ANTECEDENTS OF SATISFACTION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN MALAYSIA

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Science (Human Resource Development)

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To my beloved parents and grandparents
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In preparing this thesis, I was in contact with many people, researchers, academicians, and practitioners. They have contributed towards my understanding and thoughts. In particular, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my thesis supervisor, Professor Dr. Amran bin Md. Rasli, for encouragement, guidance, critics, motivation and friendship. Without his continued support and interest, this thesis would not have been the same as presented here.

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to investigate the levels, degrees, and relationships of cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality, and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China studying in Malaysia. The numerical data was obtained through the CASS questionnaire survey, which was conducted from June 2013 to July 2013 at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Johor) and Sunway University (Selangor). As the research instrument of this study, the CASS questionnaire was a modification from Samarasekera (2013), Reynolds (2010), and Danjuma’s (2012) works, and all the questions were set into the fifth-point Likert-scale format. The questionnaire was distributed to 63 China students in UTM and 54 China students in SU. The data obtained had good internal consistency, as indicated by the reliability analysis because all Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients were greater than 0.65. The result of normality test showed that the data was normally distributed, as indicated by the statistics of skewness and kurtosis coefficients as well as the Q-Q plots. More precisely, the former indicators had their values falling within ±3 for all dimensions of each variable, and the latter had depicted that the data points were close to the regression line. For cultural orientation, the pertaining formula for VSM 94 were used to assess the dimensional index value scores. Result indicated both UTM and SU students had low power distance and were primarily individualistic, feminine, and short-terms oriented. However, a contradicting result was found in the uncertainty avoidance dimension where the UTM’s respondents had shown a high uncertainty avoidance preference and that of SU was comparatively lower. For adjustment, all dimensional scores were greater than 3, the midpoint of the five point scale, which meant that the respondents could adjust to their lives in Malaysia. The results showed a negative gap scores for all five dimensions in UTM and SU. For the correlation analysis, a positive correlation between cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality, and satisfaction as a whole.
ABSTRAK

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
<td></td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td></td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td></td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td></td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Background of the Study 6
1.3 Statement of the Problem 8
1.4 Objectives of the Study 11
1.5 Research Questions 11
1.6 Significance of the Study 12
1.7 Scope of the Study 13
1.8 Purpose of the Study 13
1.9 Assumptions and Limitation of Study 14
1.10 Definition of Key Terms 16
1.11 Plan of the Thesis 16
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Theories and Models of study

2.2.1 Cultural Orientation

2.2.1.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

2.2.2 Adjustment

2.2.2.1 Acculturation Theory

2.2.2.2 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory

2.2.3 Service Quality

2.2.3.1 GAP Model

2.2.4 Satisfaction

2.2.4.1 American Customer Satisfaction Index Model

2.3 Globalization and the Higher Education Institution

2.4 International student

2.4.1 International Students from P.R. China

2.5 Background of Selected Universities

2.5.1 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

2.5.2 Sunway University

2.6 Research Framework

2.7 Summary

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Research Design

3.3 Population of Sample

3.4 Research Instrument

3.4.1 VSM 94 by Hofstede

3.4.2 Expatriate Cultural Scale

3.4.3 SERVQUAL

3.5 Research Hypotheses

3.6 Data Analysis

3.7 Summary
4 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction 57
4.2 Reliability Analysis 58
4.3 Normality Test 59
4.4 Cultural Orientation 61
4.5 Adjustment 65
4.6 Service Quality 67
4.7 Satisfaction 72
4.8 Correlation Analysis 73
4.8.1 Relationship between Cultural Orientation and Satisfaction 74
4.8.2 Relationship between Adjustment and Satisfaction 76
4.8.3 Relationship between Service Quality and Satisfaction 77

