# Individual Service Excellence for Better Performance: Evidences from MUET Students

Boo Ho Voon[*]
*bhvoon@uitm.edu.my*
Universiti Teknologi MARA, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak

Joyce E. C. Voon
voonerncze@gmail.com
IPG International Language, Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur

Ai Kiat Teo
aikiat67@yahoo.com
SMK DPHA Gapor, Stampin, 93350 Kuching, Sarawak.

Corresponding author*

**ABSTRACT.** An individual's attitude is imperative in sustaining his/her performance. One has to believe and do the right things all the times for excellence. However, there are many aspects that the individual needs to recognize and do excellently well. This paper presents an attitudinal measurement on service excellence attitudes and links it to the students' MUET performance. The multi-item measurement scale was systematically developed and empirically tested for reliability and validity. The individual's service excellence scale was called MyServEx (My Service Excellence) which consisted of 6 dimensions and 32 items. The MyServEx (Self) was empirically tested and the survey data were obtained from the MUET students to investigate the role of attitudes in leveraging the English language performance. The teachers can understand the students better and creatively help them. The limitations and future direction for research were also discussed.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, service excellence, performance, MUET

## INTRODUCTION

Excellence is the desired state of performance many organisations and individuals wish to achieve. The great management literature such as 'In search of excellence' of Peters and Waterman (1982) had inspired many worldwide to pursue excellence and investigate the best practices for excellent organizational performance whereas authors such as Covey (2004) had suggested numerous quality traits of the effective individuals. Generally, the literature tends to agree that the organizational culture and personal attitudes are the key determinants for great and consistent performance (e.g., Ihtiyar, 2018; Saloviita, 2020; Saloviita, 2020; Vasanthakumari,

2021; Zulkefli, Voon, Rasidah, 2020). At the personal level, the individual's attitude is crucial for his/her sustainable excellent performance. In the context of education, the students who are guided and required to learn and perform very well should have the right attitudes for academic excellence. Ideally, the individuals (e.g., MUET students) has to consistently and continuously believe and do the right things to achieve and sustain the excellent performance. However, the relevant domains or aspects have to be comprehensively and correctly recognized as well as to be in line with the situational needs. The attitudes and excellence orientation are imperative to achieve and sustain the individuals' performance. Hence, this paper aims to present a multi-item measurement for service excellence attitudes of individuals, and tested the goodness in the context of MUET students. The individual's service attitudes were measured using the MyServEx Scale (Self). The empirical findings were explained and discussed accordingly for better MUET performance and personal happiness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability has been consistently and continuously emphasized worldwide for better quality of life. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) as proposed and promoted by United Nations have been practiced to a certain extent for many nations and involve many sectors including the education service sector. Nevertheless, the relatively new sustainability assessment system still needs continuously improvement (Pope, Annandale & Morrison-Saunders, 2004). The dimensions of sustainability (i.e., social, economic and nature) have been greatly referred to for strategic adaptations to suit different contextual needs. The natural, economic and social inclusion aspects are claimed to be necessary for sustainable development. At the personal level, ideally everybody needs to be excellent as well as willing to contribute and serve. Creative practices are also essential. The personal attitudes need to be right. The personal service excellence attitudes are conceptualized as the personal culture and vigilance of comprehensively and continually understanding, coordinating, disseminating and satisfying the needs of the target individuals or groups (Voon, 2014).

Many leadership, quality management, and service management researchers suggested that providing excellent customer service consistently and continuously is imperative for to achieve as well as sustain customer satisfaction (e.g. Covey, 2004; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Voon, Jamil, Patricia, Teo & Agnes, 2017; Wang, Hu, Goa, Sun, Feng & Voon, 2019). The service providers tend to put the interests of the customers first and serve them according. Ideally, the customer-driven service even includes fostering happiness (Fisk, Dean & Alkire, 2018). In fact, this continuous pursuit of service excellence can benefit the customer-oriented organizations (e.g., schools, universities) and individual service providers such as the MUET teachers (e.g., Voon, Teo, Voon, 2020). Teachers should be always trying to understand the students and creatively help them to improve (Foong, Ismail & Tukiman, 2021; Hahl & Keinänen, 2021). From the organizational performance perspective, leveraging the service culture and service attitudes can significantly help to increase the customer satisfaction, reduce operational cost, increase profitability and competitiveness (e.g., Garvin, 1984; Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2001). Therefore, the organizations'/institutions' service culture as well as the service attitudes of the individuals (e.g., teachers) need to be appropriately understood, measured and monitored accordingly for effective and efficient service management for better performance.

