Study Determining the Most Important Service Feature Pertaining to Students' Perception of a Higher Education Institution: A Case Study of Bikaner, Rajasthan

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Abstract—*For every nation, to become globally competitive, it has to focus on its overall economic development and for that purpose there is a greater need to concentrate on education, particularly, higher education. Today, greater attention is on the global academic excellence and thus it becomes necessary for the higher education institutions to deliver quality services to their students and acquire competitive edge. It is evident that many higher education institutions are ignorant towards the level of service they provide as they should be aware as to what students expect from them. The present study tries to identify the most important service feature pertaining to students' perception of a higher education institution. An exploratory study was conducted among management students with a sample size of forty four. A structured questionnaire was used for gathering data. For analyzing the data, statistical software- MS Excel was used. The study indicated that among the various service features, quality of academic staff is the most important service feature as per students' perception. It is anticipated that the results of this research will help the higher education institutions to deliver best of the service features which are considered as important pertaining to students' perception and to improve on those features which are least important as per them.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a process in which and by which knowledge, character and behaviour of the young are shaped and moulded. (Prof. Drever) Education beyond the secondary level, especially, education provided by a college or university is higher education. Higher education mainly and generally means university level education. It offers a number of qualifications ranging from higher national diplomas and foundation degrees to honors degrees and as a further step, postgraduate programmes such as masters degrees and doctorates. These are recognized throughout the world as representing specialist expertise supported by a wide range of skills that employers find very useful. Higher education is a service since it exhibits all the classical features of services: it is intangible and heterogeneous, meets the criterion of inseparability by being produced and consumed at the same time, satisfies the perishability criterion and assumes the students' participation in the delivery process (Cuthbert 1996a).

The size of India's higher education system stands at the third position in the world after China and United States. It plays an indispensable role in the social and economic development of our country. Higher education institutions have sprung up in large numbers in India but increase in their numbers has also led to increased competition among these institutions. According to Centre for Education Growth and Research (CEGR), India's higher education system contributes about 3,50,000 engineers and 2.5 million university graduates annually to our workforce, yet at given time about 5 million graduates remain without jobs.

As customers are the lifeblood for the existence of any organization. There is nothing more precious than a customer (Lauer 2012). The same applies to higher education institutions as students are the customers and therefore also regarded as the lifeblood of its existence. All types of customers, including students, have certain expectations about the type of service they receive or buy (Nell and Cant 2014).

Earlier students were considered as the recipient of education but the current trend sees them as 'clients' or 'customers'. Students now days perceive themselves to be the customer of education sector (Raina, Bhadouria and Shri 2013). Earlier students considered institutions as a place to receive knowledge and gain learning but now days students' expectations are increasing. They expect value for their money. They expect good services being delivered by the institutions in lieu of fees paid by them. The high level of quality services being delivered by the higher education institutions also therefore provides a competitive advantage to them with respect to other institutions.

The focus of this study is therefore placed on the perception of the services delivered by the higher education institution. Therefore, this study attempts to identify the most important

service feature pertaining to students' perception of a higher education institution.

2. STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

Perception is the ability by which individuals select, organize and interpret the input from their senses to give meaning and order to the world around them. According to Parasuraman, A "Perceived quality is the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority. It differs from objective quality, is a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance."

Parasuraman et al., (1985, 1988) developed an important framework for understanding customer satisfaction in services. Satisfaction is based on the disconfirmation of consumer expectations in what is commonly known as the Gap model or the ServQual model: satisfaction occurs when perceived performance meets or exceeds the student's expectations and dissatisfaction results when there is a negative gap between performance and expectations. These authors propose that satisfaction is based on the gaps alongside five dimensions of experience that are common to all services: assurance (i.e., courtesy, knowledge, trust), empathy (i.e., individual attention and caring), reliability (dependability and accuracy), responsiveness (i.e., promptness and accommodation), and tangibles (i.e., facilities, equipment, personnel). They also suggest that the formation of expectations is based on word of mouth (e.g., recommendations), needs, past experiences, formal communications from the organization to its customers (i.e., printed promises), and price (Zeithaml, 1993, 1996).

