Research Paper Management

Exploring Quality Gaps in Higher Education Institutions: A Viewpoint of Male Undergraduates of Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is an extremely fast growing service industry and is exposed to the globalization process every day. The customer-centric approach of service quality has gained momentum in educational literature also and the educational institutions are striving hard to satisfy their elite customers, the students. Like every service provider, it has become absolutely essential for these institutions to identify and minimize the quality gaps between students' perception and expectations. In the present study, an attempt has been made to identify the extent of quality gaps existing in these institutions by applying the adapted version of SERVQUAL technique given by Parasuraman. Data collected revealed existence of huge quality gaps in these institutions and in all the thirty two items these institutions were found lagging.

KEYWORDS Quality Gaps, Perception, Expectations, Service Quality

INTRODUCTION:

Higher education is an extremely fast growing service industry and is every day exposed to the globalization process. Service quality, emphasizing student satisfaction is emerging a new field of concern. The rising expectations of the students about the quality of service and value for their money have posed a major challenge before these institutions and they are striving hard and leaving no stone unturned to satisfy their elite customers (students). These institutions are actively involved in understanding the expectations of their customers as well as their perceptions. Creating a competitive advantage, once a concept largely foreign to higher education, has become a driving force (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). Thus, this customer-centric approach of service quality has gained momentum in educational literature and higher education institutions, in order to gain competitive edge are searching for effective and creative ways to attract, retain and foster stronger relationships with students. Social requirement for quality evaluation in education is another factor responsible for the same. In many countries this requirement is expressed directly through the establishment of independent quality assurance bodies, which place emphasis on student experience as one of the assessment criteria. Two widely used scales, namely, SERVQUAL and SERVPERF which were earlier confined to study the quality gaps in business world only, are now being increasingly applied by educational institutions as well. Empirical research till date is primarily built on the Parasuraman et al. (1988) SERVQUAL instrument, a 22-item scale that measures service quality across five dimensions. Various researchers have used adapted version of SERVQUAL given by Parasuraman to measure quality gaps in educational institutions. Almost all the studies concluded that the SERVQUAL model can be used to assess and improve the quality of student service at a particular institution. In this study also an adapted version of the SERVQUAL scale has been used to measure the extent of quality gaps prevailing amongst the higher education institutions of Chandigarh.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STYDY:

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the quality gaps between students' perceptions and expectations.
2. To identify and rank the expectations of students from these institutions.
3. To highlight the variables where these institutions are lagging from students' point of view.
4. To give necessary suggestions and recommendations to improve the quality of education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

1. The area of the study is restricted to one city only.
2. The study covered only undergraduate male students.
3. A single tool of SERVQUAL has been used to identify quality gaps.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

Source of Data:

Well structured modified questionnaire was developed and used to collect data.

Sample Size:

250 questionnaires were distributed among the male students of private as well as government colleges. Out of these 50 questionnaires were deleted because either they were not returned back or they were not complete in all respects. So the final sample consisted of 200 students studying in different colleges of Chandigarh. The students pursuing their graduation in different streams like arts, commerce and science were chosen for the study.

Tool used for measuring quality gaps:

The adapted version of SERVQUAL given by Parasuraman (1988) was used to measure quality gaps in these institutions. This adaptation of the SERVQUAL survey was made up of thirty-two items relating to five dimensions of service quality as given below:

Tangibility (Dimension I)

- Visually appealing environment (item 1)
- Modern and updated classrooms (item 2)
- Neat and professional appearance of faculty and staff (item 3)
- Sufficient no. of courses as per market demand (item 4)
- Up to date study material and educational equipments (item 5)
- Sufficient support services (item 6)

Reliability (Dimension II)

- Ability of the staff to solve students' problems (item 7)
- Maintenance of up to date and accurate records (item 8)
- Presentation of relevant educational content by faculty (item 9)
- Easy accessibility of information and references to students (item 10)
- Institutions ability to fulfil responsibilities in promised time (item 11)
- Reliability of staff in terms of punctuality, sincerity and capability (item 12)

Assurance (Dimension III)
- Professional knowledge of the faculty (item 13)
- Innovative faculty and staff (item 14)
- Friendly and courteous staff (item 15)
- Staff's ability to instil confidence among students (item 16)
- Communication skills of the staff (item 17)
- Reliable and valid process to evaluate students (item 18)
- Well conceived plans for monitoring students' progress (item 19)

Responsiveness (Dimension IV)
- Easy accessibility of faculty outside class rooms (item 20)
- Institute's ability to handle students' questions and comments (item 21)
- Faculty and staff's willingness to help students (item 22)
- Availability of channels for students to express their concerns (item 23)
- Promptness in solving students' complaints & problems (item 24)
- Assigning of special hours for students to discuss their problems with faculty (item 25)