The belief and implementation of marketing concept, termed as market orientation, was extensively researched since the early 1990s (i.e., Desphande, Fahley & Webster, 1993; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Kohli, Jaworski & Kumar, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). Their research findings had inspired and encouraged many service researchers to adapt, further develop, and practice the market-oriented service culture to improve service performance. The market orientation of at the individual level was also proposed and tested accordingly. The individual market orientation was developed and there were significant and positive impacts on the individuals' performance (e.g., Baber, Kaurav, and Paul, 2018; Hamzah, Othman & Hassan, 2020; Lytle & Timmerman, 2006; Voon, Niden & Johneny, 2011). On the other hand, the service researchers tried to operationalize the service orientation of organizations (e.g., Lytle, Hom & Mokwa, 1998; Voon, 2014) to improve customer-perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. However, the element of excellence was not clearly emphasized and not conceptualised as well as tested at the individual or personal level. It was believed that the service attitudes of the individuals indeed should be emphasized to leverage the individual's performance. Besides, the cultural-based assets like the Asian values of excellence could be referred and learned accordingly. Voon (2009) identified the related dimensions of Confucian values for managing customer service towards excellence. The customer-oriented values to create and sustain the very satisfied service experiences are namely: Filial piety (孝, *xiao*)*,* Faithfulness （信, xin), Forgiving (恕, *shu*)*,* Humaneness (德, *de*)*,* Knowledge (智, zhi), Loyalty (忠, zhong), Respect, (敬, *jing*), Righteousness (義, *yi*), Ritual (禮, li), *S*incerity (誠, *cheng*)*,* and Tolerance (讓, *rang).*

Quality of service matters. The quality management of service has been contributing favourably to organizational performance and co-creating the positive customer values (e.g., Chen & Yua, 2020). Specifically, the excellent service culture and practices are necessary to improve and sustain the individual performance. For instance, the total quality management (TQM) model comprehensively emphasized the hands and minds that employed the tools and techniques for excellence (Anthony, Leung, Knoles & Gosh, 2002). The total employee involvement, continuous quality improvement, continuous employee training, teamwork, empowerment, top management commitment, democratic management style, customer satisfaction, and cultural change are emphasized. These can, directly or indirectly, foster the individual service attitudes to serve the target customers better. In the context of higher education, the service culture significantly affected the employee service management quality for better internal service quality (Nasriman, Voon & Firdaus, 2016). Every employee needs to serve the customers very well for overall great service culture of the organization/institution. Hence, the individual's service attitudes need to be taken into consideration for service management and innovations. The six-dimensional MyServEx proposed and tested in this paper includes the related dimensions and the items of TQM. The items of TQM were reworded to suit the service-settings. The six dimensions of MyServEx cover the aspects of: customer/self, competitor, coordination, performance, long-term, and service orientation.

The individual's service excellence attitudes concern the consistent and continuous belief and practices of an individual towards himself/herself, and also others. These service attitudes will most probably improve the individual's performance (e.g., Edvardsson, Frow, Jaakkola & Kelingham, 2018). The individual's service attitudes are essential in professional service contexts such as the educational services (e.g., Atabek, 2020; Saloviita, 2020).

**METHODOLOGY**

The main objective of this research is to develop and valid an individual service attitude measurement as well as investigate its relationship with individual performance. The measurement scale development and relationship analyses were done using the relevant qualitative and quantitative techniques. Specifically, the Focus group interviews and structured questionnaire survey were performed to achieve the research objectives.