(Voss, Gruber and Szmigin 2007; C.E. Nell and M.C. Cant 2014) stated that the quality of services in higher education institution can be pronounced as the variance between students' expectation of a particular service and their perception of the received service.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study conducted by Choon Ling Kwek (Corresponding author), Teck Chai Lau and Hoi Piew Tan (2010) investigated the determinants of students' perceived service quality for a private higher education institution in Malaysia, based on the process model of education quality. They found that quality of librarians, staff responsiveness from the Division of Examinations and Awards, curriculum, amount of recreational activities, and the process model of education quality are positively related to the students' perceived service quality.

An investigation conducted by Carol Sherry, Ravi Bhat, Bob Beaver and Anthony Ling (2004), assessed business students' perceptions of services experienced at New Zealand Tertiary Institute. They found a significant difference between students' expectations of what an "Excellent tertiary institution" should offer in the way of services and the students' perceptions of the services currently experienced. A significant difference was also found between the perceptions of local students and international students in all five dimensions with the international students' perceptions of services being lower than the local students. The Degree students had higher expectations of an excellent tertiary institute than the Diploma students, while the Diploma students rated their service experiences of Unitec as slightly better than the Degree students.

Halil Nadiri, Jay Kandampully and Kashif Hussain (2009), attempts to diagnose the perceived service quality of administrative units such as services provided by the registrar, library, faculty/school offices, rector office, dormitories, sports and health centre.

R. Natarajan (2000), examined the nature and scope of quality, and the different perceptions about quality, particularly as it applies to engineering education. He concluded that in manufacturing and service industries, quality is the hallmark of excellence and effectiveness in engineering education. Li-Wei Mai (2005), by using several service quality variables examined the differences in the perception of education quality, and the main factor affecting that perception, between students in the USA and UK.

In the current scenario where students are considered as "customers" of higher education institutions, it is important on the part of institutions to deliver best services and also to ascertain the important service features according to students' perception that gives satisfaction to the students.

In combining the studies of the various service features with respect to students' perception towards the higher education institution, the present study will focus on eight service features namely, operational activities, infrastructure, course organization and assessment, quality of academic staff, quality of administrative staff, quality of librarians, reputation and admission requirements of the higher education institution.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of the research is to study the various service features and determine the most important service feature with respect to students' perception of a higher learning institution.

5. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research was carried out for this study to determine the most important service features as per students' perception in a higher learning institution.

Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was used for the study. A structured questionnaire survey was used to gather information from the respondents. The

questionnaires were filled by the management students of second and forth semester from the Institution of repute in Bikaner, Rajasthan. For analyzing the data, statistical software–MS Excel was used.

A total of 60 respondents were asked to fill up the questionnaires. Out of them 48 responded, so the response rate of this study was 80%. 4 questionnaires were not filled completely and therefore not considered as a part of this study. The sample size is therefore 44. Twenty two students each from second and forth semester were taken for the analysis.

Secondary data collection was also done from various articles, websites and journals. It also includes data from other referral sites and databases.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Charts below shows the analysis and interpretation of data collected through questionnaires.

6.1. Demographic Variables

The demographic data collected includes age, gender and semester of study. Out of the total of 44 respondents, 6 respondents are in the age group 18-21 years and 38 respondents are in the age group 21-25 years as shown in Fig. 1.
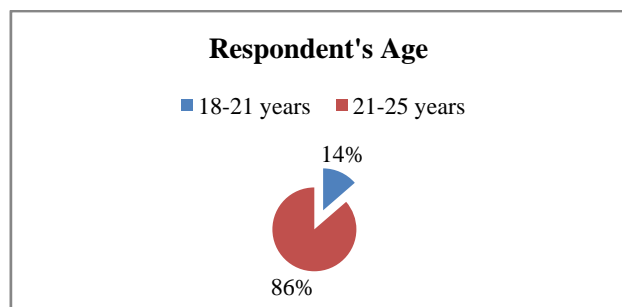

Respondent's Age

■ 18-21 years ■ 21-25 years

14%

86%

Fig. 1

Out of total 44 respondents, 20 were male and 24 were female as shown in Fig. 2.

