Service Quality in Malaysian Higher Education: Students' Perceptions and Expectations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions and expectations of undergraduate students concerning the quality of service at a private university in Malaysia. It was found that students were critical of many aspects of service, especially with regard to equipment, facilities and record keeping. Students were, however, relatively positive about the quality and the performance of their lecturers. The area that needed most improvement was the valuation placed by the university on feedback from students. It is suggested that further studies are needed to enable universities to compete in an increasingly competitive market-orientated industry.

Keyword*s: service, quality, student perceptions, evaluation, higher education.*

Introduction

Higher education was once perceived in Malaysia as only for the privileged. In recent years, however, more opportunities have been opened. A basic eleven years of primary and secondary education are now compulsory for all Malaysian children and this has increased the number of school leavers and the demand for places in tertiary institutions. Awareness of this pressing problem led the Malaysian government to invite the private sector to venture into higher education under the sixth Malaysia Plan of 1991-1995 (Sivalingam, 2007). This move allowed twinning programmes and preparatory courses between

local institutions and foreign universities to be offered locally and was followed by the establishment of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia.

About a decade after the establishment of PHEIs was allowed, problems started to appear. Some PHEIs did not have any teaching and learning activity but conferred diplomas for a certain amount of "tuition fees" paid by students. Others went too far by not running any courses at all and only opened their premises in order to get enrolment and tuition fees from unsuspecting students. Some others offered courses which were not recognized. Such problems impaired the good reputation of other genuine institutions and the trust of their clients. In order to regain this reputation, the government agreed to establish a regulating body to monitor the quality of products offered by PHEIs.

This regulating body, the National Accreditation Board (LAN), later renamed Malaysian Quality Assurance was established in 2005. Its roles include licensing and awarding accreditation to programmes, monitoring their quality and conducting periodic audits.

Private institutions need more than just recognition and validation from a governing body to survive. Since they do not receive public funds to run their business, PHEIs must generate their own revenue. One major contributor to the revenue is the tuition fees collected from students. The need to get high enrolment makes the industry a competitive field. As providers, institutions need to cater to their clients' needs and the clients are looking for 'quality'. In order to attract students, PHEIs must project an image of quality for their services and products. Nevertheless, quality is very much a subjective issue. The question is how do we interpret quality?

Woo (2006) interpreted quality of higher education in a distinctive but interesting manner. He cited Arora (1986) who listed the main determinants of quality as physical facilities, qualifications and competence of the lecturers, curriculum, instructional materials, equipment, teaching and learning strategies, evaluation and management. However, Woo later argued that parents might define quality as the popularity of the institutions and the number of enrolled students. On the other hand, academics might perceive that huge research grants and high academic entry requirements are determining factors. Woo added that students make decisions to choose institutions that offer desired courses with the shortest duration or the ones with the largest campus grounds. He concluded that customers' satisfaction is viewed as a function of 'perceived quality'.

Objective quality might be determined by some standard key performance index (KPI) decided by experts and monitored through quality audits conducted by the MQA. PHEIs must ensure that perceived quality is given as much emphasis as objective quality because that is the only way to maintain enrolment. As customer satisfaction is the determinant of perceived quality, the only way to find out about the level of satisfaction is to ask the students themselves.

Private colleges and universities have played a significant role in the development of higher education in Malaysia. Although they are relatively new players in the field their contribution is becoming more important and recognizable. Unlike their public counterparts, private institutions are fully responsible for their own survival. Although research grants are another source of income, for most new universities this is not very significant. Most PHEIs are teaching universities that rely on student enrolment to survive. For universities to ensure a steady flow of students, they need to understand the students' current and future needs in order to ensure that existing students can be retained and new ones recruited (Siti et al., 2000).

This study looks into students' current perceptions and what they expect an ideal university to be with regard to infrastructure, administration, academia affairs and overall performance. If institutions are unable to meet students' expectations there will be dissatisfaction among clients (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003) and this may lead to termination of service in the form of students quitting their courses.

