010), many universities have chosen to invest large amounts of money and resources into internationalizing their institutions. Senior university administrators often see many benefits to internationalizing, whether because it prepares their graduates to practice in a global context (Bennett & Kane, 2011) or because it allows the university to gain lucrative profits from the international students’ premium tuition fees (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2007; Jordan, 2015). Another benefit of internationalizing is that foreign students can infuse diversity into a student population and add new perspectives to classroom conversations, creating an international learning experience for every student who studies on campus (Gopal, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Knight, 2008; Otten, 2003; Yang, 2014).

According to Cort, Das, and Synn (2004), however, there is no single strategy that can be used as a consistent template to internationalize a higher education institution. However, many researchers have argued that there are several effective ways to achieve university internationalization. These include:

- Increasing the participation in study abroad programs (Crose, 2011; Parson, 2010);
- Enrolling more international students (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2007; Crose, 2011; Knight, 2008; Yang, 2014);
- Internationalizing the curriculum (Bennett & Kane, 2011; Cort et al., 2004; Crose, 2011; Knight, 1999, Parson, 2010; Yang, 2014); and
- Preparing faculty members to teach students from diverse backgrounds (Cort et al., 2004; Gopal, 2011).

International Students in the USA

In the past decade, international students have become necessary sources of income for many western countries (Onsman, 2015). For a country like New Zealand (NZ), international education is one of the largest export earners, contributing $2.85 billion in 2014 from nearly 100,000 international students studying on NZ soil (Intuier Education Group, 2015). In the United States, international students contributed nearly $27 billion to the country’s economy in 2013 (Paulson, 2014).

The number of international students in the USA has increased every year since 2005 (Gill & Routon, 2015). There are several reasons why international students see the United States as the destination of choice for their university qualification. Based on a recent publication released by the Institute of International Education, international students choose the United States due to its “high quality higher education system” as well as because it offers “a wide range of schools and programs to suit a variety of different students” (Institute of International Education, n. d., p. 3).

Supports and Services for International Students

Research in higher education for international students normally takes place in large public or private universities that have a strong international student presence. Although a lot of literature regarding international students focuses on the difficulties that they face in transitioning to a new
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