5 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 80

5.1 Introduction 80
5.2 Recapitulation of this study 80
5.3 RQ1: What are the types of cultural orientation, adjustment, and service quality faced by oversea students from P.R. China? 82
5.3.1 Types of Cultural Orientation 82
5.3.2 Types of Adjustment 83
5.3.3 Types of Service Quality 84
5.4 RQ2: What are the levels of dimensions of cultural orientation and the levels of service quality, adjustment and satisfaction among the oversea students from P.R. China? 85
5.4.1 Dimensions of Cultural Orientation 85
5.4.1.1 Individualism 86
5.4.1.2 Power Distance 87
5.4.1.3 Masculine 88
5.4.1.4 Uncertainty Avoidance 89
5.4.1.5 Long-term orientation 89
5.4.2 Dimensions of Adjustment 90
5.4.2.1 Cultural Adjustment 91
5.4.2.2 Interaction Adjustment 92
5.4.2.3 Studying Adjustment

5.4.3 Dimensions of Service Quality
   5.4.3.1 Tangible
   5.4.3.2 Reliability
   5.4.3.3 Responsiveness
   5.4.3.4 Assurance
   5.4.3.5 Empathy

5.5 RQ3: What are the levels of satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia?

5.6 RQ4: What is the relationship between cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China?

5.7 Conclusion and Implications
   5.7.1 Theoretical Implications
   5.7.2 Practical Implications

5.8 Limitations of this study

5.9 Recommendations for Future Research

REFERENCES

Appendices A - E
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE NO.</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>The Sponsorship of Oversea Students from P.R. China (2000-2011)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Types of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Definitions of International Students Based Nations</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Adjustment Dimensions in HEI</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>SERVQUAL Dimensions in HEI</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Summaries of the Research Questions, Data Collection and Data Analysis</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Cronbach's Alpha coefficients</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Dimension Coefficients of Skewness and Kurtosis for UTM</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Dimension Coefficients of Skewness and Kurtosis for SU</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Orientation for UTM</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Orientation for SU</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Adjustment for UTM</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Adjustment of SU</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Expectation, Perception and Gap Scores of UTM</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Expectation, Perception and Gap Scores of SU</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Satisfaction of UTM</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Satisfaction of SU</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>Cultural Orientation Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in UTM</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>Correlation between Cultural Orientation and Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>Cultural Orientation Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>Correlation between Cultural Orientation and Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>Adjustment Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in UTM</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>Correlation between Adjustment and Satisfaction in UTM</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>Adjustment Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>Correlation between Adjustment and Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>SERVQUAL Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in UTM</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>Correlation between SERVQUAL and Satisfaction in UTM</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>SERVQUAL Dimensional Correlation with Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>Correlation between SERVQUAL and Satisfaction in SU</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE NO.</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>The Number of Oversea Students from P.R. China (2000-2011)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>The Number of Candidate and Enrollment of National Entrance Examination for Postgraduate in P.R. China (2002-2012)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>The Number of International Students and China’s International Students in Malaysia’s Higher Education Institution (2002-2011)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>The Percentage of China’s International Students in Malaysia’s Higher Education Institution (2002-2011)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Comparison of China-Malaysia on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Framework of Understanding Acculturation Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Brown’s four successive stages of acculturation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>GAP Model</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>American Customer Satisfaction Index Model</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework of this Study</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Research flowchart</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Culture Dimensions Scores amongst University Students from P.R. China in UTM</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Culture Dimensions Scores amongst University Students from P.R. China in SU</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1 Cultural Dimension Scores amongst University Students from P.R. China in UTM and SU 86
5.2 Adjustment Scores amongst University Students from P.R. China in UTM and SU 91
5.3 Service Quality Scores amongst University Students from P.R. China in UTM and SU 94
## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACSI</td>
<td>American Customer' Satisfaction Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASS</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Cultural Adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASS</td>
<td>Culture Orientation, Adjustment, SERVQUAL and Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA</td>
<td>Interaction Adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDV</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTO</td>
<td>Long-term Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDI</td>
<td>Power Distance Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. R. China</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Studying Adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVQUAL</td>
<td>Service Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU</td>
<td>Sunway University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAN</td>
<td>Tangible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAI</td>
<td>Uncertainty Avoidance</td>
</tr>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>United State of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTM</td>
<td>Universiti Teknologi Malaysia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDIX</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Sample Size Estimation Table</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Pilot Questionnaire</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Content Validity of CASS Questionnaire</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Cultural Orientation, Adjustment, SERVQUAL and Satisfaction (CASS) Questionnaire</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Mandarin Version of CASS Questionnaire</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reliability Analysis</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Normal Q-Q Plot</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

