

Measuring the Satisfaction of International Postgraduate Business Students of a British University

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This paper aimed to measure the satisfaction level of international postgraduate business students of a British University. The research focused on the core service delivery of Higher Education - teaching and learning. A two-stage methodology was adopted incorporating a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured focus group interviews. The importance-performance analysis (IPA) framework was utilized as the research instrument. The findings revealed that the performance of the Business School was generally below the expectation of students. The IPA matrix has presented the university policy makers with some practical resource allocation strategies. It is suggested that quality improvement efforts should focus on the following areas: student education, student feedback and service recovery, total quality initiative, and staff motivation and development.

INTRODUCTION

The most recent trends in Higher Education (HE) have been characterised by a considerable growth in the inflow of overseas students into countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States (Prugsamatz and Ofstad, 2006). The United Kingdom is one of the leading players in higher education provision to international students. Over the past 10 years the enrolments of students from non-EU countries in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) have increased by 105%. In 2006-07, one in 10 students in UK HEIs came from a non-EU country and one in 20 from an EU country (BBC, 2008). The total number of non-UK students continued to go up steadily between 2005-06 and 2007-08 from 307,040 to 341,790 (HESA, 2009).

It is impossible to quantify the full benefits brought by international students to the UK. The greatest beneficiaries are obviously UK's universities which are increasingly depend on income from foreign students. The Universities UK report said that since 2000-01 university income had grown by more than 50% with the largest share coming from international students. In 2007-08, their tuition fees amounted to £1.7 billion, a rise of 58% since 2002-03 (BBC, 2008). International fees are now a bigger source of income for most universities than research grants, which has been part of their strategy to reduce their reliance on public funding (Ibid). In addition to tuition fees, international students spent over £2.5 billion on living costs in 2004-05 (Vickers and Bekhradnia, 2007).

International students bring more than just financial rewards (Ryan, 2008). By internationalising its education provision, the UK is able to attract intellectual capital to enrich the UK's capacity for research, technological growth and innovation (British Council, 2006). At the cultural level for the university, the international focus of the institution helps their students to develop a global perspective they need to become global citizens in an increasingly globalised world (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008). Moreover, the

university's international branding and profile can be promoted by the presence of a large number of international students (Knight, 2003).

Over recent years postgraduate programmes have become an increasingly important fiscal resource to many UK business schools (Barnes, 2007). UK's funding system has made it possible to charge higher fees for postgraduate students on both taught and research programmes (Angell *et al.*, 2008). Tuition fees for undergraduate programmes are regulated by the government, while no upper limit exists as to the price charged for postgraduate education (Barnes, 2007). Consequently, almost 20 per cent of all university places are currently occupied by postgraduate students (UniversitiesUK, 2006), and further expansion is likely to continue well into the next decade (Taylor, 2002). In 2006-07, international students accounted for 66% of full-time taught postgraduates and 50% of full-time research postgraduates at UK universities (HESA, 2009).

Given the increasing importance of non-EU international students to UK HEIs, it appears worthwhile to undertake in-depth research to investigate whether or not they are satisfied with their educational experience. The aim of this paper is to measure the satisfaction level of international students on one-year taught postgraduate business programmes of a British university located in the Midwest regarding their academic experience so that areas leading to student dissatisfaction can be identified to help improve the quality of its postgraduate business education. Objectives of the research are:

- ◆ To explore appropriate methodologies to customer satisfaction measure in HE
- ◆ To determine what service factors of HE need to be examined
- ◆ To investigate the satisfaction level of a representative sample of international students

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education

In the UK, students are regarded as the “primary customers” of a university (Crawford, 1991). It has been found that students look for evidence of service quality when deciding which university to attend, one of the major decisions in their lives (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004). It is essential for HEIs to ascribe importance to the measurement of service quality, and realise the competitive nature of attracting students (Angell *et al.*, 2008). Students are indeed customers and universities are in a competitive battle for recruiting them (Sines and Duckworth, 1994).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has introduced a National Student Survey to seek the perceptions of final year students on university services concerning teaching, assessment and support. The production of university performance league tables by Government and Funding Bodies is primarily based on the survey results (Douglas *et al.*, 2006). To some extent, the image of a university is affected by its position in any league tables. A poor Image makes it difficult for the university to retain current students and attract potential ones (James *et al.*, 1999).

One main reason why most universities attach considerable importance to student recruitment and retention is that HEFCE aims to increase the UK student population to meet Government targets (Douglas *et al.*, 2006). Satisfactory retention rates will put institutions in a more favourable position to obtain more funding (Rowley, 2003). Student satisfaction is closely related to retention and recruitment. When existing students are dissatisfied, they may have to complete their studies. However, they will be very unlikely to study at a higher level within the same institution and recommend it to others (Douglas *et al.*, 2006). Thus student satisfaction has become a critical issue for universities.