It is not uncommon for private institutions to go out of business in Malaysia. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, expressed his concern over the closing of 123 PHEIs owned by bumiputras (Malays and other ethnic groups classified as indigenous to Malaysia) while 30 others were reported to be in difficulties. One reason is poor planning (Habibah, 2005). In order to prevent this happening to other institutions, it is time for private colleges and universities in Malaysia to prepare for future challenges. Unfortunately, there are few studies that measure the satisfaction level of the clients of Malaysian higher education providers, something which is crucial to ensure a sustainable level of enrolment. The decision to enrol is very much influenced by perceived quality and this depends on the satisfaction of the clients. Thus, it is crucial to indentify students' perceptions and their needs and expectations.

 In light of such developments, significant questions need to be raised. First, what are the perceptions of the students of the institutions they are

studying in? Second, what are their expectations that we can fulfil to ensure a long term amicable relationship? Finally, what do students feel about the overall service of their university?

Private higher education needs to consistently gauge the level of their service quality to ensure their competitive edge in confronting new challenges of higher education industry. It is hoped that this study will help private higher education providers understand their clients' perceptions of the service rendered and what they expect universities to provide.

Literature Review

In recent years, a substantial literature on quality in tertiary education has appeared. Several general surveys have discussed the establishment of higher education as an industry. For example, Kaur (2007) argued that globalisation has changed the perception of commercial organizations of higher education and has created new needs such as internationalised teaching, research and community service in the quest for academic excellence. Similarly, Simic and Carapic (2008) emphasised the importance of cooperative links between higher education providers and commercial markets. To achieve this, a study by Wright and O'Neill (2002) suggested that higher education providers conduct extensive consumer research to identify factors that students consider important. Another researcher, Egol (2006) suggested that the 'industrial age' approach of teacher-directed, lecture-based systems in universities is obsolete and that it can therefore be presumed that the governance of private universities should also be transformed.

This business perception of higher education is shared by Bryant, Scoufis and Cheers (1999) who stated that with changing market trends, higher education providers face pressure to demonstrate quality outcomes, excellence and cost effectiveness. However, although higher education shares significant features with other sectors, there is still a unique feature of higher education service that sets it aside from other businesses. Sivanand and Nagalingam, (2004) suggested that unlike physical products, services cannot be packed, weighed or checked before they are bought because production and consumption takes place simultaneously in the presence of the customer. Chua (2004) and Yeo (2009) noted that that to provide quality services, providers must

understand the customers' needs and in order to understand their needs, providers must know how their customers define quality.

The concept of quality in higher education has been analyzed in several studies, for example by Tih and Salleh (1999), Airey and Bennet (2006) and Woo (2006). Other studies have discussed the mechanisms used to measure quality in higher education (see e.g. Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2002; Sivanand, 2004; Paechter et al., 2009; Yeo, 2009).

The relationship between students' perceptions, needs and expectations in higher education has been studied by several researchers including Pithers and Holland (2006) and Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991). A study by Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003) found that students need to be informed about the nature of the course, future employment opportunities, study workload, amount of independent learning required and access to resources. Turnbull et al. (2006) found that one of the needs is to balance paid work and study. Jamaliah and Zaidatol (2004) studied students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and found that students' satisfaction is based on expectations while Gallifa and Batalle (2010) found that students based their perceptions of service quality on campus-related matters such as the appearance of the campus and facilities.. Similar findings were discovered in another study in Auckland where students had issues with assurance (Sherry et al., 2004). Clewes (2003) discovered that students' expectations of service quality were based on three stages: pre-course position, in-course experience and post-course service as well as hostels and post-graduation service (graduation audit, alumni and career advice).

