

## Critical factors affecting international students' satisfaction of hostel facilities: A case study of Universiti Sains Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to assess the quality of hostel facilities from international students' perspective in University Sains Malaysia. The assessment methods used include walkthroughs and in-depth interviews. A total of 22 international students from nine different nationalities were interviewed. The key investigative issues identified include the quality of bedrooms, bathrooms, pantry, and lobby. Support service facilities such as garbage disposal, parking lots, fire safety, electrical wiring, water supply, cafeteria and mini market are also explored. Moreover, this study investigates the services facilities from hostel management include a response for first aid/health emergency issues, response to minor repairs, general maintenance, availability of management to complaints, and response to complaints. The findings showed that the support service facilities and facilities from hostel management were moderate, while the quality of rooms (room size, room temperature, furniture), kitchen (lack of cooking facilities), and lobby (lack of appropriate sitting area and TV) were found displeased. This study offers recommendations to serve as feedback, and feedforward for the sake of improvements in hostel facilitation. This research has a practical value to the potential stakeholders, particularly hostel management and university administration to reconsider the housing policies for providing an appealing environment for international students. Study limitations and future recommendation have been provided.

**Keywords:** hostel facilities, international students, support service facilities, hostel management

### INTRODUCTION

Universities around the globe are striving to appeal to a large number of international students to their educational programs and executing different strategies to provide them with facilitation. Providing a good accommodation to international students within the campus is one of the key enabling policy by any institution. Prior research revealed that university accommodation and the facilities attached to it influence students' choice of study destination (Lee & Park, 2010). Some researchers argue that students' academic productivity is highly dependent on the indicators such as facilities available to students and support services provided by their university (Adewunmi et al., 2011; Thomsen & Eikemo, 2010). Amole (2009) observed that the students' interpersonal growth has a positive relationship to the adequate

facilities available in the institutions. Thus, the physical environment of universities is a strong area of consideration for students' overall satisfaction.

Given that universities are in need to meet an increasing demand for international students' housing. Students' satisfaction with their housing serves as a determining factor in enhancing their living environment. Several researchers considered student accommodation as one of the most adequate facilities offered by the higher education institutions (HEIs). For instance, Najib et al (2011) observed that students' intellectual capabilities are expandable through the facilitation of appropriate physical environment at the residence halls. Furthermore, it was noted by Hassanain (2008) that desirable educational outcomes with students' mutual interests can be fostered with adequately designed residential facilities. In his research, he also found that suitable hostel facilities can ensure security, cooperation, intellectual stimulation, responsible citizenship, inspiration and mutual composition among students.

However, to provide such satisfaction to students is a challenging task due to the public nature of such spaces (Kaya and Erkip, 2001). The individual judgments about residential conditions are generally formed by their desires and needs. Satisfaction with one's residential condition comes from congruency between desired and actual situations. If such an agreement is not met, dissatisfaction could be experienced (Vera-Toscano and Ateca-Amestoy, 2008). Though a lot of factors seem to contribute to international students' satisfaction level, the majority of students would prefer to stay in hostels as long as they are provided with decent housing and adequate facilities at a cheaper rate (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011). Unlike the effort has made to investigate factors influencing residents' satisfaction with their house and neighborhood, the lack of inquiry into students' satisfaction with their university housing seem to suggest more investigation particularly from the perspective of international students (Amole, 2009).

In studies that place the critical lens on students' satisfaction levels of their university accommodation, the units of focus have been diverse such as on the influence of the physical attributes, and, psychological and management aspects. Most of these studies indicate that there is a direct correlation between the satisfaction levels and the hostel environment (Alfert, 1966; Sam, 2001; Najib & Sani, 2012). Basically, when the environment meets the individuals' expectation a higher degree of satisfaction has been noted. On the other hand, incongruence between housing needs and aspirations leads to dissatisfaction (Mohit et. al, 2010). Thus, it can be concluded that understanding students' satisfaction predicting factors can assist universities to undertake changes to increase satisfaction among them. However, there is a paucity of research on students' housing satisfaction factors, especially in Malaysia. Hence, this study is an attempt to fill this gap to a certain degree. Consequently, the current study seeks to identify the most important factors that predict international students' satisfaction with their on-campus accommodation in Universiti Sains Malaysia hostels. The following section provides a discussion of factors that influence satisfaction with regard to campus accommodation. This is followed by a discussion on the methodology utilized in this study, data analysis and a discussion of the findings.