Approaches to Customer Satisfaction Measure in Higher Education

A variety of models have been invented to measure customer satisfaction or service quality. SERVQUAL is a popular service quality model devised by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) on the basis of disconfirmation paradigm. They state that the customer's overall service examination is determined by the gap between “expected” and “perceived” service quality. The model measures five determinant service factors including reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles (Angell *et al.*, 2008). Cronin and Taylor (1992) proposed an alternative model SERVPERF which only measures the

“performance” of service delivery without relying on the disconfirmation principle (Angell et al., 2008). Since only half the items required of SERVQUAL are necessary for the administration of SERVPERF, it is regarded as a practical, easy-to-manage tool (Babakus and Boller, 1992).

However, neither SERVQUAL nor SERVPERF is wholly suitable for application in HE (Angell et al., 2008). Though SERVQUAL is useful in short-duration service exchanges, it may not be as effective in the university exchange which is longitudinal (O'Neill, 2003). Because students' “perceptions” change over time (Hill, 1995), SERVQUAL is considered entirely inappropriate, particularly when the time on student perception is unknown (O'Neill, 2003). Meanwhile, owing to the absence of the disconfirmation approach, SERVPERF was unable to capture shortfalls in desired levels of service quality by only assessing the “performance”, making it impossible to prioritise resource allocation (Jain and Gupta, 2004).

A more appropriate approach to service quality measure in HE is the importance-performance analysis (IPA) framework (Angell et al., 2008). The same disconfirmation principle as SERVQUAL was employed by Martilla and James when they constructed the model in 1977. As “an absolute performance measure of customer perception” (Wright and O'Neill, 2002, p. 26), the framework requires the subtraction of “Importance” scores from “performance” scores to see whether disconfirmation exists (Martilla and James, 1977). Another practical function of IPA is to identify the more influential dimensions in the service exchange by evaluating the “importance” assigned to various service dimensions by customers (Wright and O'Neill, 2002).

An additional advantage of IPA is that the researcher is free to decide what service dimensions to measure without rigidly sticking to those prescribed by SERVQUAL (Angell et al., 2008). With a similar diagnostic ability to SERVQUAL, IPA is able to pinpoint where resource allocation is most critical through the use of importance measure (Lovelock et al., 1998). The resource allocation implications of IPA are best reflected by the IP matrix (Angell et al., 2008). Table 1 indicates how mean “importance” and “performance” scale scores are plotted on the matrix.

TABLE 1
IMPORTANCE - PERFORMANCE MATRIX

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Importance | Quadrant A – high importance and low performance | Quadrant B – high importance and high performance |
| | concentrate here | keep up the good work |
| | Quadrant C – low importance and low performance | Quadrant D – low importance and high performance |
| | low priority | possible overkill |
| | Performance | |

Source: adapted from Martilla and James (1977)

Service Factors to be Measured in Higher Education

Identification of critical factors in the service exchange should form a key part of measuring service quality in HE (Abdullah, 2006). Approaches to the evaluation of the student experience either focus on assessing teaching and learning or the total student experience. It is widely acknowledged that evaluating totality of the student experience adds a valuable dimension, since teaching and learning is not simply confined to the classroom. The total student experience is becoming an increasingly vital determinant of students' attitudes to the institution (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998). Nevertheless, the most important theme in HE is still teaching and learning. Quality of the core service delivery significantly influences the overall quality of the service offering (Douglas et al., 2006).

Many researchers seem to be more interested in evaluating student satisfaction from the perspective of total student experience. One of the pioneers in this field is the Centre for Research into Quality at the University of Central England in Birmingham (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998). Utilising the IPA framework,

the Centre undertook an annual survey to assess student satisfaction with a wide range of service factors. One important feature of the research was that the questions were student determined in focus group discussions (Harvey, 1995). Nevertheless, questions entirely determined by students may not cover all the crucial service dimensions which need to be investigated. It is advisable to supplement those questions with attributes identified by other researchers.

Despite the doubted suitability of the application of SERVQUAL in HE, Barnes (2007) adopted a modified SERVQUAL instrument to investigate the expectations and perceptions of service quality among EU and international postgraduate students at a leading UK business and management institution. A number of service factors were added to the five dimensions of SERVQUAL. These were organised under two other dimensions: university (for example, accommodation) and guidance (for example, guidance on cultural issues).

The findings revealed that perceptions of service are influenced more by whether or not students pay themselves than by the price itself. Hence, international students tend to have higher overall perceptions of the service quality than EU students, despite paying considerably more. Moreover, international students appear less critical in terms of service provision and are less inclined to lodge complaints (Barnes, 2007). These valuable findings can help university decision-makers to gain deeper understanding of the varying satisfaction levels of students from different regions and the underlying causes. Therefore, they can differentiate the strategies employed to improve student satisfaction.

Advocating that the IPA framework is more appropriate than SERVQUAL as a measurement tool in HE, Douglas et al. (2006) evaluated student satisfaction with IPA at the Faculty of Business and Law, Liverpool John Moores University. The concept of the service-product bundle was utilised to design the survey questionnaire, which consisted of three elements:

- ◆ The physical or facilitating goods (for example, IT facilities)
- ◆ The sensual service– the explicit service (for example, staff teaching ability)
- ◆ The psychological service – the implicit service (for example, the treatment of students by staff).

