Full Length Research

Quality delivery service in higher education: An exploratory study of what students consider as excellent professors/Lecturers/Instructors

George O. Tasie
Postgraduate Programmes Coordinator, Department of Business and Management Sciences
University of Kurdistan, IRAQE. Email: tasiego111@gmail.com

Accepted 9 January, 2015

Quality delivery service is of paramount importance in organizations particularly now that competition is becoming very intense and aggressive. Organizations of all kinds record a very low customers' loyalty due to lack of quality delivery service. The fact that there is a proliferation of higher education institutions the world over makes this topic academically interesting. This paper focuses on University as representing higher education and the professors or lecturers as the provider of quality service. The students are chosen to represent the customer and are asked to rank in order of importance attributes they expect of an excellent lecturer or professor. The findings of this study are contrasted with the study carried out by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990). In this context, therefore, the conclusion drawn is that controlling and measuring quality service in higher education is difficult and problematic since it involves high customer contacts and high customer interactions during service delivery. This undoubtedly makes productivity and quality both the responsibility of the service provider and the customer.

Key words: Quality, delivery, service Zeithaml, Parasuraman, professor, lecturer, instructor, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that a considerable research has been carried out in the past on the concept of quality delivery of service, its success remains relatively low among the providers. This is due to poor understanding of the characteristics of quality of service. In the context of University or higher education institutions, professors, lecturers or instructors are regarded as providers of quality service. These academic professionals provide some of the inputs to the quality process. Ipso facto, in order to provide quality service, the university should be able to manage the service delivery process through managing inputs systematically to enhance quality delivery process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining quality in higher education has proved to be a challenging task. Cheng and Tam (1997, p. 23) suggest that "education quality is a rather vague and controversial concept" and Pounder (1999, p. 156) argues that quality is a "notoriously ambiguous term". As a result of the difficulty in defining quality, the measurement of quality has also proved to be contentious. There have been various attempts to draw on industry models such as the quality dimensions of Gronroos, Garvin and Parasuraman (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996), SERVQUAL (Oldfield and Baron, 1998; Aldridge and Rowley, 1998), importance-performance analysis (Ford et al., 1999) and the balanced score card (Cullen et al., 2003) to develop quality assessment models for higher education. Internationally, the tool most frequently drawn upon (Cruickshank, 2003; Motwani and Kumar, 1997; Eriksen, 1995) however, is that of total quality management (TQM), defined as: a management approach of an organization, centered on quality, based on the participation of all its members and aiming at long run success through customer satisfaction and benefits to all members of the organization and to society (ISO 8402 in Wiklund et al., 2003, p. 99). The rationale for adoption is
that TQM has the potential to encompass the quality perspectives of both external and internal stakeholders in an integrated manner and thereby enable a comprehensive approach to quality management that will assure quality as well as facilitate change and innovation.

Despite their support for viewing education as a system, Sahney et al. (2004) suggest that this creates further difficulty in conceptualizing quality as the different component parts of the system have different requirements. The authors' review of the literature suggests that there have been a number of different attempts to articulate the dimensions of quality in higher education as Garvin (1987) did for services. One of the most clearly defined set of dimensions of quality for higher education has been identified by Harvey and Knight (1996). They argue that quality can be broken down into five different but related dimensions:

i. Quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards);
ii. Quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects);
iii. Quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications);
iv. Quality as value for money, (as efficiency and effectiveness); and
v. Quality as transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of customer satisfaction).

It is argued that front-line staff do not mutely accept policy or the changes associated with it, and are not passive recipients of management actions. This argument impinges upon the view that "academic culture" exists as a monolithic, mono-cultural entity guiding the behavior, thoughts and actions of academics. Thus, culture may be considered as at least partly constructed on an ongoing basis by individuals and groups' (Trowler, 1998). Harvey and Knight (1996) concluded that quality assurance systems have negative impact on staff in higher education. In particular, organizational members who are already involved in innovation and quality initiatives may be discouraged by accountability approaches. Furthermore, they have to overcome both the additional burden of responding to external scrutiny and the feeling of being manipulated and undervalued by managers and external agencies.

Roffe (1998) suggests that while there are a small number of quality indicators in industry, these are more numerous and complex in higher education and are therefore make management more difficult to assess. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) highlight that the application of TQM is more appropriate to the service rather than the education functions of a university. Similarly Yorke (1994) advises that accountability relationships are more complicated and Roffe (1998) highlights that while the accountability emphasis of TQM in industry is on a team, this tends to lie with individuals in higher education.

