

A STUDY ON STUDENT PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Liberalization of the higher education sector has increased the access of students to institutions of higher learning. Students of today are far more informed and have more choices in terms of institutions to pursue their higher studies. In the age of competition, the institutions of higher learning need to understand the customers' (students') perceptions of service quality and identify the gap between their expectations and these perceptions. The paper studies the students' perceptions of service quality in the present educational scenario. This study attempts to examine the relationship between service quality dimensions and overall service quality and students satisfaction. This research is gathered through the use of focus groups as the primary data collection method. This study provides management with a 'snapshot' of the current provision of service quality at the higher education institutes. It also offers suggestions that could be implemented to improve service quality, given the limited resources available to management.

Keywords: Service Quality, Gap, Student, Higher Education

I. Introduction:

In today's competitive academic environment where students have many options available to them, factors that enable educational institutions to attract and retain students should be seriously studied. Higher education institutions, which want to gain competitive edge in the future, may need to begin searching for effective and creative ways to attract, retain and foster stronger relationships with students. As a private organization, it has to depend on the interaction and mechanism of the market. As a result, competition to attract as many students as possible or so-called "potential customer" may become more and more intense.

Most institutions do give a great deal of importance to meeting customers' expectations which is similar to business organization, but they still lack customer awareness among the staff, and it has become a common drawback for many institutions. This brings us to an understanding that students will have more voice in deciding which institution to enroll for higher education. This study attempts to explore the aspects of service quality and the level of satisfaction among the students of private higher education institutions.

II. SERVQUAL METHOD:

The SERVQUAL instrument was developed during the late 1980s and early 1990s by Valerie A Parasuraman and Leonard L. Berry. Their early study revealed that while the literature in the area of goods quality was fairly abundant, there was practically nothing in the area of service quality. The quality control principles and practices that they uncovered in the area of goods quality were inadequate for understanding service quality. They concluded that the inadequacy of the quality control principles and practices for understanding service quality is the result of three fundamental differences between services and quality. First, services, as opposed to goods, are intangible; they are performances and experiences rather than objects. While precise manufacturing specifications can be set concerning uniform quality standards for objects like vehicles and shovels, the same cannot be said for services like tactical and strategic analytical support since the criteria that are set for evaluating performance of service delivery by the consumers is likely "complex and difficult to capture precisely. Second, services, as opposed to goods, are "heterogeneous; their performance often varies from producer to producer, from consumer to consumer, and from day to day" Finally, services, as opposed to goods, are inseparable in terms of their production and use. Quality in services often occurs during service delivery, usually in an interaction between the consumer and the provider, rather than being engineered at the developed plant and delivered intact to the consumer.

By the early 1990s, the authors had refined the model to 5 factors that enable the acronym RATER:

1. Reliability
2. Assurance
3. Tangibles
4. Empathy
5. Responsiveness

The simplified RATER model allows consumer service experiences to be explored and assessed quantitatively and has been used widely by service delivery organizations.

Five Dimensions Of Service Quality

Parasuraman et al. (1988) devised the scale for measuring service quality on the basis of five dimensions as follows.

- **Tangibles:** Tangibles dimension of service quality refers to those elements, which provide tangibles to the service and includes physical facilities, equipment's of the service contributor, dress and appearance of the service personnel.
- **Reliability:** Reliability refers to the ability of the service provider to accurately perform the promised service of right quality goods at right prices.
- **Responsiveness:** Responsiveness refers to the willingness of the service provider and his staff to provide assistance and prompt service to customers.
- **Assurance:** Assurance refers to the ability of the service provider and his employees to use their knowledge and courteous behavior to instill trust and confidence in customers regarding the services rendered.
- **Empathy:** Empathy refers to the care and concern shown to the customers and the capability of the firm to devote individualized attention to its customers.

III. Problem Statement

In India NAAC accreditation is of paramount importance and institutions with higher score will be automatically eligible for getting autonomous status. For this purpose identifying weaknesses in core course structures and bringing out changes has become important. Among factors that contributed toward the problems were the lecturers' lack of skills to handle the task and failure to attain the required curriculum standard set up. The government for example has for long not compromising on the quality of education offered and hope to see that the private higher education will provide a quality education toward the students. This of course is in-synchronization with the current trend in education industry.