Initially, the related services marketing, service management, market orientation and sustainability literature were reviewed to identified the related dimensions and items of individual service excellence attitudes. Thereafter, empirical data were collected and analyzed accordingly. The sample data were obtained from various groups of students to reflect the educational settings. The empirical qualitative and quantitative research findings suggested that the service excellence attitudes (hereby called My Service Excellence, MyServEx) is a valid and reliable multi-dimensional construct which can help individuals to perform better.
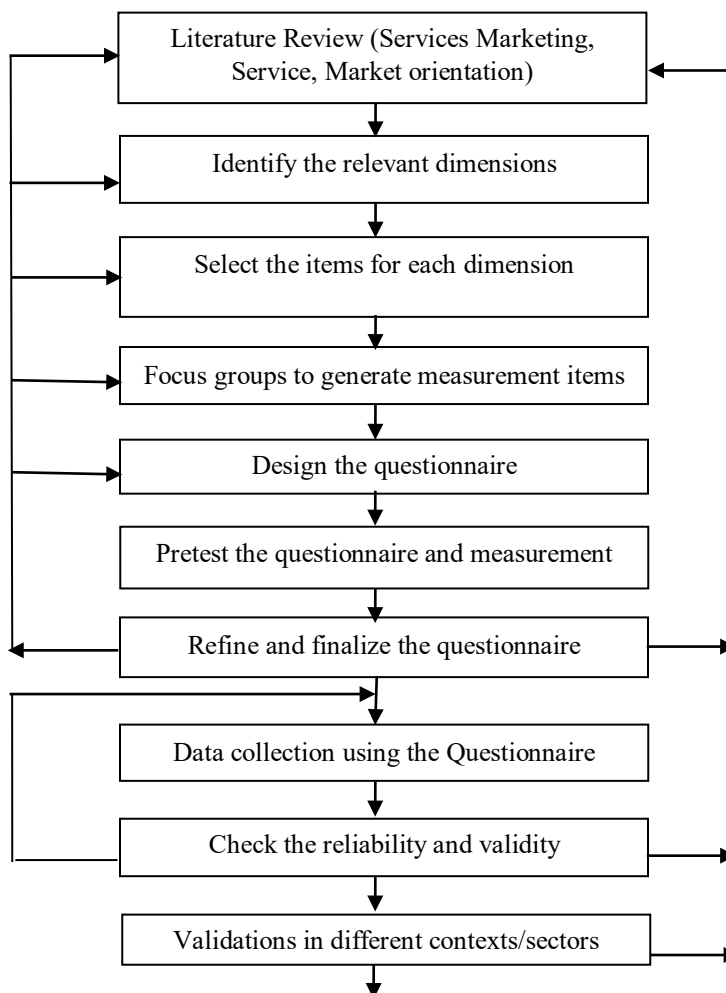
The service excellence attributes were first of all explored through literature review and qualitative research. The related marketing, market orientation and service management literature (e.g., Despande, Farley & Webster, 1993; Kohli & Jawroski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990;). This was followed by qualitative interviews. The qualitative technique called Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to interview individual students and generated items for the multi-item measurement. Four focus groups (8-12 student participants each) were conducted. During the qualitative analysis and sorting process, the validity and reliability aspects of data classification were stressed. The intra-judge and inter-judge agreements were ensured. In the intra-judging process, the categorizations of the researcher were checked by another qualified team member. They read the details of each incident to one another to confirm the respective dimensions and items accordingly. Inter-rater reliability of at least 85% was required and the sorting went through an inter-judging process by another qualified external colleague in the field of services marketing and service management.

Once the sorting of dimensions and items were done, the questionnaire was designed. In the questionnaire design process, the measurement dimensions and items were carefully reworded accordingly to suit the higher education service context (e.g., MUET). The questionnaire items were checked by experts in the marketing and service management fields for face validity before it was tested and launched for the questionnaire survey. The 7-point Likert scale was used (i.e., 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree). The satisfaction was measured using a single-item measure to safeguard the unidimensionality of the service outcome. The pretest was done to develop a good instrument. The questionnaire was pretested by administering it to 10 local and international marketing and service management experts to check the content validity. Their comments and suggestions were used to improve the wording and appropriateness of the measurement items. Then, the survey data collected were analyzed quantitatively using structural equation modeling. The AMOS software was used. The findings were also validated using survey data from other services sectors (i.e., banks and hotels). The scale development and validation process is shown Figure 1. The organizational service culture (the scale called ServEx)

was established and thereafter the measurement was reworded to gauge the individual service attitudes, called My Service Excellence (MyServEx).

