EXPLORING MALAYSIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMAGE OF PREMIER POLYTECHNICS

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ABSTRACT

Polytechnic Transformation Plan aims at strengthening Malaysian polytechnics and envisions that Malaysian Polytechnics will be among the top world institutions. As part of the transformational plan, three polytechnics have been selected as the nation's premier polytechnics. They are Politeknik Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah (PSA), Politeknik Ungku Omar (PUO) and Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan (PIS). This paper examines the determinants of brand image of Premier Polytechnics perceived by polytechnic students. By using the quantitative approach, this study suggested that reputation, teaching quality, program quality, information sources on institutions were potential dimensions of Premier Polytechnics brand image. 306 students from three polytechnics were involved in the study. Results indicated that the highest determinant of brand image was reputation, followed by program quality, teaching quality and information sources on institutions. The results provide insights on how the Premier Polytechnics could improve their brand image. The findings indicated that the new brand image scale is reliable and valid. Based on the results from the samples it can be concluded that all the Premier Polytechnics have to improve on their information sources on institution.

Keywords: Premier Polytechnics, Determinants of brand Image

1. INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen the aggressive promotion of premier polytechnics by the government, an initiative that was enthusiastically embraced by three polytechnic in Malaysia (PUO, PSA and PIS) after its introduction in 2010 (.Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). This interest parallels the growth of the knowledge economy and subsequently led to the recognition that comparative advantage can be gained from the polytechnic's branding, its technical programmes in niche fields and centres of technology which serve as hubs of reference.

As part of its initiative to improve the quality and image of polytechnics, certificate-level courses would no longer be offered from the July 2010 intake. Polytechnics will now focus on diploma and advanced diploma programmes. Under the transformation plan, there will be a 30% increase in the number of places offered for diploma programmes from 60,840 in 2009 to 87,440 in 2012. The Polytechnic Transformation Plan has set to make polytechnics as the preferred choice for students in the field of TVET and would increase its student enrolment to 119,000 by 2015. Furthermore, this transformation plan is based on strengthening polytechnics development programs, specifically, inserting knowledgeable instructors and staff, then improving the image and promoting an excellent work culture (Department of Polytechnic Education, 2009).

Recently there has been a marked increase in the intake of students in most polytechnics as well as premier polytechnics (Table 1). The figures show that the student intake in premier polytechnics is experiencing a spectacular growth annually. However, the Ministry of Higher Education records on the intake of students reveal a fluctuating trend. The data shows that in 2016, the intake of students decreased to 5066.

This upswing was inconsistent, as only a slight increase (6100) in the students' intake was recorded in 2017 compared to 2015 (6271)

Table 1.1. Comparison of Non Extrusion Fermentative Buoyancy with Commercial Feed

PREMIER POLYTECHNICS	INTAKE				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
PUO	1055	1961	2503	2284	2614
PSA	1189	1318	1909	1333	1716
PIS	1139	1492	1859	1449	1770
Total	3383	4771	6271	5066	6100

Source: MOHE (2014-2017)

The fluctuating trend does not resonate well with the aim of increasing student intake to advance the establishment of premier polytechnics as to be 'preferred institutions'. From this perspective, the premier polytechnic efforts to meet the country's needs in embracing global challenges as well market itself in a climate of global competition would have less impact, particularly if this trend continues. Critically, if it is experiencing declining enrolments, a polytechnic cannot afford to be complacent hoping that there will be applications to come in. Thus, further research should be carried out to address this matter. This study responds to the need to gain better understanding of this fluctuating trend by investigating issues using the brand image paradigm. Corresponding to the issues above, several studies (Bennet & Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Nandan, 2005; Schiffman, & Kanuk 2000); Bowen & Chen 2001) have suggested that image may generate more loyal customers. Therefore, it is also pertinent to explore image research (Malhotra & Birks 2000; Che Omar, & Che Mohd Zulkifli. 2013) in the context of HEIs. Studies have agreed that satisfaction can be influenced by reputation or image which eventually leads to loyalty (Helgesen & Nesset 2007). In addition, research into institutions choice has suggested that a number of core variables can influence a student's preference for a particular institution, implying that institution management should in principle incorporate important variables into their perceptions of the contents of an institution brand (Bennett, Ali-Choudhury, & Savani, 2008).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative methodology via a cross-sectional survey. For the purpose of this study all scales used were adapted from several studies on brand image which had valid and reliable measures and finalized measurement scale in the study of Abdullah (2016). Each dimension has been developed based on previously tested scales (Abdullah & Sheriff, 2015).

Survey method is used and hence it involves distributing a set of questionnaire. The questionnaire has two sections. For Part A, the demographic variables were measured by using nominal scale. The interval scale of measurement was applied in Part B. The respondents were asked to read and indicate their level of agreement with aspects of image of the institution.. Each of the statements designed for Part B used a 7-point scale. Constructs have been operationalized using 7-point Likert scales, ranging from (1= strongly disagree) to (7 = strongly agree). The seven-point Likert scale's capability exceeds that of the 5point Likert scale and has been used widely in marketing research as it can discriminate and distinguish fine differences between people better (De Vaus, 2002).

