Original Research

Investigation of the quality status of educational services based on Servequal model (Case study: Estahban's Payem-e-Nour University)

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ABSTRACT:
Evaluation of services is a concern in academic institutions for improving the quality criterion. By finding the gap between students' expectations and understandings of offered services in different dimensions, we can propose strategies which help to enhance the quality of servicers. Using Servequal approach, this study is aimed to evaluate educational services for Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University students, who studied from 2014 to 2015. In this study, using Cochran's method, 300 individuals from a population of 1200 students were selected as a research sample. Data collection tools included is a questionnaire based on Servequal tool, whose validity was approved through a face/content method; and its reliability was approved through Cronbach' Alpha method and Split-Half method. Findings showed that in each of the five dimensions of service quality, there is a negative gap, which proposed that students' demands are not metout completely . The greatest amount of gap in the service quality was related to the assurance dimension, and the least amount of gap was related to the accountability dimension. On the other hand, it was made clear that, in "expectations and perceptions" dimension, opinions of student groups differed variably; these groups included different genders, terms, and educational status
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INTRODUCTION

Due to the diversity of services, it has always been difficult to define services specifically. It creates more complexity in the fact that the intangibility of most data and, is usually difficult to recognize and understand ways to supply services. Service is an intangible activity or benefit, which is supplied by an organization. Although services are intangible and unobservable, they deserve attention, because today, more than ever, the subject of service quality is considered as an important factor for growth, success, and sustainability in organizations, and it is used as a strategic, effective and inclusive subject in the process of managing organizations (Douglas and Douglas, 2006; Abdullah, 2006).

On the other hand, organizations have found how problematic loss of information about expectations and feedback of customers' perceptions of services could be made. Evaluation of service quality is a basic measure for designing programs in order to enhance quality (Lim and Tang, 2000). Since lack of resources is one of the main drawbacks of implementing quality-focused programs, this evaluation enables management to prevent quality decline as well as to allocate limited financial resources in a more efficient way, in order to improve organizational performance and enhance service quality (Stafford *et al.*, 1998). In addition, service quality evaluation is conducted in various ways. One of the most known methods is Servequal method. As you can see from the term Servequal, the concept of service quality comes to mind. This method comprises a questionnaire with numerous items, which has been designed in order to evaluate service quality in an organization, containing five different dimensions: appearance, physical facilities, certainty in supplied services, organizational accountability, quality guarantee and sympathy for customers (Rajdeep, 2010).

Using Servequal tool, different studies have examined the gap existing in services at educational institutes, in Payam-e-Nour University, which is relevant to studies done by Peter *et al.* (2000), Chua (2004), Barnes (2007) and Luiz (2009) in foreign universities. the contents of the above-mentioned findings, It is inferred that in all the universities studied, there were service gaps. However, we must be careful about this conclusion; because service gap happens when customers feel that their demands are not fulfilled. And it is natural to see greater customer expectations in foreign universities, compared to Payam-e-Nour University.

As mentioned above, the present study is necessary from several perspectives. First, in recent years, Payam-e-Nour University and especially its small units have had numerous problems in terms of attracting students. And it is likely that they will merge their units or even close them due to the small number of applicants. This challenge is not only due to the scarcity of students in the country but it is also due to the fact that services given in the small and big units of this university are low. Hence, not only does the present research help to identify the causes of such dissatisfaction, but it can also help to attract more students by providing a set of operational programs and doing positive oral advertisement. Secondly, in domestic studies and even those which have been done using Servequal approach in Payam-e-Nour University, big units have been examined; and considering previous explanations, implementing such researches in small units might be of greater importance. The third reason for the need of this research is that, in the past, not many studies focused on existing differences in terms of service gaps in the dimensions of Servequal model for students in different majors, terms and with different genders are available for development.