It was discovered that the most important attributes were those associated with teaching and learning, while the least important were those related to the physical facilities. The following are some priority areas for improvement (where the importance rating is high and performance rating is low):

- ◆ Promptness and usefulness of feedback on performance
- ◆ Availability of staff
- ◆ Way timetable is organised
- ◆ Course workload
- ◆ Textbooks' availability within the Learning Resources Centre
- ◆ Responsiveness of teaching staff to requests (Douglas *et al.*, 2006, p 261)

Such findings can help the university utilise resources more effectively to tackle the critical areas for improvement.

It seems that most research focuses on home students or international undergraduate students. Inadequate data have been collected from international postgraduate students. This is surprising considering their economic importance to UK universities (Barnes, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling Techniques

The research was targeted at three cohorts of international students on taught postgraduate business programs of a British university. It was conducted in 2009 and during that time the author was an MBA student of this university. A combination of non-probability sampling techniques was used. First, self-selection sampling was employed by inviting all the students known by the author to take part in the research. Data was collected from those who responded. Furthermore, all those students were asked to encourage other students they knew to get involved. The group of respondents gradually expanded as a

snowball sample (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Questionnaire Design

Content and Organisation

Aiming to develop a research framework, relevant literature was extensively reviewed to explore service factors relating to teaching and learning in HE. The author has particularly benefited from the National Student Survey conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2007). It was decided to primarily use the research framework of the National Student Survey, which comprised the following seven categories: “Course teaching”, “Assessment and Feedback”, “Academic Support”, “Organization and Management”, “Learning Resources”, “Personal Development” and “Overall Satisfaction”.

However, a number of attributes identified from the HE literature were added in order to broaden the scope of the research. Only the vital components of teaching and learning were measured in the study. This focus would help to gain more in-depth insights. Moreover, it would take less time to complete the questionnaire. Statements used in the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

The questionnaire began with a brief introduction that explained concisely the purpose of the investigation and also emphasised the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. The rest of the questionnaire was divided into four sections. A series of demographic questions was asked in Section one to segment the sample population. These included questions regarding gender, age, country of origin, course title, year of study and the number of years of work experience.

Section two focused on the “performance” rating of the university with 22 questions grouped under the above-mentioned seven categories of teaching and learning. Questions on overall satisfaction and inclination to recommend the course were asked at the end. To allow ease of completion, all questions were structured as “closed” statements or questions.

The “importance” of the service attributes was evaluated in Section three. To avoid confusing respondents, the questions were arranged in the same order as they were in the previous section (Dillman, 2000). Section four provided an opportunity for students to make any further comments and obtain some qualitative data.

The rating scale was designed to contain five points representing the possible range of opinions about the service. As shown in Table 2, participants were required to rate the “performance” of the university by means of a 5-point Likert scale.

TABLE 2
5-POINT LIKERT SCALE RATING “PERFORMANCE”

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|----------------|
| Disagree strongly | Disagree | Neutral (Neither disagree nor agree) | Agree | Agree strongly |

The “importance” placed on each service attribute was also measured with a 5-point Likert scale, as indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3
5-POINT LIKERT SCALE RATING “IMPORTANCE”

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|---------------------|
| A little important | Somewhat important | Important | Very important | Extremely important |

All the service factors measured in the study were deliberately chosen to represent the vital components of the service delivery. Therefore, only the varying degrees of importance were assessed.

Validity and Reliability

A number of measures were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. First, a comprehensive framework of service attributes was identified through carefully reviewing the literature. Second, three experts were asked to comment on the representativeness and suitability of the questions, and the overall design of the questionnaire. Additional ideas can be generated and further insights provided by such qualitative inductive approaches (Churchill 1996).

Finally, the questionnaire was piloted among 20 international students, who reflected major variations in the final population. Attention was given to how long it took them to complete the questionnaire. At the end comments were solicited on the usefulness and clarity of the measurement questions, and if any other service factors should be incorporated in the survey. Based on their feedback, some amendments were made to a number of questions and the design of the questionnaire. These measures played a central role in the creation and evaluation of the research instrument and contributed tremendously to the effectiveness of the research.

Research Administration

Rowley (2003) argues that how and when student feedback questionnaires are distributed deserve careful consideration in order to generate a satisfactory level of response. The questionnaires should ideally be presented when the course has come to an end. Such advice was followed in administering the questionnaire. First, questionnaires were sent via internet to 86 international students who had completed their studies (self-selected sample). A total of 232 questionnaires were returned, of which 217 were valid (final sample after snowball sampling). Next, the returned ones were analysed and representative respondents identified for interviews. Finally, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted to further explore the quantitative findings and relevant issues which were impossible to be examined in the questionnaire.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Quantitative Stage: Importance-Performance Analysis

The IPA framework (Martilla and James, 1977) was utilised to measure the satisfaction of the respondents. The first step was to calculate the mean importance and performance scores for each of the 20 service attributes.