Research Question

RQ1: Determine the relationship between service quality dimensions and satisfaction among the students in private higher institutions?

RQ2: What are critical factors in service quality that contribute most to the satisfaction of the students?

IV. Research Objectives

Generally, the purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction in private higher institutions. Several factors in service quality that will be discussed and analyzed are Tangibility, Assurance, Reliability, Responsiveness and Empathy.

The purpose of this research:

1. To examine the relationship between service quality dimensions (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy and overall service quality) and students satisfaction
2. To examine critical factors in service quality (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy) that contributes most to satisfaction.
3. To find out the dominant service quality dimensions that influence student satisfaction.

V. Literature

Kotler and Clarke (1987) define satisfaction as a state felt by a person who has experience performance or an outcome that fulfill his or her expectation. Satisfaction is a function of relative level of expectations and perceives performance. The expectation may go as far as before the students even enter the higher education, suggesting that it is important to the researchers to determine first what the students expect before entering the university (Palacio, Meneses and Perez, 2002). In contrary, Carey, Cambiano and De Vore (2002), believe that satisfaction actually covers issues of students' perception and experiences during the college years.

While most student satisfaction study focus on the perspective of customer, researchers is facing a problem of creating a standard definition for student satisfaction thus providing a need of customer satisfaction theory to be selected and modified so that it can explain the meaning of student satisfaction (Hom, 2002). Even though it is risky to view students as customer, but given the current atmosphere of higher education marketplace, there is a new moral prerogative that student have become "customer" and therefore can, as fee payers, reasonably demand that their views be heard and acted upon (William, 2002).

A definition of quality revolves around the idea that quality has to be judged on the assessment of the user or consumer of the service. The construct of quality as conceptualized in the services literature is based on the perceived quality. Perceived quality is defined as the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall experience or superiority (Zeithaml, 1987; Zammuto et al.

1996). Similarly, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1990) also concluded that consumer perceptions of service quality result from comparing expectations prior to receiving the service, and their actual experience of the service. Perceived quality is also seen as a form of attitude, related to, but not the same as satisfaction, and resulting from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance (Rowley, 1996).

Therefore, perceived service quality could be the product of the evaluations of a number of service encounters and in this case, of a student, these could range from encounters with office staff, to encounters with tutors, lecturers, the head of departments, etc (Hill, 1995). As a result, if an organization regularly provides service at a level that exceeds customer expectations, the service will be evaluated as high quality. In contrast, if an organization fails to meet customer expectations, the service will be judge as poor quality (Zammuto et al., 1996).

Generally, students have three main criteria that need to be satisfied with services. These has been labeled as Requisite encounters which essentially enable students to fulfill their study obligations; Acceptable encounters which students acknowledge as being desirable but not essential during their course of study and Functional, an encounter of a practical or utilitarian nature (Oldfield and Baron, 2000).

According to Lassar, Manolis and Winsor (2000), two most prevalent and widely accepted perspectives on service quality include the SERVQUAL model and the Technical/Functional Quality framework. Gronroos (1984) held that service quality is made up of three dimensions "the technical quality of the outcome", "the functional quality of the encounter" and "the company corporate image". He argued that in examining the determinants of quality, it is necessary to differentiate between quality associated with the process of service delivery and quality associated with the outcome of service, judged by the consumer after the service is performed.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) however listed ten determinants of service quality that can be generalized to any type of service. The ten dimensions include tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security and understanding. In addition, these ten dimensions were then regrouped in the well-known five dimensions in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1990) which include assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangibility.

VI. Methodology

Research Framework

This study was adopted from Parasuraman's SERVQUAL dimensions. The dependent variable in this study is overall student satisfaction that is measured by the overall satisfaction with the higher education institutions. The independent variable in this study is service quality in higher education that measures the level of satisfaction with service performance. The dimensions included in this variable are tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, reliability, and empathy.

Sample

The samples in this study were professional degree students studying at a Private higher education institutions in Dakshina kannada district of Karnataka.. We have distributed 230 questionnaires and finally, 200 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires, which represents about 87% response rate.

