AN IMPORTANCE PERFORMANCE-PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN STUDENTS'PERCEPTION ON ENROLLING AT THAI UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *This study focuses on African students' perception on enrolling at Thai Universities using the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), so the objectives are set to describe the African students' perception of their university experience upon studying in Thailand and identifying the extent to which these perceptions can lead to what Thai universities services for them. The reason behind the need to study on perception on enrolling at Thai Universities is that these universities are no exception when it comes to marketing on international studies as such there has been an influx of students from all over the world who study at Thai universities, so in order to understand what makes international students leave their home countries to study in Thailand, that alone signifies the importance of Thai universities to international education, thereby bringing more reasons to understand the perceptions of enrolling students to these universities. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to five universities within the greater Bangkok metropolitan, including Salaya sub-district in Nakhon Pathom province and Pathum Thani province. The universities engaged in this study are Assumption university, Mahidol university, Rangsit university, Ramkhamhaeng university and Kasem Bundit university. Out of the 400 enrolling African students respondents from these five universities 207 respondents were male, representing 51.8%, while 193 respondents were females, representing 48.3%. Thus the majority of enrolling African students in Thai universities within Bangkok metropolitan and surrounding provinces are male. The IPA in this study is based on five elements which include: academic aspects, access, administrative support, programs issues, reputation and 30 attributes of the students' perception of the five elements and 6 attributes on demographics. There in total five hypotheses tested using paired sample t-test and the results indicate that four out of five hypotheses have the significant difference at the level of p>0.05 except academic aspects.*

Key Words: *African students' perception, Thai Universities, and Importance-Performance Analysis.*

1. Introduction

Studying abroad involves a student pursuing opportunities in a country other than one's own. The open doors report on international education exchange released late 2015, reveals that the number of international students pursuing studies in the United states colleges and universities marked the highest rate of growth in 35 years, increasing by 10 percent to a record high of 974,926 students in the 2014/2015 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2015)

The USA is not the only country in acknowledging the essence of students' mobility. Evidently, studying abroad has become a common phenomenon in every corner of the world. This does not mean students of the less developed countries seeking education in the big name institutes like those in the U.S and the UK, but the cross border education can happen in the developing countries like south east Asian or south Asian countries like Malaysia, Thailand and India.

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As a result from increased activity of employers on studying abroad, several students from various parts of the globe including African students have increasingly been engaged in international studies, since their being aware of the benefits of a study abroad program and the impact of the type of scholar they are likely to receive as they participate in overseas studying program (Elliot and Healy, 2001).

The objectives of this study are to describe the African students' perception of

From an experience with African students studying in several universities in Asia, it is evident that openness to study abroad, persuasion to international education, and emerging buying power of African countries constitute the essential factors that allow African students to seek undergraduate and graduate studies in Asia. Mostly, African students set high expectation on Thai institutes, as opposed to the ones they have back home. The experiences they have when in Thailand are, by and large, positive as they encounter with international setting of academics, coupled with lecturers and fellow students from diverse parts of the world. This study situates Thai universities ahead of most African institutes.

According to the study in Thai.org (2016) there are 2000 African students in Bangkok province studying in Thai universities, hence an increase in demand in the African students seeking undergraduate and graduate studies in Asia. As an African student who studied in Thailand, the attributes of African students in Thailand are that, they are open to learning new cultures, ready to face new challenges and solutions, as well as adapting well to the ideology of living in an international community despite their unfamiliarity with the cultural setting. This is in contrast to other international students, such as Chinese students, who can more quickly learn to adapt to Thai culture, since they share common Asian cultural perspectives.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is used to understand service quality importance and performance of their university experience upon studying in Thailand and to identify the extent to which the perceptions of the African students can lead to improvement of what Thai universities services for the African students. Based on the Importance-Performance analysis, this study delivers recommendations for the Thai universities service to the African students.

