



QUALITY GAP OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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Introduction

Education is a service directly affected by the Service provider, and its services may be effective to the requirement or inadequate as the quality of the academic services offered. As colleges continue to become student oriented, understanding students' perceptions, services offered are becoming more important. Assessment and the quality of educational services have been the dominant area in the present context of education.

While much has been written about assessing student outcomes, less has been written about the evaluation of student satisfaction with services. The evaluation is far more important in the current situation because of paradigm shift in teaching. Today teaching is not merely in class room lecturing but also in incorporating conceptual knowledge through multidimensional teaching methods. This paradigm shift increases the level of perception in the minds of students which is causing the perceptual gap between faculties and students.

Teaching is undergoing a change from content to context. Faculties are using various teaching methodologies to deliver the quality of service. Higher education institutions had to be concerned with not only what the society values in the skills and abilities of their graduates (Ginsberg, 1991), but also how their students feel about their educational experience. Colleges are giving serious consideration to the issue of service quality assessment for a multitude of reasons, arguably the two most important of which are: students report that word-of-mouth recommendations play a large role in their decision to choose a college and both college quality assurance and independent assessment evaluators place heavy emphasis on the student experience as one of their assessment criteria (Cuthbert, 1996). Performance indicators may have something to do with the provision of higher education, but they certainly fail to measure the quality of education provided in any comprehensive way (Berg, 2005).

Many higher education institutions perform some evaluation of the quality of education provided to students, as well as an assessment of the student satisfaction. However, different universities and even different academic departments within the



same institution use different questions on student evaluation forms.

Literature Review

The customer-centric approach of service quality has gained momentum in educational literature as the increasing cost of education has created a new generation of students with greater customer awareness than ever before. As Old-field and Baron (2000) pointed out, the “interaction between customer and service organization lies at the heart of the service delivery.” Employees, who deliver the service, in this case the instructor, are of key importance to both the customers they serve, the students, and the employer they represent, the university. A satisfying exchange relationship between the consumer and the provider must, from the consumer perspective, provide customer satisfaction. Boulding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml (1993), and Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) described customer satisfaction as the difference between observed and expected quality. The difference is described as the “disconfirmation” or “quality gap.” A positive gap suggests the product exceeds expectations while a negative gap suggests the product quality does not meet expectations.

Assessment and the quality of educational services have been dominant themes in higher education in the 1980s and 1990s. Numerous reports (Bennett, 1984; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Seymour, 1992, 1994; Sykes, 1988) have been critical of various aspects of higher education, ranging from the quality and consistency of the core curriculum to the frustration experienced by students on many campuses with registration and academic advising and other administrative processes.

Some authors have suggested that colleges and universities adopt market driven models of service quality to assess student satisfaction with support services (Delene & Bunda, 1991; Seymour, 1992, 1994). Quality in higher education is about efficiency, high standards, excellence, value for money, fitness for purpose and/or customer focused (Watty, 2006).

SERVICE QUALITY

Ghobadian et al. (1994) posit that most of the service quality definitions fall within the “customer led” category. Juran (1999) elaborates the definition of customer led quality as “features of products which meet customers’ needs and thereby provide customer satisfaction.” As service quality relates to meeting customers’ needs, we will be looking at “perceived service quality” in order to understand consumers (Arnauld et al., 2002). Grönroos (1984) and Parasuraman et al., (1985) looks at perceived quality of service as the difference between customers’ expectation and their perceptions of the actual service received.

SERVICE QUALITY MEASUREMENT

It is difficult to measure service quality as compared to good’s quality. The difficulty to measure is due to fewer tangible cues available when consumers purchase



services (Parasuraman et al., 1985), fewer search properties, but higher in experience and credence properties (Zeithaml, 1981 in Parasuraman 1985), as compared to goods. It also requires higher consumer involvement in the consumption process (Grönroos, 1984). Researchers operationalized the service quality construct either as a gap between expectation of service and perceived performance of service, or just perceived performance alone (Hurley and Estalami, 1998). On the other hand, service quality dimensions are seen as the criteria to assess service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985).

SERVQUAL Model

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1988) developed SERVQUAL, a conceptual model of service quality from their work in the area of retail marketing. SERVQUAL is based on the assumption that satisfaction is found in situations where a perception of service quality is met or exceed consumer expectations. The multi-item SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988, 1994; Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991) compares consumers’ perceptions of 22 aspects of service quality to their rating of each factor’s importance (expected service quality).

In their early research into service quality, they identified ten criteria that customers rely on while evaluating the service quality.

These include:

Reliability, Access, Security, Credibility, Degree of customer understanding, Responsiveness, Competence, Courtesy, Tangibles, Communication

Later Parasuraman and associates (1988) proposed that these ten criteria could be reduced into five factors, and they identified these factors as

- Reliability
- Responsiveness
- Assurance
- Empathy
- Tangibles

Table 1
Dimensions of Service Quality in Educational Services

Dimensions of Service Quality	Definition
Reliability	The accuracy and dependability with which a faculty or department or college provides service
Responsiveness	The demonstration of an eagerness to be of service, and a commitment to act in the best interest of the students
Assurance	The ability to earn students’ confidence by performing services in a knowledgeable and professional manner
Empathy	Being able to communicate care and understanding through the interpersonal skills of the staff and student friendly policies and procedures
Tangibles	The physical appearance of the department, its staff, and any materials associated with service delivery



Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research paper is to identify the service quality (SERVQUAL) perceptions of engineering college students and to find out the Gap between the perception of staff and with expectation of students. In line with the primary objectives this research study was aimed at emphasizing the importance of Service Quality and its components in the minds of staff and internal customers of college.