Instrumentation

This study used questionnaire as a medium to obtain the data needed. There are three sections in the questionnaire, consisting of Section A: Demographic factor, Section B: Measurement of Service Quality in Higher Education and Section C: Measurement of Student Satisfaction. In this section A, three question covering from the subjects of gender, age and their year of study. Followed by section B: service quality in higher education and section C: student satisfaction. Instrument used in this research is adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1990) using the five dimensions in service quality (tangibility, assurance, reliability, responsiveness and empathy) using the Likert scale from 1 for not satisfied at all to 6 for very satisfied. In measuring student satisfaction, instrument for this variable was adapted from Atheeyaman (1997). In this variable, it has six items with Likert scale ranges from 1 for much worse than expected to 6 which is the best.

I. Findings

Profiles of the respondents

The demographic information includes the following characteristic of participants: gender, age, year of studies and. The demographics information is represented in the below given Table based on frequency distributions and percentages.

From the 200 respondents in this study, 95 (47.5%) are male and 105 (52.5%) are females. The calculated mean age of the respondents is 23 years old with the majority of the students being 22 years old (33%). Most of the respondents are in the fourth year of their study (35%), followed by second year (26.5%), third year (21.5%) and first year (17%).

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	95	47.5%
Female	105	52.5%
Age		
21	40	20.0%
22	66	33.0%
23	63	31.5%
24	20	10.0%
25	6	3.0%
26	2	1.0%
28	2	1.0%
29	1	0.5%
Semester of study		
First year	34	17%
Second year	53	26.5%
Third year	43	21.5%
Fourth year	70	35%

Descriptive statistics of the variables in the model of the study

For the dependent variable: student satisfaction contains of six items, while for the independent variable service quality, each of the dimension starting with tangibility contains 16 items, assurance 9 items, while reliability, responsiveness and empathy contains 7 items, totaling 46 items.

Variable Type	Variable Name	N	No. of item	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Actual Study Means
Dependent Y	Student Satisfaction	200	6	1.00	6.00	4.17
Independent Service Quality						
X1	Tangibility	200	16	2.25	6.00	3.95
X2	Assurance	200	9	1.25	6.00	4.44
X3	Reliability	200	7	1.43	6.00	3.98
X4	Responsiveness	200	7	1.43	6.00	4.09
X5	Empathy	200	7	1.71	6.00	3.95
<u>Overall Service Quality</u>			46	2.16	5.98	4.07

Descriptive Statistics of Measures

In the above Table it shows that mean of student satisfaction was (4.17 on a 6-point scale) followed by service quality with an overall mean of 4.07 (on a 6-point scale). For each dimension, assurance scores the highest (4.44 on a 6-point scale), followed by responsiveness (4.09 on a 6-point scale), reliability (3.98 on a 6-point scale), tangibility and empathy (3.95 on a 6-point scale). The minimum score for student satisfaction is 1.00 indicating that there are students who felt that their satisfaction is much worse than expected and the maximum score is 6.00 indicating that there are some who felt that the satisfaction was much better than expected. As may seen in the Table 1.2 below, the mean for service quality is 4.07, which can be perceived as students in these higher education institutions are actually somewhat satisfied with overall service quality.

In Table below, it can be seen that the highest mean score for item under an independent variables was “appearance of lecturers” (mean=4.89; sd=0.87), followed by “friendly and courteous lecturers” (4.76; 1.00) and “academic credentials of lecturers” (4.77; 0.92) while the lowest score were “computers adequacy provided in the lab for students” (3.27; 1.36) and “up-to-datedness of computers” (3.38; 1.37) which mean that the lowest satisfaction toward the services was related to tangibility of services and the highest was related to assurance. However it can also be seen here tangibility item (appearance of lecturers) had the highest overall score. For the dependent variable (student satisfaction), the item "I am satisfied with my decision to attend this University" (4.32; 0.99) score the highest while "If have a choice to do it all over again, I still will enroll in this University" (3.94; 1.17) score the lowest.