2. Literature review

and customer satisfaction attributes. This method was established by Martilla and James (1977). Busacca and Arbore (2011) supports Martilla and James concept of IPA by stipulating that this tool has been a popular multi-attribute technique for evaluating marketing actions, as it yields insights into which elements of value propositions the management should focus on.

In this study, IPA demonstrates the attributes which African students in Thai universities perceive to be important and how those attributes perform, hence this will help in improving service quality strategies that derive high level of customer satisfaction in the higher education sector of Thailand. The paired sample T-test analysis is used in this study to illustrate the gap between importance and performance of each attribute.

The definitions of the variables used in this study are as follows:

Academic aspects: These are elements that make the class relationship between instructors and students (Marsh and Cheng, 2008). These elements are categorized into three aspects which include: Instructors knowledge when interacting with students, instructional communication, readiness and preparation.

Administrative support: This encompasses administrative staffs of an institution of higher education treating students as customers (Bajou,2005). Examples of administrative support include: provision of caring attention to the students problems by administrative staffs

and proper communication of administrative staffs to the students.

Programs Issues: Sohail and Shaikh (2004) suggest that this term means the various specializations and disciplines offered by the universities to the students, for the advancement of careers.

Reputation: This is a perspective representation of an organization's previous behaviour as well as an estimate of its future (Robert, 2009). Examples of reputation of a university include: the university's professional image, and easy employment for the university's graduates.

Access: Sappey and Bamber (2007) stipulate that access of a university environment as the ease of contact by academic staffs when students approach them. Examples of access at a university include: academic staffs willingness to respond to students request for assistance, and allocation of sufficient time for consultation.

Importance and Performance: These are measurements that are used on the Importance-Performance Analysis to rate attributes between service quality and customer satisfaction (Martilla, J.A and James, J.C, 1977).

3. Research Framework and Methodology

The modified framework for this study is proposed from mainly the model of Importance-Performance Analysis of service quality in administrative department of private universities in Thailand (Kitcharoen,2004) and the model from the title Does higher education service quality effect student satisfaction, image and loyalty?(Ali, Zhou, Hussain and Ragavan,2016). In Kitcharoen (2004) model the gap between Importance and performance (P-I) was demonstrated while in Ali *et al.,*(2016) model the five elements which include: academic aspects, administrative support, program issues, reputation and access are applied to determine student satisfaction, image and loyalty.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
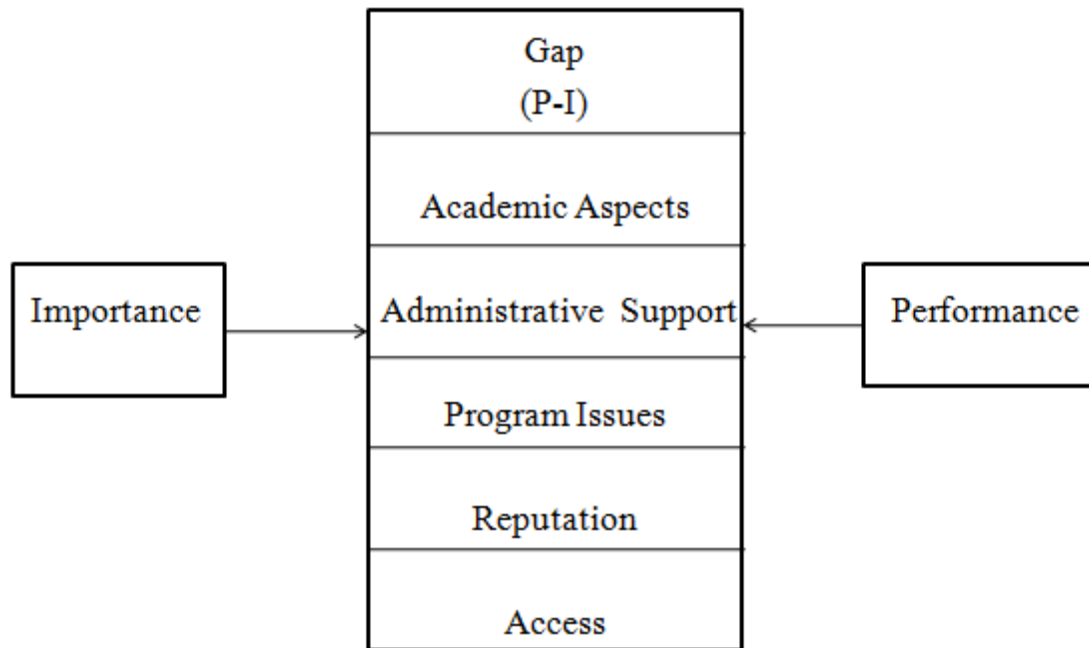
The description of the five variables is as follows:

The diagram in figure 1 of the conceptual framework illustrates how the African students perceive the variables that include: Academic aspects, administrative support, program issues, reputation and access in terms of their importance and This study has five hypotheses.

H1a: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of academic aspects.

H2a: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of administrative support.

H3a: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of programs issues.

H4a: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of reputation.

H5a: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and

performance upon enrolling at Thai universities. The level of importance of each variable differs from one student to another based on how they individually see the performance element. However the gap exists when the Performance mean subtracts the Importance mean and this is well elaborated in table 2.

their perceptions about performance in terms of access.

Hypotheses are established to provide the guidelines on what, and how, data can be collected and analyzed (Malhotra, 2008). The hypotheses in this study are used to measure the enrolling African student's perception on each attribute and on the five elements: academic aspects, administrative support, program issues, reputation and access.

According to Study in Thai.org (2016), there are approximately 2000 African students pursuing their studies within Bangkok province. It was a challenge for the researcher since not all the African students in Bangkok province could be reached, as a result the researcher decided to use the sampling method of Zikmund

(2010), which gave the relevant calculation of a sample size with a 95% confidence level and a tolerable error of ±5 for the unknown population, and the sample size is four hundred African student respondents. This is a purposive sampling method, which means a non-probability sampling procedure which the researcher uses his experience and judgement to select proper characteristic of a population.

The research instrument utilized in this study is a questionnaire, called a structured technique for data collection consisting of a series of questions, written or verbal, that a respondent answers (Maholtra 2008). Totalling 36 questions, the instrument is divided into two parts: Part 1 is comprised of 30 perception questions based on importance and performance measurements and Part 2 uses 6 questions to identify the demographic factors of the respondents based on gender, age, school faculty, academic level being enrolled, number of years experienced in living abroad and experiences in living abroad before coming to Thailand. The enrolling African student's perception is measured on five point Likert scale between most important to less important and excellent to poor performance.

The questionnaire was distributed to both male and female enrolling African students within the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan, including Salaya sub-district in Nakhon Pathom province and Pathum Thani province. The pre-test for this study was conducted in April, 2016 to identify the possible problems about the questionnaire in terms of understanding based on different respondents. Vanichbancha (2001) recommended that the pre-test should involve at least 25 respondents. Therefore, the researcher pre-tested the questionnaire among 30 respondents. Then the reliability of data was tested and indicated by Cronbach's Alpha(α) coefficient. The results of the pilot distribution of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability Test

Reliability Analysis Scale for Importance		
Operational Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items
Academic Aspects	.733	9
Administrative Support	.747	10
Access	.705	4
Program Issues	.714	4
Reputation	.780	3

IPA employs several attributes, which are derived from previous studies of the same field. The attributes are evaluated by the respondents in terms of importance level and performance level based on their opinion. The researcher then identifies the mean of Importance and Performance components. In addition, the presentation of the results, which is shown in an axis of the grid, specifically communicates to the Thai universities what is most important to the enrolling African student's and how best do they perform as they provide various varsity services to the student's. The model illustrates the attributes that are neglected and those that need immediate attention.