## **SATISFACTIONS WITH HOSTEL INFLUENCING FACTORS**

Some research was undertaken on the key factors affecting students' satisfaction with the living environment. A study conducted for the investigation of students' perceptions of the living environment at Kuwait University showed that students' perception could be affected by gender, nationality, and duration of residency. Years of residence also could predict students' perception of their living environments. Nonetheless, no significant differences were reported among the responses based on their nationalities. Hassanain, (2008) explored the impact of social density (an increase in a number of roommates sharing a double occupancy) on students' perception of crowding. Their results revealed that "Residents of triples expressed greater feelings of crowding, perceived less control over room activities, expressed more negative interpersonal attitudes and experienced a more negative room ambiance". Holahan and Wilcox (1978) demonstrated how floor level could have an effect on students' satisfaction and friendship formation. They came to this conclusion that "residents of low-rise dormitories were significantly more satisfied and established more dormitory-based friendships than residents of a mega-dorm setting".

Physical attributes of hostels have been hardly examined in detail. Among the studies that investigate the influence of physical attributes of campus accommodation on students' satisfaction is Kayas' and Erkip's research (2001) on student housing setting at Bilkent University, Ankara. The study reveals that students living on the highest floor perceived their rooms larger and found them less crowded in comparison to those on the lowest floor. The study postulates that students' perception of their privacy led to an increase in the level of students' satisfaction with their living condition. Similarly, Karlin, et al.'s study (1979) posits that hostel room size can indeed influence students' level of satisfaction. For instance, their study found that students who lived in triple sharing rooms were less satisfied and unhappier with their living conditions than students residing in double sharing rooms. Kaya and Erkip (2001) study on student housing setting revealed students living on the highest floor perceived their rooms larger and found them less crowded in comparison to those ones on the lowest floor. Further, they concluded that students' perception of their privacy led to an increase in the level of students' satisfaction with a dormitory. Fisman (2007) argued "sense of place attempts to capture how and why humans feel connected or "rooted" to a place". In this line, Rodger and Johnson (2005) found that students living in dormitory-style buildings have a lower level of sense of belonging to place than those living in suite-style buildings.

The review of the related literature reveals that less attention has been given to the most important predictors of students' housing satisfaction and comparison between various students' accommodation. In the context of this study, Universiti Sains Malaysia offers a range of on-campus accommodation with different designs and facilities located inside and outside of campus. This researcher opines that these categories of housing facility have their own advantages and disadvantages. Most of the literature focused on the local students and the investigation about international students' satisfaction with housing facilities is still demanding consideration.

Consistent with this view and with an aim to fill the literature gap on the international students' satisfaction with hostel facilities, the following research questions are addressed in this study;

- What is the international students level of satisfaction with the quality of bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, and lobby?
- What is the international students level of satisfaction with the support service facilities such as garbage disposal, parking lots, fire safety, electrical wiring, water supply, cafeteria and mini markets?
- What is the international students level of satisfaction with the services facilities from hostel management including response for first aid/health emergency issues, response to minor repairs, general maintenance, availability of management to complaints, and response to complaints?

The outcome of this study can be useful for university administrators to understand the international students' needs and satisfaction predictors to keep students more satisfied with their university housing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Walkthrough***

This is a tour of the entire facility to identify issues that can be addressed immediately or issues that require further investigation. A walkthrough helps to identify building deterioration and associated problems. To obtain an overview of the conditions at the student housing facilities, a walkthrough exercise was carried out by moving from floor to floor within the building, and wing to wing on each floor. Three buildings were assessed in the walkthrough exercise. Notes and photographs were taken to record the observations.