After China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the central government of People's Republic of China (P.R. China) began to focus more on long-term economic growth that requires a fundamentally well-educated labor force to support future knowledge-based activities (Wang, 2009). According to the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council of China (2003), human resource is an important element of the broader strategy for China national development. This can be seen from president Hu’s (2007) firm emphasis on the importance of developing human resource as a part of national development for P.R. China. As a result, this has called for a higher demand in high-quality education in the country.

With China's rapid globalization and economic growth, the number of P.R. China students studying overseas has increased dramatically. According to Wang (2012), the number has surged more than 8 times over the past twelve years and is expected to further escalate in the near future (refer to Figure 1.1).
In 2011, P.R. China has 339.7 thousand students studying abroad, occupying 14% of global abroad study population and was ranked number one in the world (UNESCO, 2012). Though it seems that the overseas education market capacity for Mainland Chinese students has been overwhelmed, it actually has greater room for improvement and growth since there is still a serious imbalance between demands and supplies of tertiary education in P.R. China’s education system.

In the undergraduate level, approximately ten million Chinese students take the Pre University Examination with six million graduating every year. In the postgraduate level, Figure 1.2 shows that, in the past twelve years, the candidate and enrollment of the National Entrance Examination for Postgraduate in P.R. China has been surpassing one million applicants since eight years ago and is steadily increasing every year. However, its annual acceptance rate is only around one third of this number. In 2012, more than 1.1 million applicants had the intention to continue postgraduate education, but had unfortunately failed the examination. Under such circumstances, it seems that opting for overseas education has become a viable choice for those with undying determination to study, and this has given the overseas education market ample spaces to prosper.

**Figure 1.1:** The Number of Oversea Students from P.R. China (2000-2011)
Figure 1.2: The Number of Candidate and Enrollment of National Entrance Examination for Postgraduate in P.R. China (2001-2012)
Source: http://edu.sina.com.cn/kaoyan/2012-08-31/1743353989.shtml

MyCOS (2012) revealed that, during the past five years, the top five reasons to study abroad for students from P.R. China are to improve comprehensive occupational competency; acquire advanced knowledge and skills; broaden their own perspectives and get to know other cultures; access to advanced education system; and live in a foreign country. This clearly emphasized on China students’ desire to access to higher education level as well as advanced knowledge.

Undoubtedly, the education systems of most countries are well developed. However, the educational expenses of most developed countries are comparatively higher for overseas students from developing countries than local students. Such phenomena has been confirmed by Doan (2002) and Van Der Meid (2003) who stated that the cost of studying abroad is a practical concern for Asian students when choosing which country to go to, especially for those that are studying at their own expenses. Table 1.1 shows that the percentage of oversea students from P.R. China without any sponsorship is around 90% over the past 12 years. Therefore, it is undeniable that the cost of studying is a vital factor that influences the students’ decision in choosing the country to study in.
Table 1.1: The Sponsorship of Oversea Students from P.R. China (2000-2011)
Source: Li (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sponsorship (thousand)</th>
<th>Own Expense (thousand)</th>
<th>Total (thousand)</th>
<th>Proportion of Own expense (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>39.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>90.48</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>117.0</td>
<td>125.0</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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<td>144.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19.2</td>
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<td>91.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>314.8</td>
<td>339.7</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to developed countries such as the US, Australia, and Singapore, the Malaysian higher education is of relatively lower cost with uncompromised quality. This is the result of the Malaysian government’s globalization and industrial upgrading strategies to make the nation an Asian regional education hub. In 2011, about 93,000 international students from more than 100 countries are studying in Malaysia. There are four types of High Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, which are public universities, private HEIs, polytechnic institutions, and community colleges. Table 1.2 shows the number of Malaysia HEIs offering opportunities for higher education in 2011; it should be noted that only public universities and private HEIs have offered similar opportunities to overseas students.
Table 1.2: Types of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia
Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public University</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private HEI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Status</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Status</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign University Branches</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polytechnic</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to achieve Malaysia’s 2020 education strategic target and stimulate the industry’s development, foreign students ought to be considered as the customers of education businesses (Drucker, 1985). In fact, the education industry is a vital part of the services industry. Kotler and Keller (2006) believe that customer satisfaction refers to a state of feeling after comparing one’s expectations with the service actually received. From a business perspective, maintaining customer satisfaction is the core in marketing management. At the same time, it is also a way of nurturing customer loyalty (Fornell et al., 1996). With positive customer satisfaction, two promising circumstances can happen: (1) the current international students will possibly further their studies in Malaysia, and (2) they may recommend Malaysia’s HEIs to other Mainland Chinese students who intend to study abroad.

