Service Quality and Student Satisfaction in Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study of a Private Zambian University

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Abstract. This study was carried out to find out the effect of service quality on student satisfaction at a Zambian Private university. This had the objective to determine how the service quality dimensions can affect student satisfaction. 354 students were interviewed through a survey that was based on Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL). Data was collected from the students in order to assess their expectations and perceptions of services received. The discrepancy between expectations and perceptions (Perception – Expectation) formed the gap scores that were used to assess service quality and student satisfaction. Negative gap scores show that service quality is perceived poor and hence no customer satisfaction while positive gap scores show that higher service quality and hence customer satisfaction. However, from the study, it was found that overall service quality was perceived low (-1.5125) meaning expectations exceeded perceptions of services and all the dimensions showed higher expectations than perceptions of services. The implications of using this model in assessing service quality and student satisfaction from the student's perspective include knowing about students' perceptions on service quality, trying to meet and manage students' expectations, improving quality management by identifying areas that have weaknesses in terms of satisfying students' needs.

Keywords: Dimensions, Higher Education, Service Quality, Student Satisfaction

Background

In today's world education has become the primary determinants of standard of living, employment status and further the economic and industrial development. There is a stiff competition among Higher Education Institutions around the world. Students have got so many options and for this reason for the Higher Education Institution to stand out it has to provide the best services. With the increasing number of competitions, it is crucial for institutions to understand what students expect as they are becoming more demanding and selective in their choice of an institution for their studies (Sukwadi, Yang, & Liu, 2011). It becomes more important when the institution is trying to attract international students (Rasli, Shekarchizadeh, & Iqbal, 2012). When students are satisfied, they will recommend their friends or family to join the institution. According to Kasper, Helsdingen and Gabbott (2006) service quality is one of the factors that can lead to customer satisfaction. Service quality can be used as a strategy for competitive advantage (Gronroos, 2007).

Student Satisfaction and Service Quality

Satisfaction is a state felt by a person who has experienced an outcome that fulfilled their expectations (Kotler & Clarke, 1987). Palmer (2005) defines satisfaction as "a psychological experience of a customer after confirmation-disconfirmation of expectations of a specific transaction." Satisfaction can be expressed through compliments or loyalty to the service provider (Kasper, et al., 2006). Students express dissatisfaction by switching to other universities.

There is no universal, all-encompassing definition of service quality (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). However, the most common definition is the traditional notion that views quality as the customer's perception of service excellence, i.e., quality is defined by the customer's impression of the service provided (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Thus, service

quality is defined as the gap between customers' expectation of service and their perception of the service experienced. Customer perception is what the customer thinks of the service that has been performed and customer expectation is what the customer was expecting to receive.

Service Quality in Higher Education

In the recent years there has been a number of Higher Education Institutions that have opened up in Zambia. This has resulted in competition among the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In accordance with the provision of the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 Part IV, Section 15 (1) and Statutory Instrument No. 25 of 2016 Part II Section 5 (2), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is mandated to provide for the registration and regulation of private Higher Education. Higher Education Authority through the Government Gazette on 23rd April, 2021 published a list of registered private Higher Education Institutions in Zambia. 53 private Higher Education Institutions had been registered with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for 2021. In addition to this there are 9 public Higher Education Institutions in Zambia making a total of 62 Higher Education Institutions in Zambia. HEA has continued to caution the general public not enroll at any HEI not registered with the Authority and as their qualification are not recognised. Although there are external quality assurance agencies to regulate higher education institutions on quality it is the responsibility of each higher education institution to provide quality services to its customers who are students.

Literature Review

Definition of Service Quality

The term service quality is a combination of two different words; service and quality. According to the Oxford dictionary, service means any activity or benefit that someone can provide to someone else that is essentially intangible. (Kotler & Keller, 2009) define service as "any intangible act or performance that one party offers to another that does not result in the ownership of anything". Quality on the other hand is the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something. Parasuraman et al. (1988) have defined service quality as the ability of the organization to meet or exceed customer expectations. It is the difference between customer expectations of service and perceived service (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Measuring service quality is a better way to dictate whether the services are good or bad and whether the customers are satisfied with it. Haywood-Farmer (1988) listed: components of service quality, called the 3 "Ps" of service quality" as comprising of three elements:

1. Physical facilities, processes and procedures;
2. Personal behaviour on the part of serving staff, and;
3. Professional judgment on the part of serving staff but to get good quality service.