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE ATTITUDES

Based on the survey data of five hundred and fifty-eight university students, collected using quota sampling among the various higher learning institutions in Sarawak, the data were carefully processed and analyzed. First of all, the reliability and validity of the data and measures were checked and ensured accordingly. Internal consistency of the items was analyzed. The items which had item-to-total correlations (i.e., in Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis) of less than 0.5 were dropped for the factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis (i.e., with the varimax rotations) was performed to explore and identify the factors. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used (DeVellis, 2003). Once the factors were obtained, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was also performed to understand the model fit based on the Structural Equation Modeling process using the AMOS software. The measurement was found to be a multi-dimensional construct with six dimensions. The dimensionality was assessed using the multiple fit criteria (i.e., CMIN/DF, CFI, RMSEA) and found that the measurement model was good (e.g., Bryne, 2004).
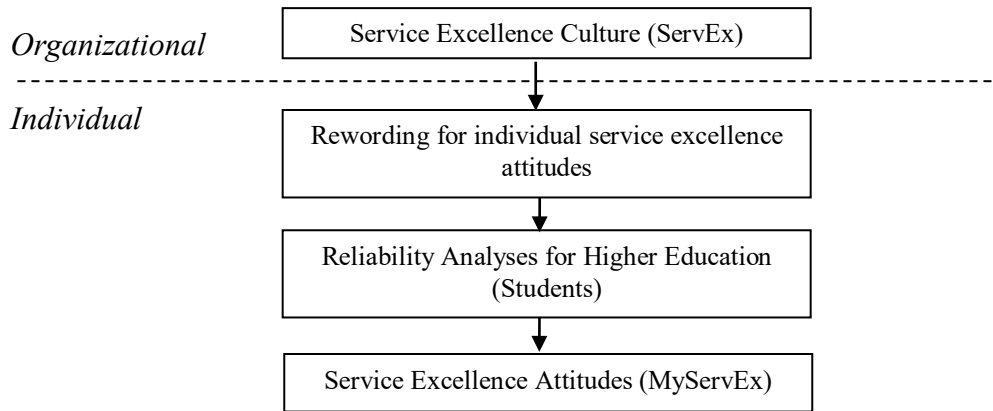
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│  Literature Review (Services Marketing, │
│  Service, Market orientation)           │
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│  Identify the relevant dimensions      │
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│  Select the items for each dimension   │
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│  Focus groups to generate measurement items │
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│  Design the questionnaire              │
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│  Pretest the questionnaire and measurement │
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│  Refine and finalize the questionnaire │
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│  Data collection using the Questionnaire │
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│  Check the reliability and validity    │
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│  Validations in different contexts/sectors │
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**Figure 1: The Research Process for Service Excellence Attitudes**

The empirical data yielded a 6-dimensional measure for the service excellence attitudes. The principal component and varimax rotation showed that the dimensions explained 55.7% of the variance. The eigenvalues were greater than 1.00. The Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin (KMO) which indicated the sampling adequacy was satisfactory (i.e., 0.96) whereas the communalities for all the measurements items were from 0.47 to 0.69. The analysis results also indicated good model fit (i.e., the $\chi^2/df$=2.54, CFI=0.92, RMSEA=0.053) and the t-values were significant at p=0.01.

The scale validation was done using survey data; university student (n=200), bank customers (n=100) and hotel customers (n=155). Results from the numerous reliability analyses suggested that the measurement scale was reliable. The internal consistency of the items was satisfactory (i.e., item-to-total correlations higher than 0.40). The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three service sectors were higher than 0.90 (i.e., university 0.96, bank 0.95, and hotel 0.92).

**My Service Excellence (MyServEx) Attitudes**

The individual's perspective of their own service attitudes was measured using the questionnaire. The individuals' service excellence attitudes include their service towards self, other people, nature and super-nature for happiness and sustainability. Individuals with the right attitudes are believed to be able to perform well. In fact, what an individual has, does and how he/she does things are service. Hence, he or she must pursue what they are doing excellently, for service excellence. Their strong belief in service and their service practices, for the sake of serving themselves, and also others is called My Service Excellence (MyServEx).

The empirical investigation was done on the MyServEx (Self) to measure the individual's assessment of his/her service excellence attitudes towards himself/herself and thereafter linked it to personal happiness and performance of participating MUET (Malaysian University English Test) students. The questionnaire survey was voluntarily participated by two hundred and three MUET students (n=203) in Sarawak. Table 1 shows the respondents' profile.

**Table 1: Respondents' Profile for the MyServEx Survey (n=203)**

| Gender: | | Race: | | Place of Stay: | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 77 (39.1%) | Iban | 63 (30.0%) | Kuching | 86 (42.4%) |
| Female | 126 (62.1 %) | Malay | 57 (28.1%) | Sibu | 72 (35.5%) |
| | | Chinese | 59 (29.1%) | Bintulu | 45 (22.2%) |
| Average Age: 18.6 years | | Bidayuh | 10 (4.9%) | | |
| | | Others | 14 (6.9%) | MyServEx Score: 5.12 | |

The findings suggested that the multi-item scale was reliable and it can potentially help the individual students to leverage their MUET performance and their personal happiness in life. The results of the reliability analysis are presented in Table 2. The six dimensions are reliable and the items within the respective dimensions are showing satisfactory internal constancy (i.e., item-to-total corrections higher than 0.40). The overall MyServEx score of the participating students stands favourably positive at is 5.12 (out of maximum score of 7.00). The teachers can take the initiative to understand the students better by finding out the mean scores for all the dimensions and their respective items. The items with lower mean scores denote relatively unfavourable attitudes, hence the teachers can guide and encourage the students with regards to those weaker aspects of their service excellence attitudes. This student-oriented approach will be the potential creative practices in language teaching (i.e., MUET).

