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SERVQUAL: Measuring higher education service quality in Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate service quality in higher education in Thailand. Specifically, this study investigates the five dimensions of SERVQUAL instrumentation (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness). The study also examines the validity and reliability of SERVQUAL in assessing higher education in Thailand. A total number of 350 undergraduate students from a private university participated in this paper. The study found that the higher education in Thailand did not meet the expectations of undergraduate students. In all five dimensions of service quality, a gap was observed between undergraduate students' perceptions and expectations as follows: Reliability: -2.25, Responsiveness: -2.72, Assurance: -2.48, Empathy: -2.48, Tangible: -2.88. The gap analysis between service perceptions and expectations showed that all scores for perceptions were lower than their expectations scores, indicating that there are a lot of service improvements efforts need to be fulfilled to enhance the service quality. Consequently, for the institution to improve the service delivery it needs to upgrade facilities and equipment in order to decrease the gap between undergraduate students' perceptions and expectations may be helpful in higher education in Thailand.

Keywords: SERVQUAL; Service Quality; Higher Education

1. Introduction

Education is a significant institution given the shift to a knowledge economy. The marketplace of higher education institutions has led to their students being increasingly concerned as customer. Higher education has become a global business and universities have to continuously explore options for exporting higher education services (Mohamad Yusof, Hassan, Abdul Rahman, & Ghouri, 2012). Moreover, the education sector where no true products are involved; service provided will represent the competitive demarcation between institutions in terms of their superiority in creating unique experiences (Khodayari & Khodayari, 2011). While there is competition in outcomes such as research and innovation, universities are also expected to deliver high service quality. Therefore, the assessment of the service quality in higher education can provide an important contribution and inputs which will be useful for management and staff to continue improving the quality of education (Al-Alak & Alnaser, 2012).

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In the 2015, Thailand became part of the single market system under Asean Economic Community (AEC), which may provide rare opportunities, and if Thais prepare thoroughly, the AEC should not affect them. Many businesses sectors have begun preparing to meet these challenges and opportunities. Education is one of the sectors to be internationalized. Therefore, higher educational institutions can prepare themselves for AEC membership by offering superior service quality.

Higher educational institutions, like any other service establishment, should strive to achieve excellence in service quality. Thus, the purpose of this study is to propose a conceptual framework for service quality in higher education by measuring the gap between expectation and perception of service quality expectations and perceptions, and to use the data collected to suggest improvements in service quality for the universities in Thailand.

2. Conceptual framework and relevant literature

2.1 Service quality concept

Quality in a service organization is a measure of the range to which the service delivered meets the customer's expectations. The characteristics of service consist of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability. Quality as defined for higher education has been identified by Harvey and Knight (1996). They suggested that quality reflects exceptional, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative.

Research on service quality gained a major push forward in the early 1980s. A number of researchers posit that service quality involves a comparison of expectations with performance. Lewis and Booms (1983) argued that service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations. Grönroos (1984) identified two dimensions of service quality namely functional quality — which involves the performance in which the service delivered and technical quality -- the actual outcome of the service. Finally, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) conceptualized service quality using a disconfirmation model that assesses customer's expectations and perceptions, with development and subsequent refinement in 1988 and 1991 of the SERVQUAL instrumentation (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1991).

The SERVQUAL model used to assess service quality is determined by the size and direction of the so-called internal gaps. The gaps are defined as: Gap 1 (positioning gap) - between customer expectations and management perceptions of those expectations; Gap 2 (specification gap) - concerned with management perceptions of customer expectations and the firm's service quality specifications; Gap 3 (delivery gap) - between service quality specifications and actual service delivery by employee; Gap 4 (communication gap) - pertains to actual service delivery and external communications about the service (Khodayari & Khodayari, 2011). The SERVQUAL instrument is based on Gap 5 (perception gap) is the difference between the customer's internal perception and expectation of the services (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990; Akter, Upal & Hani, 2008)

The original SERVQUAL scale was comprised of ten dimensions, which following further testing by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) reduced from ten to five dimensions. The five key dimensions of service quality namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, and tangibles, is one of the most used models for evaluating customer expectations and their perceptions of the service quality (Abu Hasan et al., 2008; Al-Alak & Alnaser, 2012; Khodayari & Khodayari, 2011; Zarei et al., 2012; Pakdil & Aydln, 2007). These five dimensions are identified as follows:

- Reliability – refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- Responsiveness – refers to the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service.
- Assurance – refers to the knowledge, courtesy of employees and ability to convey trust and confidence in the customer towards the service provider.
- Empathy - refers to the provision of caring, individualized attention provided to customers.
- Tangibles – refers to the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.