The measurement of service quality in higher education has interested many researchers and authors. One of the most influential developments in the measurement of service quality is SERVQUAL, devised by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988 (Fogarty et al., 2000). Initially SERVQUAL was developed after a series of focus group sessions with consumers. It contains 22 questions which encompasses five dimensions of customer service which are named 'tangibles', 'reliability', 'responsiveness', 'assurance' and 'empathy'. Oliveira and Ferreira (2009) elaborated these dimensions which can be summed up as 'tangibility' (the physical appearance or facilities of the company), 'reliability' (how trustworthy the company is in providing the service), 'responsibility' (how helpful and customer-friendly the employees are), 'security' (the knowledge, competence and qualification of the employees) and 'empathy' (the human touch of the service provided). Another study was carried out by Firdaus (2006) to test the efficacy

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of three instruments, namely HEdPERF, SERVPERF and HEdPERF-SERVPERF on a group of higher education students in Malaysia. The results confirmed that HEdPERF was superior in reliability of estimation, validity of criterion and construct, explanation of variance and a better fit to the other two instruments.

Several studies have used the Gap Model Analysis of Rajasekhar, Muninarayanappa and Reddy (2009). This study identified the 13 most common weaknesses of Indian universities, including lack of market orientation in curriculum design, inefficiency of the system and excessive standardization. Nevertheless, another study revealed that what bothered students most were bureaucratic procedures (Brenders et al., 1999).

Suggestions were also made in a study by Tang and Zairi (1998). They suggested that service providers should have regular reviews of policies and strategies to improve TQM, engage in benchmarking, outline comprehensive strategy and policy to satisfy stake holders and establish a quality action team and performance measures. A similar belief was shared by Ahmad and Noran (1999) who suggested that higher education providers need to deliver a curriculum that is relevant to the industry to help the nation develop and prosper.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative methodology using a questionnaire with four sections adapted from HEdPERF (Firdaus, 2004) which was distributed to 45 undergraduate students. The questionnaire elicited information about the students' perceptions of the service provided by the university and their expectations of how this service should be rendered. The questionnaire contained four sections: Section A consisted of a demographic profile, Section B measured students' expectations of an ideal university, Section C looked into perceptions of the service provided by the university and Section D explored students' feelings about their university in terms of the overall service level. Section D also contained open-ended questions that allowed the students to indicate their positive and negative comments and the difference(s) they would make if they were in charge of the university.

The target population of this study were the students at a private medium sized university in Malaysia. The study was confined to education students taking a bachelor degree specialising in TESL. During the period of this study, the number of students in this program was 577.

The subjects were selected based on non-random sampling methods using systematic sampling with a random start. An alphabetical list of 577 undergraduate students was obtained from the Programme Head and ten percent of the population was chosen as the sample. Thus, every 10th student from the list was selected. Out of the 58 respondents initially chosen, 13 students did not return the questionnaires.

Permission to conduct this research was sought from appropriate authorities. The questionnaire was administered during lesson breaks with the cooperation from lecturers teaching the groups involved. Data was collected by the researcher with the help from other lecturers who are also academic advisors. The researcher gave the name list of the students selected in a particular group to their respective academic advisors. The advisors then contacted the students and handed the questionnaires to them. All respondents were given five days to complete and return the questionnaires to their respective advisors. Once the questionnaires were completed, the respondents returned them to their advisors to be handed over to the researcher. Out of the 58 questionnaires distributed, only 45 were completed and returned. Seven questionnaires could not be handed to the students by the academic advisors as they were undergoing teaching practicum in schools which are a significant distance from the campus while six questionnaires were not returned to the advisors after the dateline given for unknown reasons.

This study employed an instrument adapted from HEdPERF (Firdaus, 2004) to identify students' perceptions and expectations. The service quality was calculated by subtracting the perception scores from the expectation scores which produced the gap scores. These gap scores were then interpreted using a satisfaction grid devised by Watson et al. (2002).

Data obtained from Section A (demographic profile) was tabulated into frequencies and percentages. Data from Section B (students' expectations) and Section C (students' perceptions) was tabulated into mean scores. The first two questions in Section D (students' feelings) were also tabulated into mean scores as they use a Likert Scale similar to Section B and C. All data gathered from the remaining three open-ended questions in Section D was categorized into common themes and later tabulated into frequencies and percentages.