Harvey (1995) further argues that the emphasis on quality in industry lies predominantly with the customer, whereas in higher education there is a continued debate regarding who the customer actually is. Critics of this approach suggest that a wholesale adoption of TQM without adaptation to reflect the particular characteristics of higher education is unacceptable (Yorke, 1994). It has even been purported that the practice of TQM in higher education is deteriorating into managerialism because of the disparity between TQM techniques and educational processes, as well as the lack of shared vision within institutions or educational fields (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). As a result of this debate, Hewitt and Clayton (1999, p. 838) recommend that a model of educational quality that is different from, but capable of being related to commercial models, is beginning to emerge. However, it is not yet complete. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) suggest that "a fresh view is necessary of quality in higher education". A starting point for this process is arguably a comprehensive assessment of current practices to determine the extent to which different meanings of quality and different stakeholder perspectives are taken into account. Drawing on relevant literature from both education and industry, a new framework for a quality audit tool has therefore been developed in order to assess current quality management approaches within higher education.

Smart (2003), states that the organization must recognize either a threat to its survival, or a strong positive external pressure calling for adaptation and integration of new systems, before the introduction of changes. Employees must be convinced that the change is necessary not only for organizational survival but also for betterment at the individual as well as at the organizational level. Since, leadership come to play a significant role in the transformation of attitudes, management has to find ways to facilitate changes towards enhanced service quality. In this line, management systems that support the emotional needs of people, and encourage experimentation are required. Designing organizational systems that take into account human relations and employee welfare, and create a climate that promotes positive group interactions and creativity is of utmost importance for an institute that values openness, trust, and innovativeness in the academic community. In addition, Lakos and Phipps (2004) support that by involving staff in decision making and developing clear and comprehensive communication systems, increase the potential for actual cultural change.

**Service Quality**

SERVQUAL has earned great popularity and wide application in last decades. The majority of the studies in higher education service quality have focused on
student's view of quality, while little attention has been paid on the perspective of academic and administration staff. In a similar vein, few researchers have empirically tested measurement instruments of service quality referring to teaching processes as well as administration services.

Research on service quality gained momentum in the early 1980s. Initially the focus was on defining service quality. Lewis and Booms suggested that "service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customers expectations". Research by Gronroos (1982) focused on what he referred to as the "missing service quality concept." He argued there was a difference between technical quality, which describes what the customer gets, and is objective in nature, and functional quality which describes how the customer gets it, and is subjective in nature. Lethinen and Lethinen (1982) viewed quality from the customer's perspective and suggested that customers perceive process quality (the customer's qualitative evaluation of their participation in the service production process) and output quality (the customer's evaluation of the result of a service production process). Research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry into the service quality concept has focused on three issues: what is service quality; what causes service quality problems; and what can service organizations do to improve quality. Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed a service quality model to demonstrate that consumers' perceptions of quality are influenced by four separate gaps occurring in organizations.

The SERVQUAL approach to measuring service quality departs from the customer's perception. It is argued that perceived service quality involves a comparison of expectations with actual performance. In the SERVQUAL model, perceived service quality is determined by the size and direction of so-called internal gaps: between customer expectations and management perceptions of those expectations; between management perceptions of customer expectations and the firm's service quality specifications; between service quality specifications and actual service delivery; and between actual service delivery and external communications about the service. The SERVQUAL instrument is based on Gap 5. Parasuraman et al. (1985) concluded that consumers evaluated service quality by comparing expectations with perceptions on ten dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing customers, and access. These ten dimensions were subsequently collapsed into five generic service-quality dimensions, as follows: (1) tangibles (measured by four items): the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, and personnel; (2) reliability (five items): the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; (3) responsiveness (four items): the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; (4) assurance (four items): the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; and (5) empathy (five items): the level of caring and individualized attention the firm provides to its customers. Quality in higher education is a complex and multifaceted concept and a single correct definition of quality is lacking (Harvey and Green, 1993). As a consequence, consensus concerning "the best way to define and measure service quality" (Clewes, 2003) does not exist yet. Every stakeholder in higher education (e.g. students, government, professional bodies) has its own view of quality due to particular needs. Students receive and use the training offered by the university, which make them priority customers of educational activities (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2005). Authors such as Sander et al. (2000), Gremler and McCollough (2002), and Hill (1995) also regard students as primary consumers of higher education service. This view, however, does not mean that other perspectives may not be valid and important as well. In this connection, Guolla (1999) rightly points out that students could also take the role as clients, producers, and products. Based on findings in the service quality literature, O'Neill and Palmer (2004, p. 42) define service quality in higher education as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery".