Figure 2: Importance-Performance Analysis Grid
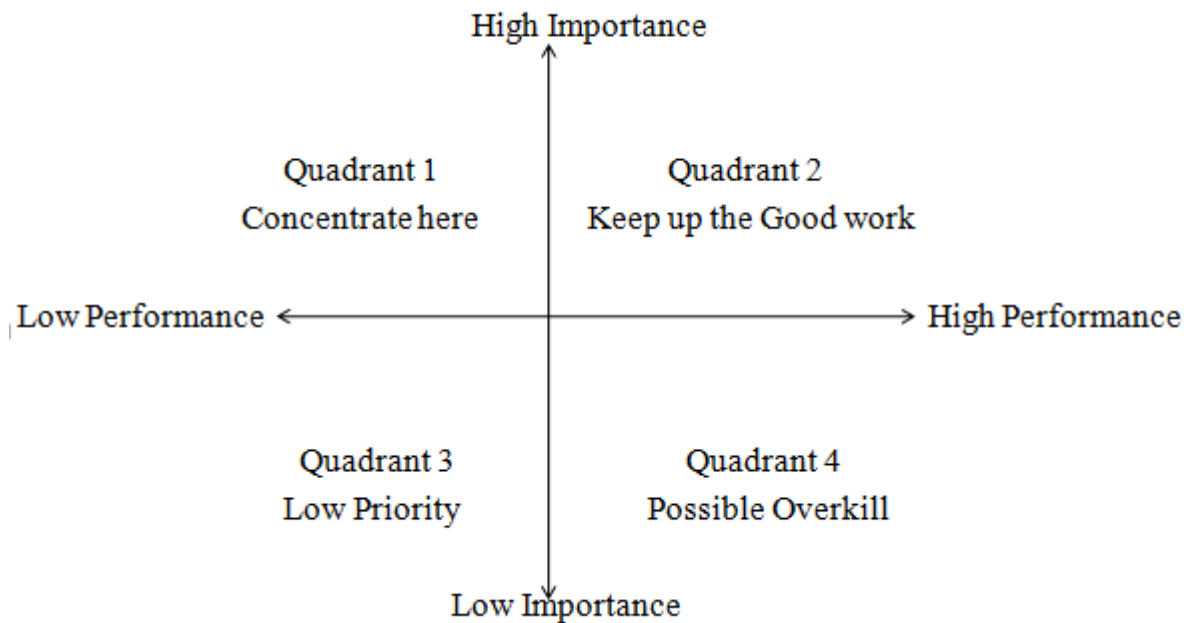
Source: Martilla, J.A, & James, J.C (1977, January). Importance-Performance Analysis. *Journal of Marketing, 14(1),* 77-79.

The quadrant which attributes are plotted illustrates the specific scenario that explains the attributes situation.

Quadrant 1: Concentrate here: This area has high importance but low performance, the Thai Universities should engage in more efforts that will improve the attributes in this area. Attributes in this quadrant have importance means greater than the grand mean, but performance mean is less than the grand mean.

Quadrant 3: Low Priority: in this area have both low importance and low performance. Attributes in this area have importance means lower than the grand means, and performance means are also lower than the grand mean. Thai universities need to put much effort in improving this area, even though currently, a low priority but the attributes in this area

4. Results and Discussions
The researcher distributed the questionnaire to five universities within the greater Bangkok metropolitan, including Salaya sub-district in Nakhon Pathom province and Pathum Thani province. The

Quadrant 2: Keep up the good work: This area is concerned with highly important perception of the attributes by the African students and the performance of the Thai universities is accordingly as high as importance. Attributes in this quadrant have importance means higher than the grand mean, and performance mean is also higher than the grand mean.

when improved can take these universities to higher heights in the academic world.