Regardless of the promising educational prospects offered by overseas educational institutions, studying abroad remains a concern for many students. The two major concerns being their cultural value difference with the local community and the lifestyle adjustment phase that they have to endure. Culture is a common value held by a group of people such as beliefs and senses, and adjustment is a process where people are trying to balance conflicting between needs and obstacles in a new environment (Arkoff, 1968). To constructively address these two concerns, it is necessary to understand the status quo, altitudes, and beliefs of international students studying in their respective host countries.
Another concern that can affect international students’ studying experience in a foreign country is the quality of education, which is reflected from the level of services provided by the institution. Service quality is the core issue of service marketing and the key for winning in the competition. With reference to Juran (1999), service quality is the extent to which the perceived service has met the consumers’ need, and this involves not only the service results, but also the service process. In order to guarantee service quality, it is essential to build a mechanism and create a quality indicator that leads to service standardization for the Malaysia HEIs.

This study has focused on four important aspects, i.e., cultural orientation, adjustment, services quality, and satisfaction among present oversea students from P.R. China in Malaysia HEIs. The two main HEIs under scrutiny were Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Sunway University.

In conclusion, keeping a higher reputation with international students is a way to attract more overseas students (Yang, 2009; Imran, 2011). To become a preferred education destination of the biggest oversea students market in the world, the Malaysian government has launched a pilot project geared towards this direction. In P.R. China, the nation’s long-term sustainable economic growth requires a continuous development and well-educated labor force to support future knowledge-based activities. Therefore, the conditions of Mainland Chinese students studying overseas ought to be addressed since they are a vital human resource.

1.2 Background of the Study

Within rapid technology and economy progression, industries need to adjust and upgrade their structures to catch up with the trend. Since the 1970s, the Malaysian government has constantly adjusted its industrial structure, resulting in the tertiary industry developing aggressively, and thus becoming the business pillar of national economy in 1990s. In time to come, the focus is due to shift towards the education industry and thus expanding the knowledge economy. In Malaysian, the
tertiary industry basically serves the production and consumption sectors, and is relatively highly developed and stably conducted.

In 2011, more than 2.4 million students are studying outside of their home countries (UNESCO, 2012). Bohm et al. (2002) predicted that the data will rise to 7 million by 2025. However, only about 93,000 (2011) foreign students have joined the Malaysian HEIs. This small amount depicts Malaysia’s vast potential in absorbing more foreign students in years to come. The government itself is also promoting the nation as a world-class education destination and aims to get a bigger slice of the international education market, i.e., attracting 200,000 oversea students by 2020. This is noted in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 in 2007. Undoubtedly, as the largest source of international students, China is crucial to the nation’s higher education industry. As such, constructive researches have to be carried out to help Malaysia into achieving its strategic goal (Anantha and Krishnaveni, 2012).

Foreign students bring a lot economic benefits and employment opportunities to the host countries. The economic benefits come in the forms of the funds they bring in to support their tuition fees and living expenses. Employment opportunities come from the need to fulfill the services needed by these foreign students.