Servequal Model

One of the methods which are often used to evaluate the quality of higher education and universities' services is Servequal model being a multidimensional scale. This model was proposed by Parasuraman *et al.*

(2006). Servequal model includes five scales: physical, reliability, guarantee, responsibility, and sympathy (Rajdeep, 2010). These scales are explained in detail in the following:

Physical dimensions: This dimension refers to the availability of work environment facilities in the organizational atmosphere. In university services section, this dimension includes the size of classes, quality of chairs, presence of advanced computerized systems in classes, website atmosphere, suitability of study salon, sport salons, lab facilities, offering nutrition-related services (dining room, chips, and etc.), green areas, and special transportation vehicles for students.

Guarantee: Guarantee refers to employees' eligibility and ability to give confidence and assurance to customers. This dimension of quality is especially important in products which have higher risks. In university services section, this dimension comprises employees' knowledge and competence to offer high quality and guaranteed educational services to students; it also includes professors' knowledge and expertise in offering practical knowledge to university students.

Accountability: It refers to the tendency to cooperate with customers. This dimension of quality emphasizes sensitivity and consciousness when facing requests, questions, and complaints from customers. This dimension of university services refers to quick responsiveness in employees when answering telephone calls, responsiveness when students are selecting their units, responsiveness in tests, managers' responsiveness to students' complaints and so forth.

Assurance: It refers to the ability to offer services in a reliable way, such that student expectations are provided. In fact, reliability is commitment; this means that when an organization makes promises about the time, style, and costs of services, it must be committed to them. In university services section, this dimension includes giving promises to students and realizing the promises.

Empathy: Personal attention and allocating time to all customers means that each customer should receive a certain type of attention, such that they become convinced that their organization has understood them and that they are part of a whole congregation (Martinez and Martinez, 2010).

Research Experimental Background

Numerous studies have focused on revealing the results of using service quality evaluation patterns. Study results in some universities in Iran have indicated a gap in the fivefold dimensions of educational service quality, which refers to an unfavorable level of quality in services; some studies are exemplified here:

A) The results of a study done by Peter *et al*. (2000) on educational services quality in two groups of students (graduated and undergraduate) in Sunshine Coast University and a university in Australia showed that quality gaps in graduated students are bigger than those in undergraduate students.

B) In a study conducted by Chua (2004) in Toronto, Canada, on educational service quality in Business Management College in Rayerson University, in all dimensions of service, there was a negative gap in quality. The most negative quality gap was seen in guarantee dimension, and the least was seen in certainty dimension.

C) Richard and Adams (2006), in a study aiming to determine Chinese students' expectations and perceptions of educational service quality, showed that in all dimensions of service quality, there is a negative gap: The most negative quality gap was seen in guarantee dimension and the least was seen in certainty dimension.

D) Luiz (2009), in his study using a servequal model approach in Brazil, concluded that there is a big difference between students' expectations and their perceptions.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is a gap in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University services in terms of physical dimension.

2. There is a gap in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University services in terms of assurance dimension.

3. There is a gap in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University service in terms of accountability dimension.

4. There is a gap in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University services in terms of guarantee dimension.

5. There is a gap in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University services in terms of empathy dimension.

6. Service gaps differ in each of the fivefold dimensions of Servequal model for students in different terms.

7. Service gaps differ in each of the fivefold dimensions of Servequal model for students in different education groups.

8. Service gaps differ in each of the fivefold dimensions of Servequal model for male and female students.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is a descriptive-survey; and in terms of objective, it was practical. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all students in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University from 2014 to 2015. Sampling from non-random researches was done using a convenience sampling method. The reason why convenience sampling method was chosen is because although it was possible to code students based on their student numbers and random selection, it was probable that some students in Payam-e-Nour University would not be found because they did their studies without making presence in classes. Hence, non-random method was of a convenience type. Considering Cochran's method, 300 individuals were selected from a population of 1200 students, and they responded to two questionnaires for evaluation of customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality (Servequal model). In order to collect data, a certain questionnaire was used. The items in the questionnaire had answer choices (21 items in a Likert scale), and some questions were related to respondents'. The validity used in this research was face/content validity. Hence, in addition to using

