

Service Quality in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Management and Education Institutions

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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 environment, using the modified service quality (SERVQUAL) instrument to measure

five constructs: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The study has been done on 500 students pursuing their post-graduation in management and education streams in 10 institutions located in the north Indian state of Haryana. A significantly negative gap is observed in the expectations and perceptions of the service quality of higher education, indicating a sense of dissatisfaction among the students.

Key Words: Higher Education, Students, Service Quality, Gap analysis

Introduction

Higher education in India has witnessed a sea change in the last decade. From being a subsidized service to the masses, education services are becoming market-oriented with increasing participation of the private sector, especially in the higher education sector. The traditional set-up for imparting higher education, comprising of the colleges, universities and other institutions, is facing stiff competition from the institutions in the private sector. Over the years, inertia has crept into the traditional set-up and despite having the faculty with better qualifications and experience, their systems for service delivery have not responded to the fast pace of change encompassing the education sector. The strategic orientation of the government on the issues concerning higher education has been on increasing access and expansion, equity and inclusion, and, quality and excellence. In practice, this has resulted in additional infrastructure and creating new institutions, without a commensurate development of the systems to deliver better educational services. This has resulted in a mismatch between expected services and the services actually delivered thereby creating a gap. Higher education as a service can be said to be fulfilling the need for learning / acquiring knowledge and providing an intangible benefit (increment in aptitude, professional expertise, skills) produced with the help of a set of tangible (infrastructure) and intangible (faculty expertise and learning) means, where the buyer of the service does not get any ownership. Taking the SERVQUAL framework, the paper studied the service quality perceptions of the students and compared the service quality of the private and public sector institutions.

The biggest expansion in higher education in India has been in the disciplines of engineering & technology, management and education. The increased capacity of

students' intake has been rather too fast and many of the institutions have to compete with each other for student enrolments. They need to build their reputation by providing better services through quality equipment, physical facilities, employees, well-trained faculty, material (brochures or statements) and create a pull in the market. Interestingly, many institutions find that despite doing all these, they are unable to get a sufficient number of students onto their campuses, implying that there is a gap in their perceptions and the students' perceptions of service quality. It is difficult to measure quality in comparison to goods as the specific standards cannot be determined due to involvement of human behaviour. The basis of the measurement was to evaluate the service quality by comparing customer expectation with their perception. The business of education demands new concepts and approaches in order to survive in an increasingly competitive and professional environment. Due to increasing complexity, specialization, competitive nature of the business, the requirement of service marketing has emerged. In the view of the changing needs of customers, a changing world, changing life styles, knowledge explosion, population explosion and technology innovations, there is a need for improvement in quality of services in the educational sector.

Traditionally this sector (education) avoided using even the word-of-mouth marketing; however, they are now seeking better ways to understand the segment and their customer, to ensure the delivery of quality services and to strengthen their positions amid a growing number of competitors. Education is a service industry. It needs to adopt techniques that help measure the quality of services and customer satisfaction. Service quality has become a predominant focus of an advanced organization's

strategic plan. Increasing attention paid to service quality has resulted in more progress and profit in organizations. Higher education possesses all the characteristics of the service industry, i.e., intangible, heterogeneous, inseparability, variability, perishable, and the customer (student) participates in the process. Earlier research on service quality in higher education also often emphasized on the academic aspect more than the administration angle, concentrating on effective course delivery mechanisms and the quality of courses and teaching (Atheeyaman, 1997; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Griemel-Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003). However, there is also an attempt to look upon the administrative side of higher education institutions as done in the study by Kamal and Ramzi (2002), which attempts to measure student perception of registration and academic advising across different faculties and other administrative services to assure positive quality service that compliments the academic.