Haywood-Farmer (1988) stated that "an appropriate, carefully balanced mix of these three elements must be achieved." What constitutes an appropriate mix, according to him will, in part, be determined by the relative degrees of labour intensity, service process customization, and contact and interaction between the customer and the service process.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed the gap model that explains gaps that may arise in between what the customer expects to receive and what the organization provides. It is composed of five gaps linked together. The gaps are defined as: Gap one occurs as result of management's misunderstanding of the customer's needs from the market research carried out. Gap two is as a result of the designer's misinterpretation of the information passed on from market research while gap three is the conformance gap and arises when staff fail to perform the service as stipulated by the standards that have been put by the organization. Gap four is the communication gap, which arises due to the wrong information being passed on to the

customer. This means that the customer is not informed of what goes on in the background and therefore may interpret delays as failure when this is not the case. Gap five is the difference between what the customer expects and what the customer thinks of the service that has been received. Below is a figure of the illustration of the gap model.

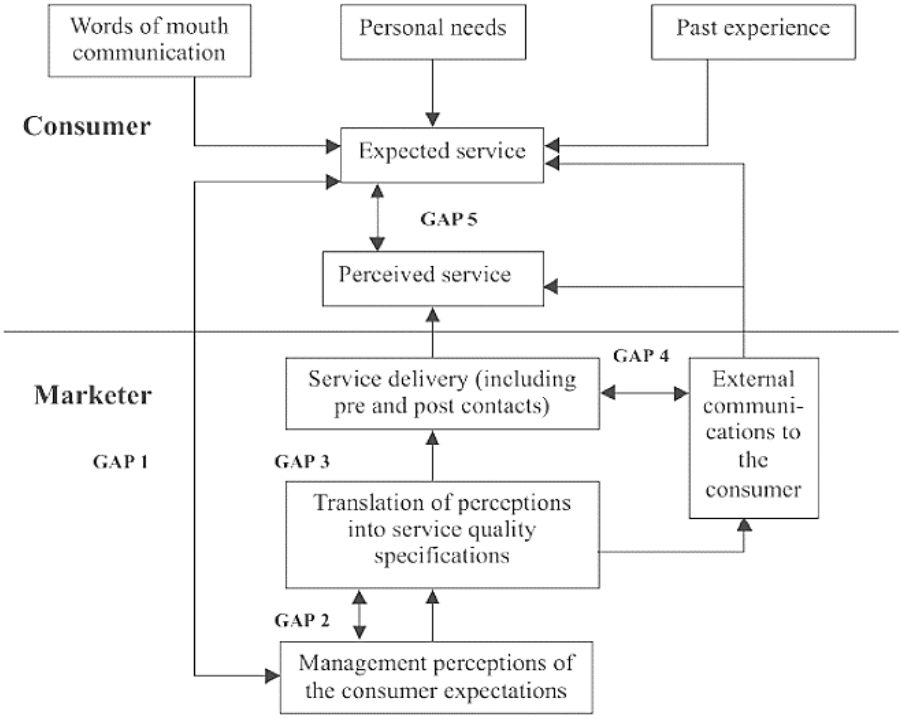

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Service Quality
Source: Parasuraman, et al. (1985)

Service Quality and Student Satisfaction in Higher Education Institutions

It has been stated that in the last decade student satisfaction has been dramatically affected not only by the service quality offered by HEIs but also by the ever-changing environment of the global markets. However, the concept of service quality is not well defined in higher education (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Cheng (cited in Cheng and Tam, 1997) defines education quality as the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations‖. The seven models of quality of education proposed by Cheng and Tam (1997) to evaluate the concept of education quality are: (1) goal and specification model; (2) resource-input model; (3) process model; (4) satisfaction model; (5) legitimacy model; (6) absence of problems model; and (7) organizational learning model. Each of the education quality models has its own peculiar characteristics, strengths and limitations that describe the aspects of the education quality in its own respective ways; they are, however, interlinked with one another (Tam & Cheng, 1996). These models allow the administrators of tertiary institutions to assess their own education quality (Tam & Cheng, 1996).