	Question	Mean	Standard deviation
Service Quality (Independent Variable)			
	Tangibility		
1.	Appearance of Lecturers	4.8850	0.87499
2.	Layout of classrooms	4.1300	1.13115
3.	Lighting in classrooms	4.5450	0.93399
4.	Appearance of building and grounds	4.0452	1.11598
5.	Overall cleanliness	3.7186	1.17688
6.	Degree to which classrooms and study rooms are comfortable	4.0150	1.06322
7.	Decoration and atmosphere	3.8700	1.13558
8.	Appearance of personnel	4.2350	1.12521
9.	Available of parking	3.6566	1.38638
10.	The degree to which curriculum is up to date	4.1005	1.04927
11.	Number of courses offered	4.3131	0.94677
12.	Computers adequacy provided in the lab for students	3.2650	1.36163
13.	'Up-to-datedness' of computers	3.3800	1.36562
14.	'Up-to-datedness' of software used in computers	3.4824	1.26269
15.	Access to the Internet/e-mail	3.5550	1.23475
16.	The organizational culture, belief and value in this university	4.0408	1.03694
	Assurance		
17.	Friendly and courteous university staffs	4.1809	1.11348
18.	Friendly and courteous lecturers	4.7626	1.00719
19.	Lecturers research efficiency/productivity	4.5900	0.88647
20.	Academic credentials of lecturers	4.7700	0.92269
21.	Lecturers are innovative and agents of change	4.5377	0.90305
22.	The degree to which university involve with the community	4.2727	0.90305
23.	University's staffs knowledge on rules and procedures	4.3266	0.98926
24.	Security measures at your university	4.1364	1.05993
25.	Communication skills: courses are well taught by the lecturers in this university	4.4400	0.86611
	Reliability		
26.	Registration is timely and error-free	3.5228	1.27204
27.	This university keeps its records accurately	3.8878	1.16692
28.	The general reliability of lecturers ie. keeps time/don't cancel classes	4.3550	1.06991
29.	Staff sincere interest in solving student's problem	3.9000	1.30326
30.	This university provides its services at a time it promises to do so	3.8100	1.03889
31.	Teaching capability of lecturers/proficiency	4.3150	0.96978
32.	Lecturers sincere interest in solving student's problem	4.1106	1.09075
	Responsiveness		
33.	Availability of personnel to assist you	3.9850	1.07730
34.	Availability of lecturers to assist you	4.5381	0.97144
35.	Lecturers capacity to solve problems when they arise	4.4600	1.07899
36.	Staffs capacity to solve problems when they arise	4.0253	1.11945
37.	I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information on this University	3.9250	1.18168
38.	Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available	3.8300	1.11684
39.	Queries are dealt with efficiently and promptly	3.8593	1.26742
	Empathy		
40.	Administration has students' best interest at heart	3.7850	1.18990
41.	Access to computer facilities is accommodate with students' convenient	3.7300	1.22253
42.	Access to study rooms is accommodate with students' convenient	3.9500	1.14633
43.	Staff are willing to give students individual attention	3.8200	1.11075
44.	The extent to which lecturers are sympathetic and supportive to the needs of students	4.4322	0.87281
45.	Opening hour of computer rooms to the students	3.8550	1.25773
46.	University are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individuals students	4.0500	1.11522

	Student Satisfaction (Dependent Variable)		
1.	I am satisfied with my decision to attend this University	4.3166	0.99254
2.	If have a choice to do it all over again, I still will enroll in this University	3.9397	1.17051
3.	My choice to enroll in this University is a wise one	4.1350	1.04990
4.	I am happy on my decision to enroll in this University	4.2400	1.03817
5.	I did the right decision when I decided to enroll in this University	4.1750	1.08641
6.	I am happy that I enrolled in this University	4.2100	1.09172

Relationship between Service Quality Determinants and Students' Satisfaction

Variable Type	Y	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6
Dependent							
Y= Satisfaction	1.00						
Independent							
X1-Tangibility	0.568	1.00					
X2-Assurance	0.582	0.699	1.00				
X3-Reliability	0.555	0.728	0.789	1.00			
X4-Responsiveness	0.556	0.669	0.776	0.847	1.00		
X5-Empathy	0.640	0.688	0.623	0.763	0.747	1.00	
X6-Overall Quality	0.653	0.899	0.867	0.914	0.885	0.849	1.00

