Service Quality in Malaysian Higher Education: Adult Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

The study of service quality is relatively new especially in higher education sector. Previous studies predominantly focus service quality issues of main stream higher education but rarely discussed in the context of adult-learner especially in the context of off-campus program. The issue is whether university manages to provide equal service quality for both mainstream and off-campus students. Uniquely, off-campus students are more mature, perhaps could be different in term of their expectation and evaluation toward service quality. Thus, this study aims to discover service quality issues in 'off-campus program' offered by one of the university's center of excellence. This study employed the SERVQUAL measurement to understand students' service quality gaps at two different centers. Finding from 82 respondents suggest that there is a significant difference in service quality gaps between the two centers. Among the crucial dimensions are tangibility, reliability and empathy issues. Implication and recommendation for service quality of adult learning were also discussed.

Keywords: service quality, service quality gaps, off-campus program, adult learners

1.0 Introduction

Higher education in Malaysia is facing tremendous challenge in winning students' choice and preference. This is due to the increasing number of higher education institutions, both public and private. For instance, it is recorded that only 32 private higher education institutions in year 2000, the number had increased to 418 private institutions in 2009 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2009). This development had forced Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia to investigate the ideal number of institution for the ease of monitoring and strengthening the rating of higher education in Malaysia (mStaronline, 2011). Among others, this exercise is to ensure the quality of higher education in Malaysia and toward achieving international education's excellence-hub in this region that is consistent with Malaysia Economic Transformation Program.

1.1 Problem Statement

Such intense competition, only few higher education institutions will survive with the ability to deliver high quality education service. This is because high quality service delivery assured students' satisfaction. According to Cheng (1990) and Tan and Kek (2004), higher educational quality can be assessed through students' satisfaction by determining the extent to which students' need and expectation can be satisfied. Hence, various measures have been developed to address higher education students' satisfaction. Most scholars (e.g. Abdullah, 2006; Athiyaman, 1997; Hill, 1995) using SERVQUAL instrument. However, previous studies were conceptual in nature and strictly focus on mainstream student sat faculty as well as university level. Little study has been researched to understand service quality among adult learners. Thus, this study employed SERVQUAL instrument but limit the study on 'off-campus' program (i.e. adult leaner)operated by one of university's center of excellence.

The objectives of the study are, (1) to identify differences between students' expectation and performance of service quality and (2) to recommend area(s) for improvement.

This study benefits the management and staffs of the 'off-campus program' operators to continuously improve the service quality of higher education. This is important as students' of this specific program typically matured students thus more critical and demanding. Additionally, the latter improvement effort could benefit students.

2. Literature

The research of quality management in service sector is relatively new as compared with manufacturing sector (Jusoh et al., 2004). As stated by Vinzant and Vinzant (1996), it just started in 1990s. However, the study of service quality has gained considerable attention and debated by numerous scholars and practitioners due to the nature of the service itself and the difficulty in defining ideal definition of service quality (Shahin, 2010). The most cited definition of service quality refers to the measure of what is expected from a service encounter and the perception of the actual service encounter (Parasuraman, Zeithaml& Berry, 1988).

Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggested that the measure of service quality through SERVQUAL dimensions, namely; tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The measurement consists of 22 items. This is an extension of the earlier service quality conception that is explained as Model of Service Quality Gaps (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). According to these scholars, there are five major gaps in service quality concepts. These gaps are:

- Gap 1:the difference between what customer expected and what management perceived about the expectation of customers
- Gap 2: the difference between management's perceptions of customer expectations and the translation of those perceptions into service quality specifications and design.
- Gap 3:the difference between specifications or standards of service quality and the actual service delivered to customers.
- Gap 4:the difference between the service delivered to customers and the promise of the firm to customers about its service quality.
- Gap 5: the difference between customer expectations and perceptions – the service quality gap.

The first four gaps (Gap 1, Gap 2, Gap 3 and Gap 4) are known as how the service is delivered, while Gap 5 closely related to customers. As such , it is believed that the gap could be the ideal measure of service quality (Shahin, 2010).

The study by Tan and Kek (2004) among two local universities in Singapore revealed that learning and facilities aspect as a key determinant of students' service quality satisfaction. These researchers also concluded that student with different years had different perception and expectation towards service quality. This finding is consistent with the study by Jusoh et al. (2004) and Hill (1995). They suggested that new students tend to rate positive response as compared to senior students perhaps due to their experience with service provider.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of initial study, two major learning centers of 'off-campus program' were selected namely Center A and Center B. These two centers were selected because of variety of programs offered and huge number of students relative to other centers. The characteristic of these two centers is summarized as in the Table 1.

Table 1: *Characteristics of Academic Centre*

Characteristics	Centre A	Centre B
Location	Rural area	Metropolitan area
Type	Main campus	Learning centre (rented premise)
No. of student	1000	500
Program offered	Bachelor of Business Management, Bachelor of Public Management, Bachelor of Communication	Bachelor of Business Management, Bachelor of Public Management, Bachelor of Communication

A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to identified students. Ten classes/courses were selected randomly during the third meeting (5 classes for each center). In average, each class consists of 30-40 students. Every 3rd student in the attendance list was approached with the help of course coordinators and lecturers during the class meeting. Only 96 sets were returned, thus response rate is 96% based on the self-collected basis. However, after data cleaning and screening, only 82 questionnaires were usable and proceed for data analysis.

Research instrument i.e. questionnaire was adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988). The questionnaire consists of three main sections, namely; section A to measure students' service quality expectation, section B to measure students' service quality perception and section C detailing students' background.

