

EMPLOYING DECENTRING TO ASSESS QUALITY OF SERVICES AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS SATISFACTION

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Abstract:

The higher education scenario in Pakistan has gone through tremendous changes and improvements in the last decade. Competition resulting from a sudden surge in the number of higher education imparting institutions and the active role of Higher Education Commission has increased the pressure on the universities to continuously enhance the quality of educational services being provided by them. The aim of the researchers in this endeavor is to employ decentering in order to assess the quality of services being provided by the universities. The study has used the SERVQUAL tool by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1991) on a five point Likert scale in order to gauge the responses of the students. Analysis was conducted on a total of 156 valid questionnaires. The sample included the students of the top five HEC (Higher Education Commission) recognized universities in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Data was analyzed using Pearson correlation and regression. Factor analysis was also carried out so as to classify the most important dimensions for the students with respect to higher education in Pakistan. Statistical analysis disclosed a positive and significant association between service quality and customer satisfaction. The factor analysis revealed that the most significant dimension with respect to the Pakistan's higher education sector are the level of management support, responsiveness of the service providers and the adequacy of physical facilities. The study highlights the importance of treating students as valued customers as the competition in the industry along with the regulatory requirements of HEC as well. The service providers need to be provided adequate support and backing of the top management. The physical facilities and the infrastructure must also be adequate enough to meet the growing and ever changing demands of the industry. The current study is the first of its kind that covers the higher education imparting institutions in Pakistan. Further it is suggested that more and more such researchers be conducted periodically in the future with an increased sample size in order to assess quality.

Key words: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Higher Education, Decentering

Introduction

“Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives” (William A. Foster, 1917 – 1945). Quality assurance is not a term any more restricted to the quality control department of the organizations in fact it has grown up to become the basis of gaining competitive advantage for firms.

The Higher Education scenario in Pakistan has undergone major transformations in the last couple of years many of which are driven by the reforms introduced by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. The number of and the expectations of the students are increasing and there is a greater need for improved quality of educational services. Most of these reforms are student-centric and there is an increased pressure from the students and the HEC on the universities to ensure that the students are getting value for money. There are also pressures from within the industry to improve the quality of educational services because of the increased competition in the higher education industry and the proliferation of private universities who have started providing universities at par with the public sector organizations. The Higher Education Commission (H.E.C) of Pakistan develops and reviews the ranking of H.E.C recognized universities in Pakistan. This ranking is developed by a specialist ranking board which is setup by the Chairman of the HEC; the methodology used for ranking the universities has been established by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) of HEC. This ranking is developed keeping in view the current practices and systems currently being employed for the ranking of the institutions internationally.

The process of developing the

ranking model included broad stakeholder involvement at all levels and was customized in order to fit to the perspective of the higher education sector of Pakistan. The basic objective of conducting the ranking activity by HEC is to enable the students, their parents and all other stakeholders to make knowledgeable decisions with respect to selecting a higher education institution in Pakistan. Further it also serves the purpose of providing a fair and transparent instrument for the higher educational institutions to evaluate themselves, compare against each other and establish benchmarks. But as is the case worldwide the university rankings are naturally contentions and there has not yet been established a universally established evaluation criteria.

In spite of years of reassessment and modifications to the evaluation mechanisms even the most widely acknowledge and accepted criteria are still disputed and debated. The ranking criteria used by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan along with their relative weight ages are: Research (26%), Facilities (15%), Students (17%), Faculty (27%), and Finances (15%). The basic controversy related to the university rankings stems from the argument that whether the numerical indicators used for evaluation criteria are sufficient alone for measuring the quality of services provided by a university.

The objective of the study is to identify the relationship of Service Quality and Customer Relationship and to identify the relationship of Reliability, Responsiveness, Tangibility, Assurance and Empathy separately. The second Objective of the research is to identify the factor which impact strongly consumer satisfaction.

Therefore the confusion surrounding the ranking mechanism despite their importance in the decision making criteria for the stakeholders

makes it necessary to compare the performance of higher education using qualitative measures alongside quantitative measures. "Quality" has grown up to become a subjective concept that is not merely restricted to tangible satisfaction; it is dependent on customer's expectations and perceptions of the way services are performed (Harvey and Green, 1993). Therefore once again it is imperative to employ a qualitative tool to measure the perceptions of students with respect to the quality of education services being provided to them by the higher education institutions in Pakistan.