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Students' Expectations

Section A of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding the background of the respondents. Out of 45 respondents, 10 (22%) were males while the remaining 35 (78%) were females. All of them were between the ages of 20 to 35 years old. Thirty (67%) were Malays, two (4%) were Chinese, nine (20%) were Indians while four (9%)were from other ethnic groups.

Four respondents (9%) were from semester one, seven (15.5%) were from semester two, six (13%) were from semester three while four (9%) were from semester four. Twenty percent of the respondents were from semester five (nine respondents), seven respondents (15.5%) were semester six students and finally eight students (18%) were from semester seven.

In section B, students were asked about their expectations of an ideal university in terms of its facilities, administration and academia with ten representing the maximum score. Running high in importance was valuing students' feedback (6.76) about the service for its improvement followed by accurate record keeping (6.71). Running excellent programs also recorded a high score of 6.69. Hostel facilities were also considered important with a mean score of 6.62 which means that the students think the hostel facilities should be sufficient to cater to the students' needs. Sharing the same rank of importance with a mean score of 6.58 were the expectations of providing up-to-date equipment, ability of the academic staff to communicate well in the classroom and the level of education and experience of the academic staff. It was followed by the students' expectation that academic staff should be knowledgeable (6.51).

Graduate employability and provision of good health service shared the same mean score of 6.44 while convenient operating hours were also very much valued by students as this attribute had a mean score of 6.36. Still considered important were standardized and simple delivery procedures of the university (6.13), followed by the availability of the academic staff to attend to students (6.02) and the feedback provided by the academic staff on students' progress (6).

Some other aspects that students still thought were important were the encouragement to set up a student union which scored 5.96, while providing appealing physical facilities enjoyed a score of 5.91. Students also thought that an ideal university should have ideal location, excellent campus layout and appearance (5.76) followed by the provision of sufficient recreational facilities (5.73). Still perceived to be important

was the availability of excellent counselling service (5.56). The aspect that was least important for the students was keeping class size to a minimum (5.36).

Students' Perceptions

This section asked about students' perceptions of the service delivery of their university. Questions were similar to those of section B except that they were concerned specifically with the university and assessed students' perceptions.

It is interesting to note that students had a relatively low perception of their university. The lowest score (2.53) came from students' perceptions of how the university valued their feedback in order to improve its service. It was also evident that the students thought that the university did not provide excellent counselling services and that the service delivery procedures were not standardized or simple enough. Both of these aspects scored 2.8.

The students also perceived that the location, layout and appearance of the campus was unsatisfactory (3.02) and the recreational facilities seemed insufficient (3.09). The university was perceived as lacking in up-to-date equipment as the mean score recorded was only 3.18. Keeping minimum class size for personal attention was still perceived as unsatisfactory with a mean score of 3.24. The study also revealed that the students did not think that the physical facilities of the university were appealing (3.29) and the healthcare service was perceived as inadequate with a mean score of 3.42.

Students thought that the support from the university in setting up a student union was adequate and this had a mean score of 3.64. Students seemed to perceive the hostel facilities and record keeping service as adequate as these aspects both had the mean score of 3.69 and 3.78 respectively. Higher scores were recorded for the availability of the academic staff to attend to students (4.02). Students seemed satisfied with the level of graduate employability and the operating hours as both aspects scored 4.13 respectively. The students' perception of the academic staff's feedback of their progress was rated satisfactory (4.31). The quality of the programmes ran by the university was perceived as very satisfactory (4.64) while the academic personnel of the university were perceived to be very knowledgeable by the students as it scored 4.67.

The most encouraging result came from the students' perceptions of the academic staff. Students of the university were very satisfied

with the university's academic staff. This aspect of the service recorded relatively higher mean scores than other. Qualification and experience of the academic staff were found to be very satisfactory recording a mean score of 5.20. Students also perceived that their lecturers were very good in communicating with them in the classrooms which resulted in the highest mean score of 5.29.