According to Shah (2013) there are three main areas when it comes to measuring the performance of an institution. These areas are; i) innovative learning, ii) research excellence, and iii) personal and professional development. With the realization of providing high quality services in developing curricula and the administration and management of higher education institutions, measurement of service quality has become an issue of great importance (Shekarchizadeh, Rasli, & Hon-Tat, 2011) (Al-Alak A. , 2009).

Evaluation of performance is another such area. In Higher Education Institutions students are considered as customers and the recipients of the service being provided. It is the students who should measure the quality of the output of the provider, the instructor, whereas it the instructor who as provider should be responsible of the quality assurance of the service (Henard & Roseveare, 2012). Students evaluate and judge the service quality to be satisfactory by comparing what they want or expect to what they are really getting. Gruber, Fub, Voss, and Glaser-Zikuda (2010) believe that the behaviours and attitudes of customer contact employees primarily determine the customers' perceptions of the service quality provided. This means, the human interaction element is essential to determine whether students consider service delivered satisfactory or not (Sapri, Kaka, & Finch, 2009).

Ilias, Hasan, Rahman and Yasoa (2008) noted that the main factors that could affect the level of students' satisfaction were students' perception of learning and teaching, support facilities for teaching and learning such as libraries, computer and laboratory facilities, learning environment (rooms for lectures, social space and university buildings), support facilities (health facilities, student accommodation, student services), and external aspects of being a student (such as finance, transportation). With all these capabilities, an institution will be able to meet student expectations and compete favorably.

Dimensions of Service Quality

With regards to service quality dimensions Parasuraman, et al. (1985) came up with ten determinants of service quality that can be applied to any type of service. Later on, the ten dimensions were then regrouped in the well-known five dimensions in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1990) which include assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangibility.

The five dimensions of service quality and these are explained below:

i. *Assurance:* Khan & Fasih (2014) after (Blery, Batistatos, Papastratou, Remoundaki, & Retsina, 2009) states that the process of acquired knowledge being showcased by staffs in executing their term of preferences during service delivery can be highly assuring to customers.
ii. *Empathy:* Khan & Fasih (2014) after Blery, et al., (2009) state that empathy is the ability for service delivery firms to pay attention to individual customer problems and demands, then address these issues effectively.
iii. *Reliability:* The process in which service provider remains faithful in rendering services to its customers can be considered as the reliability dimension of service quality (Khan & Fasih, 2014).
iv. *Responsiveness:* The process in which service providers react quickly to resolve customer problem positively within a given time is called responsiveness (Blery, et al., 2009). interface improves the responsiveness of service delivery firm (Kaura, Datta, & Vyas, 2012).
v. *Tangibles:* According to Khan & Fasih (2014) after Blery, et al., (2009) tangibles are seen to be perceptible by touch or a visible existence.

In this research however, the researcher used all the above five dimensions to measure the effects of service quality on students' satisfaction at the university.

Measurement of Service Quality

There are a notable number of approaches to measure service quality but four main approaches have become most popular for measuring service quality. The most popular one is SERVQUAL model which was developed by Parasuraman et al. This measurement compares the level of perception against expectation. Another one is simpler and straight forward which just measure on the current level of performance, known as SERPERF developed by Cronin

and Taylor, Evaluated Performance Model (EP) developed by Teas have its importance as E-P = service quality and the fourth, HEdPERF become successful in measuring the service quality of higher education, developed by Firdaus Abudullah.