Empathy (Dimension V)
- Institutions always have students' interest at heart (item 26)
- Faculty & staff supportive towards students' needs (item 27)
- Encouraging and motivating environment (item 28)
- Availability of silent & convenient places for students to read and study (item 29)
- Flexibility of the staff in accommodating specific & individual needs of the students (item 30)
- Respectable treatment to students (item 31)
- Individual attention to the students (item 32)

The expectation and perception items were organized on a five-point scale, from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

The difference between perceptions (P) and expectations (E) represents the measure of service quality (Q).

$$Q = P - E$$

A negative Q depicts service gap while positive Q indicates higher satisfaction as shown below:

Perceived Performance > Expectation: High Satisfaction

Perceived Performance = Expectation: Merely Satisfied

Perceived Performance < Expectation: Dissatisfaction

Resembling the original SERVQUAL instrument, five more questions regarding the relative importance of SERVQUAL dimensions were added to the questionnaire to calculate weighted SERVQUAL score. The respondents were required to indicate the importance of each of the five dimensions of service quality, that is, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, by allocating a total of 100 points among these dimensions.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

Table 1 depicts the quality gaps both dimension-wise as well as item-wise. It is clear that out of 32 items, students were not satisfied even with a single item as all items have negative Q. Dimension-wise highest dissatisfaction was found in tangibility closely followed by responsiveness. Least dissatisfaction was found in terms of assurance. Maximum quality gap of -1.49 was found in the indicator relating to modern and updated classrooms (no.2), followed by up to date study material and educational equipments (no.5) and assignment of special hours for students (no.25).

Table 2 depicts the importance of each dimension from students' perspective. From the table it is clear that students ranked responsiveness at the top with an average weight of 23.20, followed by assurance 20.79, tangibility 18.97 and reliability 18.79. Empathy was ranked at the bottom with a weight of 18.25.

Table 1: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONOF EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

	Item	Expectations						Perceptions						P – E
		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	
Tangibility	1	3	11	12	109	65	4.11	12	45	28	84	31	3.38	-0.72
	2	0	4	7	84	105	4.45	30	65	17	59	29	2.96	-1.49
	3	1	3	14	86	96	4.36	4	10	28	113	45	3.93	-0.44
	4	0	5	16	87	92	4.33	4	44	33	80	39	3.53	-0.80
	5	0	0	8	67	125	4.58	7	59	24	79	31	3.34	-1.25
	6	0	0	8	57	135	4.64	8	29	23	85	55	3.75	-0.89
	Mean													-0.93
Reliability	7	0	0	3	70	127	4.62	9	19	33	97	42	3.72	-0.90
	8	0	0	8	118	74	4.33	5	22	34	103	36	3.72	-0.62
	9	0	2	12	110	76	4.30	8	23	32	112	25	3.61	-0.68
	10	0	1	8	101	90	4.40	3	38	30	96	33	3.59	-0.81
	11	0	2	13	80	105	4.44	6	39	41	80	34	3.48	-0.96
	12	0	0	10	69	121	4.56	7	23	24	101	45	3.77	-0.79
	Mean													-0.79
Assurance	13	0	1	7	63	129	4.60	6	11	24	109	50	3.93	-0.67
	14	0	0	26	85	89	4.32	6	18	71	78	27	3.51	-0.81
	15	0	0	12	90	98	4.43	4	19	28	112	37	3.80	-0.64
	16	0	0	16	72	112	4.48	3	24	35	106	32	3.70	-0.78
	17	0	1	6	77	116	4.54	4	18	19	119	40	3.86	-0.67
	18	1	2	13	109	75	4.28	3	19	33	111	34	3.77	-0.50
	19	1	0	13	117	69	4.26	7	48	38	81	26	3.35	-0.91
	Mean													-0.71
Responsiveness	20	0	3	11	95	91	4.37	6	37	22	92	43	3.65	-0.73
	21	1	0	4	87	108	4.51	11	30	38	76	45	3.57	-0.94
	22	0	7	12	102	79	4.27	10	36	31	94	29	3.48	-0.79
	23	1	2	15	112	60	4.19	11	55	31	75	28	3.27	-0.92
	24	0	2	13	99	86	4.34	11	42	28	82	37	3.46	-0.88
	25	1	5	19	102	73	4.21	26	73	17	52	32	2.96	-1.25
	Mean													-0.92

Empathy	26	0	1	12	99	88	4.37	9	32	40	98	21	3.45	-0.92
	27	0	3	8	105	84	4.35	2	22	35	108	33	3.74	-0.61
	28	1	1	10	71	117	4.51	7	34	39	76	44	3.58	-0.93
	29	0	2	19	93	86	4.31	13	28	17	103	39	3.63	-0.68
	30	0	3	18	111	68	4.22	4	31	39	102	24	3.55	-0.66
	31	0	1	16	80	103	4.42	7	31	3	100	32	3.60	-0.83
	32	1	2	13	102	82	4.31	12	55	24	69	40	3.35	-0.96
	Mean													-0.80