Quadrant 4: Possible Overkill: the attributes in this area have low importance and high performance. This means that the attributes in this area are unimportant to the African students, and are viewed as an area of performance overkill and Thai universities can redirect resources to the areas that require improvement.

universities engaged in this study are Assumption University, Mahidol University, Rangsit University, Ramkhamhaeng University and Kasem Bundit University. Out of the 400 enrolling

African students respondents from these five universities 207 respondents were male, representing 51.8%, while 193 respondents were females, representing 48.3%. Thus the majority of enrolling African students in Thai universities within Bangkok metropolitan and surrounding provinces are male. The highest age of the respondents in this study range from 26 to 30 years old, 132 respondents representing 33%, followed by above 30 years old range, 98 respondents representing 24.5%, 97 respondents are in the range of 22 to 25 years old representing 24.3% and 73 respondents are in the range of 18 to 21 years old representing 18.3%. Thus the majority of enrolling African students in Thai universities are in the range of 26 to 30 years old.

In addition, out of the 400 target respondents in this study, 110 respondents are in school of management and human resource, representing 27.5%, 97 respondents are in school of business, finance, economics, and tourism representing 24.3 percent, 85 respondents are in school of information and technology representing 21.3%, 60 students are in the school of science and engineering representing 7.5%, 18 respondents are in school of medical sciences, dentistry, veterinary and nursing representing 4.5%. Thus the majority of enrolling African students in Thai universities are in school of management and human resource. The demographic results illustrate a similarity to studies on the IPA of service quality in administrative departments of private universities in Thailand that was studied before (Kitcharoen, 2004).

The survey asked the African student's respondents to rate both the perception of Importance and Performance of their experiences upon studying in Thailand based on the five elements which include: academic aspects, administrative support, programs issues, reputation and access (Ali *et al.,* 2016). For importance rating, the two most important attributes that concerned the enrolling African students are "Instructors courteous manner upon communication"(5.71) and "academic staff's knowledge in responding to requests"(5.55). On the other hand the two least important attributes are "operation of counselling service"(1.52) and administrative staff's well rounded knowledge of systems.

For performance evaluation, the top two scores belong to these attributes: "administrative staff timely delivery of what is promised"(5.87) and administrative staff's positive work attitude towards students"(5.81). The attributes that show least satisfaction are "administrative staff's efficient dealing with enquiries"(1.64) and "accessible contact of academic staff"(2.01).

The results of this study show that Instructors skill of communication to the students and academic staff's knowledge in responding to the students are more important than counseling service and staff's knowledge of systems. This indicates that the enrolling African students at Thai Universities value the relationship with their instructors and prefer effective assistance from the academic staff.