These dimensions are captured in the SERVQUAL instrument which consists of a total of 22 scale items. Each item is measured on the basis of responses of two statements: the first, measures customer expectations concerning a service (E) and the second, is the perception of the actual service delivered by the firms within that service sector (P). The gap for each item is calculated as the perceptions score minus the expectations score (P - E). The results of computation were as follows:

- A positive gap score implied that expectations have been met or exceeded, service quality is perceived to be satisfied.
- A negative gap score implied that expectations have not being met, quality is perceived to be unsatisfactory.

Gap scores can be analyzed for each individual statement and can be aggregated to give an overall gap score for each dimension (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Ramseook-Munhurrun, Naidoo, & Nundlall, 2010). Moreover, SERVQUAL has been

applied widely by researchers in higher education to assess customer perceptions of service quality (Khodayari & Khodayari, 2011; Mohamad Yusof et al., 2012; Al-Alak & Alnaser, 2012; Amelia, Hidayanto, & Hapsari, 2011).

2.2 Measuring service quality in education sector

The literature review has shown that numerous studies used the SERVQUAL instrument to measure service quality in higher education. Legčević (2009) studied to the students' expectations and perceptions of service quality in the faculty of law at Osijek University in Croatia and found that students' expectations exceeded their perceptions. The least and the most negative gap means were in the reliability and empathy dimensions. Also, there were significant differences between perceptions and expectations of students in all of five dimensions. Zeshan, Afridi, and Khan (2010) assessed service quality among eight business schools in Pakistan showing that the students perceived low quality in all five dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) in all institutes. Abu Hasan, Abd Rahman, and Abd Razak (2008) studied service quality in private higher education institutions and found that five dimensions and overall service quality had a significant relationship . Students' satisfaction and empathy had the strongest relationship followed by assurance, tangibles, responsiveness and reliability.

Khodayari and Khodayari (2011) examined the perceptions and expectations of Islamic Azad University in Iran, their results showed that there was a gap between student's expectations and perceptions among the dimensions of the service quality. Thus reliability, tangible, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were important for students. Furthermore, the University of Islamic Azad Firoozkooh branch must allocate more funds to improve performance. Mohamad Yusof et al. (2012) studied to service quality in higher education between research universities and non research universities finding that the tangibles dimension was most important, whereas empathy and assurance were least important. The result of this study helps academics and administrators allocate their resources accordingly. Al-Alak and Alnaser (2012) examined the relationship between service quality dimensions (tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy) and overall service quality with undergraduate students' satisfaction in the Faculty of Business at the University of Jordan. Their findings indicated that the assurance and reliability dimensions of service quality were two most important dimensions related to improvement. Amelia et al. (2011) reported that the quality of IS/IT service at STMK MDP Palembang in Indonesia had gaps between expectation and service performance with the highest and lowest gaps on the reliability and the assurance dimensions respectively. Therefore, the STMK MDP improvements to service quality lead to increase user satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

A cross-sectional study was conducted between March and April 2012 in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand.

3.2 Survey instrument

The study questionnaire consists of 2 parts; in the first part, demographic characteristics of the undergraduate students, such as age, gender, and average GPA. In the second part, the SERVQUAL questionnaire was used to assess undergraduate students' expectations and perceptions of service quality which included 21 items representing 5 the five service quality dimensions tangibles (5 items), reliability (5 items), responsiveness (3 items), assurance (4 items) and empathy (4 items). The SERVQUAL scale was translated into the Thai and back-translated into English from Parasuraman et al. (1991). A 9-point Likert-type scale was used, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (9) to access expectations and perceptions of undergraduate students in service quality of higher education institutions in Bangkok, Thailand.

The SERVQUAL instrument was revised from a pilot sample of 50 respondents. The Cronbach alpha results of pilot test were used to test the scale reliability with values of 0.8477 and 0.8271 for expectation scores and perception scores respectively. Churchill (1979) indicated that a reliability estimate of 0.80 or more was acceptable, hence the reliability results of this pilot study were supported.