According to Wang’s report (2012), the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have become the new popular choices for China’s students to study. According to the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (2011), in 2010, the numbers of oversea student from P.R. China was 10214, which exceeded Indonesian students (9889 students) and became the second largest international students group in the country, the first being Iranian student (11828 students). Generally, Mainland Chinese students had only occupied 3% of the nation’s international student population; this again highlights the country’s potential to absorb more Mainland Chinese students.

However, for these foreign students, shifting their cultural orientation and adjusting to the new lifestyle are most of the time a pressing problem in their host
countries. This is because they are balancing conflicting needs and the obstacles with its environment (Arkoff, 1968). In this regard, the HEIs need to get to know about students’ expectations and demands, and provide support to help them overcome the problems. They also need to upgrade their own service standard and competitiveness in the market, especially when maintaining the students’ satisfaction is important to maintain good appraisals. For instance, according to Jarrahi (2004), China’s students prefer to get information in informal way rather than professional counseling services. Therefore, the HEIs ought to take this into account to tailor successful yet comfortable counseling sessions to their Mainland China students.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Figure 1.3 shows that the number of international students in Malaysia has increased dramatically over the past ten years. However, the quantity of Mainland China students has decreased within this period. Based on Figure 1.4, this has dropped from almost 50% in 2002 to less than 8% in 2011.

Figure 1.3: The Number of International Students and China’s International Students in Malaysia’s Higher Education Institution (2002-2011)
Figure 1.4: The Percentage of China’s International Students in Malaysia’s Higher Education Institution (2002-2011)


From another aspect, Malaysia has failed to achieve the 2010 national higher education target to attract more than 100,000 international students into Malaysia, which is clearly denoted in Figure 1.3. In that particular year, there were only 86,000 international student enrollments in Malaysian HEIs. Compared to most developed countries, the local education industry is still young. Therefore, more efforts have to be poured on its relative studies.

In order to develop the international higher education business in Malaysia and to attract more Mainland China students to join Malaysian HEIs, it is important to understand the opinions of the current group studying here. This is to allow the Malaysian government and HEIs to become more aware of the importance of university service quality, exploration on the students’ customer satisfaction standard, and understanding on the cultural orientation and adjustment issue phases that these students are facing. These ought to be addressed so that they can adjust to their new lifestyle and thus academically excel.

Adjustment problems may arise due to the differences in culture (Bochner et al., 1979), language (Anderade, 2006), and food (Furukawa, 1997). Research by Liu
and Redfern (1999) indicated that language barriers constitute to a significant problem for non-English students in their academic adjustment. In this regard, most Mainland Chinese students lack self-confidence in their English standard since they rarely have the chance to practice the language at home. Unless overcome, this will obstruct their efforts in adjusting both academically and socially to their new environment.

Cultural orientation problems, on the other hand, are mostly caused by the cultural differences among international and local students. Since Chinese is a major ethnic group in Malaysia, the host culture, to a certain extent, is similar to the Mainland China’s culture. Nevertheless, differences still exist in both culture and thoughts since the Malaysian Chinese are accustomed to a multi-racial society. Therefore, misunderstandings may still exist between these two groups of Chinese.

World famous HEIs often focus exclusively on their service quality and special services to students to establish a good image for the institution. In relation to this, many Malaysian HEIs have made significant progress in the cultivation of its brand and competitiveness against other HEIs. However, in comparison with world renowned HEIs like the Ivy League, the Malaysian HEIs still have a long way to go. According to Kelsey and Bond (2001), service quality is vital to the satisfaction level among international students. In the education industry, the students are the institutions’ customers. In other words, the target of their services is the student. However, many of the HEIs’ executive officers and staff have failed to fully review their customers’ needs, resulting in a gap between the students’ expectation and the management’s perceived students’ expectation as well as between the service delivered to students and the promise given earlier on its service quality (Parasurama et al., 1985). These HEIs have overlooked the importance of giving suitable services with decent quality to assist their overseas students in adjusting to the new academic environment and host culture. With good services, the HEIs can actually build up a good reputation overseas to attract more international students.
1.4 Objectives of the Study