All the measure of service quality dimensions namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988). These measures consist of 22 items. For the purpose of the study, service quality is defined as measures the difference between what is expected from a service encounter and the perception of the actual service encounter (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In details, the dimensions of service quality are stated as follows:

- *Tangibles*. Refers to physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel.
- *Reliability*. Refers to ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- *Responsiveness*. Refers to willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- *Assurance*. Refers to knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- *Empathy*. Refers to caring and individualized attention that the firm provides to its customers.

4. Findings and Discussion

Generally, 35.4% are male and 64.6% are female respondents. Majority of the respondents aged between 26 to 35 years old. Only 1.2% of the respondents are more than 55 years old. Based on the survey, majority of the students are from Bachelor of Public Management program (69.5%), followed by Bachelor of Business Administration program (19.5%) and Bachelor of Communication (11%). Most of the respondents from semester 1 (51.2%), followed by 14.6% in semester 2, 12.2% in semester 5 and only 1.2% in semester 4. With regards to source of information of the academic program, almost 40% of the respondents obtain the information through friends and 34% via website. Almost 20% of them depend on official media advertisement. The distribution of sample throughout learning centers considered equal with 53.7% respondents from Center A and 46.3% from Center B.

To answer the research objective one, T-test was conducted. Table 2 summarized the mean gap scores between these two learning centers. According to Tan and Kek (2004), service quality gap score could be obtained by subtracting the perception scores with expectation scores. Positive gap score denote the satisfaction while negative score indicate that there was dissatisfaction towards the consumption of the services.

The results suggest that, the trend of dissatisfaction of service quality emerged in both Center A and Center B. The result is consistent with Tan and Kek (2004) findings in higher education whereby all the scores toward negative service quality gaps. Generally, the negative service quality gaps predominantly huge for Center B. The result also suggests that respondents from Center B had put high expectation on the service encounter as compared to Center A. Center B is situated at metropolitan and Center A is located in the main campus which is quite remote area. According to Australian Communication and Media Authority (2008) study, there is a tendency for people in metropolitan to have more complaints on service quality as compared to non-metropolitan. Perhaps, respondents or students from Center B have different demographic and psychographic (income distribution, lifestyle, attitude) background that resulted the higher expectation from them.

The highest service quality gap for Center A is associated with responsiveness of staffs and lecturers to serve the students. On the other hand, the lowest service quality gap recorded in Center A is tangible aspect (relates to equipment, physical facilities and education materials). Respondents from Center B indicated that the crucial negative service quality gap is pertaining tangible aspect (-1.77) which is contradicting with the Center A's finding. The least effect is on reliability aspect such as the issue of delivering promised services. This is hold true as students in Center A enjoyed the main campus facilities which are up to the standard of higher education requirement outlined by Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia. However, Center B is a learning center that is rented by the operator. Such facilities are at the minimum requirement for offering the off-campus program.

The second critical aspect of service quality for Center B is empathy gaps (i.e. -1.71). Empathy refers to the ability of service provider to show caring and individualized attention to the customers. Based on the findings, students had high expectation of empathy yet, the actual performance as perceived by students' is less than what is expected. The gap is quite crucial that demand for immediate corrective action. Currently, lecturers and staffs of Center B are part timers. The current practice of the operator is to appoint nearby higher education institution lecturers to conduct the lectures. Perhaps, these lecturers did not felt sense of belonging thus limit their empathy toward the service provided. However, advance investigation cannot be proceeded to confirm the findings as employees' commitment issues is out of the scope of this study.

In general, based on the satisfaction grid as suggested by Watson, Saldana and Harvey (2002), students in both centers had rated that service quality dimension as very important and the score is between satisfactory and very satisfactory. As a result, management should seek formula to maintain excellent standard and take a countermeasure to ensure that there is no slippage and improve the service quality whenever possible.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, service quality in higher education specifically among adult learners is equally important as in mainstream system. The dimension of responsiveness, tangibility and empathy were recorded as a crucial element for adult learners' service satisfaction. This finding suggested the urgency for management and operator of this program to take corrective action at their Center B. As the center located at strategic location i.e. metropolitan with high population and market potential, it is important to reduce the discrepancy between expectation and perception of adult learners towards service encounter.

Importantly, as majority of the respondents were from semester 1, it is deemed necessary to highlight that possibility of potential customers to form their expectation not only after they had registered as a student, but maybe beforehand. Therefore, it is crucial for management and operator to gather relevant information mainly to enhance adult learners' service satisfaction. This study also revealed that, majority of the students obtained the information of the program through friends. Thus the currents service gaps put the management and operator of this program in danger situation and perhaps could tarnish the brand image at large. In this new millennium with the advance in telecommunication and information such as social media, students that experienced negative service gaps could tarnish overall image of the program, organization and the brand through negative word-of-mouth.

As this initial study limit to understand the main issues in service quality among adult learners in two main learning centers, future study should extend in term of number of centers as well as respondent. Comparative study between main stream and 'off-campus program' also could be research as it benefits university in improving overall service quality to community.

Table 2: *Mean gap scores between Center A and Center B*

Dimensions	Mean expected service score	Mean perceived service score	Mean gap score
Centre A			
Tangible	5.94	5.21	-0.73
Reliability	5.70	4.88	-0.82
Responsiveness	5.73	4.71	-1.02
Assurance	5.98	5.22	-0.76
Empathy	5.96	4.97	-0.99
Centre B			
Tangible	6.13	4.36	-1.77
Reliability	5.81	4.49	-1.32
Responsiveness	6.07	4.49	-1.58
Assurance	6.09	4.55	-1.54
Empathy	6.10	4.39	-1.71

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