Figures 3: Presentation of Attributes
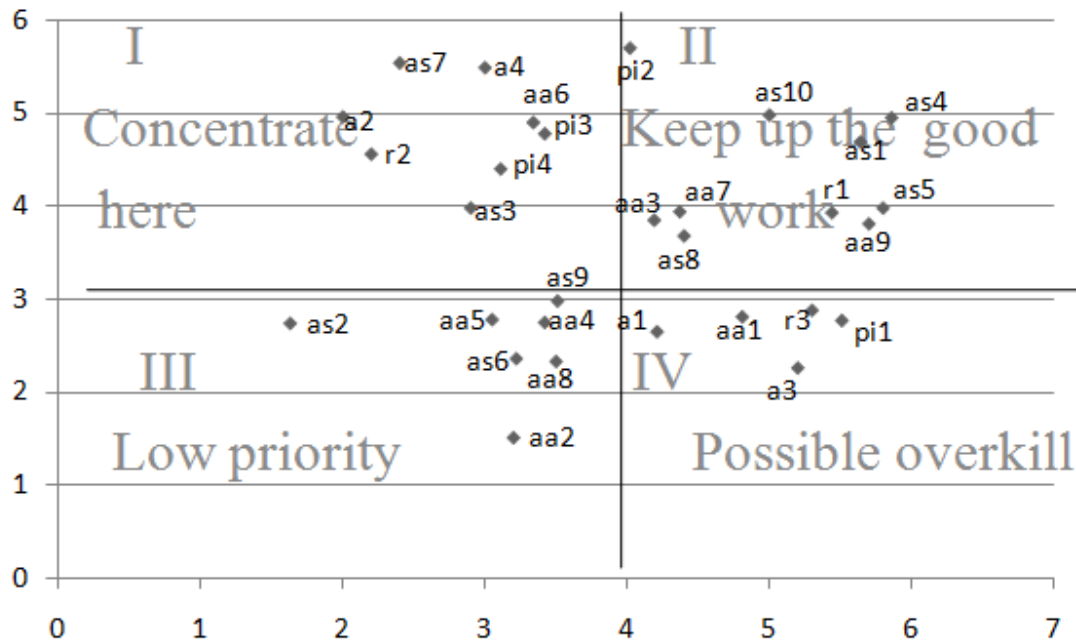
From the attribute presentations in Figure 3, there 30 attributes presented and they are with 5 acronym's representing the 5 elements of the enrolling African students perception of importance and performance. The acronym's are as follows: aa refers to academic aspects, as refers to administrative support, pi refers to program issues, r refers to reputation and a refers to access. In dimension perspective, the strength point of Thai universities within greater Bangkok metropolitan and surrounding provinces as perceived by the African students are administrative support, and reputation and the dimensions that need to be concentrated on are programs issues and access while majority of academic aspects are on low priority as such need immediate improvement.

Programs issues and administrative support had high performance, which is more than importance level. The highest difference is program issues (0.35) and the lower level is administrative support (0.23). On the other

On the positive side, performance is higher than importance, there are nineteen attributes. The two attributes that had widest distance were "accurate retrievable records managed by administration office"(5.87) and "instructors classroom communication"(3.06). Moreover, the closest gap attributes were "accurate retrievable records managed by administration office"(5.87) and "administrative staff's delivery of what is promised"(5.89).

On the other hand, the negative side when performance is lower than importance, there are eleven attributes. The greatest difference belongs to the attribute: "reputable academic programs by the university"(-.2.36). The minimum distance is the attribute "provision of caring attention by administrative staff's"(-1.11).

hand, academic aspects, reputation and access performed less than what the enrolling African students perceived to be important. The widest gap is access (-0.43), reputation (0.07) and academic aspects

(0.071) are followed respectively. Furthermore, two tailed significant test do reveal that these differences are nonetheless significant at the level p<0.05 in this case four out of five elements assessed (except academic aspects).

Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Dimensions	Importance Mean	Performance Mean	Performance minus Importance	t value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Results
$H1_0$	Academic aspects	3.2355	3.3066	.0711	-.486	0.346	Failed to reject $H1_0$
$H2_0$	Administrative support	3.8811	4.1166	.2355	-.586	0.000	Rejected $H2_0$
$H3_0$	Program issues	3.6475	3.9975	.35	-.574	0.000	Rejected $H3_0$
$H4_0$	Reputation	3.9525	4.0225	.07	.059	0.000	Rejected $H4_0$
$H5_0$	Access	4.5425	4.1125	-.43	-.562	0.000	Rejected $H5_0$

Hypothesis 1
$H1_a$: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of academic aspects.

Table 2 indicates the two-tailed significant test showing that these differences are significant at the level p>0.05. This means that 0.346 is greater than 0.05 (0.346>0.05). This implies that the null hypothesis failed to reject and the t-value is-.486.

Hypothesis 2
$H2_a$: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about performance in terms of administrative support.

Table 2 indicates the two-tailed significant test showing that these differences are significant at the level p<0.05. This means 0.000 is less than 0.05 (0.000<0.05). This implies that the nul hypothesis is rejected and the t-value is -.586.

Hypothesis 3
$H3_a$: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about program issues.