Servequal standard questionnaire, comments made by experts such as educational management professors and marketing management professors were collected in order to approve questions and to find whether questionnaire items can cover research goals; and after applying necessary modifications, a final questionnaire was designed. The reliability of the questionnaires was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha method for "perceptions" questionnaire to be $74=\alpha$ % and for "expectations" questionnaire to be $88=\alpha$%. On the other hand, split-half index coefficient was 73 % for perceptions questionnaire, and for expectations questionnaire, it was 79 %. The data collected in SPSS software were processed, and they were analyzed in two sections: descriptive and inferential. In the descriptive section, this research used the distribution of variables' frequency; and in the inferential section, it used Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests (to test distribution normality), independent binary comparison test, and Mann Whitney-Kruskal Wallis.

RESULTS

Respondents' Demographic Qualities

In the first section of findings, respondents' demographic features have been examined in an educational, gender and term group. As it can be seen in Table 1, female students studying in Human Sciences educational group within terms 5-6 formed the biggest size of respondent population in this research.

Testing Data Distribution Normality

In order to decide if research data have been distributed normally or abnormally, we must use Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. This is because if data are distributed normally, we can use parametric methods such as independent binary method and so forth in data analysis. And when data are not distributed normally, we must use a non-parametric method such as Freedman, Kruskal Wallis, and/or Mann Whitney. In Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, H_0 hypothesis indicated that data

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Features

Demographic features	Education Group			Gender		Education Terms			
	Human Sciences	Basic Sciences	Engineering	Man	Woman	Terms 1-2	Terms 3-4	Term s 5-6	Terms 7+
Percentage of Respondents	49.5	34.1	16.4	57.5	42.5	1.3	36.8	54.5	7.4

distribution is normal. If this hypothesis is accepted, we can accept the normality of data. Based on the information given in Tables 2 and 3, since the significance of data in each of the fivefold dimensions of service is lower than 0.05, H_0 hypothesis is not accepted in any variable except two variables of Servequal (perception and expectations); as a result, because the normality of data is not accepted, we cannot use parametric statistical methods in data analysis. Hence, we have used Mann Whitney test and methods such as Kruskal Wallis in order to compare mean differences of respondents' comments.

Mann Whitney test for comparing expectations and perceptions states in the fivefold dimensions of service:

In this section, using Mann Whitney test, and through non-parametric methods, the differences between respondents' comments on expectations and perceptions in each of the fivefold dimensions of Servequal model is examined (Table 4 and 5).

As it can be seen from Tables 4 and 5, for all of the fivefold dimensions, expectations and perceptions have different mean values (significance percentage is lower than 0.05, which shows that the difference between the two mean values are significant). On the other hand, the most difference is seen for assurance, and the least gap is seen for accountability.

Comparison of the fivefold dimensions for service quality variable in expectation and perception state:

In this state, using independent binary comparison test (based on Kolmogrov-Smirnov test, the data corresponding to this variable had normal distribution, and we must use parametric tests in order to evaluate differences), respondents' comments on service quality variable were compared in terms of expectations and perceptions (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 2. Testing the normality of data distribution for the fivefold dimensions of service in a perception state

	Dimensions	Empathy	Certainty	Accountability	Guarantee	Physical
Number of samples	300	300	300	300	300	300
Mean	2.5174	5.3846	2.4537	2.9599	2.2609	2.5278
Standard Deviation	0.30165	0.74019	0.60848	0.64900	0.70151	0.46588
Perfect	0.040	0.147	0.118	0.126	0.177	0.093
Positive	0.040	0.147	0.116	0.099	0.177	0.091
Negative	-0.022	-0.144	-0.118	-0.0126	-0.124	-0.093
Kolmogrov—Smirnov Statistics	0.694	2.543	2.048	2.171	3.057	1.615
Significance percentage	0.721	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.011

Table 3. Testing the normality of data distribution for the fivefold dimensions of service in expectations state