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis on the MyServEx Dimensions and Items**

| MyServEx Dimensions and Items (6 dimensions, 32 items) | MUET Students (n=203) | |
|---|---|---|
| | Cronbach's Alpha values | Item-to-Total Correlations |
| Self Orientation (6 items) | 0.81 | |
| Committed to love myself | | 0.600 |
| Understanding my own needs | | 0.663 |
| Delivering quality service to to myself | | 0.599 |
| Measuring own satisfaction | | 0.511 |
| Know the changes in my preferences | | 0.550 |
| Consistently and continuously love | | 0.522 |
| Competitor Orientation (5 items) | 0.78 | |
| Responsive to competitors | | 0.522 |
| Know the competitors/opponents | | 0.509 |
| Focus on strategic aspects | | 0.541 |
| Try to be better than others | | 0.634 |
| Try to be different to stay competitive | | 0.594 |
| Coordination (5 items) | 0.73 | |
| Communicate with others | | 0.494 |
| Share relevant information | | 0.509 |
| Relate well with others | | 0.522 |
| Cooperate and work with others | | 0.513 |
| Communicate with different people | | 0.461 |
| Performance Orientation (5 items) | 0.76 | |
| Strive for happy life | | 0.420 |
| Committed for service excellence | | 0.625 |
| Regularly measure service performance | | 0.582 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Monitor service performance to myself | | 0.542 |
| Walk the talk in loving myself | | 0.516 |
| Long-term Orientation (7 items) | 0.86 | |
| Sacrifice to provide excellent service | | 0.563 |
| Changes to have good future | | 0.689 |
| Emphasis on long-term performance | | 0.618 |
| Continuous improvement for future | | 0.680 |
| Long term plans/goals of loving myself | | 0.665 |
| Serving myself as long-term investment | | 0.577 |
| Consistent service excellence to myself | | 0.630 |
| Service Orientation (4 items) | 0.82 | |
| Know how to love myself | | 0.517 |
| Motivated and joyful to love | | 0.696 |
| Have someone/facility to care | | 0.696 |
| Have someone/facility to relate | | 0.687 |
| Overall (32 items) | 0.93 | |

The MyServEx and MUET Performance data were categorized into two categories (i.e., Low vs High MyServEx; Low vs High MUET Performance) and the Chi-square analysis was used to investigate the association between these two categorical variables. The association analysis can help to provide the necessary strategic direction to help the policy-makers. The results of this cross-tabulation analysis in Table 3 suggest that there is a significant association between MyServEx and MUET performance of the students.

**Table 3: Association between MySerVEx and MUET Performance**

| MyServEx | MUET Performance | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | High | |
| Low | 51 | 41 | 92 |
| High | 22 | 89 | 111 |
| | 73 | 130 | 203 |

N.B.:  Chi-square value = 27.708, Sig = 0.000

The Chi-square value stands at 27.708 and significant at 5%. If the students are having high level of service excellence attitudes, their MUET performance will tend to be good. The students' service excellence attitudes towards themselves are instrumental. The empirical findings suggest that if they are self-oriented and taking good care of themselves, knowing their competitors/counterparts, coordinate with others, performance-oriented and think of their future, coupled with providing excellent service to themselves, they will perform better in MUET. The findings strategically suggest that the MUET students who have the right service excellence attitudes will tend to perform better in their English language course, MUET.

The cross-tabulation results shown in Table 4 suggest that there is a significant association between MyServEx score and personal happiness of the MUET students. The Chi-square value stands at 10.495 and significant at 5%. If the students are having high level of service excellence attitudes, they tend to be very happy. Logically, this desirable personal happiness will most probably help to sustain the favourable performance of the individuals.