3.3 Sample design and data collection

A self-administered questionnaire survey was administered to collect empirical data from the undergraduate students in five universities in Bangkok during the academic session 2011/2012 are taken as sample from public and private sectors randomly.

A convenience sampling of 400 students was selected in order to collect quantitative data for the study, a total of 400 questionnaires were printed and distributed for the purpose of data analysis. A total of 350 questionnaires were received.

3.4 Ethics

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the higher educational institution administrative officer was obtained. Further, the undergraduate students were assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

3.5 Data analysis Procedures

The data analysis for this study conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science software of SPSS version 17. This study also tested the reliability of the SERVQUAL instrument so as to ensure robust and valid results. The SERVQUAL score was calculated between perceived service and expected service with respect to the following measures: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Each dimension score was obtained by calculating the difference between the perceived (P) and expected (E) service scores (SERVQUAL score = P- E).

The positive scores mean that undergraduate students' expectations have met and their perceptions of higher educational institution services are good. The negative scores indicate that undergraduate students' expectations have not been met and their perceptions of higher educational institution services are poor.

4. Results

4.1 Profiles of the respondents

The demographic information includes the following characteristic of participants; gender, age, year of education and average of GPA. The demographics information shown in Table 1 is based on frequency distributions and percentage.

From the 350 respondents in this study, 197 (56.3%) were female and 153 (43.7%) were male. In terms of age groups, the majority of the students were 21 years old or more (77.7%). Most of the respondents' year of education were in the fourth year level (39.7%), followed by second year level (38.3%), third year level (17.4%) and fifth year and above (4.6%). The obtained GPA average of the respondents was as follows: 2.00 - 2.50 range (48%) and 2.52-3.00 range (29.4%).

Table 1. Demographic data of the sample (N = 350)

Variables		N	%
Gender	Male	153	43.7
	Female	197	56.3
Age	18 years	10	2.9
	19 years	19	5.4
	20 years	49	14.0
	21 years or more	272	77.7
Year of Education	Second year	134	38.3
	Third year	61	17.4
	Fourth year	139	39.7
	Fifth year and above	16	4.6
Average of GPA	Below 2.00	27	7.7
	2.00-2.50	168	48.0
	2.51-3.00	103	29.4
	3.01-3.50	43	12.3
	3.51-4.00	9	2.6

4.2 Reliability of study

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was used to test the internal reliability of the component variables of all dimensions for service quality. Hair, Black, Bablin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006) suggested that alpha of 0.70 and above was considered acceptable. A Conbach alpha coefficient ranging from 0.60 to 0.77 was obtained for service quality expectation dimensions and 0.96 for overall service quality expectations, and 0.49 to 0.86 for service quality perception dimensions and 0.97 for overall service quality perceptions, showing that the instrument is sufficiently reliable. Table 2 summarizes the result of the reliability tests described above.

4.3 Descriptive statistics of the variables in the model of the study

Table 2 shows the mean score of service quality expectations, service quality perceptions, and the service quality gap scores.

The mean score of the service quality expectations were high and ranged from 6.46 for (item: Given individual attention) to 7.48 for (2 items: Modern and up-to-date equipment / Convenient operating hours). The total means score of undergraduate students' service quality expectations was 7.12. Among the five dimensions, the highest expectation related to the *responsiveness* dimension (mean score = 7.33) and the lowest expectations related to the *empathy* dimension (mean score = 6.79). Besides, the four items with highest expectations score, two items related to the responsiveness (i.e. Staffs always to help students / Staffs respond promptly to queries) and two items related to the tangibles (i.e. Modern and up to date equipment / Convenient operating hours). Among the four items with lowest expectations score, all 4 items related to empathy.

The mean score of the service quality perceptions ranged from 4.05 for (item: Visual appeal of physical facilities) to 5.25 (item: Convenient operating hours). The total mean score of undergraduate students' service quality perceptions was 4.56. Among the five dimensions, the highest perceptions related to the *reliability* dimension (mean score = 4.80) and the lowest perceptions related to the *empathy* dimension (mean score = 4.32). Furthermore, the five items with highest perceptions score, two items related to the reliability (i.e. Sincere interest of personnel in solving problems/ Providing services at appointed time/ Telling when services will be performed) , one item related to the assurance (i.e. Professors have the knowledge to answer students) and one item from tangibles (i.e. Convenient operating hours). Among the four items with lowest perceptions score, 2 items related to empathy (i.e. given individual attention / Understanding specific needs of students) and these items had the lowest expectations scores, as well. Of the second items related to tangibles (i.e. Visual appeal of physical facilities / Visual appeal of materials).