To make sure that there was quality in the findings of this study on brand image of premier polytechnics, the pilot study was first conducted before doing the final survey. The pilot test was conducted for the full questionnaire using respondents whose backgrounds were similar to the actual study. In this study, 30 students from Premier Polytechnics were selected to answer the questionnaire besides giving opinions about the questionnaires. Johanson and Brooks, (2009) suggested that 30 representative participants from the population of interest is a reasonable minimum. By using this method, the researcher would get instant response and gained further information related to the questions given. The exercise that was used in pilot test is person administered survey. This method was carried out to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire and to find out the weaknesses and potential errors of questionnaires (Cooper & Schendler, 2003). Based on the information given, amendments have been made to ensure the questionnaires will be easily understandable.

After finalizing the instrument and conforming that it is appropriate through the pre-test and pilot test, the researcher adopted a number of procedures to conduct the final survey. A sample of 150 respondents was selected randomly from each Premiere Polytechnic to ensure adequate representative.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demography

A total of 306 responses were obtained from 450 questionnaires. Out of 450 questionnaires delivered, only 68% respondents answer the questionnaires successfully.

Majority of the respondents were male which comprised of 164 (53.6 %) respondents while female consisted of 142 (46.4%) respondents. For age demography 240 (78.6%) were between 18 to 20 years old, 63 (20.5%) of the respondents were 21 to 25 years old, while those between 26 to 30 years old were the least (1%) respondents.

In the data, the respondents were from different semesters. The reason why semester demography was analysed is because students from different semesters have different thoughts and opinions on their polytechnic especially students from semester one and five. In this research the data were collected from 23 (7.5%) respondents from the first semester, 40 (13.1%) from the second semester, 31(10.1%) from the third semester, 44 (14.4%) from fourth semester, and fifth semester students consisted of 168 (54.9%) respondents.

For department demography, departments were involved in the Polytechnic which were Commerce Department (JPG), Electrical Engineering Department (JKE), Mechanical Engineering Department (JKM), and Civil Engineering Department (JKA). From 306 of the respondents, 61 (19.9%) of the respondents were from JKE, 60 (19.5%) from JKM, 59 (19.3%) from JKA, and 126 (41.4%) from JPG. All of the respondents were also from three different Premier Polytechnics, and the majority of the respondents were students from PSA which was 109 (35.6%), PIS came in second which was 101 (33.2%), while PUO has the least number of respondents which was 96 (31.4%) students.

Based on the question as to which of these students from these three Premiere Polytechnics really applied for the polytechnic that they are currently studying, surprisingly, the majority of the students answered yes to the question. This consisted of 174 (57.2%) respondents, while the rest answered no. For the question, as to whether polytechnic was their first choice of institution that they applied in Bahagian Pengurusan Kemasukan Pelajar (UPU) instead of other higher educational institutions such as UITM, UPM, UM, or UIA, the result showed that 130 (42.8%) of the respondents answered no, while the other answered yes.

The last question was on the resources they gained information regarding premiere polytechnic. There were 9 options which were internet, education fair, embassy, newspaper/magazine, school, television, radio, friends, family, relatives, and the lastly from recruitment agencies. Predominantly, the responses were from internet and newspaper / magazine.

Reliability analysis

The first step of the analysis was the employment of the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test (Table 2). Cronbach's coefficient alpha is the commonly used measure for internal consistency reliability and it is importantly used for measuring multi-point items (Sekaran, 2003). As a result, each factor or component yielded a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) ranging from 0.8 to 0.9 (Table 2) which is greater than the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978) Cronbach's alpha value of .7 and above is considered to be reliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). An alpha value of .7 and above indicates items are homogenous and measuring the same construct.

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha reliability of the variables

Variables	Number of items	Number of items Discarded	Cronbach's Alpha
Reputation	13		
	-	.840	
Program Quality	4	-	.817
Teaching Quality	6	-	.821
Information Source on Institution	6	-	.776

The findings revealed some interesting results in the perception towards the reputation of Premier Polytechnic. Here are some of the findings. Thirteen items were utilized to measure the degree of perceived Reputation of Premier Polytechnic. Higher scores on the scale suggest that the respondents perceived that the premier polytechnics have a high reputation while lower scores imply that the respondents view premier polytechnics have a low reputation. The results shown in Table 3 reveal a mean value ranging from 4.96 to 5.33. The highest mean value for the construct reputation is that faculty members have many projects. Overall, evidence derived from the results suggests that the respondents' perception on the reputation premier polytechnics was around 5. The respondents were in agreement that the reputation of premier polytechnic is moderate.