OVERALL GAP SCORE: -0.83

Table 2: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF WEIGHTS ASSIGNED (n=200)

Dimension	Frequency												Mean
	5	10	15	18	19	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	
Tangibility	1	35	38	0	0	77	30	18	0	1	0	0	18.97
Reliability	2	23	48	1	0	92	16	18	0	0	0	0	18.79
Assurance	0	17	29	1	0	109	19	15	2	4	0	4	20.79
Reponsiveness	2	10	16	0	1	61	52	42	7	4	1	0	23.20
Empathy	4	42	46	0	0	67	19	18	1	2	0	1	18.25

Table 3: DIMENSION-WISE WEIGHTED SERVQUAL GAP (n=200)

Dimensions	Unweighted Gap Score (1)	Weight Assigned (2)	Weighted Gap Scope (3) = (1)*(2)
Tangibility	-0.93	18.97%	-.18
Reliability	-0.79	18.79%	-.15
Assurance	-0.71	20.79%	-.15
Responsiveness	-0.92	23.20%	-.21
Empathy	-0.80	18.25%	-.14
Total	-0.83	100.00%	-.83

Table 3 shows the dimension-wise weighted gap score of the total sample. It is seen from the tables that when relative importance of different dimensions is taken care of, the gap scores narrowed down. Moreover, there was a change in the order of different dimensions as per the weighted gap score. From the table it is seen that in case of unweighted scores tangibility was at the top with a gap score of -0.93 followed by responsiveness (-0.92). However after weight-age, responsiveness headed the list with weighted gap score of -.21, followed by tangibility -.18. While next in the order was empathy in case of unweighted gap score, it was at the bottom in terms of quality gaps in weighted gap score.

Table 4: CORRELATIONS COEFFICIENT MATRIX OF QUALITY GAPS (n=200)

P-E(weighted)	Tangibility	Reliability	Assurance	Responsiveness	Empathy	Overall
Tangibility	1					
Reliability	0.463**	1				
Assurance	0.484**	0.503**	1			
Responsiveness	0.500**	0.645**	0.467**	1		
Empathy	0.273**	0.464**	0.428**	0.637**	1	.
Overall Gap Score	0.706**	0.782**	0.739**	0.868**	0.715**	1
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

In order to find the degree of association between different dimensions and to identify the most important dimensions explaining quality gaps, the correlation coefficients of the five dimensions (weighted) with each other as well as with the overall weighted SERVQUAL gap were calculated. It is seen from the table 4, that all the five selected dimensions are positively as well as significantly associated with each other as well as with the overall gap score. Responsiveness and reliability had the highest degree of significant positive correlation followed by responsiveness with empathy and assurance with reliability. The overall service gap has highest significant positive correlation with responsiveness (0.868), followed by reliability (0.782), assurance (0.739), empathy (0.715) and tangibility (0.706). Further as the inter-correlations among the five independent variables were moderate ranging from 0.27 to 0.64 so there was no problem of multicollinearity.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

- Students' were not satisfied with the service quality of educational institutions as in all the thirty-two items, their expectations were higher than their perceptions i.e. E>P. There existed negative quality gap, indicating dissatisfaction level.
- Maximum gap score was found in the dimensions relating to tangibility and responsiveness whereas assurance experienced the least gaps.
- In terms of weights, students assigned maximum importance to responsiveness, followed by assurance, tangibility, reliability and empathy, in that order.
- All the five dimensions showed significant positive correlation with the overall service quality gap score.
- Responsiveness was found to be the main dimension explaining maximum variation in the overall service quality, followed by tangibility, assurance and reliability. Empathy explained the least variation.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

Firstly, Consistent and vigorous efforts are required on the part of educational institutions to close the prevailing quality gaps by studying the perceptions and expectations of their students. This can be done by having a strong and reliable system of feedback.

Secondly, Promoting student-friendly environment is the urgent need of the hour as this has emerged as the single most important factor contributing to students' dissatisfaction. Students expect the staff to be more sympathetic and flexible. Even they want their institutions to assign special hours for sharing their concerns with the faculty.

Thirdly, the institutions need to introduce new courses as per market demand as the students perceived their institutions very low in terms of this indicator .Students feel that no short term job-oriented courses are being offered in these institutions. There is an urgent need to introduce job-oriented and inter-disciplinary courses.

Fourthly, the identification of quality gaps will give the right direction to these institutions in allocating their limited financial resources in a more efficient manner and in right direction ultimately controlling the students' unrest in the long run.

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