The gap score for each item and dimension was computed by subtracting the expectation score from the perception score (P-E). The results show that the differences between perceptions and expectation for all the 21 items and five dimensions are statistically significant (p<0.001). In addition, the different between the total mean score of perceptions and expectations is statistically significant. Consequently, a gap between the undergraduate students' service quality perceptions and expectation exists among the higher educational institutions included in this study.

The results of study show that the total gap mean score of undergraduate students' overall service quality was -2.56. The highest gap of the service quality related to the tangible dimension (gap mean score = -2.88) and the lowest gap of the service quality related to the reliability dimension (gap mean score = -2.25). An overview of 21 items gap scores found that from five items with highest gap, four items relate to the tangible dimension (i.e. modern and up to date equipment / Visual appeal of physical facilities / Visual appeal of materials / Neat and well-dressed staffs), and one item related to the responsiveness dimension (i.e. staffs give prompt service to students).

Table 2. Mean scores of dimensions of service quality

Dimensions and Items	Expectations (E) Mean	SD	Item to total correlations	Perceptions (P) Mean	SD	Item to total correlations	(P- E) Mean Gap score
Reliability	**7.05**	**1.34**		**4.80**	**1.67**		**2.25**
Providing service as promised.	6.91	1.66	.6059	4.71	1.83	.6958	-2.20
Sincere interest of personnel in solving problems.	7.02	1.60	.6695	4.80	1.93	.7483	-2.22
Carrying out of the services right at the first time.	6.97	1.70	.6798	4.76	1.95	.7118	-2.21
Providing services at appointed time.	7.10	1.55	.7111	4.80	1.90	.6746	-2.30
Telling when services will be performed	7.25	1.49	.6306	4.93	2.04	.6263	-2.32
Responsiveness	**7.33**	**1.48**		**4.61**	**2.00**		**-2.72**
Staff give prompt service to students.	7.27	1.67	.7611	4.45	2.18	.7201	-2.82
Staff always to help students.	7.43	1.52	.7641	4.79	2.23	.7970	-2.64
Staff respond promptly to queries.	7.30	1.58	.7626	4.58	2.08	.7943	-2.72
Assurance	**7.13**	**1.35**		**4.65**	**1.98**		**-2.48**
Students trust staffs.	6.98	1.59	.7466	4.44	2.10	.7990	-2.54
Students feel safe while receiving services.	7.05	1.56	.7459	4.57	2.25	.8256	-2.48
Staffs are courteous with students.	7.18	1.63	.7721	4.54	2.25	.7536	-2.64
Professors have the knowledge to answer students.	7.31	1.54	.6708	5.03	2.11	.7110	-2.28
Empathy	**6.79**	**1.53**		**4.32**	**1.76**		**-2.48**
Given individual attention.	6.46	1.85	.5977	4.29	2.05	.6439	-2.17
Dealt with in a caring fashion.	6.89	1.65	.7211	4.35	2.08	.7893	-2.54
Staff keep students' interest at heart.	6.94	1.78	.6518	4.37	2.02	.6608	-2.57
Understanding specific needs of students.	6.90	1.82	.7249	4.28	2.04	.7054	-2.62
Tangibles	**7.30**	**1.47**		**4.42**	**1.87**		**-2.88**
Modern and up to date equipment.	7.48	1.77	.6919	4.25	2.28	.7661	-3.23
Visual appeal of physical facilities.	7.29	1.81	.7276	4.05	2.12	.8612	-3.24
Neat and well-dressed staffs.	7.13	1.70	.7311	4.44	2.08	.7351	-2.69
Visual appeal of materials.	7.15	1.80	.6467	4.12	2.12	.8169	-3.03
Convenient operating hours.	7.48	1.56	.6243	5.25	2.38	.4915	-2.23
			α=.955			α=.965	
Overall service quality	**7.12**	**1.21**	**6**	**4.56**	**1.64**	**5**	**-2.56**

An Investigation of the difference between the five dimensions of expectations, the five dimensions of perceptions, and gap of service quality based on the undergraduate students' demographic variables (i.e. gender, age, faculty and GPA average) in higher educational institutions by one-way ANOVA showed the following:

- There were no significant differences between the expectations based on the all demographic variables.
- There were no significant differences between the five dimensions of expectations based on the demographic variables- gender, age and GPA average. An exception was the faculty of students' variable showed that there was a significant difference between the assurance of expectation and faculty (p=.023).
- There were a relatively significant differences between the perceptions based on gender (p=.019), age (p=.004) and faculty (p=.000) except GPA average had no significant.
- There were significant differences between the all five dimensions of perceptions based on age and faculty variables. Besides, the result supported that there was significant difference between reliability, responsiveness, assurance of perceptions and gender (p= .045, .003, .022). Including, there was significant difference between assurance of perceptions based on GPA average (p= .017).

- There were a significant differences between the gap of service quality based on gender (p=.026), age (p=.018) and faculty (p=.001) except there was no significant difference between gap of service quality and GPA average (p=.519).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to provide a conceptual and operational framework to decision about the undergraduate students' expectations and perceptions of service quality in higher education institutions. The SERVQUAL instrument was used in this study to assess the five service quality dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. The result of the reliability tests by Cronbach alpha values for overall expectations and perceptions ranged from 0.96 to 0.97, similar to the results of previous studies accomplished in Indonesia, Malaysia, Croatia (Amelia, et al., 2011; Mohamad Yusof, et al., 2012; Legčević, 2009). The highest expectation score related to the responsiveness dimension and the highest perception score related to the reliability dimension. The lowest expectations and perceptions score of empathy dimension is indicative of a weak relationship between the professors, staffs, and the personnel with students and need to improve behavior and communication between personnel and students.

Based on the statistical analysis, it is found that undergraduate students' expectations exceed their perceptions, evidenced by the students perceived low quality scores in five dimensions of service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles) in all institutes; a gap between expectations and perceptions with the highest gap of the service quality is related to tangibles dimension and the lowest gap of the service quality is related to reliability dimension. This is similar to the results gained from the study by Zeshan, Afridi, and Khan (2010) assessed to service quality in the eight business school in Pakistan and Khodayari and Khodayari (2011) studied to service quality of Islamic Azad University in Iran. Previous study results showed that the highest and lowest gap of service quality were on reliability and assurance of IS/IT services provided by universities in Indonesia (Amelia et al., 2011). Legčević (2009) indicated to the least and the most negative gap means were in the reliability and empathy dimensions of service quality in faculty of law Osijek in Croatia.

Thus reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were important for students. In addition, results of this study showed that there were significant differences between the gap of service quality based on gender, age and faculty. As the findings indicated, among SERVQUAL's five dimensions, the dimension with the most negative gap mean score was in tangibles; followed by responsiveness was the second assurance, empathy and reliability. The findings of the present study have several managerial implications for service quality enhancement in the universities in Thailand.

First, tangibles showed the most negative service quality gap mean score (Mohamad Yusof et al., 2012). Thus, the universities can work on improving tangibles, i.e. to increase the visual appeal of physical facilities, materials and modernize the equipment. Also the administrators should introduce flexible working hours.

Secondly, to address the responsiveness dimension; schools need to provide prompt services, demonstrate a willingness to help, and respond to student inquiries (Legčević, 2009).

Thirdly, regarding assurance; the staffs of the universities' staff can increase over perceived quality by possessing the knowledge to answer students' questions, and by making sure that their staff are courteous and friendly at all times to students. Moreover, the behavior of staffs should instill trust among the students.

Fourth, the empathy can be strengthened especially by understanding students' specific needs and looking out for their best interests inside and outside of class.

Finally, as to reliability universities should strive that to ensure that they communicate correct and accurate information, and in a timely fashion; also they need to clearly communicate when its services will be performed. Therefore, higher educational institutions may improve their services in the light of discussed dimensions of SERVQUAL according to the expectations and perceptions of the undergraduate students.

6. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations of the results. First; the results are based on the higher educational institutions of Bangkok, Thailand, so other studies should conducted in other parts of the country to increase the external validity of the study's results. Second; the research was conducted using to only bachelor degree students, future research might include master and doctoral students. The service quality model developed in this study could be extended to investigate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction and customer behavior intentions in the education sector. Also, perceptions of service quality in the higher education sector from other stakeholders' perspectives such as administrative staff, academic staff, etc. should be considered. Finally, a comparison between public and private higher educational institutions' service quality gap scores should be investigated.

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