Importance Analysis

The importance attached by the respondents to the service factors was ranked according to the mean importance scores, which is presented in Table 4.

One outstanding feature is that all the four service attributes directly associated with teaching are high on the list of ten most important service factors. "Subject area expertise", "Helpfulness with questions", "Teaching skills" and "Enthusiasm about teaching" were respectively ranked number 1, 3, 4 and 6, which has clearly demonstrated the important role teaching plays in the mind of students. This strongly reinforces the argument of Douglas et al., (2006) that as a core service component at university, teaching is a powerful determinant of the overall quality of the service offering.

Respondents were also very much concerned about what they learn, which is indicated in the number 7, 8 and 9 positions of "Course academic content", "Improvement of English skills" and "Coverage of vocational topics". The emphasis on vocational topics shows that students want to see a more direct link between what they learn and their future career prospects. Better English language skills are beneficial to them in securing a job offer from a multinational company. Interestingly, students ranked "Improvement of English skills" higher than "Development of transferable skills", although transferable skills are also highly valued in the recruitment and selection processes of multinational companies. Probably this is because English language skills are more easily observable and measurable than transferable skills.

TABLE 4
IMPORTANCE RANKING

| Ranking | Factors | Ranking | Factors |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|--|
| 1 | Subject area expertise (4.62) | 11 | Course organisation (4.25) |
| 2 | Library resources and services (4.59) | 12 | Explanation of academic conventions (4.23) |
| 3 | Helpfulness with questions (4.49) | 13 | Development of transferable skills (4.18) |
| 4 | Teaching skills (4.46) | 14 | Appointments with staff (4.15) |
| 5 | IT resources and services (4.43) | 15 | Fair marking (4.08) |
| 6 | Enthusiasm about teaching (4.38) | 16 | Usefulness of assignment feedback (4.06) |
| 7 | Course academic content (4.34) | 17 | Student feedback arrangements (3.85) |
| 8 | Improvement of English skills (4.33) | 18 | Student workload (3.69) |
| 9 | Coverage of vocational topics (4.31) | 19 | Timely assignment feedback (3.62) |
| 10 | Supporting lecture materials (4.27) | 20 | Class sizes (3.54) |

Exploring the areas of the service students find relatively less important can also generate some interesting findings. All the three dimensions related to assessment and feedback were ranked rather low. “Fair marking”, “Usefulness of assignment feedback” and “Timely assignment feedback” are positioned at number 15, 16 and 19. Though almost every student is desperate to get high marks in assignments and exams, service factors in related area were assigned comparatively low importance. Seemingly, many students are more concerned about their marks than how they can utilise the assignment feedback to identify areas for improvement. “Student feedback arrangements” is only number 17 on the list, showing that most students fail to understand that student feedback is a vital vehicle to communicate their needs to the university as well as a crucial part of the continuous teaching quality improvement cycle.

Performance – Importance (P- I) Gap Analysis

The next step was to evaluate the performance-importance (P-I) gap, which indicates whether a deficit or surplus exists between the performance and the importance assigned to it (Angell et al., 2008). Mean importance and performance scores together with the P-I scores for all the 20 attributes are presented in Table 5. For the convenience of analysis, the service factors are grouped according to relevant service categories.

A positive “P-I” gap means a quality surplus, indicating that the service attribute is performing above the expectation of students. A quality deficit, a negative “P-I” gap, is certainly of more significance to the management of the university (Angell et al., 2008). Table 6 ranks the P-I values of the 20 service factors, displaying quality deficit for all attributes except for “IT resources and services” and “Class sizes”. Apparently a gloomy picture was painted for the performance of the Business School. The greatest deficits are recorded in “Fair marking”, “Course academic content” and “Coverage of vocational topics” with P-I scores either equivalent to or above -1. The underlying causes of student dissatisfaction with these factors were examined in depth in the follow-up focus group interviews.