Literature review

Quality of an organization's offering is one of the most important concerns which is now being given as much importance in services organizations as is the case in manufacturing organizations and is considered an important foundation for gaining competitive advantage. Different researchers have differing opinions of the exact definition for service quality therefore its difficult to propose a universally acceptable definition and concepts related to service quality. According to (Bryland and Curry, 2001) service quality is concerned with providing the consumers something intangible that results in pleasure and gives them some value. Other definitions proposed by researchers also revolve around the customer, although the existence of a relationship between service quality and satisfaction has always been debated (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993). The uniqueness of services in the form of their heterogeneity, inseparability, intangibility and others that differentiate them from products makes it problematic to establish quality measures (Zeithaml et al., 1990). Regarded as a source of corporate marketing and financial performance service quality is holds considerable importance for all types of organizations

(Buttle, 1996).

Service quality can be used as a tool for achieving competitive advantage by creating differentiation (Moore, 1987) and therefore is regarded as an important contributor towards achieving competitiveness (Lewis, 1989). The fact that service quality influences the re-purchases intentions of the consumers makes it even more vital (Ghobadian et al., 1994). Consumers who had been through a poor service experience are more likely to share it with other existing and potential consumers therefore resulting in negative word of moth and a possible decline in future sales (Horovitz, 1990). It has been proposed that the customer's views about quality of services are established on the basis of their internal evaluation of the performance of the services with respect to their expectations (Parasuraman, 1988). Therefore on the basis of this consideration they developed and validated a scale for measuring service quality.

There has always been an argument over the fact that the nature of services provided by an industry may vary in some form from the services offered in another industry. To overcome this problem (Zeithaml et al., 1990) conducted a study of five different services industries and identified the following dimensions of services quality i.e. reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibility. When compared to products services are perishable and last only as long as that particular service providing activity or process continues. The consumer plays an important role in the service delivery process. Therefore each consumer's expectations with respect to the quality of services may vary which has result in a lack of standardization as it varies from customer to customer (Douglas et al., 2006). Therefore educational activities in a university in the shape of delivery of lectures, conduct of examination, counseling, training etc

can be termed as a kind of service delivered to the students who are playing the role of consumers in the universities. Just like other type of services the quality of each experience in the university education can be different as it is mainly dependent on the student's expectations.

SERVQUAL instrument has been used by a number of researchers in different research settings and has been regularly reviewed and criticized in different published researches. The basic model of service quality known as SERVQUAL was introduced by (Parasuraman, 1985) which propagates that the perceptions about quality of service provided are the outcome of the discrepancies between the customer's expectation and the actual performance of the services. However measuring discrepancies in the form of gap theory for measuring the quality of services has received criticism in numerous researches by different authors (Cronin and Tylor., 1992). Similarly there has been a continued argument over the adaptability of SERVQUAL in different industry settings (Teas, 1994). Researchers (Reeves and Bednar, 1994) have offered strengths and weaknesses of SERVQUAL and related instruments. Despite all the criticism SERVQUAL is widely considered as SERVQUAL is the leading scale being used for measuring services quality perceptions (Kettinger and Lee, 1995). In their pioneer study (Parasuraman, 1985) identified ten determinants for measuring services quality which include accessibility, courtesy, competence, communication, responsiveness, reliability, credibility, understanding the customer, security and tangibility.

These ten determinants of services quality were later reduced into five which are reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibility. These dimensions can be discussed with respect to educational institutions. Responsiveness: the university staff

needs to be responsive towards the needs and demands of the students in providing them guidance, responding to their requests for assistance and be always willing to help. Empathy: it's an issue of real concern especially in the Pakistani context where the students feel neglected and rendered powerless by the semester system as the students expect the teaching staff to give them individualized attention and expect the university's decisions and policies to be student centric. Assurance: this dimension deals with the level of trust the student is having on the university's teaching staff and the ability of the university to provide them with the necessary support to perform their roles well. Reliability: this primarily deals with the competence of the teaching staff and their ability to deliver according to the requirements and meeting other similar promises with respect to different activities. Tangibility: the physical facilities play an important role in the delivery of quality education especially with the advent of modern technology which is needed for research purposes, physical appearance and the attractiveness of the physical facilities also counts a lot.

Literature suggests service quality as an important antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). According to Rust and Zahorik, (1993) service quality influence consumer purchase pattern. Another research by Wong and Sohal (2003) concluded direct and indirect relationship with several behavioral outcomes. Gerrard & Cunningham, (1997) identify consumer switching intention as an outcome of service failure. Allred & Addams, (2000) further confirms the results of (Gerrard & Cunningham, 1997). Jamal & Nasser (2002) links service quality dimensions with customer satisfaction. Muslim and Zaidi, (2008) confirms positive relationship of service quality with customer satisfaction. Based on the discussed literature review, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction.