	Dimensions	Empathy	Certainty	Accountability	Guarantee	Physical
Number of samples	300	300	300	300	300	300
Mean	4.0593	4.1438	4.1550	4.0100	4.0318	3.9559
Standard Deviation	0.27434	0.56109	0.46599	0.56716	0.64101	0.45751
Perfect	0.049	0.193	0.161	0.138	0.189	0.114
Positive	0.036	0.193	0.130	0.102	0.145	0.073
Negative	-0.049	-0.165	-0.161	-0.138	-0.189	-0.114
Kolmogrov—Smirnov Statistics	0.839	3.339	2.780	2.394	3.273	1.966
Significance percentage	0.482	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001

Table 4. Mean of comments for each of the fivefold dimensions of service in expectations and perceptions States

Statistical tests	Empathy	Certainty	Accountability	Guarantee	Physical
U Mann Whitney	2908	1408	10258	3595.5	1592.5
Wilcoxon	47758	46258	55108	48445.5	46442.5
Z-normal Statistics	-19.972	-20.601	-16.379	-19.627	-20.461
Significance Percentage	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

As it can be seen from Table 7, for service quality variable in expectation and perception states, mean values are different (significance level is lower than 0.05, which shows that the difference between the two mean values are significant).

Comparison of students' comments based on gender, term and educational group in the fivefold dimensions of service (expectation and perception):

Different populations

Statistical analyses obtained from Mann Whitney test in table 8 show that none of the existing differences between students' comments on each of the fivefold dimensions of service is not significant in terms of perception. This happened due to the fact that significance percentage was higher than 0.05, and as a result, H_0 hypothesis is accepted (equality in mean values

Table 5. Comparison of mean differences in expectations and perceptions states for each dimension of Servequal model

Dimensions	Sum of ranks	Mean of ranks	Number	Group
Physical	46442.5	155.33	300	Total expectation and perception
	132658.5	443.67	300	
			600	
Guarantee	48445.5	162.03	300	Total expectation and perception
	130655.5	436.97	300	
			600	
Accountability	55108	184.31	300	Total expectation and perception
	123993	414.69	300	
			600	
Certainty	46258	154.71	300	Total expectation and perception
	132843	444.29	300	
			600	
Empathy	47758	159.73	300	Total expectation and perception
	131343	439.27	300	
			600	

In this section, in order to prevent the increase in the quantitative size of the paper, in the next sections, statistical tables are briefer, and it has been tried to present the differences between the comments of gender, term, and educational groups on expectation and perception of the fivefold dimensions of service quality in three tables, i.e. Tables 8, 9, and 10.

of perceptions). On the other hand, it has been made clear that the differences between male and female students' comments are significant in empathy dimension in terms of expectations, and in other dimensions, these differences are not significant. It must be noted that in boys' empathy dimensions, compared to girls, there are more expectations for employees and universities to

Table 6. Comparison of comments on service quality variable in expectation and perception

Average	Standard Deviation	Mean	Number	Group	Parameters
0.01744	0.30165	0.5174	300	Perception	All service
0.01586	0.27428	0.05944	300	Expectations	quality dimensions

Table 7. Approval of validity of comparison of comments mean values for service quality variable in expectation and perception states

Parameters		"t" test for equality in mean values							Test for equality in variances	
		95 % certainty distance from differences		Standard error difference	Mean differences	Mutual significance	Free-dom of degree	"t" statistics	Significance	Fisher statistics
		high	low							
Equality in variances	All dimensions	-1.5	-1.588	0.02358	-1.542	0.000	598	-0.465	0.012	6.342

show empathy (due to boys' higher rank mean). These findings are given in Table 8.

Different Educational Terms

Statistical analyses obtained from Kruskal Wallis, which are presented in Table 9, show that none of the differences between students' comments in different terms are not significant in terms of perception of the fivefold dimensions of service. This happened due to the fact that significance level was greater than 0.05, and as a result, H₀ hypothesis is accepted (equality in mean values of perceptions). On the other hand, it has been made clear that the differences between students' comments in different terms have been significant in certainty dimension in terms of expectations. In line with this, students in the seventh term and above have greater expectations for certainty dimension than in other terms.