Section D contained five questions of which two questions were about the students' feeling towards the service delivery of their university and the probability of future visits to the university. Both of these questions used the Likert Scale while the other three questions were open-ended.

With regard to section D, the mean score of the students' feelings about the service of the university was 3.51 which can be interpreted as unsatisfactory. The mean score for future visits to the university was recorded at 3.17 which indicated that it would probably be very seldom.

When asked about positive opinions about the university, many respondents had more than one answer. Two respondents (4%) referred to the facilities, four mentioned the surroundings and the buildings (9%). Favorable comments about the lecturers recorded the highest percentage (51%) with 23 students who agreed to it while three students (7%) mentioned the hostel facilities, programmes ran by the university and its location. Two students (4%) mentioned the achievements of the university while three students did not answer (7%) the question.

Data from the questionnaires revealed that the facilities of the university posed the most problems with 18 students (40%) mentioning this. Other services ranging from the service provided by contractors like security company, hostel management company to broadband service were criticised by 13 students (29%). Twelve students (27%) complained about the management including the administrative staff and the system. Five students (11%) were not happy with the location of the campus and three (7%) complained about the hostel facilities. Meanwhile, as for the surroundings, buildings and lecturers, all three recorded one complaint each (2%).

It was interesting to see the responses from the students when asked about what they would do if they were in charge of the university. Nineteen respondents (42%) mentioned that they would upgrade its facilities while 14 (31%) answered that they would improve the management. Four students (9%) wanted to upgrade the surroundings and two respondents did not answer the question. One respondent (2%) wanted the campus to be relocated.

The Gap Between Eexpectations and Perceptions

The scores from Sections B and C were used as the basis for the gap analysis. The gap scores were used to measure the quality of service delivered. Positive gap scores signify satisfaction with the service provided while negative gap scores indicate dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, a large negative score does not necessarily mean that there is a serious problem in the service delivery since it might be caused either by high expectations or by low perceptions of the customers (Tan & Kek, 2004).

Table 1 presents the service quality gap scores which were obtained by subtracting the perception scores from the expectation scores. The largest gap score in this study was how the university valued feedback from the students to improve its service. It recorded -4.23 which can also be interpreted as an area which was considered very important by the students and which received very low attention from the service provider. The second highest negative gap was contributed by the state of the equipment, with the score being -3.4. This means that although the students rated this aspect as important, it was felt that the equipment available in the university was not up-to-date. The service delivery procedures recorded a -3.33 gap score which means that students saw this aspect as very important and that service delivery was unsatisfactory. Similarly, health service was another area with a high negative gap (-3.02).

Record keeping and hostel facilities scored relatively smaller gaps with -2.93 for both areas as compared to the others. These were aspects that were considered very important in line with inadequate service delivery. This was followed by the quality of the counselling service provided by the university (-2.76). Similarly, the location, layout and appearance of the campus scored -2.73 and recreational facilities scored -2.64. Students also strongly felt that the physical facilities in the campus were not appealing enough with a gap score of -2.62.

The employability of the graduates recorded a gap of -2.31. The same gap was recorded for encouragement for the establishment of a student union. Meanwhile, operating hours and minimum class size had smaller gaps with -2.22 and -2.11 respectively. Students appeared to perceive the programs ran by the university as relatively better with -2.04 and more satisfaction was seen in the academic staff's readiness to attend to students (-2 gap).