TABLE 5
OVERALL MEAN IPA SCORES

| Service factors | Mean performance | Mean importance | Performance - importance |
|--|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Course Teaching (n=9) | 3.59 | 4.23 | -0.64 |
| Enthusiasm about teaching | 3.69 | 4.38 | -0.69 |
| Subject area expertise | 3.79 | 4.62 | -0.83 |
| Teaching skills | 3.67 | 4.46 | -0.79 |
| Helpfulness with questions | 3.62 | 4.49 | -0.87 |
| Course academic content | 3.29 | 4.34 | -1.05 |
| Coverage of vocational topics | 3.31 | 4.31 | -1 |
| Student workload | 3.54 | 3.69 | -0.15 |
| Class sizes | 3.64 | 3.54 | 0.1 |
| Supporting lecture materials | 3.76 | 4.27 | -0.51 |
| Assessment and Feedback (n=3) | 3.36 | 3.92 | -0.56 |
| Fair marking | 2.92 | 4.08 | -1.16 |
| Timely assignment feedback | 3.54 | 3.62 | -0.08 |
| Usefulness of assignment feedback | 3.55 | 4.06 | -0.51 |
| Academic Support (n=2) | 3.66 | 4.19 | -0.53 |
| Explanation of academic conventions | 3.56 | 4.23 | -0.67 |
| Appointments with staff | 3.75 | 4.15 | -0.4 |
| Organization and Management (n=2) | 3.34 | 4.05 | -0.71 |
| Course organisation | 3.68 | 4.25 | -0.57 |
| Student feedback arrangements | 3 | 3.85 | -0.85 |
| Learning Resources (n=2) | 4.54 | 4.51 | 0.03 |
| Library resources and services | 4.46 | 4.59 | -0.13 |
| IT resources and services | 4.62 | 4.43 | 0.19 |
| Personal Development (n=2) | 4 | 4.26 | -0.26 |
| Development of transferable skills | 3.85 | 4.18 | -0.33 |
| Improvement of English skills | 4.15 | 4.33 | -0.18 |

It is clearly revealed that the all the service categories were performing below the expectation of students except for “learning resources”. The category of “Organisation and Management” received the largest “P-I” quality deficit (-0.71). The underlying reason can be traced in Table 6. The university scored rather low for “Student feedback arrangements” (P-I=-0.85). “Course Teaching” (P-I=-0.64) is another area where the university seems to be experiencing difficulty. Among the five worst performing service factors in Table 6, three of them belong to this category. They are “Course academic content” (P-I=-1.05), “Coverage of vocational topics” (P-I=-1) and “Helpfulness with questions” (P-I=-0.87). On the other hand, respondents assigned relatively high importance (I=4.23) to this category.

The third problem area seems to be “Assessment and Feedback” (P-I=-0.56), although the lowest importance (I=3.92) was ascribed to it. Table 6 indicates that “Fair marking” (P-I=-1.16) achieved the greatest quality deficit of all the service factors. This has confirmed the findings in the ISB (International Student Barometer) data showing that international students are particularly dissatisfied with assessment and feedback issues (Ryan, 2008).

More positively, “Personal Development” attained the smallest quality deficit (PI=-0.26), although it was regarded as the second most important category (I=4.26). The best performing service category is “Learning Resources” (P-I=0.03), the only area of service with a quality surplus. Since it was considered

the most important service category (I=4.51), a very high level of performance was required to obtain a quality surplus.

TABLE 6
PERFORMANCE – IMPORTANCE (P-I) RANKING

| Ranking | Factors | Ranking | Factors |
|----------------|--|----------------|---|
| 1 | IT resources and services (0.19) | 11 | Course organisation (-0.57) |
| 2 | Class sizes (0.1) | 12 | Explanation of academic conventions (-0.67) |
| 3 | Timely assignment feedback (-0.08) | 13 | Enthusiasm about teaching (-0.69) |
| 4 | Library resources and services (-0.13) | 14 | Teaching skills (-0.79) |
| 5 | Student workload (-0.15) | 15 | Subject area expertise (-0.83) |
| 6 | Improvement of English skills (-0.18) | 16 | Student feedback arrangements (-0.85) |
| 7 | Development of transferable skills (-0.33) | 17 | Helpfulness with questions (-0.87) |
| 8 | Appointments with staff (-0.4) | 18 | Coverage of vocational topics (-1) |
| 9 | Supporting lecture materials (-0.51) | 19 | Course academic content (-1.05) |
| 10 | Usefulness of assignment feedback (-0.51) | 20 | Fair marking (-1.16) |

Further examination of the P–I values of various service categories, represented in Table 7, will add a broader perspective.

TABLE 7
MEAN IPA SCORES FOR SERVICE CATEGORIES

| Service categories | Mean performance | Mean importance | Performance - importance |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Course Teaching | 3.59 | 4.23 | -0.64 |
| Assessment and Feedback | 3.36 | 3.92 | -0.56 |
| Academic Support | 3.66 | 4.19 | -0.53 |
| Organisation and Management | 3.34 | 4.05 | -0.71 |
| Learning Resources | 4.54 | 4.51 | 0.03 |
| Personal Development | 4 | 4.26 | -0.26 |

Quadrant Analysis

Quadrant analysis has typically been used to analyse student feedback data in UK universities for a number of years (Douglas et al., 2006). The researcher has to decide where the matrix should be split into the four quadrants (Angell et al., 2008). Martilla and James (1977) proposed that this was a matter of judgment rather than an absolute measure. Mean importance and performance scores were adopted by O'Neill and Palmer (2004) to position the cross-hairs. The same method was used in this study with the cross-hairs on the “importance” and “performance” scale at 4.19 and 3.67 respectively. The left column of Table 8 shows where various services factors are situated on the IP Matrix.

