Using Servqual and Gap Analysis for Enhancing the Quality of Teaching at University Level

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Abstract

Quality is an emerging paradigm and it is only quality that shall drive the existence of business and management schools that once mushroomed in the 90s in India. It is imperative to understand what constitutes quality in the context of higher education and how can the expectations of students, employers and other stakeholders be met to ensure that the student undergoes not mere education but develops skills which are a result of quality development initiatives at the hands of the faculty and the owners of these institutes of higher education. This paper provides a model to analyse the components of quality expectations from the students and provides a platform for the providers of education to understand where do they themselves stand vis-a-vis the student expectations and then further provides a solution to close the gaps between the expectations and what is actually being delivered through a method called co-creation.

Keywords: Gaps, higher education, quality, SERVQUAL.

1. Introduction

Education is a service industry and in itself it is one industry that transforms the society and the nation at large. Higher education in India has seen a big phase of growth and the entry of private universities has enhanced competition on each parameter like it does in any other industry. However what remains a matter of grave concern is the quality of teaching at these institutions because this is what determines the quality of the students that emerge out of these institutions. It is thereby of utmost
importance that quality of instruction or teaching be of a high quality that aims at student skill development which shall be beneficial both to the student and the institution in the long run and will also be fundamental to the existence and growth of the institution.

Successful students of management education acquire the knowledge and skills that enhance and enrich their lives and enable them to make meaningful contributions to their organizations. In turn, organizations that are successful in meeting their goals and fulfilling their purposes become enormous assets to societies, fostering greater productivity and a more desirable quality of life. The value of management education to individuals, organizations, and society is almost incalculable.

The paper is based on the application of services marketing practice for the design, delivery and quality assurance of research supervision. Academic research supervisors can benefit from the use of the service delivery quality systems which aid in supervision design, understanding of student needs and expectations, and addressing gaps between what the student perceives, and the supervisor believes is occurring in the supervision arrangement.

There are three levels of services products—search goods, experience goods and credence goods—which are exist across a spectrum of the relatively certain outcome to high uncertain outcomes and subjective judgements. Search goods are easily explored and understood by the consumer before encountering the service as the have higher levels of physical products associated with them—for example, car repairs, tailoring or take away food. For the most part, the first type of service delivery is less commonly identified with the higher education supervision process—although physical products such as teaching notes, books or even the diploma are present, they are not the core of the supervision arrangement.

Experience goods represent the less tangible, although still measurable, understandable and predictable by the consumer—whilst the services are usually high in experience, and can only be judged whilst in the service encounter, they can be assessed by the customer in terms of enjoyment, entertainment or overall satisfaction Law, D. C. S., & Meyer, J. H. F. (2011). This is often measured at the university level through subject evaluation forms which address in-process issues of teaching quality, lecture enjoyment, content understanding and similar experiential aspects Bryant, J. L. (2006).

2. Literature Review

Services marketing refers to the communication, management and delivery of any deed, performance or effort which results in limited to no physical outcomes for the customer. Services are intangible, perishable activities which do not always lead to the possession of a material object, and which take place in an interactive process aimed at creating customer satisfaction (Wilson, K.L., Lizzio, A. and Ramsden, P. (1997). Services marketing is based on the principle that the customer will receive an experience, emotion, memory or other intangible outcome as the primary benefit of the
service encounter. Whilst this does not prevent the service from providing some forms of tangible evidence that the service encounter occurred, the physical objects are supporting evidence rather than the reason for the purchase. Within services marketing theory, higher education is frequently cited as a key example of a service with limited tangible outputs. Higher education is classified as a service product with the primary outputs being the mental development, knowledge, skills and graduate outcomes rather than the ownership of an object such as the degree certificate that represents tangible evidence of the education service encounter.

Recent developments in the broader marketing community have incorporated the intangibility of the service outcome into the wider marketing literature through the concept of services-dominant logic Zavvar, T., Behrangi, M.R., Asgarian, M. and Naderi, E. (2007). Services dominant logic proposes the concept that all marketing exchange is based on the provision of an actual service which results in intangible outcomes or the delivery of a physical object which, when used by the consumer, contains an embedded service that results in an intangible outcome Law, D. C. S., & Meyer, J. H. F. (2011). The recasting of the physical object as an embedded service delivery mechanism, rather than as the product in its own right, has two impacts for the use of marketing within the higher education service delivery. First, within the broader education framework, the physical evidence of higher education such as readings, textbooks or other physical materials represent forms of embedded service delivery. The textbook becomes an embedded education service that is accessed as a self service delivery mechanism through the student reading and internalising the embedded knowledge. Co-creation of value occurs as the customer creates the service by using the physical product (Payne et al., 2006) Second, the physical evidence of the research supervision process retains the intangible embedded service component—the creation of a physical thesis document at the end of the research supervision period is the development of an embedded education service that coexists with the graduate outcomes component of the supervision service product.

**Methodology**
This study provides a conceptual framework based on the authors own experience of ne and a half decades and discussions with senior professors engaged in quality initiatives at various colleges and university departments to arrive at a direction to apply service quality models to enhance quality of teaching.