Methodology

The study followed a positivist view of epistemology. The researcher assessed customer satisfaction in HEI's using the SERVQUAL model basing on previous studies from where the research obtained more knowledge. The approach of this research was quantitative in nature. This was used because it is appropriate to answer the research questions. Survey strategy which the researcher used for the study, entails the collection of data on more than one case (usually quite a lot more than one) and at a single point in time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables (usually many more than two), which are then examined to detect patterns of association (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The population of the study included students who are studying at the university. The University is estimated to have about 4,500 registered students and Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table was used in this study to determine the sample size in which the sample size was 354 respondents. The table below shows the Krejcie and Morgans's *(*1970) table used to determine the sample size.

Table 1. Krejcie and Morgans's (1970) sample size table

N	*S*	*N*	*S*	*N*	*S*
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327
60	52	340	181	2400	331
65	56	360	186	2600	335
70	59	380	191	2800	338
75	63	400	196	3000	341
80	66	420	201	3500	346
85	70	440	205	4000	351
90	73	460	210	4500	354
95	76	480	214	5000	357
100	80	500	217	6000	361
110	86	550	226	7000	364
120	92	600	234	8000	367
130	97	650	242	9000	368
140	103	700	248	10000	370
150	108	750	254	15000	375
160	113	800	260	20000	377
170	118	850	265	30000	379
180	123	900	269	40000	380
190	127	950	274	50000	381
200	132	1000	278	75000	382
210	136	1100	285	1000000	384

Note.—*N* is population size. *S* is sample size.

Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970

For this research both primary and secondary data collection methods were utilized to get a broad picture of the phenomena at hand. Where a self-administrated questionnaire survey was administered to collect empirical data from the students at the university as sample and secondary data was collected from sources like past studies and archives in order to obtain some reliable literature and empirical findings that was applied in order to have a better understanding on the service quality construct and how the SERVQUAL model can be used to measure it.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science software. 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).

Ethical Consideration

The researcher treated any information collected from any individual confidentially without disclosing the respondent's identity, and the researcher was also as open minded as possible and expressed opinions as they are given.

Study Limitations

Being a cross-sectional study, this research could only offer a snapshot of the phenomenon. Thus, only correlation rather than causality can be inferred. In future longitudinal studies conducted annually as an all-encompassing, holistic and recognized higher education service quality evaluation system would help institutions to assess and monitor their service quality performance and the level of students' satisfaction.

Presentation of Findings and Analysis

Reliability of the Study

To determine the reliability of the data collected, Cronbach's Alpha for the all five dimensions was calculated using SPSS and results tabulated in the table below. Cronbach Alpha ranges between 0 and 1, with 0 indicating a perfectly unreliable measurement and 1 being a perfectly reliable measurement. Thus, the Cronbach Alpha was calculated for each subscale or service quality dimension in the survey.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha reliability test results

	Service Quality Dimensions	Number of Respondents	Expectation Cronbach's Alpha	Perception Cronbach's Alpha
1	Reliability	354	0.807	0.792
2	Responsiveness	354	0.801	0.797
3	Assurance	354	0.794	0.801
4	Empathy	354	0.805	0.806
5	Tangibles	354	0.804	0.797

Therefore, all Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the service quality dimensions are higher than 0.7, indicating a reasonably high level of reliability of the measurement instrument; i.e., the questionnaire.

Overall Service Dimensions Score

Table below shows the means and standard deviation gap score analysis for students' satisfaction for each of the five dimensions and their statements as well as the average gap score means and standard deviations for each statement from the five dimensions. The scores indicate that expectations have all exceeded the perceptions by roughly 1 or 2 units. The biggest differences in the statements are with regard to Reliability (-2.1751), Responsiveness (-2.0169), Assurance (-1,4859), Empathy (-1.935) and Tangibles (1.6836).