Respondent's Gender
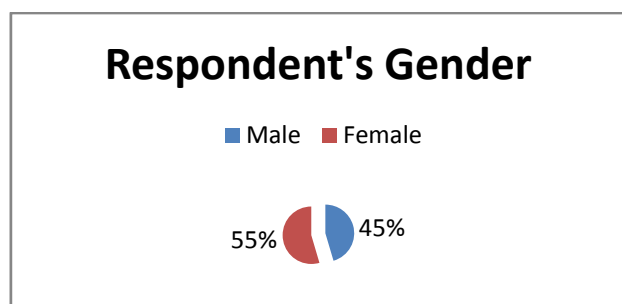
■ Male ■ Female

55% 45%

Fig. 2

To get a representative sample out of the second and forth semester of study, 22 respondents are chosen from second semester and 22 respondents were chosen from forth semester as shown in Fig. 3.
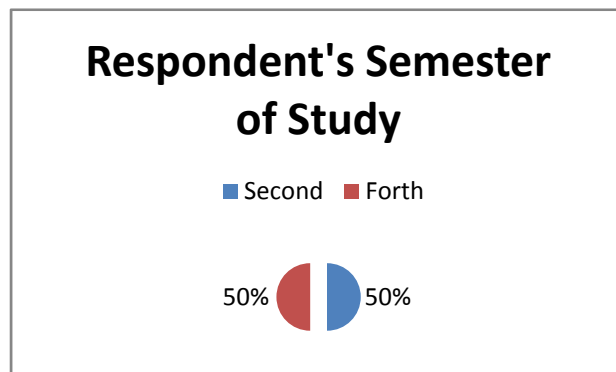

Respondent's Semester of Study

■ Second ■ Forth

50% 50%

Fig. 3

6.2. Service Features of Institution

The respondents were asked to give rank to each of the eight service features pertaining to their perception of the service quality of institution. The most satisfied feature was ranked as 1, the second best was ranked as 2, and so on for all the features and the service feature that was least satisfied was ranked as 8. The mean value was calculated for every service feature as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Students' Perception with respect to Service Features

S. No.	Features	Mean	Ranking
1	Operational activities	6.36	8
2	Infrastructure	6.23	7
3	Course organization and assessment	4.59	5
4	Quality of academic staff	2.73	1
5	Quality of administrative staff	3.14	2
6	Quality of librarians	4.73	6
7	Reputation	3.68	3
8	Admission requirements	4.55	4

Table 1. shows the mean value of ranks given by the students according to their perception for service features of the institution. The service feature with the lowest mean value indicates that it is the most important service feature as per students' perception and was ranked as 1 and so on and the service feature with the highest mean value indicates that it is the least important service feature and was ranked as 8.

These results show that the quality of academic staff is the most important service feature for the students. The next important feature is the quality of administrative staff of the

institution. Operational activities of the institution were found to be the least important service feature.

7.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results indicated that the students' perception about the quality of academic staff was the most important service feature of the academic institution. The result also shows that students are satisfied by the majority of the service features offered by the institution. Even though it shows that the students are not unsatisfied, there is still a room for the improvement in order to completely satisfy the students.

According to students' perception, the students are most satisfied by the quality of their academic staff in the institution. They feel that the lecturers have good academic credentials and research efficiency, courses are well taught by their lecturers, they deliver their lectures on time and show sincere efforts in solving their problem and are supportive to their needs.

It was further found that the students are also satisfied by the quality of administrative staff and reputation of their institution. The administrative staff also solves the students' problem sincerely and they are well aware about the university's rules and procedures to be followed in the institution.

In contrast to this, the least important service features as per students are operational activities and infrastructure. Therefore the institute should focus on the improvement of the physical facilities, lighting in the classrooms, transportation facility and other basic facilities in the institution. To conclude, the institution can obtain the competitive advantage above other institutions by having excellent service features being delivered to their students by focusing on their quality.

8.   LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The use of a non-probability sampling technique places limits on the generalisability of the results. The sample size is small. With large sample size the results may differ. Limitation of the study that needs to be addressed for further studies is that the sample consisted of only one institution.

The future research must identify other possible service features and cover more institutes and universities in the study. Furthermore, different faculties in a higher education institution can be included to study the quality of service features.

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