The table above indicate that there are significant and positive relationship between tangibility, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy and overall service quality to students' satisfaction. From the output, empathy has the strongest relationship with satisfaction followed by assurance, tangibility, responsiveness and reliability. The relationship between tangibility and student satisfaction is $r=0.568$ meaning that tangibility has a moderate relationship toward satisfaction similar with assurance ($r=0.582$), reliability ($r=0.555$) and responsiveness ($r=0.556$). Only empathy show a stronger relationship with satisfaction with $r=0.640$. The relationship between overall service quality and students' satisfaction is 0.653 meaning that the relationship is stronger than moderate. Furthermore, the results indicate that all the dimensions are highly correlated and very significant with one another. Therefore, the results proven that the service quality dimensions (tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, reliability and empathy) have a significant relationship with students' satisfaction. In fact, Mahiah., S. et al. (2006), shown that tangibility, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and assurance are highly correlated and very significant with one another.

Critical factors in Service Quality

The regression statistics show that $R^2=0.475$ (adjusted $R^2=0.46$), meaning that 47.5% of the variance in students' satisfaction are explained by the five dimensions provided in the output. The F statistics produced ($F=29.102$) is significant at the 0.000. From this result, tangibility (unstandardized coefficients B is 0.175 at sign. T = 0.104), responsiveness (unstandardized coefficients B is -0.004 at sign. T= 0.972), and reliability (unstandardized coefficients B is -0.151 at sign. T= 0.244) are not significantly related with satisfaction.

From the results, it is apparent that two dimensions (empathy and assurance) are consistently more significant than the other dimensions (age, tangibility, responsiveness and reliability). It mean empathy and assurance are the two critical factors that contribute most to students' satisfaction. For assurance (unstandardized coefficients B is 0.406 at sign. T= 0.001) and empathy (unstandardized coefficients B is 0.498 at sign. T=0.000) are significantly related with satisfaction.

II. Discussion and Conclusion

The Research Question 1 (RQ1) indicates five-service quality (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy) and overall service quality has strong relationship with students' satisfaction. The result is consistent with the finding by Ham and Hayduk (2003) and Bigne et al. (2003) that found there is a positive relationship between service quality and student satisfaction. In the study, empathy ($r=0.640$) has the strongest relationship followed by assurance ($r=0.582$), tangibility ($r=0.568$), responsiveness ($r=0.555$) and reliability ($r=0.556$). In addition, the relationship between overall service quality and students' satisfaction is 0.653 meaning that the relationship is stronger than moderate. Seeing that tangibility has a stronger relationship than responsiveness and reliability bring the researcher back to what Umbach and Porter (2002) have been stressing on earlier, seeing it as a compliment to the services provided in higher education in such to enhance satisfaction. Smith and Ennew (2001) also agree and the way they see it, the peripheral aspects and facilities will have a direct and indirect effect on the evaluation of

higher institution. It is found that, although the dimensions in service quality are important but assurance is found to be one of the most important (Perisau and McDaniel, 1997). Consistent with what has been depicted by Soutar and McNeil (2003) in their research, stating that although all dimensions in service quality are actually useful in explaining student satisfaction, but that does not mean that all dimensions are significant. It proven that assurance is one of the dimensions that are significantly related with satisfaction meaning that students in higher institution are actually concern with the knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust and confidence.

In this study, the Research Question 2 (RQ 2) indicates that assurance (unstandardized coefficients B is 0.406 at sign. T= 0.001) and empathy (unstandardized coefficients B is 0.498 at sign. T=0.000) are significantly related with satisfaction are critical factors that contribute most to the satisfaction of the students.

Conclusion

From the results, it is clear that service quality has significant positive relationship with student satisfaction. Thus, it confirms what other literature try to suggest here, which is by improving service quality, it may potentially improve the students' satisfaction as well and that is the priority of the private higher institutions due to the fact that they have to compete to earn interest from the students to study there. It is important to verify here that from the regression analysis, two dimensions in service quality empathy and assurance are the most critical factor in explaining students' satisfaction. Whatever done to increase empathy and assurance in service quality therefore will help students to give better evaluation to their satisfaction.

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