Table 3. Overall Service Quality Dimensions Score

Dimension	Statement	Expectations		Perceptions		Gab Score (P-E) (Student Satisfaction)		Average Gap Score for Dimensions	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reliability	RL1	5.8559	1.56778	4.4011	1.65000	-1.4548	0.08222	-1.6305	0.30090
	RL2	5.7062	1.58913	4.0904	1.93163	-1.6158	0.3425		
	RL3	5.6073	1.72009	3.9548	1.98241	-1.6525	0.26232		
	RL4	6.1243	1.44447	3.9492	1.81361	-2.1751	0.36914		
	RL5	6.0508	1.52699	4.7966	1.97531	-1.2542	0.44832		
Responsiveness	RS1	5.8446	1.66658	4.1582	1.90953	-1.6864	0.24295	-1.6535	0.30074
	RS2	5.9209	1.53503	4.6638	1.78838	-1.2571	0.25335		
	RS3	6.1412	1.51941	4.1243	1.92533	-2.0169	0.40592		
Assurance	AS1	5.7175	1.64545	4.2316	1.83220	-1.4859	0.18675	-1.2931	0.23190
	AS2	6.0678	1.41058	4.6017	1.90038	-1.4661	0.4898		
	AS3	5.7768	1.72908	4.3814	1.91277	-1.3954	0.18369		
	AS4	5.9209	1.79532	5.0960	1.86266	-0.8249	0.06734		
Empathy	EM1	5.4915	1.67338	3.8079	1.84908	-1.6836	0.1757	-1.7570	0.25144
	EM2	5.5621	1.52703	4.0085	1.90643	-1.5536	0.3794		
	EM3	5.8079	1.52685	3.8729	1.70923	-1.935	0.18238		
	EM4	5.9209	1.43784	4.0650	1.70610	-1.8559	0.26826		
Tangibles	TA1	6.1243	1.47551	4.4407	1.74854	-1.6836	0.27303	-1.2898	0.28455
	TA2	5.9153	1.55308	4.4746	1.72490	-1.4407	0.17182		
	TA3	5.7486	1.53765	4.8842	1.83007	-0.8644	0.29242		
	TA4	5.9718	1.43185	4.5339	1.77174	-1.4379	0.33989		
	TA5	6.161	1.44377	5.1384	1.78934	-1.0226	0.34557		
	Overall Mean	5.8780		4.3655		-1.5125			

The Gap analysis clearly indicates that there is a significant difference between expectations and perceptions of the respondents. The substantially large number of gaps, which is evident across all dimensions, is indicative of a considerable discrepancy between the expectations and perceptions of the respondents.

Discussion of the Findings

How Service Quality Affect Student Satisfaction

Service quality greatly influences the students' satisfaction in multiple dimensions. Empathy is the highest recorded gap of the five dimensions with average of -1.7570 and greatly

influence by the statement that staff should keep students' interests at heart which scored at (-1.935). Students also had a concern in the empathy dimension from the statement that the staff should have an understanding of specific needs of students scoring at (-1.8559). O'Neill and Palmer (2004) said empathy is a dimension that is significant with satisfaction, although the strongest support for this finding is actually from Maushart (2003) as he found that when student show a high satisfaction with their college experience, it is due to the formal and informal contact with their lecturer and staff members. The impact of students' satisfaction lies in the quality of their learning environment of institution as students demand the well qualified, learned and experienced faculty for their academic and professional development. The students want to be taught by those lecturers whose knowledge, expertise, liberality and reasonability are up to the mark.

Conclusion

In conclusion, service quality has been widely accepted as an antecedent of satisfaction and neglecting it may jeopardize the competitiveness of an organizations as satisfaction and competitiveness of a service-related organizations are inter-related. For that, denying or neglecting the importance of service quality is the same like risking the continuation and the competitiveness of the institutions because by taking it into consideration service quality can actually explain why students are not satisfied with certain service quality dimensions. More than that, by focusing on critical factor in service quality especially empathy and assurance mean that the institution is paving a way toward a better evaluation in student satisfaction.

Recommendations

- Future studies can be carried out in multiple cultures in order to find out the applicability of the SERVQUAL model in HEI.
- Further studies could be carried out on service quality of Public High Learning Institutions.
- To enhance the understanding of the concepts of service quality and students' satisfaction, a similar study to be conducted with a larger sample size.
- Further, a comparative study should be conducted to investigate any differences in service quality and student satisfaction between public higher institutions and private higher institutions.

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