Student's Perception On Educational Service Quality An Empirical Study

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Abstract:
Service quality is the ability of the institute to meet or exceed customer (student) expectations. Monitoring of the service quality performance of organizations (institutions) is an important factor for quality sustenance, a necessary step towards gaining the competitive advantage over the other organizations (Getty and Getty, 2003; Zeithaml et al., 2006). Research and awareness about what students think important will enable educators to better anticipate and address their particular needs which in turn will strengthen the educational institutions. The purpose of this study is to examine the usage of different dimensions of service quality in education system and evaluate the service quality (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy) with students' satisfaction in the higher education institutes in twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Questionnaire was administered to collect the primary related data to establish the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction in higher education. Data collected was analyzed using SPSS package. The findings of this study showed that the assurance and the reliability dimensions of service quality were the two most important dimensions and had significant positive relationship with student satisfaction. Recommendations were presented and suggestions for further research were highlighted.

Key words: Service quality, student satisfaction; higher education; Hyderabad

1.Introduction

The education is one of the most important sectors which play an essential role in national development. According to Brunat (2006) there is a correspondence between education and economic growth but a correspondence is not a cause-and-effect relationship. The emphasis placed on education has resulted in India having one of the largest higher education systems in the world, consisting of over 20,000 institutes enrolling more than 12 million students. However, as Amitabh Jhingan, partner, Ernst & Young, puts it, "growth in numbers has not been accompanied by an improvement in the delivery of higher education and consequent outcomes." The challenges facing the higher education system continue to be access, equity and quality.

The Yashpal Committee first appointed to look into the functioning of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), went beyond its mandate to chalk out a plan to revamp higher education in-sync with international standards. The country needs 40,000 to 45,000 colleges in 2020 as against 26,000 colleges at present and 1000 universities by 2020 against 700 universities at present if it wants to treble the GER from the present figure of 15 million to 45 million by that period.

There is a growing interest in enhancing service quality in educational institutions as the competitiveness is increasing. And the same was also emphasized by Husain, Hanim, Fernando, and Nejati (2007). According to Ham, Johnson, Weinstein, Plank, Johnson (2003) to sustain quality in higher educational institutes, it is very important to have a constant monitoring of the quality of their services, their service delivery and performance levels.

Admission into the particular higher education institution mainly depends on its service quality. Student satisfaction is an important marker of the quality of education provided by the institutes. This means that satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality. Husain, Hanim, Fernando, and Nejati (2007) assert that students' expectations and satisfactions are essential in order to enhance a college service delivery measures.

Service quality in education sector by giving overview of education in India, policies in this sector, quality assessment ,factors for declining educational standards in India ,better service quality leads to student satisfaction, application of TQM in education, holistic and transformative approach in quality education, innovations tools and techniques in this sector and finally trends that can be expected in Indian education sector.

1.1.Scenario Of Indian Education

The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress is well recognized." It is empirically "verified that education which is one of the components of human capital impacts economic growth positively (Stiglitz, 1998, 2003, Dreze and Sen, 1996). Therefore, improvement in education can enhance life skills, learning skills and livelihood skills which in turn can raise the overall quality of life. Besides, the strengthening of education sector can play an instrumental role in achieving rapid and inclusive

growth. In this knowledge intensive world driven by information technology, primary education is a must but the importance of higher education cannot be ignored.

Higher education is of paramount importance for social and economic development. Institutions of higher education have the main responsibility for equipping individuals with advanced knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility….estimated social rates of return of ten percent or more in many developing countries also indicates that investments in higher education contributed to increase in labor productivity and to higher long term economic growth essential for poverty alleviation.

The UGC has contributed in a number of ways in developing policies and to devise the schemes and to transform them into action plan for implementation. The UGC also took several new initiatives for reforming higher education, many of the initiatives are of fundamental nature.