Literature Review

There are a number of studies that have successfully applied SERVQUAL to public sector service institutions such as in healthcare (Youseff et al. 1996); information systems (Dyke 1999); local authority (Bryslund and Curry, 2000); education (Broadnurst, 2006; Brown, 2006; Markovic, 2006; Grammil, 2004; LaBay, 2003; Ham, 2003; Wever, 2002; Avdjieva, 2002; Hadikoemoro, 2001; Greiner, 2000; Kerlin, 2000; Lampley, 1999; Long, 1999). SERVQUAL has been used successfully in higher education research. Ham (2003) observed that SERVQUAL has been administered by researchers investigating service quality in various industries including higher education by assessing expectations and perceptions with various determinants of service quality.

Vaz & Mansori (2013) studied the impact of five factors of service quality (responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, tangibility) on students' satisfaction at private universities and colleges and concluded that tangibility has an influence on satisfaction followed by empathy; responsiveness and assurance have a direct and positive effect on students' satisfaction. Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012) identified the determinants to evaluate the service quality in the higher education sector and developed a new instrument called HiEdQUAL covering various service dimensions from the stand point of students as primary customers. Khan & Nawaz (2011) found that there was a significant relationship between dimensions of service quality i.e. Reliability, Assurance Responsiveness and Empathy, with satisfaction; however the fifth factor, Tangibility, had an insignificant relationship with student satisfaction. It was also observed that higher the level of students' satisfaction greater was their willingness to put more efforts towards their studies. Shekarchizadeh et al., (2011) assessed the service quality perceptions and expectations of international postgraduate students studying in selected Malaysian universities through a gap analysis based on a modified SERVQUAL instrument and five factors in the form of professionalism, reliability, hospitality, tangibles, and commitment were identified. A similar kind of study was conducted by Barnes, (2010) using a modified SERVQUAL instrument to investigate expectations and perceptions of service quality among a sample of post-graduate Chinese students at a leading business and management school in the UK. The research findings suggest that the instrument was suitable for use in a Chinese and post-graduate context.

Katarne and Sharma, (2010) in their study titled, "Measurement of Service Quality of an Automobile Service Centre" examined and measured the current service quality level of an automobile service centre.

Service quality level depends on satisfaction /dissatisfaction of the customers. Dissatisfaction may be caused by various reasons. The reason(s) may be on all dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. They have tried to focus on two-fold objectives; first, to find out the most influencing factor of dissatisfaction, and second, to suggest the best possible solution for the root cause of dissatisfaction. In this study, satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the customer was measured using standard statistical tools, and an attempt was made to find out reason(s) of dissatisfaction by applying root cause analysis. Current performance of the service centre was not found to be up to the mark. Necessary suggestions were made and the service centre started executing them to improve the current service quality level. In another study, Ilhaamie, (2010) tried to identify the most important dimension and to examine the level of service quality, expectation and perception of the external customers towards the Malaysian public services. It was found that the factor of tangibility was the most important dimension. It also had the lowest scores in the factor of perception. On the other hand, service quality gap is neither the lowest nor the highest. Finally, these external customers had the highest expectation on the reliability of the Malaysian public service. Butt and de Run, (2009) identified the service quality components using SERVQUAL in private healthcare sector in Malaysia and observed a negative quality gap in service quality dimensions. The scale development analysis yielded excellent results, which can be used in wider health care policy and practice. Siadat, (2008) stated that service quality is a concept that has aroused considerable interest and debate in the research literature because of the difficulties in both defining and measuring it with no overall consensus emerging on either. Customer satisfaction and service quality are often treated together as functions of the customer's perceptions and expectations, and research has shown that high service quality