Table 2 indicates the two-tailed significant test showing that these differences are significant at the level p<0.05. This means 0.000 is less than 0.05(0.000<0.05) This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the t-value is -.574.

Hypothesis 4
$H4_a$: There is a significant difference between African student's importance and their perceptions about reputation.

Table 2 indicates the two-tailed significant test showing that these differences are significant at the level p<0.05. This means 0.000 is less than 0.05 (This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the t-value is .059.

Hypothesis 5
$H5_a$: There is a significant difference between African students' importance and their perceptions about access.

Table 2 indicates that the two-tailed significant test showing that these differences are significant at the level p<0.05. This means 0.000 is less than 0.05 (0.000<0.05) This implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the t-value is -.562.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aims to investigate the African students' perception on enrolling at Thai universities using the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) matrix. Empirical data for this study is drawn from 400 African students at Thai universities within greater Bangkok metropolis and nearby vicinity. The African students' perceptions focus on academic aspects, administrative support, programs issues, reputation and access attributes. Based on the four quadrants of the IPA matrix, the results suggest that academic aspects dimension is the most important, followed by Access, Administrative support, Program issues and Reputation. The attributes that they are concerned with most is "Instructors courteous manner upon communication"(5.71). However, the highest performance provided by the Thai universities is administrative support. Access, program issues, reputation and academic aspects are followed respectively. The best performance attributes belong to "administrative staff's timely delivery of what is promised"(5.87).

In quadrant 1 referred to as "Concentrate here" there a few elements of each of the five elements of this study so Thai universities need to improve on these few elements. In quadrant 2 referred to as "Keep up the good work" majority of the attributes in this area are Administrative support as such Thai universities need to maintain the tremendous efforts put in this area. In quadrant 3 referred to as "low priority" the majority of the attributes are academic aspects so Thai universities need serious improvement of the performance of the attributes in this area. In quadrant 4 referred to as "Possible overkill" there a few elements of each of the five elements or dimensions of this study so Thai universities need to redirect the resources in this area to other areas that need immediate improvement.

In addition, the recommended ways which Thai universities can employ in order to improve the areas which the African student's were concerned with are as follows: Apart from the questionnaire forms that the Thai universities give to their students to evaluate their lecturers, they need to design other questionnaires forms that encompass students life and experience as they study in Thailand. Those questionnaires must comprise of issues such as how students view quality assurance of the programs and standards at their universities, the impact and benefits that they are gaining from studying at Thai universities, how important is it for them to study abroad in Thailand, is what they expected before coming to Thailand matching to what they are getting.

The researcher also recommends that Thai universities must engage in more suggestion boxes that must be provided to the students for them to put suggestions in the areas that they might identify a need for improvement.

This study accessed African students who speak English because they are coming from various countries in Africa so the efficient and effective mode of communication was English. This study was conducted during the months of February 2016 to August 2016. Furthermore, this study focuses on describing the African students' perception of Importance and Performance of their university experiences upon studying in Thailand and identifying the extent to which the perceptions of African students can lead to improvement of what Thai universities services for the African students.

6. Future Research

This study finds that African students at Thai universities are not homogenous in their perceptions because of their differences in cultural context of educational values. Future research should be applied to investigate the cultural context of education value of the respective host country of academics as opposed to that of the African students. The impact of

international exposure on foreign students should be examined in the host country to determine how it transforms there mindset on studying abroad programs. Future studies should develop a benchmark of the overall value of education globally to determine what is considered as the international accepted standard of education. This will help all students coming from various parts of the world to adjust and adapt at any host country's educational system.

This study only focused on African students' perception on their instructors, administrative staff and other areas at the Thai universities they study. In order to strike a balance between a service providers and their customers there is a need that the service provider understands its customer. Future studies should focus on the instructors' point of view of their international students. This will help the instructors have an understanding of the mindset of the students they are dealing with.

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