**Table 4: Association between MyServEx and Personal Happiness**

| MyServEx | Personal Happiness | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | High | |
| Low | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| High | 48 | 149 | 197 |
| | 53 | 150 | 203 |

N.B.: Chi square = 10.495, Sig=0.001

MyServEx will most probably help individuals to scale greater heights and scope. The philosophy, conceptualization and operationalization of the individual's service excellence (MyServEx) can potentially help the individual to continuously and consistently remind, measure and improve himself/herself for own's benefits, others' well-being as well as better quality of life. The carefully reworded MyServEx scales can help to gauge the individuals' service attitudes towards the natural environment and community for sustainability. All in all, the individual's service excellence assessments will consist of many MyServEx Scales (Table 5). The various versions of the MyServEx scales can capture their attitudes towards others, nature and super-natural as these will holistically contribute to sustainability in different contextual dynamics, including challenging environment such as COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 5: The Fifteen Scales for Service Excellence Attitudes**

| The 15 MyServEx Scales (each measurement scale has 6 dimensions, 32 items) | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Customer | 6. Family | 11. Cross-cultural People |
| 2. Self | 7. Children | 12. Community |
| 3. God | 8. Friends | 13. Nature |
| 4. Parents | 9. Superiors | 14. Sustainability |
| 5. Spouse | 10. Colleagues | 15. Special People |

In line with the advancement in digitalization and eCommerce, the MyServEx measurement system can make the self-evaluation process easier and more convenient. The self-evaluations of the individual's service attitudes can be done online 24/7/365 using the online MyServEx System. For performance management purposes, the individualised MyServEx Scorecard (with personal profile, performance graph as well as the detailed MyServEx scores for overall, dimensions and items) can be generated to help the individuals to improve and/or sustain his/her service excellence attitudes and performance from time to time.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The individual service excellence attitudes (MyServEx, My Service Excellence) measurement is potentially essential to leverage and sustain the individual's performance and happiness as well as potentially benefiting others for sustainability. The questionnaire survey on MUET students suggested that MyServEx can potentially help to improve the students' MUET performance and their level of happiness. The right attitudes are imperative for English language learning.

The multi-item measurement scales of My Service Excellence (MyServEx) attitudes are comprehensive and able to help monitoring the required attitudes for better individual performance. The teachers can understand their students better and able to guide them to improve their attitudes accordingly to the numerous dimensions and items. Besides, the various MyServEx scales can help to gauge the individual's service towards own-self, others as well as the nature and super-nature for sustainability. The measurement scale was found to be reliable and valid for self-evaluations and continuous improvement. Nevertheless, the vigilant process requires stringent "plan-do-check-act" activities and these activities are measurement-oriented. The MyServEx scores can be useful performance indicators to help the individuals to enjoy the real happiness (especially happiness from within), for others and for sustainability.

One of the future research directions can include the new design for service inclusion (Fisk *et al*, 2018) to leverage personal happiness. This MyServEx measurement scales can provide the individuals with the service excellence attributes to be prioritized for more effective allocation of resources. It can be integrated with Kano Modelling for attribute-based improvement and sustenance. Besides, each of the questionnaires can be employed and further validated by linking the variables to the meaningful variables (e.g., household income, cost effectiveness, empathy, green index, physical health, spiritual health, spouse happiness). The researchers can use relevant quantitatively techniques (e.g., Kano Model, Kansei Engineering, Quality Function Deployment, Analytical Hierarchy Process (ATP), SWOT-ATP Method) to identify critical attributes for continuous improvement. The research-based continuously assessment as well as improvement of service attitudes of individuals using the MyServEx System will be instrumental for sustainable personal performance and happiness for sustainability.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## About the Authors

**Boo Ho Voon** is a Professor of Marketing at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak. He is interested in doing service and marketing research. He teaches various marketing and research methodology courses as well as supervises students at bachelor degree and postgraduate levels. His innovations such as ServEx, BEHAVE, eDioms (Chinese Marketing), and MyServEx system have won awards locally and internationally. His consultancy projects on service management, customer experience and product development have helped many customers.

**Joyce E.C. Voon** is pursuing Bachelor of Education (TESL) at IPG International Language, Kuala Lumpur. She has been active in doing research on teaching and learning of English language, educational service. She has been applying the student-oriented educational technology in her teaching to benefit her students.

**Ai Kiat Teo** teaches MUET at SMK DPHA Gapor, Kuching, Sarawak. She holds a Bachelor of Education (TESOL) from Murray House College, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. She has completed and published numerous papers in action research related to teaching and learning of English language as well as student orientation in teaching and learning.