Table 1: *Mean Gap Scores*

No	Question	Perception	Expectation	Gap
1	Up-to-date equipment	3.18	6.58	-3.4
2	Appealing physical facilities	3.29	5.91	-2.62
3	Accurate record keeping	3.78	6.71	-2.93
4	Convenient operating hours	4.13	6.36	-2.23
5	Adequate hostel facilities	3.69	6.62	-2.93
6	Sufficient recreational facilities	3.09	5.73	-2.64
7	Runs excellent programmes	4.64	6.69	-2.05
8	Keeps class size to minimum for personal attention	3.24	5.36	-2.12
9	Has ideal location, excellent campus layout & appearance	3.02	5.76	-2.74
10	Graduates are easily employable	4.13	6.44	-2.31
11	Operates excellent counselling service	2.80	5.56	-2.76
12	Provides adequate health services	3.42	6.44	-3.02
13	Encourages the setting up of student union	3.64	5.96	-2.32
14	Values feedback from students to improve service	2.53	6.76	-4.23
15	Standardized & simple service delivery procedures	2.80	6.13	-3.33
16	Knowledgeable academic staff	4.67	6.51	-1.84
17	Academic staff is never too busy to attend to students	4.02	6.02	-2.00
18	Academic staff communicates well in the classroom	5.29	6.58	-1.29
19	Academic staff provides feedback on students' progress	4.31	6.00	-1.69
20	Highly educated & experienced academic staff	5.20	6.58	-1.38

The most encouraging areas in this survey were those involving the academic staff as these areas reported the lowest negative gap. Students indicated that they were relatively more satisfied with the knowledge possessed by the academic staff (-1.84), the feedback given on students' progress (-1.69), the level of education and experience of the lecturers (-1.38) and the way the academic staff communicated with students in the classroom which recorded a -1.29 gap.

Satisfaction Grid

Computing the gap score can only tell the level of satisfaction on the customers' part but cannot indicate the appropriate action to be taken based on the scores. Therefore, the use of the satisfaction grid devised by Watson et al. (2002) is crucial to suggest solutions to the problems which were identified.

In interpreting the scores from the questionnaires, a satisfaction grid designed by Watson et al. (2002) was used. The satisfaction grid categorizes scores into 15 squares which function like a map. The

perceptions are divided into five levels classified as 'A' (5.25-7.00, very satisfactory), 'B' (4.25 to 5.25), 'C' (3.75-4.25, adequate), 'D' (2.75-3.75, unsatisfactory) and finally 'E' (1-2.75,very unsatisfactory). As for expectations, the classification differs slightly in terms of the labels chosen. Scores from 1 to 5 are rated 'not so important', scores from 5 to 5.5 are 'important' while 5.5 to 7 are classified as 'very important'. The grid works by finding the coordination of an aspect. Each square in the grid is assigned with a label: 'A' has 'a' and '(a)', while 'B' has 'b' and '(b)' and so on with 'C', 'D' and 'E' and each has an interpretation of actions to be taken. 'A' means *maintain excellent standard*, 'a' is *avoid overkill* and '(a)' means *no need for action here.* 'B' means *ensure no slippage, improve where possible*, 'b' and '(b) indicate *maintain standards.* 'C' signifies *this area to be targeted for future improvement*, 'c' indicates *ensure no slippage* while '(c)' is for *restrict attention*. 'D' means action in *this area has high priority*, 'd' indicates *target this area for improvement* and '(d)' means *ensure no further slippage*. 'E' signifies *urgent need for immediate action*, 'e' means *actions to substantially improve this area* while '(e)' means *improve where resources permit*. Expectations which are deemed 'very important' are represented by capital letters from A to E, attributes deemed 'important' are represented by lower case letters while 'not so important' attributes are represented with lower case letters in parentheses. As for perceptions, attributes which are deemed 'very satisfactory' are represented by A, 'satisfactory' attributes are represented by B, followed by attributes categorized 'adequate' (C), 'unsatisfactory' (D) and finally, attributes which are deemed 'very unsatisfactory' are represented by E (all letters also come in lower case and parentheses according to their importance).

Only two aspects of service were rated 'A' and both pertained to the academic staff. The aspects were the communication skills of the lecturers in the classrooms and the other was the lecturers' education and experience level. These two aspects had the coordinate of "very important and very satisfactory". The quality of these aspects need to be maintained by the university.

Rated 'B' in the satisfaction grid were operating hours, hostel facilities, quality of the programmes, graduate employability, knowledgeable academic staff and the feedback given by lecturers on the students' progress. The coordinate of these aspects was "very important and satisfactory in the satisfaction grid. These areas require maintenance of current standards and need to be improved wherever possible.