Based on the information from the studies conducted by UGC and other material the UGC had put together a report akin to a road-map for higher education in the country. The UGC report had suggested following issues to be addressed under the Eleventh plan:

● Lower enrolment in higher education;
● Inter-state and inter-district disparities and rural-urban differences in the access to higher education;
● Inter-caste, inter-religion, male-female, poor-non-poor disparities in access to higher education;
● Issue of quality in higher education;
● Issue of providing relevant education;
● Academic reforms in Universities and Colleges; and
● Regulation of private educational institutions.

It is gratifying to note that, eventually, the Eleventh Plan has addressed most of these issues, and developed policies and programs accordingly. Its main focus is on expansion in higher education with inclusiveness, quality, relevance, and with academic reform.

1.2.Importance Of Higher Education

This current era of globalization has offered immense opportunities. But people must have the necessary knowledge, skills, capacities and capabilities to seize those opportunities (Joshi, 2004). Herein lies the role of education and especially higher education in building up and improving human capital. In India, elementary education has received a major push through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan during Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07). But the higher education remained neglected till Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12). In 2004-2005 as per revised estimates, just 3.68% of GDP was spent on education and 0.66% of GDP on higher education (see Kapur and Mehta,2007,p.50). Since, economic growth of India in recent years is driven primarily by services sector and within services sector by information technology (IT) and information technology enabled services (ITES); therefore, to keep alive India's ambition of becoming knowledge powerhouse, the sustainable development of higher education is not an option but imperative. Without expansion of higher education system and improvement in its quality, India will not be able to sustain the overall growth. Further, the development of higher education sector is a must to counter the global challenges which we may have to encounter in the form of aftermath of Wall Street meltdown or Euro-Zone crisis or climate change or global inflation. It is important to point out here that with General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), trade in higher education is already taking place through the movement of students, teachers, programmes and even institutions.

1.3.Quality Education

In order to plan and execute quality education in a vast country like India, there's a need for a two-pronged audit in higher education - academic audit and administrative audit. In fact, these will address some of the most pressing concerns such as:

The result of the academic and administrative audit could serve as a guide in the allocation of funding and as an aid to the evaluation of higher education institutions at all levels. In essence, quality assurance is about ensuring that the standards are specified and met consistently. In its simplest form, quality in university teaching ought to satisfy the primary customer, the student. However this comes with a rider: a caution may be practiced here that in an obvious sense students consume or experience teaching, but who have to be satisfied include colleagues, funding agencies, employers, government and society as a whole. All of these may in some sense be identified as customers of a university.

1.4.Declining Standards

A careful analysis of the administrative audit on higher education would identify the following common factors for the declining educational standards in India:

• Administrative mismanagementHighly personalized dealing
• Political interference and manipulations in matters of appointments and administration, paucity of qualified faculties,
• Financial corruption,
• Apathy of students and teachers, and
• Passive and non-vibrant environment.

The in-depth study reveals that the above reasons are not limited to the university system. It is permeated everywhere and rotting the society.

1.5.Quality Assessment

The six broad parameters that may be considered for quality assessment are:

• Curriculum design, content and organization.
• Teaching, learning and assessment.
• Student progression and achievement.
• Student support and guidance.

- Learning resources (e.g. Information technology, laboratories, libraries etc.), and Quality assurance and enhancement.
- Results would provide a good guide:
    - To observe whether a preferred course is being well delivered.
    - To ensure that education is of approved quality.
    - To encourage improvements in quality.
    - To provide information about subject quality in an institution.
    - To secure value for public expenditure.

To take decision to cancel funding for any subject provision that is judged to be of unacceptable quality on assessment and reassessment within a specified period.

1.6.TQM Approach In Education And Its Impact

Following manufacturing and service industries, higher education is one of the latest sectors which are being challenged with Total Quality Management (TQM) concepts and methodologies. A customer-oriented approach to quality, adopted from such a philosophy, necessitates investigating the needs of the customers. This is reinforced when considering the fact that quality of service in general is subjective, unlike quality of products, which can be measured objectively and so an appropriate way of measuring this characteristic is to assess the perception of consumers. In order to attract customers, serve their needs and retain them, service providers and researchers are actively involved in understanding consumers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. It is found that in a highly competitive environment, students have become more discriminating in their selection and more demanding of the colleges and universities they choose. Therefore, it is important for universities to understand their expectations. A constant research and analysis of education service quality is a necessary prerequisite for its improvement. Researchers have tried to define general quality dimensions, particularly concerning services. The most well known set of dimensions has been proposed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996).