### ***Structured interviews***

The respondents were 22 full-time international master's and postgraduate students (coded as R1 – R22) studying in different schools/faculties at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Respondents came from nine different countries namely Nigeria, Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Jordan. A qualitative approach was employed for this research and in-depth interviews were conducted to determine these students' hostel satisfaction level. Researchers attempt to describe and interpret the more complex human experience based on these interviews (Creswell, 1998). An open-ended interview protocol was developed based on previous work related to hostel facilities and students satisfaction. Before the interview, each respondent was given a consent form and an information sheet outlining the objective of the research, the criteria for respondents, research procedures and respondent rights.

The interview questions addressed their experiences of hostel facilities and management role in resolving the issues. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and

coded. Many important constructs emerged from the data. The constructs were then categorized into a few main themes (Creswell, 1998). The themes are first described and then supported by verbatim quotations from the respondents.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the findings and results of the qualitative analysis of the interview data. The initial analysis of interviews generated three main categories such as international students' satisfaction with rooms quality, support service facilities, and service facilities from hostel management based on the respondents' views and experiences at University Sains Malaysia hostels. The given examples of responses (as shown in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3) illustrate the factors stimulating international students' satisfaction with housing and facilities provided by their institution at hostels.

### ***International Students' Satisfaction with Rooms' Quality***

The findings revealed that majority of the students are satisfied with the bedroom sizes and facilities available within the rooms. The rooms for a single person found sufficient for living purpose. Rooms have some furniture such as a bed, cupboard and study table with chair. However, some students revealed that bedrooms are not clean enough when their arrival day. For instance, one respondent said that, *"When I entered the room, I saw the mattress.. Oh! It was so dirty and yeah I was worried how I will use this"*. R13

For the bathrooms, some students complaint about cleanliness. Most of the students confirmed that cleaners clean the bathroom every day, but some students use them without caring for cleanliness. To answer the question about pantry's cleanliness and facilities, most of the students do not use the pantry as cooking is prohibited in the hostels. Students reported complains about drinking water facilities. They mentioned that there are very few water dispensers in the hostels. One respondent revealed that: *"I go two floors down to take water from water dispenser but disappointedly the water is always finished"*. R7

Besides, researchers found that students are not happy with the lobby room as they do not feel comfortable and relax there. Lobby rooms are without TVs, if any, the TVs are small in size and lack of proper sitting. Some examples of students' responses have been given in Table 1 for a brighter view.

**Table 1** International Students' Satisfaction with Rooms Quality

| Categories                                | Examples   |
|---|--|
| Quality, size, and facilities at bedrooms | "Hostel room is good in size...quality is also ok." R12<br>"...if more bigger size it is more good, however it is suitable for single student to live." R5 |

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| Cleanliness of bathrooms                 | “Yes, usually it is in good conditions, however some of students do not use it properly” 10<br>“Bathrooms cleaned everyday by a lady... at weekends it becomes smelly.” R13  |
| Cleanliness and facilities in the pantry | “I do not cook, actually many students eat from outside...facilities can be improved such as microwave oven and ironing.” R9<br>“In only one pantry the water dispenser is available which sometimes is out of water. University need to improve pantry services.” R17 |
| Size and facilities of lobby             | “We friends sometimes sit in lobby. There is no proper sitting there...TV is not available.” R11<br>“No... no..., I do not sit in lobby. If hostel provide good lobby to sit and study then I will use it” R 20  |

### ***International Students’ Satisfaction with Support Service Facilities***

While exploring the support service facilities, some key issues were founded by researchers such as unawareness with fire safety guidelines, cafeteria accessibility and lack of minimarkets. Students reported that they have not given a proper training in using safety instruments in case of fire. Moreover, cafeterias and mini markets are far from hostels and close early in the evening. As one respondent revealed that, “*For dinner, we must go outside university because no cafeteria open after 8 or 8:30 in the evening*”. R05 Students were seemed satisfied with the garbage disposal, parking facility, and electric wiring within and outside the rooms (see Table 2).