The overriding value in measuring service quality in higher education lies in the identification of critical aspects of the service delivery (Abdullah, 2006). However, this presumes a customer-led strategy, whereby the student, as the buyer of the service exchange, is regarded as the customer (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). It has been argued that a "customer" metaphor for describing the university service exchange from the perspective of students is unsuitable (Svensson and Wood, 2007). After all, this indirectly frames the academic as the service provider, and thus retracts their immunity from the common marketing axiom: "the customer is always right" (Scott, 1999). It follows that if students cannot be seen as "customers", the measurement of service quality, with the intention of improving the service offering is wholly inappropriate. Some contend this view, suggesting that the acceptance of the student as the "customer" need not negate the power relationship between students and academic staff (Scott, 1999; Sines and Duckworth, 1994). It appears that refuting the idea of the student as a university customer on such grounds is narrow, and ignores the fact that the university experience is wider than just the contact between students and academics. It has been found that when making the uncertain and high-risk decision of choosing a university, "the student will look for evidence of service quality", Confirming its importance in the university's function (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004). Therefore, ignorance of the competitive nature of attracting students, alongside the importance of measuring the service quality, will
ultimately be at the disadvantage of the institution. The importance of this has been claimed by Sines and Duckworth (1994) who summarized this position by saying that: "it's time for educational institutions to face two facts: they are in a competitive battle for students, and students are customers".

Student expectations are a valuable source of information (Sander et al., 2000; Hill, 1995). Especially new undergraduate students may have idealistic expectations, and if higher education institutions know about their (new) students' expectations, they may be able to respond to them to a more realistic level. At least, universities could inform students of what is realistic to expect from lecturers (Hill, 1995). The knowledge of student expectations may also help lecturers to design their teaching programmes (Sander et al., 2000). Hill (1995) found that student expectations in general, and in particular, in relation to academic aspects of higher education services such as teaching quality, teaching methods, and course content have been quite stable over time. Telford and Masson (2005) point out that the perceived quality of the educational service depends on students' expectations and values. The authors cite several studies that indicate a positive impact of expectations and values on variables such as student participation (Claycomb et al., 2001), role clarity, and motivation to participate in the service encounter (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2000; Rodie and Kleine, 2000). Accordingly, Telford and Masson (2005) believe that it is important to understand expectations and values of students in higher education.

In higher education literature, Browne et al. (1998) and Guolla (1999) show that students' perceived service quality is an antecedent to student satisfaction. Thus, this paper follows the majority of recent papers that regard service quality as an antecedent to customer satisfaction. Positive perceptions of service quality can lead to student satisfaction and satisfied students may then attract new students by engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication to inform acquaintances and friends, and they may return to the university to take other courses (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2005; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Mavondo et al., 2004; Schertzer and Schertzer, 2004). Student satisfaction has also a positive impact on fundraising and student motivation (Elliott and Shin, 2002). Winsted (2000) and Zeithaml et al. (1990) maintain that service providers will only be able to deliver service encounters that will satisfy customers if they know what their customers expect in general, and if they understand the critical employee behaviors and attitudes from a customer's point of view in particular. If lecturers know what their students expect, they may be able to adapt their behavior to their students' underlying expectations, which should have a positive impact on their perceived service quality and their levels of satisfaction.

Oldfield and Baron (2000) maintain that "there is an inclination to view service quality in higher education from an organizational perspective". They suggest that institutions should better pay attention to what their students want instead of collecting "data based upon what the institution perceives its students find important".

Similarly, Joseph et al. (2005) point out that research on service quality in higher education has relied too strongly on the input from academic insiders while excluding the input from the students themselves. They believe that traditional approaches leave "decisions about what constitutes quality of service (e.g. such as deciding what is 'most important' to students) exclusively in the hands of administrators and/or academics". The authors, therefore, suggest that academic administrators should focus on understanding the needs of their students, who are the specific and primary target audience.

Problem statement

In every country of the world including Kurdistan – one of the regions in Iraq, people seek higher education in order to develop and improve themselves in preparation for a better quality of life. According to Steiner (1995), one of the key elements for attaining service excellence is through having the right people for the delivery of service. Before designing quality service delivery by the academic professionals in higher education, customers' requirements or expectations need to be known and defined. Doing so will enhance and improve efficiency and effectiveness. And knowing the expectations of students in a professor/lecturer/instructor would likely help to determine, to a very significant extent, the University policy on recruitment, selection and training of lecturers.