The authors have later developed their framework and condensed the original ten dimensions to five comprehensive dimensions (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). In an alternative framework, Gronroos (2000)presents a compilation of seven criteria of service quality.

1.7.Holistic And Transformative Approach To Quality

Towards a Holistic and Transformative Approach to Quality in Education, there have been a number of studies (Angell et al, 2008; Hickie and Sawkins,1996; Idrus, 1996; Johnson and Golomski,1999) among others which sought to apply the concepts of quality as it is in industry to the education sector and as a competitive tool for educational institutions considered merely as profit making businesses. These attempts have been qualified has being inappropriate, unassimilated and unimaginative by Doherty (2008) who also states that applying manufacturing methodologies to universities, colleges and schools have rightly raised the ire of teachers, lecturers and researchers.

Furthermore instead of enhancing quality of education, competition as had an inverse effect. Indeed as argued by Harvey (2002) the increase in competition between educational institutions is resulting in lowering standards and quality, rather than raising them. This is supported by a study conducted by Carmichael (2001) which empirically tested the hypothesis of Lee Harvey. While as Venkatraman (2007) points out, treating students as being mere products will have as consequence the failure to cater for the learning process since as the author states "students are non-standard human beings who are embodied with a range of experiences, emotions and characteristics"

According to Harvey and Green (1993) the interpretation of quality as "transformation" of students is a meta-quality concept which subsumes the other ones. Therefore when students are transformed, it satisfies and even exceeds the requirement of the other definitions of quality, namely, quality as value for money, quality as excellence, quality as fitness for purpose and quality as consistency. As such quality initiatives aim at the improvement of the quality of services (administrative, information technology, infrastructure…) and enable the transformation of the student. Furthermore, to achieve that, a transformation at organizational level is a prerequisite. (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007)

1.8.The Objectives Of The Study Are The Following

- To examine the usage of different dimensions of service quality in education system
- To evaluate the service quality in terms of tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy with students' satisfaction in the higher education institutes in Hyderabad and
- To find out the dimensions having a positive relationship with the satisfaction levels.

2.Literature Review

Quality is a much more complicated term than it appears. Dictionary definitions are usually inadequate in helping a quality professional understand the concept. The concept and vocabulary of quality is elusive. Few can define quality in measurable terms that can be operationalized. There is an old maxim in management that says, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it," and so it is with quality. If strategic management systems and the competitive advantage are to be based on quality, every member of the organization should be clear about this concept, definition, and measurement as it applies to his or her job.

Harvard professor David Garvin, in his book *Managing Quality*, summarized five principal approaches to defining quality: transcendent, product based, user based, manufacturing based, and value based

2.1.Transcendental View Of Quality

Those who hold transcendental view would say, "I can't define it, but I know when I see it."

2.2.Product-Based View
Product based definitions are different. Quality is viewed as quantifiable and measurable characteristics or attributes.

2.3.User-Based View
User based definitions are based on the idea that quality is an individual matter, and products that best satisfy their preferences (i.e. perceived quality) are those with the highest quality.

2.4.Manufacturing-Based View
Manufacturing-based definitions are concerned primarily with engineering and manufacturing practices and use the universal definition of "conformance to requirements." Requirements, or specifications, are established design, and any deviation implies a reduction in quality. The concept applies to services as well as products. Excellence in quality is not necessarily in the eye of the beholder but rather in the standards set by the organization.