Different Educational Groups

Statistical analyses obtained from Kruskal Wallis test, given in Table 10, show that in accountability, certainty, and empathy dimensions, the differences between students' comments in different educational groups are significant in terms of perception. This is due to the fact that significance level is lower than 0.05, and as a result, H₀ hypothesis is not accepted (equality in mean values of perceptions). In line with this, it must be noted that engineering students have had the greatest amount of perception, compared to other groups, whereas in empathy dimension, Human Science students have had the greatest amount of perception, compared to other educational groups. On the other hand, in terms of expectations, it has been made clear that the differences between students' comments in educational groups have been significant only in accountability dimension. It must be noted that in relation to accountability, students in engineering, compared to other students in other educational groups, have had more expectations for employees and universities to be more accountable (due to higher rank mean in engineering students).

DISCUSSION

By analyzing the quality of services and determining service gaps in educational institutions, managers can prevent quality from decreasing; they can also allocate their financial resources to areas which are more important. Hence, in this research, Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University's educational service quality was examined using Servequal model through students' expectations and perceptions. This way, service gaps were identified and certain pieces of advice were offered for service quality improvement.

One of the most important results of the present study is that the mean of service quality in the university in terms of all five dimensions, i.e. guarantee, empathy, accountability, and certainty has been lower than expected service quality mean value. Another finding

Table 8. Differences between male and female students' comments in terms of expectations and perceptions of the fivefold dimensions of service

Servequal dimensions	Expectations Significance Percentage	Expectations Rank mean	Perceptions significance Percentage	Perceptions rank mean	Number	Gender
Physical	0.556	153.39	0.287	143.86	128	Man
		147.79		154.53	172	Woman
					300	total
Guarantee	0.070	160.24	0.274	156.21	128	Man
		142.44		145.41	172	Woman
					300	total
Accountability	0.163	157.98	0.464	154.21	128	Man
		144.11		146.89	172	Woman
					300	total
Certainty	0.103	159.24	0.776	151.63	128	Man
		143.18		148.80	172	Woman
					300	total
Empathy	0.018	163.22	0.102	140.71	128	Man
		140.24		156.86	172	Woman
					300	total

showed that the biggest gap was related to certainty dimension, and the smallest gap was related to the accountability dimension. The present study refers to the fact that this gap can be rooted in promises made by

Table 9. Comparison of students' comments in different terms in terms of perceptions and expectations of the fivefold dimensions of service

Servequal dimensions	Expectations significance level	Expectations rank mean	Perceptions significance level	Perceptions rank mean	Number	Gender
Physical	0.365	132	0.529	129.25	4	Terms 1-2
		146.02		152.90	110	Terms 3-4
		149.05		151.84	163	Terms 5-6
		180.25		125.64	23	Terms 7+
					300	
Guarantee	0.822	172.88	0.214	182.00	4	Terms 1-2
		147.88		152.95	110	Terms 3-4
		152.42		143.22	163	Terms 5-6
		138.52		179.68	23	Terms 7+
					300	
Accountability	0.961	141.63	0.544	116.38	4	Terms 1-2
		152.42		144.94	110	Terms 3-4
		149.56		155.78	163	Terms 5-6
		142.68		138.61	23	Terms 7+
					300	
Certainty	0.015	106	0.543	126.88	4	Terms 1-2
		143.10		150.54	110	Terms 3-4
		158.87		147.06	163	Terms 5-6
		126.77		173.34	23	Terms 7+
					300	
Empathy	0.865	126.13	0.222	212.38	4	Terms 1-2
		153.15		139.82	110	Terms 3-4
		149.64		154.21	163	Terms 5-6
		141.20		158.32	23	Terms 7+
					300	

Table 10. Differences between students' comments in different educational groups in terms of expectation and perception of the fivefold dimensions of service