H4: There is a significant positive relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction.

H5: There is a significant positive relationship between tangibility and customer satisfaction.

H6: There is a significant positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Research methodology and analysis:

SERVQUAL tool established by (Paasuraman et al., 1991) has been used in the study in order to measure the quality of educational services being provided by the university on all the five dimensions of services quality i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. Although the SERVQUAL tool was initially established to measure services quality in a pre-experience (expectations) and post-experience (perceptions) approach but using such a method in this scenario is not quite practicable as the students had joined their respective universities quite some time back therefore it might be difficult for them to evoke precisely what were there expectations at the time of enrolment. Therefore this study only measures the perceptions of the

students of the top five H.E.C recognized universities in the cities of Rawalpindi & Islamabad. The top five universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi in the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan's General Ranking of Universities are Quaid –e-Azam University, International Islamic University, Fatima Jinnah University, Bahria University and National University of Modern Languages.

After conducting the pilot study the original instrument was condensed from initial 22 items to 15 items as the researchers found that the original questionnaire was too long for the respondents to fill it with attention and ease as people get irritated by prolonged questionnaires. Therefore the condensed version consists of 3 items measuring each dimension of the service quality and one question measuring the overall customer satisfaction. The questionnaire used a five point Likert scale with 5 for strongly disagree and 1 for strongly agree. The questionnaire was customized in order to fit the perspective of Pakistani higher education sector.

The respondents included only those students who had at least a year long experience with their university i.e. all the students studies in the sample were students of 3rd semester or higher. After checking the results of the pilot study the modified questionnaires were personally distributed among 250 students of the top five universities with 50 questionnaires in each university, out of the 168 questionnaires returned final analysis was performed on 156 valid questionnaires.

Table 1

Descriptive analysis

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reliability	158	1	5	3.42	.824
Responsiveness	156	1	5	3.34	.742
Assurance	158	1	5	3.61	.743
Empathy	157	1	5	3.20	.787
Tangibility	156	1	5	3.19	1.007
Total Service Quality	153	1	5	3.35	.587

The table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample from the study mentioning the means for reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility respectively and the combined SERVQUAL score.

Table 2

Comparisons of means

University		Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Tangibility	Total Service Quality
Quaid-e-Azam	Mean	3.35	3.32	3.45	3.14	3.27
	N	34	34	34	34	34
	Std. Deviation	.917	.859	1.066	.857	.606
International Islamic	Mean	3.29	3.40	3.48	3.01	3.30
	N	38	36	38	38	36
	Std. Deviation	.554	.716	.552	.875	.388
Fatima Jinnah	Mean	3.11	3.24	3.54	2.64	3.07
	N	38	38	38	38	38
	Std. Deviation	.931	.794	.704	.829	.601
Bahria University	Mean	3.81	3.46	3.94	4.36	3.88
	N	24	24	24	23	23
	Std. Deviation	.834	.643	.579	.864	.507
NUML	Mean	3.79	3.29	3.81	3.30	3.47
	N	24	24	24	23	22
	Std. Deviation	.596	.639	.538	.904	.532
Total	Mean	3.42	3.34	3.61	3.19	3.35
	N	158	156	158	156	153
	Std. Deviation	.824	.742	.743	1.007	.587

The table 2 provide a comparison of means of all the five Universities in the sample on all the five dimensions observed in the study and the responses of the sample on these dimensions.

Table 3**Reliability analysis**

Variable	Alpha Reliability
Reliability	0.729
Responsiveness	0.779
Assurance	0.670
Empathy	0.729
Tangibility	0.731
Combined Scales	0.828

The values for the Cronbach's Alpha for the combined scale as well as all the variables separately are good, mentioned in Table 3.

Table 4**Correlational analysis**

		Customer Satisfaction
Reliability	Correlation	0.411**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Responsiveness	Correlation	0.100
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.216
Assurance	Correlation	0.365**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Empathy	Correlation	0.171*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032
Tangibility	Correlation	0.397**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Total Service Quality	Correlation	0.416**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Table:4 represent the correlation between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. There is a significant positive relationship exists between satisfaction and reliability ($r= 0.411^{**}$, Sig: 000). There is a significant positive relationship exists between satisfaction and assurance ($r= 0.365^{**}$, Sig: 000). There is a significant positive relationship exists between satisfaction and empathy ($r= 0.171^{*}$, Sig: 0.032).