**Defining service quality**
Service quality is seen as a subjective measure of the difference between what the customer expects, and what they perceived they have received during the service encounter. This has been explored as two separate, yet connected, approaches to measuring services quality—the services gap model (Zeithaml et al., 1988) and theSERVQUAL service quality measurement instruments. Service quality is also connected to satisfaction with the performance of a service—in the context of this paper,
satisfaction with the supervision service is considered to be a measure of the quality of the supervision service.

**Perceptions versus expectations: the customer gap**

Stodnick, M. and Rogers, P. (2008), identifies the gap between the expectations of the research process and the reality of the research experience as a primary factor in the non-completion of the subject’s thesis components. In services marketing, this is identified as the disconfirmation of expectations model, and is a core element of the management of service quality and service delivery. The disconfirmation model is simply the difference between the expected level of a service and the perceptions of the service received ($Q = P - E$) with three outcomes of satisfaction from the levels matching (0) positive disconfirmation resulting in satisfaction ($+$), and negative disconfirmation (2) resulting in dissatisfaction with the service.

Mayer _et al._ (2003) outline a range of influence of the customer perception include personality, cultural factors, and other influences based on temporary subjective factors such as mood, and the perceived risk associated with the service. Key customer influences for students in the process have been identified as cultural influences including gendered role expectations (Johnson _et al._, 2000), importance of the research to the individual and the risk associated with failure or breakdown in the supervision (McCormack, 2004). From a research supervision design perspective, there are limits to how these influences on the perceived service can be influenced as they are residual elements of the student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>TEACHING EQUIVALENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RELIABILITY</td>
<td>Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately</td>
<td>Competency to supervise Area expertise Appropriately appropriate research experience or qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSURANCE</td>
<td>Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence</td>
<td>Supervision experience Technical knowledge of methodology Subject area/content knowledge Interpersonal relationship between student and supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANGIBILITY</td>
<td>Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel</td>
<td>Office space Tutorial rooms Lecturer appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPATHY</td>
<td>Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers</td>
<td>Understanding student outcomes from the thesis, requirements of the supervision arrangement Personalised research agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSIVENESS</td>
<td>Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service</td>
<td>Willingness to assist the student Speed of response to submitted Materials Open door policy</td>
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The provider gap: four potential gaps in supervision delivery

The service provider gap model demonstrates the influencing of the delivery of the actual service, and the creation of the expectations in the minds of the customer in terms of controllable factors that are influenced by service product design. The services gap model is presented as a conceptual framework for analyzing points of potential breakdown in any service delivery process (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Consequently, the model is presented as a series of negative constructs that identify potential points of failure in the process—this negatively framed focus is a feature of the model as a service-failure audit system. The four identified points of breakdown are:

2. Gap 2: not having the right service designs to deliver what the customer expects.
3. Gap 3: not delivering to service standards that are set.

Student gap: the difference between the expected and the perceived supervision

McCormack (2004) emphasized this gap as the major contributing factor to thesis drop out as the tension between the student’s perception of the supervision, and their expectations for the supervision arrangement overwhelmed the research project. The student gap is influenced by the external communications from the university, supervisor and word of mouth from current or former research students. The external communications represent a form of socialization of the research students into the research agenda of the university, and the expectations of the research supervision project. In the broader services literature, this gap is frequently measured against the SERVQUAL framework.

Gap 1: not knowing what student expects

Gap 1: Is perhaps the easiest gap to close during the initial stages of the research supervision as the student and supervisor negotiate their respective roles and agree to the structure and nature of the supervision project. Direct question of student expectations and assumptions, along with the development of a research contract, or through the recasting of the supervisor-student relationship from master-apprentice to a more advisory role may reduce this primary gap. The failure to establish the expectations of the student had a significant impact on the completion rates (McCormack, 2004; and overall student satisfaction with the research experience (Ives and Rowley, 2005).

Gap 2: Not having the right supervision designs to deliver what the students expects

The second gap is most likely to be the enduring problem of generational change between supervisor and student, with the expectations held by supervisors being shaped by their research scholarship experience. Anderson et al. (2006) examined the
perceptions of supervisors as to the roles of the student, and highlighted a range of factors that supervisors believed were the pre-existing attributes required of a research capable student. Gaps in the supervision design can also be attributed to the supervisor’s assumptions regarding the nature of graduate attributes as either pre-existing (level 1) or secondary by-product of the supervision process. Where the supervisor believes the role of the supervision process does not extend to level 3 or level 4 of the Barrie (2004) model of attribute development, the supervision gap has the potential to exist, and to influence the design of the supervision arrangements.

Similarly, Todd et al. (2006) emphasized the design of the research process and the “fading” method of progressively reducing the active role of the supervisor in the decision making processes as the student gained experience and confidence in their capacity as a researcher. However, without the research design matching the needs of the student, or having been clearly communicated to the student, the supervision gap is likely to widen as the supervisor “fades” out the support in the belief that the student is ready or willing to accept the responsibility. Manathunga (2005) also outlined the early warning signs of research student drop out which included the failure of the research supervision designs to meet the needs of student in terms of support, access or guidance. This also impacts on the capacity of the supervision to match the reliability aspect of the supervision quality, and reduces the sense of assurance in the capacity of the supervisor to deliver a satisfactory supervision experience.