The present research was conducted to identify the cultural orientation differences between Mainland Chinese students and Malaysian students to understand the former’s current situation, assess Malaysian HEIs’ service quality, and identify the satisfaction level among university students from P.R. China. The research objectives are:

- To investigate the types of cultural orientations, adjustment, and service quality faced by oversea students from P.R. China in Malaysia.
- To assess the levels of dimensions of cultural orientation, adjustment, and service quality among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia.
- To determine the levels of satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia.
- To assess the relationship between cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the objectives and the requirements, this study attempted to find answers to the following research questions (RQs):

1. What are the types of cultural orientations, adjustment, and service quality faced by oversea students from P.R. China in Malaysia?
2. What are the levels of dimensions of cultural orientation, adjustment, and service quality among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia?
3. What are the levels of satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia?
4. What is the relationship between cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction among university students from P.R. China in Malaysia?
1.6 Significance of the Study

This research was conducted to determine the influencing factors to the cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality, and satisfaction level of Mainland Chinese students studying in Malaysian HEIs. The results of this study will benefit several groups at the national, organizational, and individual levels.

At the national level, the results may benefit the development of domestic education business, economy growth, and employment opportunities creation. Currently, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education aims to develop the nation as a core distinction zone for higher education and has since set up a target of attracting 200,000 international students by 2020. This is fuelled by the domestic development of supporting services and facilities to push the Malaysian HEIs to higher world rankings. The discussion on higher educational service quality is expected to build a mechanism and identify the quality indicators, which will help in achieving standardization of service quality in the management sector of Malaysia’s HEIs. This is to increase the competitiveness of Malaysia HEIs in the global education market, and also to fulfill P.R. China’s demand for high-quality education.

At the organizational level, the results may benefit the Malaysian HEIs to attract more Mainland Chinese students. With this, the universities can produce a better marketing strategy. Booker (2001) pointed out that the experiences and recommendations of other former overseas students have significant impact on the decision making of prospective students to study abroad. This in turn is judged by the institutions’ reputation. Therefore, the HEIs ought to fully understand the problems faced by overseas students and give them useful support to give them an enjoyable and satisfactory study experience.

At the individual level, the results may benefit the Mainland Chinese students who are studying or intending to study in Malaysian HEIs. For the former group, this will help them to better adjust to their new lifestyle, familiarize themselves with the new academic environment, and have a satisfactory academic performance. As for
the latter group, this study will serve as a realistic guide to the expected study life in Malaysia.

The cultural orientation result in present study is completely different from the research conducted by Hofstede et al. (2010), which means the cultural orientation amongst the respondents of this research do not consisted with the China national cultural orientation. The finding of this study shows the China youth or young generation hold totally different cultural values from the elder generation and becomes more westernized.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The research aims at exploring the cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction status quo of foreign students from P.R. China studying in Malaysia HEIs. The scope of this study includes two Malaysia universities (one public university and one private university) that have oversea students from P.R. China. The selected public university was Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) (Skudai) and the selected private university was Sunway University (SU) (Selangor). These two universities had roughly the same population of Mainland Chinese students. The universities and actual respondents were chosen at random.

1.8 Purpose of the Study

Based on the 2020 strategic plan of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, the government intends to attract more international student to study in Malaysia and develop the Malaysian educational industry in a global context. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the types of antecedents for international students’ satisfaction. Cultural orientation, service quality and adjustment were considered as antecedents among university students from P.R. China in this present study. This research was also carried out to measure the dimensions of cultural
orientation and the levels of adjustment, service quality, and satisfaction among the international students from P.R. China in Malaysian HEIs as well as finding their inter-relationships.

The finding of this present study will depict the altitude and beliefs of the target group students, which may also contribute to the literatures or concepts in the field of study. It may also be beneficial to relevant stakeholders to respond to the pressing issues.