**Table 2** International Students’ Satisfaction with Support Service Facilities

| Categories              | Examples  |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>Garbage disposal</i> | “I have no issue with garbage disposal. There are dustbins close to my room” R13<br>“...dustbins sometimes full and with food smell. In morning staff clean it regularly” R1  |
| <i>Parking lots</i>     | “I have a car which I park in hostel parking. I find parking in front of my hostel or some near place.” R6<br>“Parking is ok for me. I parked my motorbike at parking lot.” R17   |
| <i>Fire safety</i>      | “I am not sure what to answer. There are different instruments in hostels for this purpose.... I do not know how to use these in case of fire” R14<br>“They ask us to come down for fire safety exercise in every semester” R19 |

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|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Electrical wiring</i> | <p>“Yes, it is no problem... I am living in hostel from one year and no electric issue happened.” R10</p> <p>“Wiring is working fine all time.” R4</p>  |
| <i>Cafeteria</i>         | <p>“No cafeteria at my hostel. We always go far.... During night all cafeterias are closed in university” R18</p> <p>“Cafeteria is not bad but prices are high... limited types of food is available... it should be cheap and more clean” R12</p>    |
| <i>Mini market</i>       | <p>“No mini market here. I buy everything from Tesco. There should be some market from where students can buy their daily needed items.” R7</p> <p>“One shopping mart is near to my hostel... it close early... cannot buy anything at night.” R1</p> |

### ***International Students’ Satisfaction with Service Facilities from Hostel Management***

International students’ satisfaction has been explored with the management services against health inquiries, repairs, complaints reports and actions against complaints. Students satisfaction with the services facilities were found moderate but some issues were found particularly about health emergency and to report complaints. Majority of the students did not know what to do if some health emergency will happen. Besides, there is no first aid facility were found at hostels. One student responded, *“University clinic close in the evening, and I do not know if emergency in night where I should go”*. Some more examples have been given in Table 3 regarding international students’ responses to management service facilities investigation.

**Table 3** International Students’ Satisfaction with Service Facilities from Hostel Management

| Categories  | Examples  |
|---|---|
| <i>Response for first aid/health emergency issues</i> | <p>“I do not know who I should call in emergency. Maybe I will call security or some friend to help me.” R12</p> <p>The hostel never tell us what to do in case of emergency. If I sick I visit USM clinic... I think no first aid facility available in my hostel.” R8</p> |
| <i>Response to minor repairs</i>                      | <p>“There are some numbers given at entrance of hostel. When I need some repairing I call them and they asked me to wait.” R20</p> <p>Then after few hours someone come for help” R6</p>  |
| <i>General maintenance</i>                            | <p>“I am satisfied with maintenance. No big issue about this.” R22</p> <p>“Management does not visit regularly for the maintenance problems” R11</p>  |

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|---|---|
| <i>Availability of management to complaints</i> | “Yes, I can call them and they guide me...sometimes they do not understand me because of language.” R3<br>“I do not know how to complain. Hostel management never explained about this” R10               |
| <i>Response to complaints</i>                   | “It took time to solve the problem by management.... Sometimes call them many times to remind the problem.”<br>“The response for complaints is good. They send some person for the help after some time.” |

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## CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the international students' experiences with regards to quality and sizes of hostel rooms, support service facilities, and services rendered by hostel management. The objective was to investigate the level of international students' satisfaction with several facilities and services in the hostels. The findings from the interviews indicate that occupants are generally satisfied with the facilities and services available at the hostels. They showed satisfaction with the cleanliness of bathroom, kitchen, and lobbies. However, they were indecisive about their satisfaction with management of the hostels particularly about health emergency issues and quick response against complaints. These feedbacks obtained should inform any decisions regarding future renovations and effective management of the hostels. The study recommends effective policies and maintenance management practices for the institution's hostel facilities to improve the comfortability of international students.

### *Limitations and a way to look forward*

There are some limitations to the present study. First, the aforementioned findings are derived from only the residents living in the Universiti Sains Malaysia, thus, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Second, in this study, only international students' satisfaction level was investigated which may differ from domestic occupants. University Sains Malaysia was used for data collection. Comparison and study of a larger number of respondents in different university settings can be beneficial for understanding the student's level of satisfaction towards the hostel. It is hoped that a longitudinal study will provide a basis for more informed interpretations in future studies, and hence, future studies can see how students rate their satisfaction longitudinally from the point of entry to exit.



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