There is a significant positive relationship exists between satisfaction and tangibility ($r= 0.397^{**}$, Sig: 0.000). There is a significant positive relationship exists between service quality and customer satisfaction ($r= 0.416^{*}$, Sig: 0.000). However the study has failed to establish any significant relationship between customer satisfaction and responsiveness ($r= 0.100$, Sig: 0.216).

Table 5

Regression analysis

Variables	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Significance	F Statistics
Reliability	.411	.169	.164	.000	31.759
Responsiveness	.100	.010	.003	.216	1.540
Assurance	.365	.134	.128	.000	24.045
Empathy	.171	.029	.023	.032	4.657
Tangibility	.397 ^a	.157	.152	.000	28.731
Service Quality	.416 ^a	.173	.167	.000	31.540

Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

The R of Reliability dimension of Service Quality in Table: 5 is 0.411 which shows a strong dependant relationship. The F value (31.75) is also significant at a 99% confidence level indicating that the variables are significantly different. The Durbin Watson statistic is also within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test H1 we accept our hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship (adjusted r square: .012; Sig: 0.093^a) between reliability and Customer Satisfaction. The R value of Responsiveness in Table: 5 is 0.1 which does not show a strong dependant relationship. The F value (1.54) is insignificant indicating that the variables are overlapping. The Durbin Watson statistic is within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test H2 we do not accept our hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship (adjusted r square: .012; Sig: 0.093^a) between responsiveness and customer satisfaction as there is quite a lot of overlap between the selected variables. The R value of Assurance in Table: 5 is 0.365 which shows a strong dependant relationship The F value (24.04) is also significant at a 99% confidence level indicating that the variables are significantly different. The Durbin Watson statistic is also within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test

H3 we accept our hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship between Assurance and Customer Satisfaction. The R value of Empathy is 0.171 which shows a positive dependant relationship. The F value (4.65) is also significant at a 95% confidence level indicating that the variables are significantly different. The Durbin Watson statistic is also within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test H4 we accept our hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship between Empathy and Customer Satisfaction. The R value Tangibility is 0.397 which shows a strong dependant relationship. The F value (28.73) is also significant at a 99% confidence level indicating that the variables are significantly different. The Durbin Watson statistic is also within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test H5 we accept our hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship (adjusted r square: .012; Sig: 0.093^a) between Tangibility and Customer Satisfaction. The R value of Service Quality is 0.416 which shows a strong dependant relationship. The F value (31.54) is also significant at a 99% confidence level indicating that the variables are significantly different. The Durbin Watson statistic is also within acceptable ranges showing that there is no autocorrelation. On the basis of the regression analysis conducted to test H6 we accept our hypothesis i.e. there

is a significant positive relationship between Total Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction.

Discussion and implications

The recent reforms introduced by the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan have increased the competition and responsibilities of the universities to continuously improve the quality of education. The ranking criteria used by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan along with their relative weight ages are: Research (26%), Facilities (15%), Students (17%), Faculty (27%), and Finances (15%). Although these are measures which help in assessing the quality in a quantitative manner and the qualitative analysis done by this study reveals that the most important areas identified by the study as the critical factors in the higher education industry are the management support, responsiveness of the teaching staff and the adequacy of tangibles. The findings of the analysis reveal that there is a positive and significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Ensuring quality of services in the higher education institutions is essential for creating positive perceptions in the minds of the students. The management of the universities needs to work in a close relationship with students so that they are better able to understand their needs. It is recommended that additional research

be done in the higher education industry covering an enlarged sample of HEC recognized universities.

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan in collaboration with all chartered universities shall carry out SERVQUAL surveys on an annual basis in order to obtain annual comparisons of the relative performance of the universities on all the five dimensions of services quality. In the long run these surveys shall help the Higher Education Commission and the partnering universities to assess how service improvements have contributed towards improving the student's perceptions about the quality of services being provided. These surveys can also be conducted in order to check the effectiveness of services offered by a particular department or improvements introduced in particular dimensions (Bryland and Curry, 2001). Further it is suggested that more and more such researchers be conducted periodically in the future with an increased sample size in order to regularly assess quality.

Limitations

There are some limitations in the present study. First, the research administrated in only the capital of Pakistan. Second, the research administrated to the students. The research conducted in the vast area and on other industry may yield different results.

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