1.9 Assumptions of the Study

Three assumptions were made in this study:

1. The respondents participate in this survey would express their real thoughts and feelings.
2. The respondents could fully understand the questions in regard to cultural orientation, adjustment, service quality, and satisfaction in the questionnaire.
3. The respondents of this study would be impartial and honest in giving their responses.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

The key terms of this study are defined as follows:

International Student:

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2010) defined ‘international student’ as a person who leaves his/her home country and stays in another nation in a period of time for education, or who has taken prior education outside of their home country.
Cultural Orientation:

Culture is ‘...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another, the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influences a human group's response to its environment’ (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25). Cultural orientation consists of five dimensions of culture, which are power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculine, and Long-term orientation. Power distance is the acceptance and expectation of unequal distribution of power in a society, especially for the powerless people (Hofstede, 1997). Individualism is a kind of social orientation that can be described as the degree to which individuals is integrated into community or group (Hofstede, 1980; Ehrenfreund et al., 2010). Uncertainty avoidance is the tolerance for uncertainty, unplanned event and ambiguity in a society (Hofstede, 2001). Masculine is the extent of competition, achievement and success orientation in the society. Long-term orientation can be expressed as the extent to which the society upholds traditional values (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Adjustment:

In tertiary education content, students’ adjustment consists of three aspects, which are cultural adjustment, interaction adjustment, and studying adjustment (Black and Stephens, 1989; Reynolds, 2010). Cultural adjustment can be viewed as the degree that university students adapt to changes caused by cultural differences between home country and host country. Interaction adjustment is the socialization between international students and local people in host country. Studying adjustment is about the students correspond with their study roles and requirements in the university.

Service quality:

Service quality can be seen as a global evaluation or attitude of overall excellence of services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In tertiary education content, it can be divided in to five dimensions, which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Shekarchizadeh, 2011). Tangibles can be considered as physical facilities, equipment, laboratories, and workshop. Reliability can be viewed as ability that HEI perform the service as promised dependably and accurately. Responsiveness is the
willingness that HEI help or support students and provide service efficiently. Assurance can be seen as the knowledge, experienced, competence and courtesy of HEI staff and their ability to deliver credibility and confidence. Empathy is about caring about students by accessing, communication and understanding and providing individualized attention (Shekarchizadeh, 2011).

**Satisfaction:**

Oliver (1981) defined satisfaction as the sense responded by the disconfirmation experience of consumption, which plays a role as the base approach level. Schoepp (2010) stated another definition in the overseas students’ context, which is the extent to which the international students may or may not achieve the expectations of faculty with regards to issues they faced such as adapting to the university culture or lives in host country.

1.11 **Plan of the Thesis**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the present background of this study and the basic ideas of cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction issues among Mainland Chinese students studying in Malaysian HEIs. The objective, research questions, and scope of this research are indicated as well. This is followed by the significance, the purpose, and the assumptions made in this study. The end of this chapter encompasses the definitions of key terms.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review of this study. It starts with discussing the issues related to globalization, HEIs, and international students. After that the theories of cultural orientation, service quality, adjustment, and satisfaction are explained. This is followed by a depiction of the research model, some relevant research findings, and the theoretical framework of this study.
Chapter 3 lays out the research design of this study. This includes a quantitative questionnaire named the Cultural orientation, Adjustment, SERVQUAL, and Satisfaction (CASS) questionnaire. The related statistical methods and the way to identify sample size are also described in this chapter. This ends with an explanation on the data analysis method for the obtained data.

Chapter 4 shows the result and analysis of the data obtained through the CASS questionnaire survey. It starts with the findings of the reliability analysis and normality test for the primary data, and then the single mean t-test used to examine the values of each item and dimension. Last but not the least, the results of the correlation analysis used to measure the relationship between independent variables (cultural orientation, adjustment and service quality) and dependent variable (satisfaction) are explained.

This thesis ends with Chapter 5, which explains the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations of this research. It starts with the recapitulation of this study and then the answers to the three research questions. The end of this chapter reveals the implications and limitations of this study as well as recommendations for further studies.
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