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Evaluating educational service quality in technical and vocational colleges using SERVQUAL model

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Abstract

This study attempts to assess the quality of educational services offered in technical and vocational colleges from students' perspective, via SERVQUAL model. The research is based upon a case study of the "Ahvaz technical and vocational college of girls" in Iran. SERVQUAL methodology is proven to be a powerful tool to analyze the quality of services in different sections of science and industry. The results show that in the current educational center, there are quality gaps in all the service quality dimensions; the most outstanding gap is for responsiveness dimension and the least one is for reliability.

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1. Introduction

Obtaining new customers and holding current customers have always been considered as two main approaches in service organizations. Quality of service has been studied within the discipline of business management for years; because the market is increasingly competitive and marketing management has transferred its focus from internal performance (such as production) to external interests like customer satisfaction and customers' perceptions of service quality (Gronroos, 1992).

Unlike a product which has specific specifications such as weight, size, color, substance etc. a service can have too many inconspicuous or qualitative specifications. Thus, measuring the quality of a service can be a very difficult exercise. Moreover, the expectation of the customer from the service can vary noticeably based on a range of factors like prior experience, personal needs and the other people's experience. This may lead to expand the gap between expectations and perceptions of a customer.

2. Literature Review

Service quality has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor in the success of any business (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The topic of measuring service quality has been studied widely in the past few decades.

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Parasuraman et al. (1985) described service quality as the ability of an organization to meet or exceed customer expectations. They listed ten determinants of service quality that can be generalized to any type of service, including; Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Competence, Access, Courtesy, Communication, Credibility, Security, and Understanding (Kitchroen, 2004). In 1990, Parasuraman et al. developed a multiple-attribute model called SERVQUAL for measuring service quality. This model measures service quality using five distinct dimensions that can be considered as indicators of the construct of perceived service quality. The five dimensions of SERVQUAL are “Tangibles”, “Reliability”, “Responsiveness”, “Assurance”, and “Empathy” as described in Table 1.

Several empirical studies have used SERVQUAL model to assess service quality in educational institutions like universities. Most of those researches regard students as customers of service in education (Rigotti & Pitt, 1992; Ford et al., 1993; McElwee & Redman, 1993; Foroughi Abari et al., 2011; etc.). Kitchroen (2004) cited Zammuto et al. (1996) who have argued that perceived poor service quality will ultimately affect funding and viability in the university sector by reducing the popularity of the institution and thus the number and standard of applicants, but that the effect is indirect and relatively slow. The conducted researches show service gaps in different dimensions of service quality in their case studies. Indeed, service quality, as perceived by consumers, stems from a comparison of what they feel service providers should offer with their perceptions of the performance of service provided by service providers (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Table 1. SERVQUAL Dimensions

Dimension	Description
Tangibles	The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials
Reliability	The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
Responsiveness	The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
Assurance	The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence
Empathy	The caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers

3. Case Study

The current study was conducted in “Ahvaz Technical and Vocational College of Girls” in Iran, which has 1416 students. For responding the survey, 350 students had been selected randomly and 328 of them were participated the survey and returned their answers.

In order to obtain data regarding the students’ expectations, perceptions, and importance weights of different service elements, a 25-item SERVQUAL questionnaire was employed (five questions for each SERVQUAL dimension). Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

The Cronbach-Coefficient Alpha was used to test the construct reliability (92.7 for expectations, 92.06 for perceptions, and 93.5 for indicating importance weights).

For data analysis, first we found the average score of each question. Then, by computing average for each section (corresponding to a SERVQUAL dimension) we found the average score of each dimension. Finally, we used importance weights as coefficients for each dimension. The difference between weighted averages of expectation and perception data reveals existing service gaps in service quality of this educational institution. If the gap amount is positive, this means that students are satisfied with the level of service quality and they do not expect better service from the organization. The negative value of gap, denotes that the students’ desires and expectations regarding educational services, is more than what they perceive from the currently offered services.

4. Results

4.1. Importance weights

By students' perspective the most important dimensions of services in the studied college were responsiveness and assurance. From students' point of view, empathy, reliability and tangibles are respectively less important. Table 2, shows the dimensions and their assigned weightings.

Table 2. Assigned Importance Weights

Dimension	Importance Weight
Tangibles	0.15
Reliability	0.17
Responsiveness	0.25
Assurance	0.25
Empathy	0.18

4.2. Service Gaps

Table3 shows the results of gaps analysis for each service dimension based on SERVQUAL model. Considering the table it can be concluded that there is a gap in every aspect of service quality. The negative sign for computed gap shows that the average of observed expectations is more than current perceptions.

Table 3. Service Gaps

Dimension	Perceptions (Avg.)	Expectations (Avg.)	Difference (Gap)	Weighted Gap
Tangibles	3.39	6.19	-2.8	-0.42
Reliability	4.31	6.11	-1.8	-0.31
Responsiveness	3.38	5.99	-2.61	-0.65
Assurance	3.63	6.07	-2.44	-0.61
Empathy	3.79	6.19	-2.4	-0.43

The gap in tangibles dimension (-2.8) is caused because of the leakage in physical facilities, personnel and communication materials. This is the biggest gap without considering the importance weightings and shows that the students are not completely satisfied with the level of service quality in tangibles dimension. Responsiveness is another big gap which means that the college staffs do not pay enough attention to address the students' requirements. From the findings it is obvious that students are not enough satisfied from the responsiveness of the college staff. The gap size is -2.61. Also, a meaningful gap can be seen in assurance, empathy, and reliability dimensions. But the amount of dissatisfaction is less than the other existing gaps.

It is clear that all the dimensions of service quality do not have same importance from the students view. By considering the importance weights, the ranking of the results will change. Table 4, shows the ranking of service quality dimensions regarding the amount of gap by taking the importance weights into account.

Table 4. Dimensions Ranking

Rank	Dimension	Weighted Gap	Percent
1	Responsiveness	-0.65	%26.86
2	Assurance	-0.61	%25.21
3	Empathy	-0.43	%17.78
4	Tangibles	-0.42	%17.34
5	Reliability	-0.31	%12.81

In Table 4, the percentage column represents the final share of each service dimension in the overall service quality gap.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The level of service quality in educational institution can be measured using five dimensional SERVQUAL model. The amount of computed service gaps reveals the priorities of modification and improvement of services in educational centers. From the study conducted in a technical and vocational college in Iran, final ranking of the service quality dimensions, show that the major deficiencies of service quality are in responsiveness and assurance of the offered services and this leads to students' dissatisfaction.

According to the findings, authors suggest several actions to reduce the amount of service gaps:

1. Recruiting staff who understand the importance of services and have the aptitude to provide the students with effective resolutions on the first contact whenever possible.
2. Reinforcing the staff capabilities through ongoing opportunities for training and development.
3. Requesting feedback from the students regularly using surveys or through representatives who have close interaction with students.
4. The measurement and monitoring of students' complaints is vital and the organization must have suitable systems and commitment to do this.
5. Encouraging students to share their ideas and using their opinions in educational planning

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