2.5.Value-Based View
Value-based quality is defined in terms of costs and prices as well as a number of other attributes. Thus, the consumer's purchase decision is based on quality (however it is defined) at the acceptable price
A modern definition of quality derives from Juran's "fitness for intended use." This definition basically says that quality is "meeting or exceeding customer expectations." Deming states that the customer's definition of quality is the only one that matters According to ISO 9000: 2005 quality is defined as: "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements; "Conformance to requirements" (Crosby, 1979); "a predictability degree of uniformity and dependability at low cost and suited to the market" (Deming, 1986); "Products and services that meet or exceed customers' expectations", (Kano, 1884). Quality is multi-dimensional concept and different definitions are appropriate under different circumstances (Viswanadhan, 2006).Harvey and Knight (1996) stated that Quality can be viewed as exceptional, as perfection (or consistency), as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformative.
A number of scholars in the quality field have developed lists of dimensions that define quality for a product and/or a service. David Garvin developed a list of eight dimensions of product quality. Evans & Lindsay provide a list of eight service dimensions that are drawn from the work of several other researchers are Time, Timeliness, completeness, courtesy, consistency, accessibility & convenience, accuracy and responsiveness.
Parasuraman, et al provide a list of 5 service dimensions that are empirically derived and are called the SERVQUAL Dimensions - tested in 4 service industry that is Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy
Olsen, & Wyckoff (1978), listed seven service attributes which they believe adequately embrace the concept of service quality. These include:

- Security - confidence as well as physical safety;
- Consistency - receiving the same treatment for each transaction;
- Attitude – politeness;
- Completeness – the availability of ancillary services;
- Condition - of facilities;
- Availability – spatial and temporal customer access to services;
- Training- of service providers;

Many researchers stated that service quality can be measured by making the comparisons between customers' expectations and perceptions (Zeithaml et al, 1990). The authors have distinguished the service quality into four types namely expected service; desired service; adequate service; and predicted service.
- Expected services referred to the services customers intend to obtain from the service provider.
- Desired services are the level of service which the customer wishes to obtain.
- Adequate services refer to the minimum level of services expected from the service provider and finally
- Predicted services refer to what the customers believe the company will perform.

O'Neil and Palmer (2004) also define service quality as the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery. This definition is similar to the one advocated by Zeithaml et al, (1990). In the context of higher education, students' perceived quality is an antecedent to student satisfaction (Browne et al, 1998). It is noted that positive perceptions of service quality can eventually lead to student satisfaction thus satisfied student would attract more students through word-of-mouth communications.
Service quality has become a strategic option for many institutions of higher learning around the globe. The role of service quality has also become critical to the success of an organization (Landrum, et al 2007). Perception of service quality has become paramount strategic importance for an organization due to its influence on the post-enrolment communication behavior of the students (Marilyn, 2005). Highly satisfied customers are expected to spread a positive word of mouth about the institutions, thus attracting new applicants with lower marketing costs.
To gain competitive advantage, efforts to adopt the quality management system philosophy are fast spreading within the higher education institutions (HEIs). Over the last decade, numerous assessments were conducted to measure the service quality in higher education. Furthermore, Taylor and Baker (1994) have noted that service quality and customer satisfaction are widely recognized as key influences in the formation of consumers' purchase intentions in service environments. Aldridge and Rowley (1998) explain that good quality education provides better learning opportunities and it has been suggested that the levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction strongly affect the student's success or failure of learning. Since the HE sector is considered as the service industry (Hill, 1995), study on quality of services provided to the students can be a starting point to achieve the institution's mission of achieving students' satisfaction.

2.6.Service Quality In Education Sector

In education, students are customers who come to contact with service providers of an educational institution for the purpose of acquiring goods or services. Hill (1995) mentioned that as a primary customer of higher education services, the student should focus on expectations. Although the primary participant in the service of education is the student, there is also a strong underlying assumption that the "customer" of education includes industry, parents, Government, and even society as a whole. Harvey et al (1992), have noted that higher education quality can be defined in many ways and that definition of quality in HE must be "Stakeholder Relative"; "defect avoidance in the education process", (Crosby, 1979); "value addition in education", (Feigenbaum, 1983); "fitness of educational outcome and experience for use", (Juran and Gryna, 1988);The primary concern with this approach is that it relies too strongly on the input of academics rather than from the students (Joseph et al, 2005). Perceived service quality to be satisfactory if the customer's expectations are met (Berry et al, 1985).