Research objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

i. Identify the top five attributes in an excellent professor/lecturer/instructor from the perspectives of students.

ii. Develop a conceptual framework on customer expectations and its relationship to quality service in higher education institutions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A survey was undertaken as a means of accomplishing the aforementioned objectives of the study as the researcher sees it as efficient way of collecting data in large amount at low cost in a short time frame. The survey aim is to obtain information from a sample of population for analysis.
Sample

The study involves obtaining opinions from opportunity sample from two groups namely full time and part time postgraduate Master’s degree students from University of Kurdistan Hewler in Iraq.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

A ten minutes self-completion questionnaire was administered to collect data. The pilot study was tested on five Master’s degree students at random. The students were asked to rank in order of importance their expectations of an excellent professor/lecturer/instructor. The ranking scale is used to get a baseline result of the study since this is the only preliminary research.

Data Analysis

Ranked data can be analyzed by adding up the rank of each response across the respondents (Burns, 2000), this resulting in an overall rank order alternatives. According to Nachmias (1992), ranking is a useful device in providing some sense of relative order among objects or judgments. This is particularly important in view of the fact that many properties measured in the social science cannot be given any precise numerical value. Furthermore, ranking in questionnaires is used whenever information regarding the degree of importance is obtained or the priorities that people give a set of attitudes or objects.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Using the likely attributes in the literature as being the most important to customers in quality delivery service, two groups of students were asked to place in rank order ten attributes on the basis of their expectations of performance. All students included in the survey were postgraduates studying for Masters’ degree, either by full time or part time mode at School of Social Sciences. A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed. However, only 65 questionnaires were filled and returned. Of these numbers, 57 were usable (32 from full-time students and 25 were from part-time students).

The following symbols are used in the tables and charts instead of their full names to make the presentation simpler.

RI = Reliability
R2 = Responsiveness
C1 = Competence
A = Accessibility
C2 = Courtesy
C3 = Communication
C4 = Credibility
U = Understanding
S = Security
T = Tangibles

These students were asked to rank from number one through to number 10 attributes. Number 1 being the most important attribute a student expects of an excellent professor/lecturer/instructor, and number 10 being the least important. Therefore, lower scores mean higher ranks.

Figure 1 shows the result of the ranking given to and the score obtained by each attribute by full-time students and part-time students respectively. From Figure 1, it can be said that for full-time students, the top five rankings that represent the most important attribute the students expect in an excellent professor or lecturer or instructor is competence (C1), second most important is communication (C3), equal third most important are reliability (R1) and responsiveness (R2), and the fifth most important is understanding (U). In comparison, part-time students expect an excellent academic professionals to be someone with attribute such as (C1) as the most important, responsiveness (R2) as the second most important, communication (C3) the third most important, reliability (R1) the fourth most important, and the fifth most important is understanding (U).

Analysis

For full time students, it could be said that their idea of excellent academic professional is someone who possesses the required skills and knowledge to teach them; someone with the right qualifications and background, someone who keeps them (the students) informed on relevant matters such as lecture, assignment, submission dates. and assessments, and someone who listens to them, their views in the class or discussions or their problems which affect learning, someone who is able to perform the lectures or related service dependably as accurately as promised on time and at a stated venue; someone who is willing to help through consultation and provide them with prompt service when it is required and someone who is willing to make an effort to know them and understands their needs, in that order.

In the case of the part-time students, it could be assumed that the students expect an excellent academic professionals to be those who have acquired skills and knowledge to teach them, willing to help and provide them with prompt service as and when needed, keeps them informed on pertinent matters and simultaneously listening to what they have to say and someone who has the ability to perform by fulfilling his/her promises and makes an effort to know and understands their needs.
that order.

Although there appear to be a difference in the hierarchy of rankings between FT and PT students in relation to several attributes such as communication which is ranked second by FT students but third by PT students, and reliability/responsiveness which are ranked equal third by FT students but fourth by PT students, the top five most important attributes both groups expect from an excellent professors/lecturers/instructors are still seems to be competence, communication, responsiveness, reliability and understanding. The same could be said for the ranking of the top five least important attributes with similarities in the first and second places. While differences occur for the third, fourth and fifth places for the individual groups, the top five ranking still consists of tangibles such as courtesy, security, accessibility, and reliability.