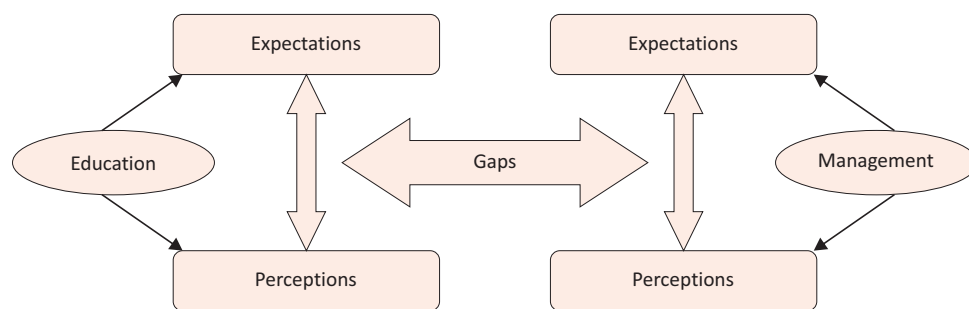
contributes significantly to profitability. This study also examined the service quality gap by comparing customers' expectations and their actual perceptions. Tahir and Bakar, (2007) in their study titled "Service Quality Gap and Customers' Satisfaction of commercial Banks in Malaysia" identified that commercial banks play a significant role in the economy, making up one of the biggest providers of services in the Malaysian economy. Hence, providing better service quality is vital as banks have to compete for customers. A descriptive statistical analysis (mean and paired t-test) was used to evaluate the level of service quality of Malaysia's commercial banks from the customers' perspective. This study examined the service quality gap by comparing customers' expectations and their actual perceptions. In addition, this study focused on their satisfaction towards the service provided by commercial banks. The results of the study indicated that the overall service quality provided by the commercial banks was below customers' expectations. Responsiveness was rated as the most important dimension followed by reliability, tangibility, assurance, and empathy. Further, the findings concluded that customers were slightly satisfied with the overall service quality of the banks.

There have been similar kinds of studies conducted by various researchers for assessing the service quality of the education sector. Some of these studies have been done by Yan (2009), Aghamolaei et al. (2008), Sunanto et al. (2007), Harris (2001), Sarafidou (1994), etc. However, there are very few studies conducted in the higher education service sector in India from the service quality components' point of view. The present study analyses the customers' (students') perceptions and satisfaction regarding the service quality of the colleges of education and management institutes of North Haryana (India).

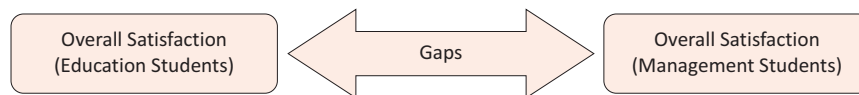
Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the gaps between expected services and perceptions about actually received service quality in educational services in the Indian context.
2. To study the gaps in expected and delivered service quality of the education colleges and management institutes.
3. To find out the difference in the overall satisfaction of the students of the education colleges and management institutes about the service quality provided by their institute.

The above objectives have been conceptualized in the form of the following models:



Model I: Gap-Analysis on the basis of SERVQUAL Components



Model 2: Gaps between the Overall Satisfaction of Education and Management Students

Research Methodology

The scope of the present study was limited to the north Indian state of Haryana and an exploratory research design was used for the study. The universe of the study is the students of Haryana, pursuing their higher education degrees in the disciplines of management and education.

Sampling

Out of about 200 management institutions and 450 education institutions located in Haryana, a sample of 5 colleges from each of these two disciplines were selected on convenience in terms of willingness to participate in the survey. From each of the institutions,

50 students were chosen randomly, making the total sample size of 500.

Tools for data collection

With the purpose of measuring satisfaction with respect to different aspects of service quality, a modified questionnaire was prepared with the help of a standardized instrument developed by Parasuraman, Ziethaml and Berry in 1998. The instrument was called SERVQUAL. SERVQUAL is applicable to all service industries. The SERVQUAL scale includes five dimensions. They are:

- Tangibles (appearance of physical elements)
- Reliability (dependable, accurate performance)

- Responsiveness (promptness and helpfulness)
- Assurance (competence, courtesy, credibility and security)
- Empathy (easy access, good communication and customer understanding)

Data Collection

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed in the form of a survey and completed by the respondents of 10 institutes (5 colleges of education and 5 management institutes). The data collection was completed with assistance from faculty from the institutions.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive analysis was done by computing the mean, standard deviation percentages and cross-tabulation of scores of the variables of the study. The differences between the variables of perceptions were found out with the help of t-test.