Hadikoemoro (2002) captured thirty five items of service quality after two focus group interviews conducted at private and public universities. A total of twenty eight items were identified through factor analysis using varimax rotation. Based on a second factor analysis, those items were categorized into five dimensions as follows:-

- Academic services: ability of the university to perform service dependably and accurately, and the completeness of academic-support facilities.
- Readiness and attentiveness: university willingness and attentiveness to help students, and provide prompt service.
- Fair and impartial: ability to implement democratic campus regulation and apply discipline to all members.
- Tangible: appearance of the university based on complete and modern equipments, physical facilities and neat appearing employees.
- General attitudes: fairness of grading and courteous handling of students problems.

Owlia and Aspinwall (1996), developed 30 attributes called "quality characteristics" after conducting thorough literature reviews on service quality research papers. Based on the similarities, the service quality attributes were grouped into six dimensions as follows:-

- Tangibles: Sufficient equipment/facilities, modern equipment/facilities; ease of access; visually appealing environment; support services (accommodation, sports)
- Competence: Sufficient (academic) staff; theoretical knowledge, qualifications; practical knowledge; up to date; teaching expertise, communication
- Attitude: Understanding student's needs; willingness to help; availability for guidance and advisory; giving personal attention; emotion, courtesy
- Content: Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs of students; effectiveness; containing primary knowledge skills; completeness, use of computer; communication skills and team working; flexibility of knowledge, being crossdisciplinary
- Delivery: Effective presentation; sequencing, timeliness; consistency; fairness of examinations ; feedback from students; encouraging students
- Reliability: Trustworthiness; giving valid award; keeping promises, match to the goals; handling complaints and solving problems.

The authors re-grouped the dimensions into seven dimensions after conducting factor analysis. Following are the dimensions developed under the new groupings namely academic resources, support services, competence, attitude, delivery, content and reliability. The authors conducted three validity tests on the seven dimensions in which they found three dimensions were not sufficiently valid to be included in the framework of quality measurement. Finally, they recommended academic resources, competence, attitude and content to be used as a framework for quality measurement. (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996).

Educational service quality is defined as a student's overall evaluation of services received as part of their educational experience. It describes a variety of educational activities both inside and outside of the classroom including classroom instruction, faculty member/student interactions, educational facilities, and contacts with administration. Service quality differs from satisfaction primarily because it is quality-specific, while satisfaction deals with quality and non-quality (eg, price) evaluations. Student feedback about educational services is useful for several reasons. It can be used in quality improvement programs to help educators recognize opportunities to improve services and establish positive student perceptions. Service quality assessments can also identify gaps between students' perceptions of education and that of educators.

2.7.Research Design

Based on literature reviewed sufficient light was thrown on service quality defined by many researchers in various ways. Most of the stake holders usually seek the best instituted based on various factors such as ranking of the institution, course curriculum, teaching- learning, cost of education (fee), research, campus culture, industry linkage and placements.

In this study after examining different definitions the following dimensions of service quality were taken to evaluation educational institutes quality:

- Tangible - appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, support services (accommodation, sports) and communication materials
- Reliability - ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; Trustworthiness; keeping promises, match to the goals; handling complaints and solving problems
- Responsiveness - willingness to help the students and provide prompt service;
- Assurance - knowledge and courtesy of teaching and non teaching staff and their ability to convey trust and confidence;
- Empathy – caring and individualized attention to the student.
- Based on the objectives of the study, relevant research questions were framed.

2.8. Methodology
The methodology adopted in the present study is explorative survey. In the light of this approach an attempt was made to collect and analyse the data from a sample of population and ascertain the important dimensions and its significant relationship with student satisfaction.