The difference in the second hierarchy between FT and PT students could be due to PT students having been on a full time job. In this context, therefore, the students who combined their studies with full time jobs are susceptible to pressure for time. Furthermore this might make them to expect the professor/lecturer/instructor to give them more attention and be willing to assist promptly when the needs arise.

Again, for the FT students, the difference in priority might be due to the fact that they have ample time to concentrate on their studies provided they know what is required of them by a lecturer through effective dissemination of relevant information by the academic professionals.

The joint overall ranking given by both groups and its total score is depicted in Figure 2. Looking at Figure 2, it is clear that students feel that in relative order of importance, competence (C1) is the most important, communication (C3) is the second most important,
Table 1. Combined Rankings of Attributes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Least important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Tangibles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Courtesy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responsiveness (R2) is the third most important, (R!) is the fourth most important, and understanding (U) is the fifth most important attribute of what they considered to be an excellent Professor/Lecturer/Instructor. It is also obvious that students feel the least important attributes they expect in an excellent academic professionals are first tangibles (T), second least important is courtesy (C2), third least important is security (S), fourth least important is accessibility (A) and fifth least important is credibility (C4). Table 1 summarizes the study findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings for the top five rankings for most and least important attributes match with the findings from the individual groups. The difference appears to be in the hierarchy of rankings given to each of those attributes. The result contrasted with the studies conducted by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (ZPB) on two banks, two insurance companies and a long-distance telephone company where it was found that 32% of the customers chose reliability as the most important, 22% found responsiveness as the second most important, 19% acknowledge insurance as the third most important, 16% chose empathy as the fourth most important whereas 11% voted for tangibles as the fifth most important dimension they feel very every service provider should have in order to deliver quality service.

However, as the studies did not cover the higher education setting, the difference in the upshot is not totally unexpected. The difference in the outcome for the first place is perhaps due to the direct recipient of the service banks, insurance companies and a long-distance telephone companies are the process and things are not the customer himself. For example, the direct recipient of the service performed by the bank teller is the account statement, not the customer himself. Therefore, the system and the process need to be reliable in order for the service to provide dependable and accurate service.

In contrast, delivery of instructions by the academic professionals in higher education is a different matter as direct recipient of the service is the student and the student will participate and interact with the lecturer during the service encounter. Based on the participation and interaction, the lecturer can then assess the understanding of the students and react accordingly to carry on the service delivery. In this instance, the student will need to be assured that the person or the academic professional responsible for teaching and guiding students is competent enough with a very good command of the subject matter. This means that the lecturer has to be someone with the required skills in terms teaching, qualifications and work experience in that order.

Furthermore, by using the ten original attributes/dimensions instead of the condensed five, the respondent could choose more specifically the attribute(s) they feel they want in an excellent lecturer. For instance, instead of lumping together all four attributes – competence, courtesy, credibility and security under assurance, respondents can now choose specifically the one attribute that they prefer, in this case competence without having to include the other three. This can be seen from how different they ranked competence (the most important attribute) compared to other three within the same group. The same argument could be made in the case of understanding which is lumped together with communication and accessibility.

Although the findings for tangible remained the same for both studies, tangibles, or the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication methods are found to be the least important attributes in measuring quality service by the customers.

Research contributions

The result of this study can be used for the university in particular and higher institutions in general to look more closely on what students want from a lecturer and the university as the providers of service. A more customer-oriented approach could then be developed in the context of recruitment, selection and training of lecturers by the university in order to satisfy the customers. Apart from the high return on improving quality, the university can also differentiate itself from other universities offering similar services and create a competitive advantage.

Compared to other fields, the literature on service quality is not extensive. Presently, the most extensive published research in the field of service quality is that of Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry. Their Phase Two research on determinants of service quality was
conducted across four sectors and it does not include education sector. Hopefully, this study would provide a glance at service quality in the higher education setting and simultaneously contribute the growing list of literature on service quality.

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Further study**

In this study, we have established, to a considerable extent, the five most important attributes of an excellent lecturer from the students’ perspective. These are competence, communication, responsiveness, reliability and understanding in that order. Although according to the outcome from ZPB study, different service settings will produce different results, it could be due to the larger samples used by the authors and the elapsed time between the two studies.

A more representative outcome could be obtained if a larger sample size could be gathered. This should include other bachelor’s degree and Ph. D students. It could also be more meaningful if nominal scale is used instead of ranking as the scale can measure the difference between each attribute in the top five positions. Research could also be conducted in different countries and cultures to see if the result would be different.

**REFERENCES**