**Gap 3: not delivering to supervision arrangements**

The third gap is relatively straightforward in terms of supervision failure, either through non-delivery of the promised supervision, or other failures of the research process incurred by the supervisor or university including the departure of the supervisor from the research project (Ives and Rowley, 2005). The supervision failures range from non-delivery of supervision through to delays in responding to requests for feedback, failure to read draft material, or avoiding contact with the student (Ives and Rowley, 2005; McCormack, 2004).

Gap 3 can arise from personal performance by the supervisor, or through structural issues such as time management, staff resource overloading or poor timetabling which reduces the capacity of the supervisor to provide adequate supervision to the students. Non-delivery of the promised supervision will influence the perceived reliability and the assurance factors, along with perceptions of responsiveness of the supervisor in reacting to student requests.

**Gap 4: not matching supervision performance to supervision promises**

The fourth gap in the process is the distance between explicit and implicit promises for the research supervision and the nature of the thesis project, and the reality of the research experience. This gap can be created by explicit promises made in the research supervision process such as those noted by Ives and Rowley (2005) where the research process is “sold” to the prospective student as a dynamic research environment which, in reality, is far more of a solo exercise in self guided research and development.
Similarly, the reputation of university research including the communicated experiences of previous research students can create the gap between the promised service and the reality of the supervision.

Beyond the breach of explicit promises, the fourth gap also represents the socialization process of higher education. McCormack (2004) noted that the dissatisfied students felt they have been given the misleading or misguided impressions as to the nature of the research supervision, and the thesis project. Kotze’ and du Plessis (2003) discuss the role of socialization processes in preparing customers and students into their roles in co-creation of the service product. It is this socialization process that creates a series of implicit promises to the student that can be the root cause of gap 4. Translation attributes and enabling attributes, as identified by Barrie (2004), socialize students into disciplinary specific expectations of autonomy, self-identification and development as a researcher. Kamler and Thomson (2004) also emphasize the role of the writing process in supervised research as the creation and development of the academic identity of the author, and the socialization of the student into the expectations, promises and boundaries of their chosen discipline.

3. Results
Applying the service quality model and the gap analysis to a set of students and teachers engaged in a MBA program we asked what went well with the course, the most popular responses were the convenience of being able to access a course from virtually anywhere, the opportunity to meet students from other places, the availability of information, and the clear structure and organization of the courses.

The feedback from the course evaluations highlighted the following quality issues in the online environment that are important to the student:

- Constant communication with the course coordinator and the course faculty.
- Knowledgeable, timely and relevant interactions with students.
- Meaningful communication with classmates.
- Relevant and sufficient short activities and assessments.
- Timely and continuous feedback on activities and assignments.
- Quality of discussions.
- Convenient access to a computer.
- Making the environment more personal.
- Adequate preparation and orientation to deal with discussions in the online environment.

Applications of the course contents to the business environment

4. Conclusion
Closing the gaps with co-creation
Co-creation provides the opportunity for the student and supervisor to frame the standards and expectations for the supervision, the research higher degree process and the expectations regarding the timelines for the thesis. For example, when dealing with the aspects of responsiveness or reliability, co-creation provides the opportunity for the student and supervisor to negotiate the expectations and the delivery of the supervision performance. Students who would prefer greater responsiveness in the supervision relationship can establish tight timelines for students and supervisor turnaround of written material. Services marketing utilises co-creation as a mechanism for consumer ownership of the service product and delivery process. In commercial marketing, co-creation can be implemented in either an explicit contractual approach, or as an implicit part of the service environment (Zeithaml et al., 2006). For example, in business consulting, both parties contractually agree to the provision of timely responses to request for information, and provision of access to the organization. The contract cannot provide an optimal or even satisfactory service without company meeting the co-creation obligations. Contract based co-creation has been raised in the higher education sector, with Hockey (1996) drafting a sample contract which incorporates explicit recognition of the delivery promises for supervisors and students, which may alleviate some problems from miscommunication of expectations and responsibilities that arise in supervisor gap 4. However, contractual co-creation does have some level of limited applicability where neither party can enforce the arrangement beyond a moral commitment to adhering to the guidelines of the documented agreement. The process of quality enhancement is not a one stop process rather a continuous one. It requires the commitment of all the stakeholders and the enforcement kills the quality process. India has seen a tremendous growth of higher education and both the public and private players are equal providers in this category. What makes it crucial is that Higher education is not run for mere compliance norms of quality parameters which have to be shown for certification to regulatory bodies like AICTE, NAAC or NBA but implemented as the spine of the system to make it fruitful and worthwhile. Education is a noble service, it delivers outcomes that have far reaching impact and a snow ball effect on the reputation of the college or university and its brand image.

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