2.9.Sample Design
Secondary data is taken from various websites, journals and magazines. Primary data is taken using well structured Questionnaires consisting of 18 closed end questions.6 colleges in Hyderabad were considered for the study. Total no. of students taken for the study was 306. Male 67.5% and female 32.5% are taken for the study.

2.10.Scope Of The Study
The study is confined to colleges in twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad colleges only and is confined to student perceptions only.

2.11.Hypothesis Of The Study
- H01: There is no significant relationship between the service dimension tangibility and the satisfaction levels.
- H02: There is no significant relationship between the service dimension responsiveness and the satisfaction levels.
- H03: There is no significant relationship between the service dimension reliability and the satisfaction levels.
- H04: There is no significant relationship between the service dimension assurance and the satisfaction levels.
- H05: There is no significant relationship between the service dimension empathy and the satisfaction levels.

2.12.Tools And Techniques For Data Analysis
The data collected was analyzed by calculating correlation coefficient with SPSS package.

3.Data Analysis & Interpretation
The data analysis and interpretation of independent dimensions and dependent dimensions are given below. Most of the students perceived that infrastructure, labs, library, caring nature of faculty, responsiveness, though they are important for selection of the institute their satisfaction levels were more correlated to reliability dimension (that is the institutions ability to delivery the promised service promptly and accurately that is passing in the course, placements and internships) and assurance dimension (that is knowledge, faculty being approachable and their helping nature and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.)
Pearson Correlation value and p value for each dimension at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) with satisfaction are given below:

Dimension	Pearson correlation value	Sig. (2-tailed) P value
Tangible	. 483	.094
Reliability	.898	.010
responsiveness	.311	.171
assurance	.812	.017
empathy	.479	.766

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Values And P Values

From the above table, it is observed that p values for reliability and assurance are less that 0.05 which indicates that the hypothesis H03 & H04 are accepted and the other hypothesis H01, H02, H05 are rejected. That is from the Hypothesis 3 & 4 it can be said that there is significant relationship between the dimensions reliability and assurance and satisfaction levels of students. The above Pearson correlation values indicate that Reliability(0.898) and Assurance (0.812) are high positively correlated with satisfaction than the other dimensions.

4.Conclusion
From the above study it can be said that five dimensions of educational service quality are important in determining satisfaction with their education, and among them Reliability and Assurance are very important to define the satisfaction levels of the student. Students perceive that though the other factors /dimensions that is: the teaching methodology, infrastructure, cost, and responsiveness of faculty, caring and concern of the faculty etc. are also necessary but the reliability and assurance i.e. promptness and accuracy in service and assurance of service play a major role and have greater impact on their satisfaction levels.

5.Recommendations
Quality experts believe that, 'measuring customer satisfaction at an educational establishment might be regarded by educators as one of the greatest challenges of the quality movement' (Cloutier & Richards, 1994, p. 117). This challenge is only one of several that surround quality improvement efforts in higher education. The following recommendations are suggested:
- Ranking of the institutes rightly using appropriate model/dimensions and right evaluation mechanism will help in selecting the right institute.
- The dimensions that are taken to study the perceptions may not be inclusive dimensions. Hence still the area can be thoroughly further researched by researchers.

- Many models were developed and are getting developed. But different models suit different situations/areas. Many factors, both objective and subjective factors decide the evaluation of quality.
- Further longitudinal and cross-cultural studies can shed more light on service delivery processes and factors which influence students' perceptions on quality. Such type of studies will help the students to evaluate institute in terms of the quality of the education they will receive before they invest their time, energy and money.
- Need to incorporate right kinds of assessment tools for selection of students and also check that at various levels filters need to be incorporated in the institutes.
- Rules framed by the regulatory bodies like AICTE/UGC need to review and changed as per the current requirements.

For improving the service quality/ satisfaction levels of the students, therefore the institutes need to focus more on the reliability and assurance factors and try to increase and satisfy the students. Hence, when an educational institute is able to produce flexible, ambitious, as per the required needs of the industry and ethical individuals for the industry/society the service quality of such institutes is said be good.

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