Results and Discussion

The analysis started with descriptive analysis followed by cross tabulation analysis. After that, the 't-test' was employed to assess the significance of the gaps based on all of the 45 items of the modified SERVQUAL.

The results showed (Table 1) that all of the items and constructs measuring the gaps are significantly negative with empathy representing the construct with the highest gap (-0.92), followed by responsiveness (-0.77), reliability (-0.76), tangibles (-0.76) and assurance (-0.69). The same kind of pattern of gaps was observed in Table 2 showing gap-scores of the students of education colleges and management institutes.

Table 1: Dimension-wise Service Gap-Analysis

Sr. No.	Dimensions	Expectation Average	Perception Average	Gaps
1.	Tangibles	4.48	3.72	-0.76
2.	Assurance	4.51	3.82	-0.69
3.	Reliability	4.59	3.83	-0.76
4.	Responsiveness	4.48	3.72	-0.77
5.	Empathy	4.49	3.57	-0.92

Table 2: Mean Gaps Scores of Education Colleges and Management Institutes

Type of Institute	Education Colleges			Management Institutes		
Components	Expectation	Perception	Gaps	Expectation	Perception	Gaps
Tangibles	4.54	3.77	-0.77	4.41	3.72	-0.69
Assurance	4.56	3.89	-0.67	4.45	3.79	-0.66
Reliability	4.65	3.95	-0.70	4.52	3.75	-0.77
Responsiveness	4.55	3.85	-0.70	4.43	3.65	-0.78
Empathy	4.59	3.64	-0.95	4.39	3.56	-0.83
Total	4.58	3.82	-0.76	4.43	3.70	-0.73

These negative gaps indicate that the students' perceptions' scores are less than their expectation scores i.e. students are expecting more from their institutes' services than they are getting in reality; which implies those institutes (service providers) are lacking in their service quality standards.

As observed from Table 1, all the means of expectations are greater than the means of perceptions implying that all the mean gaps for the 45

items are negative. The biggest gap is for items: "Up-to-datedness of softwares used in computers" and "Access to the Internet/e-mails" with a score of -1.13 for the dimension of tangibles. In addition, the difference of means for the five dimensions ranges from -0.69 to -0.92, implying that there are gaps in all dimensions of service quality. However, the mean difference for the dimension of empathy is the biggest gap (-0.92).

Table 3: Difference between Expectation and Perception scores of students

Type of Response	Number of Students	Mean scores	S.D	t-value
Expectation Scores	446	202.64	15.32	t=23.63*
Perception Scores	446	168.07	26.83	

* Significant at 0.05 level of significance and 0.01 level of significance.

Table 3 shows that the mean scores of all the students (education and management) on expectations is 202.64 and perception is 168.07. The calculated value of t-test between the mean scores of expectations and perceptions is 23.63. The calculated t-value is greater than the tabulated value at both the levels of significance. It means that there is a significant difference between the expectations and perceptions

of the students about service quality components. So, the (H0) Null hypothesis is rejected at both the levels. This implies that there exists a significant difference between the expectations and perceptions of the students about the service quality provided by the institutions.

Interestingly, these findings are in line with results of

Rasli et al. (2012) who came out with the findings that Malaysian students also had negative perceptions of quality and expressed dissatisfaction with the services rendered in the university. The findings of the present study are in agreement with the results of the studies

conducted earlier by Sunanto et.al. (2007), Aghamolaei et.al. (2008) and Yan (2009) who also identified negative gaps between the perceptions and expectations of the students from their educational institutes on SERVQUAL components.