TABLE 8
IMPORTANCE - PERFORMANCE MATRIX FOR INDIVIDUAL SERVICE FACTORS

| Quadrant A – high importance and low performance | |
|---|---|
| IP Matrix | I(P-I) Matrix |
| Helpfulness with questions (3.62) Course academic content (3.29) Coverage of vocational topics (3.31) Explanation of academic conventions (3.56) | Subject area expertise (-0.83) Helpfulness with questions (-0.87) Teaching skills (-0.79) Enthusiasm about teaching (-0.69) Course academic content (-1.05) Coverage of vocational topics (-1) Course organisation (-0.57) Explanation of academic conventions (-0.67) |
| Quadrant B – high importance and high performance | |
| IP Matrix | I(P-I) Matrix |
| Library resources and services (4.46) Subject area expertise (3.79) Teaching skills (3.67) IT resources and services (4.62) Enthusiasm about teaching (3.69) Improvement of English skills (4.15) Supporting lecture materials (3.76) Course organisation (3.68) | Library resources and services(-0.13) IT resources and services (0.19) Improvement of English skills (-0.18) Supporting lecture materials (-0.51) |
| Quadrant C – low importance and low performance | |
| IP Matrix | I(P-I) Matrix |
| Fair marking (2.92) Usefulness of assignment feedback (3.55) Student feedback arrangements (3) Student workload (3.54) Timely assignment feedback (3.54) Class sizes (3.64) | Fair marking (-1.16) Student feedback arrangements (-0.85) |
| Quadrant D – low importance and high performance | |
| IP Matrix | I(P-I) Matrix |
| Development of transferable skills (3.85) Appointments with staff (3.75) | Development of transferable skills (-0.33) Appointments with staff (-0.4) Usefulness of assignment feedback (-0.51) Student workload (-0.15) Timely assignment feedback (-0.08) Class sizes (0.1) |

The results seem to be encouraging. Seven of the ten service factors of greatest importance are located in Quadrant B. The other three in Quadrant A are “Helpfulness with questions”, “Course academic content” and “Coverage of vocational topics”.

A closer examination of the service factors in Quadrant B will result in a certain degree of concern. The mean “performance” value (3.67) was used to position cross-hairs. Nevertheless, the mean performance scores of three service factors in Quadrant B are either equivalent or very close to 3.67, which means these factors barely performed satisfactorily. These include “Teaching skills” (P=3.67), “Course organisation” (P=3.68) and “Enthusiasm about teaching” (P=3.69). One tentative conclusion is that when the mean performance scores of service factors are very close to the score adopted to position

cross-hairs, the IP matrix may be unable to discriminate for attention those areas of services with potential quality problems.

In this case, the importance and (performance - importance) matrix, abbreviated into I (P-I) matrix, might be a more discriminative tool. When viewed in line with the assigned level of importance, the PI gap pinpointing a quality deficit or surplus may lead to some useful findings. If a certain service factor with a quality deficit is considered very important, this factor deserves more improvement efforts than when it is regarded as less important. If a certain service factor with a quality surplus is considered very important, this factor deserves more efforts to maintain the current performance level than when it is regarded as less important. The right column of Table 8 indicates the location of various services factors on the I(P-I) Matrix. The mean P - I value employed to position cross-hairs was -0.524.

Comparing the results of the two matrices is worthwhile. The previously discussed three service factors, “Teaching skills”, “Course organisation” and “Enthusiasm about teaching”, are situated in Quadrant B on IP matrix. In contrast, they are located in Quadrant A on I(P-I) matrix due to more discriminative quality deficits, which are respectively -0.79, -0.57 and -0.69. There are eight service factors in Quadrant A on I(P-I) matrix, exactly twice the number of those in Quadrant A on IP matrix. Therefore, the results generated from I(P-I) matrix present a more challenging situation to the university than the IP matrix. Among these eight attributes, six of them are related to “Course teaching”. Obviously the university should devote more resources to the improvement of the service delivery in this respect. Similar quadrant analysis was then performed on the six service categories, the results of which are shown in Table 9.

TABLE 9
IMPORTANCE - PERFORMANCE MATRIX FOR SERVICE CATEGORIES

| IP Matrix | |
|--|--|
| Quadrant A – high importance and low performance | Quadrant B – high importance and high performance |
| Course Teaching (3.59) Academic Support (3.66) | Learning Resources (4.54) Personal Development (4) |
| Quadrant C – low importance and low performance | Quadrant D – low importance and high performance |
| Organisation and Management (3.34) Assessment and Feedback (3.36) | |

The university and Business School policy makers are presented with some practical directions regarding strategic decision-making. Although “Personal Development” and “Learning Resources” are in Quadrant B, continuous improvements are necessary due to their high importance. The top priority of the university is to improve the service delivery of “Course Teaching” and “Academic Support”, which are positioned in Quadrant A. The urgency to improve the service offering of “Course teaching” was also highlighted earlier in this Section by the large quality deficit gained by some service factors in this category.