Methodology :Sampling Method, Procedure and Sample size

A quota sampling procedure was used with a sample size of 200 faculty members and 200 students. The quota was fixed based on Year of education, gender, Department and age since these demographic characteristics are known to impact the perceptions of service quality (Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994). The sample was divided equally among the groups.

Data was collected by using a structured questionnaire and the questionnaire consist both demographic variables and service components.

Instrument used:

The instrument used was an adaptation of the SERVQUAL survey that included 22 Likert scale items measuring five postulated dimensions of service quality. The original SERVQUAL survey was specifically designed to assess organizations and businesses in the service sector. Minor changes in wording were used to adopt this study's survey to an academic setting.

Students and faculty members were asked to rate the each of 29 factors leading to the service satisfaction. The relative size of the gap between these two ratings was used to identify the areas where students and faculties have difference in perception to the same service quality dimension.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 2
Reliability

S. No	Factor	Staff (Mean)	Student (Mean)	Gap
1	Great interest in solving students doubts related to subjects	1.58	3.78	2.20
2	Able to resolve all the problems	2.65	4.16	1.51
3	Provide correct answers to all the questions	1.98	3.76	1.78
4	Promises to get back on issues and within time	2.02	4.06	2.04
5	Utilized up-to- date teaching tools	2.08	3.20	1.12



Table 3
Responsiveness

S. No	Factor	Staff (Mean)	Student (Mean)	Gap
1	Staff easily accessible to the students	1.88	3.66	1.78
2	No reason for staff to inform the students about the service timings	3.04	3.76	0.72
3	Not realistic for students to expect prompt service from the staff	3.60	4.04	0.44
4	Staff not willing to help students	6.46	4.58	-1.88
5	Staff not finding time to respond to students request	5.90	4.88	-1.02
6	College regularly informs the students	2.27	3.46	1.19
7	College ability to service the requests of students	2.60	3.78	1.18

Table 3
Assurance

S. No	Factor	Staff (Mean)	Student (Mean)	Gap
1	Keeping Promise	2.08	3.70	1.62
2	Staff Knowledge	1.67	3.24	1.57
3	Management support to staff	2.60	3.20	0.60
4	No bias from staff side in student problems	2.46	4.24	1.78
5	Staff unbiased in internal marks to students	2.20	4.12	1.92

Table 4
Empathy

S. No	Factor	Staff (Mean)	Student (Mean)	Gap
1	Staff are sympathetic on students crisis	2.92	3.70	0.78
2	Staff can be trusted for any problem	2.15	4.16	2.01
3	Staff individual attention to students	2.10	3.30	1.20
4	Staff know all the requirements of students	2.42	3.44	1.02
5	Staff know the learning needs of students	1.88	2.68	0.80

Table 5
Tangibles

S. No	Factor	Staff (Mean)	Student (Mean)	Gap
1	Physical facilities in the department	2.35	3.34	1.01
2	Staff well dressed and appeared professional	1.96	2.62	0.66
3	Staff updating their records	1.85	3.00	1.15
4	Various departments easily accessible	2.62	4.48	1.86
5	College facilities easily located and accessible	2.73	3.78	1.05
6	College facilities are posh and well maintained	2.50	3.92	1.42
7	Course material relevant and adequate	2.62	3.62	1.00



Result

This research work identifies the gaps existing between faculty and students. Except the responsiveness dimension all other dimensions have got the gap between faculty perception and students' expectation. Among the Service Quality dimensions Reliability factor has got large gap.

Table 5
Gap Analysis

S. No	Service Quality Dimensions	Factor	Type of Gap
1	Reliability	Great interest in solving students' doubts related to subjects	Unfavorable Large Gap
2	Reliability	Promises to get back on issues and within time	Unfavorable Large Gap
3	Responsiveness	Staff not willing to help students	High Favorable Gap
4	Responsiveness	Staff not finding time to respond to students' request	High Favorable Gap
5	Assurance	Management support to staff	Unfavorable Less Gap
6	Empathy	Staff can be trusted for any problem	Unfavorable Large Gap
7	Tangibles	Staff well dressed and appeared professional	Unfavorable Less Gap

Conclusion

It is not surprising that parents, students, faculty members and employers understands the concept of quality with regards to college education in different ways. Parents view quality as relating to input (e.g. ranking of the college, medal winners) and output (e.g. employability, academic placement). On the other hand, students saw quality as relating to the educational process (e.g. courses and teaching) and outputs. Faculty members perceived quality as relating to the whole education system (i.e. input, process and output). Employers saw quality as primarily related to the output (e.g. the skill set that the student brings to the workplace). The distributions of the quality attributes in terms of input, process and output differ among the recipients of the service provided. The result seemed to suggest that, in order to meet the needs of each group, the college has to focus on all aspects of the education system.

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