Table 4: Differences between SERVQUAL Components

Sr. No.	Dimensions	Type of Scores	N	Mean Scores	S.D	S.Ed.	't-value'
1	Tangibles	Expectation	446	71.60	6.72	0.59	20.25
		Perception	446	59.58	10.6		
2	Assurance	Expectation	446	40.56	3.82	0.33	18.42
		Perception	446	34.37	5.98		
3	Reliability	Expectation	446	32.16	2.69	0.26	20.79
		Perception	446	26.83	4.70		
4	Responsiveness	Expectation	446	26.85	2.58	0.24	18.63
		Perception	446	22.29	4.48		
5	Empathy	Expectation	446	31.46	3.19	0.28	23.1
		Perception	446	25	4.97		
	Total	Expectation	446	202.64	15.32	1.46	23.63
		Perception	446	168.07	26.83		

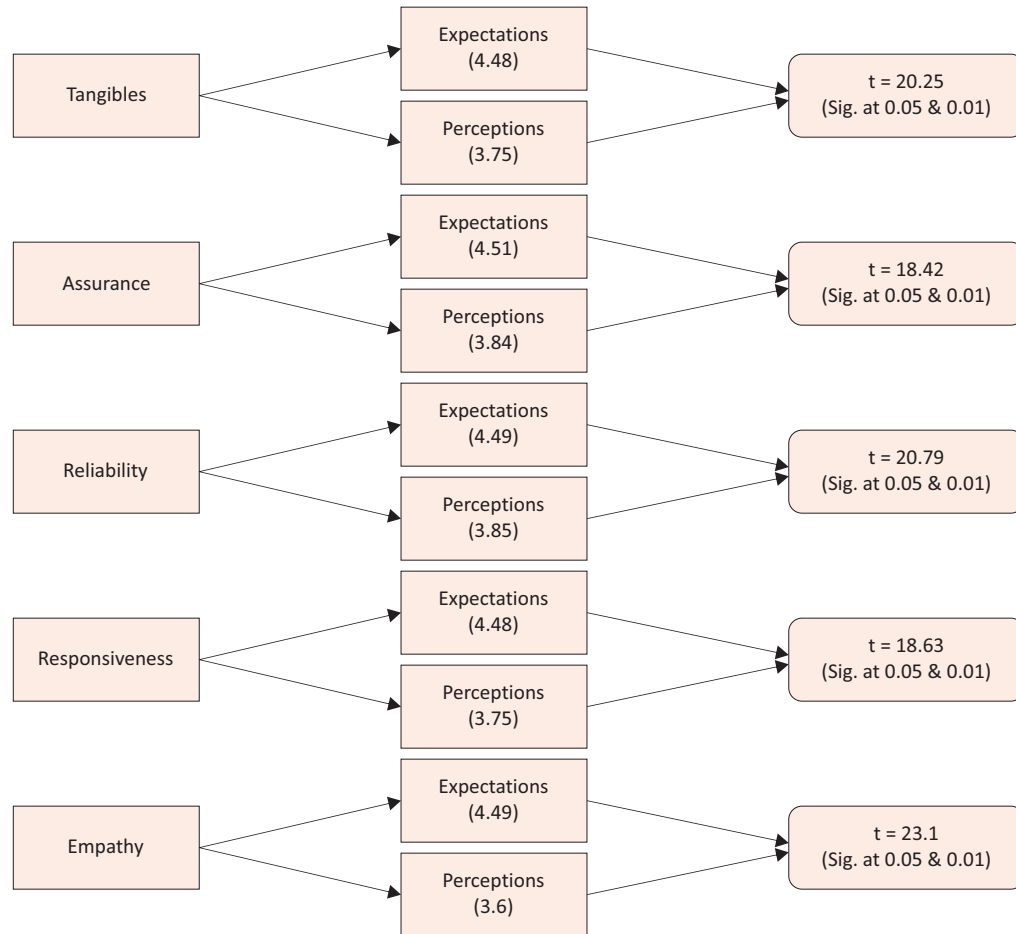


Exhibit I: Significant Differences between Perceptions and Expectations

Table 4 shows that the mean scores of all the students (education and management) on expectations and perceptions are significantly different on all components. The calculated values of t-test between the mean scores of expectations and perceptions on each service quality component come out to be greater than table-values at both levels of significance. It means that there exist significant differences between expectations and perceptions.