The availability of the academic staff to attend to students was the only aspect that fell in the coordinate of "very important and adequate" and was rated 'C'. The areas in this coordinate need to be targeted for future improvement.

There were four areas that held the coordinate of "very important and unsatisfactory" and felll under the category of 'D'. They were up-to-date equipment, record keeping, health services and service delivery procedures. All these areas need to be prioritized.

Most areas fell into grid 'd' with the coordinate of "important and unsatisfactory". These included appearance of physical facilities, sufficient recreational facilities, minimum class size, campus layout and appearance, counselling services and the setting up of a students' union. These areas need to be targeted for improvement.

Finally, the most critical area with the coordinate of "very important and very unsatisfactory" was the valuation of students' feedback in order to improve service quality. This aspect requires urgent and immediate action. The university needs to treat this matter with utmost importance to ensure a long term relationship with its student customers.

Table 2 shows the types of action that need to be taken based on the satisfaction which is co-related with perceptions and importance (expectations) scores. One attribute was graded 'E' in the satisfaction grid. This area concerns how the university values feedback from students to improve its service. The grid indicates that urgent actions need to be taken immediately as this is a very important area that was found to be very unsatisfactory.

The university also needs to give a high priority to actions about outdated equipment, record keeping, health care service and service delivery procedures as these were included in grid 'D'. To interpret, these areas are considered very important but the service is unsatisfactory.

Six areas were targeted for improvement as they were perceived as important but very unsatisfactory. These areas were the unappealing appearance of the physical facilities, recreational facilities, maintenance of minimum class size, the location, layout and appearance of the campus, counselling services, as well as how the university assisted in the setting up of a student union as these entire areas were assigned a 'd' on the grid. The only area that scored grid 'C' and therefore required future improvement was the academic staff availability to attend to students.

Operating hours of the university, hostel facilities, excellent programs, employable graduates, knowledgeable academic staff and academic staff dedication in providing students with feedback about their progress

Table 2: *Satisfaction Grid Result*

No	Question	Perception	Expectation	Grid
1	Up-to-date equipment	3.18	6.58	D
2	Appealing physical facilities	3.29	5.91	d
3	Accurate record keeping	3.78	6.71	D
4	Convenient operating hours	4.13	6.36	B
5	Adequate hostels facilities	3.69	6.62	B
6	Sufficient recreational facilities	3.09	5.73	d
7	Runs excellent programmes	4.64	6.69	B
8	Keeps class size to minimum for personal attention	3.24	5.36	d
9	Has ideal location, excellent campus layout & appearance	3.02	5.76	d
10	Graduates are easily employable	4.13	6.44	B
11	Operates excellent counselling service	2.8	5.56	d
12	Provides adequate health services	3.42	6.44	D
13	Encourages the setting up of students union	3.64	5.96	d
14	Values feedback from students to improve service	2.53	6.76	E
15	Standardized & simple service delivery procedures	2.8	6.13	D
16	Knowledgeable academic staff	4.67	6.51	B
17	Academic staff is never too busy to attend to students	4.02	6.02	C
18	Academic staff communicates well in the classroom	5.29	6.58	A
19	Academic staff provides feedback of students' progress	4.31	6	B
20	Highly educated & experienced academic staff	5.2	6.58	A

See Appendix A for Complete Satisfaction Grid by Watson et al., 2002.

enjoyed an encouraging satisfaction grid score of 'B'. This means that the university must ensure that there will be no slippage in these areas and they also need to improve wherever possible.

Finally, the most reassuring scores came from how well the academic staff communicated with the students and the education level and experience of the academic staff. Both areas scored an 'A' on the satisfaction grid which means that the university has to maintain its excellent standard in these areas of service.