Servequal dimensions	Expectations Significance level	Expectations Rank Mean	Significance Perception level	Perception rank Mean	Number	Gender
Physical	0.448	149.69	0.224	143.81	148	Human sciences
		156.08		161.91	102	Fundamental Sciences
		138.29		143.90	50	engineering
					300	total
Guarantee	0.212	158.61	0.641	153.80	148	Human sciences
		142.12		148.85	102	Fundamental Sciences
		140.39		140.90	50	engineering
					300	total
Accountability	0.047	141.18	0.030	149.56	148	Hyman sciences
		150.36		137.66	102	Fundamental Sciences
		175.89		177	50	Engineering
					300	Total
Certainty	0.707	147.11	0.000	135.51	148	Human Sciences
		155.64		151.37	102	Fundamental Sciences
		147		190.90	50	Engineering
					300	Total
Empathy	0.821	152.47	0.024	163.47	148	Human Sciences
		149.31		136.20	102	
		143.98		138.03	50	Engineering
					300	total

managers at the start of terms, within sessions, or in first meetings with students which are not kept. This happens when the studied university fails to realize its promises, because it does not have the ability to do so.

In the guarantee dimension, it was made clear that the university faces service gaps. The results obtained in this section are in congruence with the study done by Barnes (2007), because in their research, it was also made clear that in guarantee dimension, there is a gap between customers' expectations and perceptions. Service gap can be the result of the fact that some university employees do not have the ability and eligibility to provide a sense of confidence and peace in students in order for them to pursue their educational affairs. It has been observed that mistakes made by employees can force students to have an extra term. Another point is that some professors do not have the ability to present students with experimental and specialized information, which contributes to service gaps. On the other hand, it is at times observed that employees are not aware of the type of educational service that they are giving to students, which questions guarantee dimension in service presentation.

Presence of a negative gap in accountability dimension is due to the fact that officials in Estahban's Payam-e-Nour University do not pay much attention to students' requests and demands; and students' comments and propositions are not very much taken care of in educational programs. In addition, there is no willingness to help students solve their problems. This issue becomes more serious when students facing problems, they call the university but fail to contact officials. After researchers' calling university officials and receiving no answers, this gap was proved to be real. It was even observed that employees do not pay enough attention to students' requests, resulting in a low-quality service.

One of the causes of this gap was loss of a proper mechanism for expressing students' comments and propositions. Due to the fact that there is a large number of students and because there are not many experienced employees to take care of their affairs, officials have failed to express their empathy and listen to students' comments. This loss of empathy in verbal literature of employees acts like a nuisance in work environment.

In physical evidence dimension, the gap can be due to lack of facilities in the studied unit, such as sports complexes, study salons, green areas, and self-service salons. In addition, employees do not committedly wear their uniforms.

Other findings showed that students with different genders, different educational groups, and different educational terms have different comments on expectations and perceptions of the five dimensions of service. In the first analysis, it was made clear that boys had greater expectations from employees and management in empathy dimensions, compared to girls. An analysis which can be offered here refers to the fact that male students, compared to female students, have greater expectations from employees and managers, because they are more worried about their professional future and job market. It must be noted that male and female students were not different in terms of perception of the fivefold dimensions of service. In another part of these analyses, it was made clear that students in different terms were different in terms of expectations. In a way that in terms of certainty of services, students of the seventh term or higher had greater expectations, compared to other students in lower terms.

An interpretation which can be presented for this finding is that with an increase in educational years, there will be an increase in their awareness of conditions, as well as an increase in their expectations. The closer the students to graduations and job market, the greater their expectations. This is more seen in Payam-e-Nour's small units, because provincial job markets have more problems. Hence, students in such units expect universities to give them necessary capabilities connected to their fields of study, and also provide necessary workshops and skills in order to prepare them for social work. Finally, students' comments in different educational groups (human sciences, Fundamental Sciences, and engineering) in expectations and perceptions of the fivefold dimensions of services are different; in a way that when it comes to perception and dimensions such as accountability, certainty, and empathy, the differences between students' comments in different educational groups are significant in terms of perception; and engineering students, in terms of accountability and certainty dimensions, have had the most perception, compared to other groups, whereas in empathy dimension, it is human science students who have had the most perception compared to other educational groups. On the other hand, in terms of expectations, it was made clear that the differences between students' comments in different educational groups have been significant only in accountability dimension; and engineering students have had greater expectations for employees and management to be accountable, compared to other students in other educational groups.

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