Table 5: Difference between the gap scores of the students of colleges of education and management institutes

Type of students	Number	Mean (Gap scores)	S.D	t-value
Education	232	34.09	25.34	t=0.35*
Management	214	35.1	34.27	
Total	446			

*Insignificant at 0.05 level of significance and 0.01 level of significance.

As shown in Table 5 the mean gap scores of the students of education colleges are 34.09 and management institutes are 35.1, implying that the education colleges have larger mean-gap scores than management institutes. The calculated values of t-test between the gap-mean scores of the two groups come out to be 0.35. The calculated t-value is less than the tabulated value at 5% (0.05) level of significance = 1.96 and 1% (0.01) level of significance = 2.58. So, the value of critical ratio is insignificant at 5% and 1% level of significance. That means, there exists no significant difference between the gap scores of the students of education colleges and management institutes.

It is observed from Table 4 that the mean scores of students of education colleges and management institutes on overall satisfaction are 26.88 and 23.54

respectively. The calculated values of t-test between the mean scores of students from both institutes came out to be 5.66. The calculated t-value is greater than the tabulated value at both the levels of significance. It means that there exists a significant difference between students of both institutes on overall satisfaction from the service quality provided by their institutes. This implies that the students of education colleges are more satisfied as compared to students studying in management institutes. The reason behind this may be that education colleges provide better service quality standards as per students' expectations than management institutes. It may be due to the fact that management students have greater expectations from their institutes which those institutes are unable to fulfil.

Table 6: Difference between the satisfaction scores of the students of education colleges and management institutes

Type of students	Number	Mean (Satisfaction scores)	S.D	t-value (Critical Ratio)
Education (B.Ed.)	232	26.88	5.06	t=5.66*
Management (MBA)	214	23.54	7.14	
Total	446			

*Significant at 0.05 level of significance and 0.01 level of significance.

Conclusions

Increased access to institutions of higher learning combined with a larger number of such institutions has given students more options which results in them evaluating these institutions minutely before taking admission. Students are well-informed and ambitious, and they expect their educational institutions to provide them education service of outstanding quality.

However, institutes providing higher education in India have not kept pace in terms of service quality and in all parameters, the actual service delivered by them falls short of the expectations of the students. Management students are more ambitious and better informed than those studying in education colleges and hence, have higher expectations from their institutions, and accordingly, the gap between their

expectations and perceived service quality is greater than their counterparts in the education colleges. Of the dimensions of service quality, most of the students perceive that their institutions lack in terms of empathy and reliability of service. There is a gap in the form of emotional connect between the students and their institutions, as has been the tradition in the Indian education sector. A similar gap of high magnitude exists in reliability of service, primarily because of the high turnover of the faculty in these institutions. The direction of this gap between the perceptions and expectations of all the dimensions of service quality is negative, implying a sense of dissatisfaction among the students. Higher education institutions need a well-developed, comprehensive marketing strategy that is carefully communicated throughout the institution and the target market also. The service marketing mix and service quality components will help higher education institutions to shape their service offerings according to the needs of their students.

Implications

The study has implications for entrepreneurs in the education industry, who need to understand that the institutions are built by the infrastructure, faculty and

the systems that integrate the resource and derive value out of them. The present focus on infrastructure needs to shift to other components of service quality and if these institutions have to survive, they cannot continue to give precedence to economic gain over students' satisfaction from their services. The transition from the traditional mindset towards education, to a market-led approach to delivering education needs a second generation approach; otherwise the forthcoming globalization of education can become challenging for these institutes. For the regulators, the study suggests that their evaluation and accreditation of the institutions of higher education must not be confined to the physical infrastructure. They must help and regulate the private sector to build the systems that can deliver better services to the aspirants of higher learning.

Further Research

A researcher aspiring to work in this area can look for possible market positioning strategies on the basis of service quality of the institutions of higher education. Behavioural prediction studies, modelling students' perceptions and the consequent behavioural outcomes could be another interesting extension of the study.

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