Discussion and Recommendations

Service quality in higher education industry is receiving more attention due to the rapid evolution of the industry itself. The transition from the public sector to private sector requires a different approach to maintain relevance. The change has encouraged higher education institutions to take proactive measures to identify the perceptions and expectations of

their students that can be fulfilled to ensure an amicable relationship between service providers and their clients.

This study has revealed some interesting information. The most important attribute that an ideal university has is valuing the feedback given by the students to improve its service level. Students want to be heard and they want the university to be sensitive to their needs and wants. On the other hand, this very attribute was rated the lowest in the perception section. It can therefore be concluded that this is the most critical area to be looked into by the university and action should be taken immediately to address the problem.

Students also think that it is of crucial importance that a university keeps accurate records of its students. Probably from their experience, inaccurate record keeping can cause a lot of problems for the students.. The quality of the hostel facilities is another attribute that is deemed important by the students probably because of the location of their campus. It is in an isolated area and there are not many houses near the campus.

Students also have high expectations of academic staff. They believe that lecturers need to be highly educated, well experienced, knowledgeable and able to communicate well with the students in the classroom. Students are generally very satisfied with the academic staff. The small negative gap score indicates this is the most promising attribute in the service delivery of the university and thus, the excellence should be maintained at all times.

In general, students are dissatisfied with the service rendered and the possibility of them returning to the university is small. This is a loss on the part of the university as these are ready customers who if served better could give the university repeat purchases in the form of furthering their studies at a higher level.

The open ended questions in the questionnaire were designed to allow the researcher to get some insights from the students. Despite the low perception that students have on the overall performance of the university, the majority of the students are positive about the institution. Most praise the lecturers while others have praise for other aspects namely facilities, surroundings, buildings, hostels, programmes, location and achievements.

Meanwhile, many criticised the facilities, followed by management and other services. Five respondents criticized the location of the campus which is in a rural area while a few criticized the hostels.

Students were also asked how they would make a difference if they were in charge of the university. The majority of the respondents wanted to upgrade the facilities while 31% insisted they would improve the management system. Others wanted to upgrade the surroundings lower the fees or relocate the campus.

It should also be noted that besides the attributes discussed, the study reveals one attribute that is considered important by the authority (MQA), i.e. which is keeping class size to a minimum to ensure personal attention but this is of the least concern to the students.

The study also finds disheartening evidence of the service quality of the university. Data from the study indicates that students had low perceptions of the service standard of the university. The worst attribute of the service was the administration: respondents thought that the university did not pay much attention to their plight and problems. They were also frustrated with the service delivery procedures. From the data, it can be inferred that this issue concerns the confusion of the students about how a matter can be solved and who to go to when they have problems.

Physical facilities are another area that the students found frustrating as the equipment provided is not up-to-date, the appearance of the campus ground is not appealing and the recreational facilities are not sufficient.

Nevertheless, the study shows some encouraging findings. The students of the university have a positive perception of the academic staff of the university. They regard their lecturers to be very knowledgeable, highly educated and well experienced. They also perceive that their lecturers have good communication skills in the classrooms, are sufficiently helpful in making themselves available for consultation with the students as well as are reliable in giving feedback on the students' progress.

Overall, the current status of the service delivery standard of the university can be said as unsatisfactory in terms of administration and facilities but satisfactory in terms of academics.

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, it is recommended that private universities adopt the approach of other business entities, especially service providers to be more receptive towards students' feedback. It is crucial for institutions to satisfy its clients because satisfaction will guarantee a repeat business with them. Satisfaction also can go a long way – it can be a method of promotion (from word of mouth) and brings more customers in the future (Sivanand, 2004). Failure to be receptive will lead to loss on the part of the university because

the data gathered have proven that students who are not satisfied with the service delivery of the university also state that they are unlikely to come back to the university in the future. This statement does not only concern social visits but more of their attitude towards the possibility of continuing their education with the same university.

Finally, although the results can be disheartening, it would be wise for all private universities to conduct a similar research in their institutions in order to gauge their service level. Private universities need to understand the necessity of the measure in order for them to remain a player in the industry.

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