Since “Assessment and Feedback” and “Organisation and Management” are located in Quadrant C, the matrix suggests that priority should not be given to them. If more resources were allocated to other service categories like “Course Teaching” and “Academic Support”, it would contribute more significantly to the improvement of students’ service quality perceptions.

The findings of this project are different from those of the investigation conducted by Angell et al., (2008) into the service quality perceptions of postgraduates at the Social Science and Business Faculty (SSBF), the University of Plymouth. They found that the “Academic” category is in Quadrant B, including such factors as “Practical skills taught” and “Skilled and engaging teachers”. It seems that considered highly important at both institutions, the “Academic” service delivery of SSBF generally

outperforms that of the School under investigation. However, there is something in common between the two institutions. The service category positioned in Quadrant A in their research is “Industry link” with factors like “Industry contacts provided by tutors”. A similar service factor in Quadrant A in this study is “Coverage of vocational topics”. Therefore, both institutions need to concentrate on improving the “vocational” component of the course.

Analysis of Overall Satisfaction

The final task at the quantitative stage was to explore the implications of respondents’ overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend the course.

Table 10 shows the percentages of the responses to the question: “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.”

**TABLE 10
PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSES REGARDING OVERALL SATISFACTION**

| Disagree strongly | Disagree | Neither disagree nor agree | Agree | Agree strongly |
|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| 0% | 15% | 31% | 31% | 23% |

A majority of the students (54%) responded positively, including those who had chosen “Agree” and “Agree strongly”. Although only 15% of the respondents responded negatively, a significant number of students (31%) took a neutral stand.

Table 11 presents the percentages of the responses to the question: “Would you recommend the course to other students?”

**TABLE 11
PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSES REGARDING WILLINGNESS TO RECOMMEND THE COURSE**

| | |
|--|-----|
| I would actively encourage people to apply | 15% |
| If asked, I would encourage people to apply | 16% |
| I would neither encourage nor discourage people to apply | 69% |
| If asked, I would discourage people from applying | 0% |
| I would actively discourage people from applying | 0% |

The striking feature is evident. An overriding majority (69%) selected to neither encourage nor discourage people to apply. Among those who will encourage people to apply, only 15% will do so actively. These are definitely disappointing results for the university. The findings differ from those in the research conducted by Barnes (2007), which was discussed previously. He found that international students may be more willing to recommend because of the complete experience, of which the educational experience is just one part. The cultural experience also helps to add value. Moreover, willingness to recommend may be a cultural trait. Instead, this study echoes the results of the 2007 StudentPulse survey undertaken by the market research firm i-graduate. They surveyed nearly 12,000 students from 143 countries and discovered that the quality and reputation of the course and lecturers were of more importance than lifestyle, climate and culture (Evening Standard, 2008).

If probing deeper into the data, a mismatch between the perception and behavioural intention can be noticed. Overall 54% of them are either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the course. However, only 31% of them will either actively or passively recommend the course. This supports the findings of Blackmore et al. (2006) in their research into student satisfaction. According to their findings, a

considerable number of respondents, many of whom were in their final year, stated that they would not recommend their institution to others, despite the overall acceptable satisfaction ratings.

Qualitative Stage

The findings confirmed and enhanced much of the information gathered from the questionnaire. More feedback was offered on “Course teaching” and “Assessment and feedback” than other service categories.

In terms of “Course teaching”, one particular staff member was believed by quite a few participants to be reluctant to help with students’ questions. Though most staff were regarded as knowledgeable, the teaching skills of some were thought to be below their expectation. They said that some lectures were not well organised and there should have been more interaction in class between staff and students, and students themselves. This further proves the statement of Howarth (2003) that “Teaching students of multi-cultural and linguistic diversity is more demanding, due to the much wider range of learning preferences which have to be understood”. Culturally Asian students prefer teacher-centred learning to the student-centred approach adopted in the UK (Russell, 2005). Therefore, they may expect more of the lecturers regarding teaching skills.

With regard to academic content, they emphasised that the scope and depth of knowledge were inadequate. Some staff only provided an overview of the subject area rather than an in-depth knowledge. The application of knowledge in real business context should have been stressed, and case study should have been more effectively used to facilitate the link between theory and practice. Furthermore, they suggested that there should be visits to UK companies and work experience should be part of the course, for example, 3-month placement in industry. However, this is impossible for some students due to visa restrictions and not all students can meet the selection criteria set by companies. On the positive side, all students spoke highly of the team learning experience in Buxton, UK and the international study tour in Prague, Czech Republic.

It was mentioned that the curriculum should be more international, reflecting the needs of international students. For example, how should some management theories and practices be adapted for effective application in developing countries? They also said that student workload including the number of modules and the number of class hours for each module was not adequate. Some students expected the program to be a very busy and intense one. One even said that the course should have made students so busy that they should not have had much time to work outside class. This has certainly gone to an extreme.