Table 3 : Students' perceptions of the Reputation of Premier Polytechnic

	Reputation	Mean	Std
1.	Produces excellent publications	5.04	.877
2.	Produces Marketable Graduate	4.96	.899
3.	Has a strong academic reputation	5.07	.865
4.	Is committed to academic excellence	5.04	.858
5.	Faculty members has many projects	5.33	1.001
6.	Has qualified academicians	5.09	.864
7.	Has a reputation for quality academic staff	5.06	.832
8.	Has a reputation for expertise of its staff	5.01	.816
9.	Has a reputation quality graduate program	5.05	.804
10.	Has a reputation for a higher-ranking institution among Malaysian polytechnics	5.14	.913
11.	Is well known for innovation in research	4.96	.854
12.	Stimulate innovations through competitive funding	5.05	.907
13.	Stimulate innovations through rewarding for the best results	5.06	.787
	Total Mean for Reputation	**5.66**	**.867**

Six items were utilized to measure the degree of perceived teaching quality. The results in Table 4 indicate that all six mean values for teaching quality were between 4.93 and 5.05. The highest mean values for this construct were: the perception of the respondents that lecturer gives student reliable information on course content (M=5.05), lecturer gives an opportunity to questions and answers (M=5.01), lecturer is able to provide students with fundamental research skill (M=5.00) and followed by lecturers have a thorough knowledge of the subject content (M=4.99). The results pointed out on delivery of the knowledge. Teacher quality refers to the quality of those aspects of interactions that can be attributed to the teacher" (Kenedy, Latham, & Jacinto, 2016).

Table 4 : Students' perception of Teaching Quality

	Teaching Quality	Mean	Std
1.	Have a thorough knowledge of the subject content	4.99	1.034
2.	Displays skillful teaching	4.93	1.031
3.	Give an opportunity to questions and answers	5.01	1.010
4.	Give students consistent information on course content	4.94	1.012
5.	Give student reliable information on course content	5.05	1.026
6.	Able to provide students with fundamental research skill	5.00	1.070
	Total Mean for Teaching Quality	**4.99**	**1.030**

Four items were utilized to capture the respondents' thoughts on the program quality of premier polytechnics. Results from Table 5 shows that item 4 "Has recognized program", in the scale recorded the highest score (M =5.07) followed very closely by item 3 "has relevant course" (M =5.06); item 2 "has academic value" (M =5.04) and item 1 "has reputable program" (M =4.92). The overall evidence derived from the results suggests that respondents were in agreement that premier polytechnic portrayed program quality.

Table 5 : Students' Perception of Program Quality

	Program Quality	Mean	Std
1.	Has reputable program	4.92	.860
2.	Has academic value	5.04	.873
3.	Has relevant course	5.06	.874
4.	Has recognized program	5.07	.835
	Total Mean for Program Quality	5.02	.860

Table 6 shows the mean scores for Information Sources on Institutions. The Item rated with highest score are "detailed course information is available on the premier polytechnic website" and "information on premier polytechnic attributes meets student information" (M = 4.90). Next was detailed information is solicited from friends which has a mean of 4.70. Followed by detailed information is obtained from family members with a mean of 4.65. Other than that, detailed information is obtained from my experience as a student has a mean of 4.61. Lastly, with a mean of 3.96, was Premiere polytechnic's material provides detailed information

Table 6 : Students' Perception of Information Sources on Institution

	Information Sources on Institution	Mean	Std
1.	Detailed course information is available on the premiere polytechnic website	4.90	1.106
2.	Premiere polytechnic's material (brochures, pamphlets) provides detailed information	3.96	1.607
3.	Detailed information is obtained from family members	4.65	1.282
4.	Detailed information is solicited from friends	4.70	1.196
5.	Detailed information are obtained from my experience as a student	4.61	1.438
6.	Information on premiere polytechnic attributes meets student information	4.90	.988
	Total Mean for Information Sources on Institution	**4.62**	**1.269**

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Premiere Polytechnic has to emphasis on information source on institution. Information source on institution has a moderate score in contributing to the image of premiere Polytechnic. The researchers found that based on the mean, institution website was ranked highest, as important sources of information, so management institutions should consider websites as key information sources so that students can get much information from the website. Information sources such as brochures or pamphlets about Premiere Polytechnic are also important. These are institution's promotional documents which are beneficial to students and parents in getting information about institutions. Printed materials help in promoting Premiere Polytechnic and also help polytechnic to reach the students so that students know the existence and uniqueness of Premiere Polytechnic and what is these polytechnics are able to offer in. The findings also suggest that the information on source of institution serves as basic and necessary component for attracting new students to enroll in Premier Polytechnics. Researchers believe that technological advancement will improve not only performance or image of business (Levy & Powell 2000) but also higher education institution like polytechnics.

In addition, with increasing competition among various higher education institutions, these premier polytechnics need to cautiously revise their promotional and communication strategies. Higher education institutions are facing environmental challenges that call for the development of new marketing approaches. This is because not only students but also parents seek information from different information channels.

The findings of this study contribute greatly to Malaysian polytechnics considering that corporate image play an important role for them to increase their visibility among more visible students. According to Ivy (2001), student's willingness to enrol in a particular institution or university depends highly on the image of HEIs. Higher educational institutions have to develop a strong brand image or increase emphasis on corporate image to ensure the survival of the organization (Burbules, & Tores 2000; Mok, & Welch, 2003; Kotler & Armstring, 2018)

Higher standard of the corporate image that a polytechnic represents will attract students to further their study in the polytechnics. This is in turn will place Malaysian Polytechnics to be on a par with other higher educational institutions

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