As to “Assessment and feedback”, a number of participants did not consider the marking arrangements of exams to be fair and transparent. When students failed the exams or when they appealed that their marks were too low, they were not allowed to view their own exam papers. Additionally, it was stated that the assignment marking criteria of certain modules were not consistent and, in some cases, not high enough. For example, the same way of referencing caused problem in the assignment of one module, but not in that of another. Regarding assignment feedback, they said that very often they could not read the handwriting of staff.

As “Organisation and management” is concerned, it was suggested that student feedback should be gathered during the course of the program instead of at the end of the semester, because they could only benefit from the feedback gathered and acted upon before the course had finished. As to “Academic support”, it was mentioned that occasionally it was difficult to make appointments to see staff, for example, when they were slow to respond to students’ emails. It seems that certain academic conventions need to be further explained. One participant asked: “What’s the point of being so strict with referencing, which is totally useless to a professional manager?” The only issue they raised about “Learning resources” was that there should be more up-to-date books available in the library.

Some of their comments are culturally bound. For example, one Indian student believed that there should be more exams than written assignments. He said that there were many exams at institutions in India, which were more effective means of assessing students’ achievements. This lends support to the notion that different cultures have different service quality needs (Barnes, 2007). Enhanced student

satisfaction depends on identifying such needs and dealing with them properly. Adaptations on both sides are necessary to maximise mutual benefits.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This research has provided insights into how teaching and learning, the core service delivery of HE, can be a primary determinant of student satisfaction in HE on the basis of an empirical analysis of a sample of international postgraduate business students of a British university. A two-stage methodology was adopted comprising a quantitative survey and qualitative focus group interviews. Composed of seven service categories, a research framework was developed, which has basically captured the crucial service factors relating to teaching and learning in HE. If adapted accordingly, it can be employed in other HEIs. The IPA framework (Martilla and James, 1977) has been proved to be a very useful technique to measure student satisfaction in HE. Many of its advantages have been confirmed in this study.

Recommendations to the British University

According to Edwards Deming, management is responsible for 85 percent of all quality problems (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2008). The paramount task of the management of the University is to develop a culture of student focus and continuous quality improvement. Co-ordinated organizational policies, structures (Russell, 2005) and mechanisms should be established to cultivate this culture. Meanwhile, leadership should be provided in changing the systems and processes leading to student dissatisfaction (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2008). It is suggested that in addition to a central committee coordinating university wide quality issues, each faculty should have its own department dedicated to quality excellence promotion and student satisfaction enhancement. The following initiatives should be integral parts of the university's quality improvement mechanisms.

Student Education

Sometimes the dissatisfaction of international students is caused by misunderstanding and lack of knowledge, which can negatively impact on their success and educational outcomes (Ryan, 2008). Consequently, surveys should be conducted at an early stage to understand their expectations, because international students may have a "false preconceived 'ideal' image of life and educational standards in the UK" (Barnes, 2007, p 22). Unrealistic expectations and misconceptions should be dealt with and measures taken to "train" them so that they will know how to behave in certain situations. Where possible, such training programs should be started before students come to the UK. An effective induction and support system are absolutely necessary (Adee, 1997).

One focus of student education should be on differences in educational philosophies and academic conventions between HEIs in the UK and their home countries. Topics to be covered may include, for example, the purpose of higher education, the value of independent learning and critical thinking, etc. Emphasis should be placed on not only how things are done here, but also the benefits of doing things this way. As "co-producers" of their own education (Hennig-Thrau et al., 2001), students' participation in the learning process is essential for their success. Hence, training students as "partial employees" is an effective way to enhance their own satisfaction because they can learn to contribute to the service more significantly (Bowen, 1986).

Student Feedback and Service Recovery

Delivering excellent service does not only mean exceeding expectations. It is also about dealing well with problems and queries (Johnston and Clark, 2005). Convenient communication systems should be in place and incentive introduced to encourage students to report any quality issues to the university. The university should seek to respond promptly to incidents resulting in dissatisfaction by means of effective service recovery approaches. A systematic-response approach can be introduced to offer a consistent and timely response to customer complaints by identifying critical failure points and determining appropriate

recovery criteria in advance (Johnston and Hewa, 1997). Consequently, students' negative or neutral perception may be changed to a positive perception of the overall service experience (Ford et al., 1999).

Surveys should be undertaken regularly, not just at the end of the semester to monitor the level of student satisfaction with their learning experience and track the improvement made. Therefore, it is more likely for the university to identify and tackle potential quality problems before they actually become critical (Angell et al., 2008). In a way, the student feedback is also used as an early intervention approach to service recovery. It can supplement the systematic-response approach by attempting to intervene and fix service-process problems before they affect the customer (Johnston and Hewa, 1997). Student feedback should also be collected in different forms to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, such surveys may be employed as a vehicle of service benchmark to generate other indicators of quality that may contribute to the competitiveness of the university (Rowley, 2003).

Total Quality Initiative

Services are delivered to people by people, and the moments of truth are of extreme importance to a university's image (Banwet and Datta, 2003). All employees of the university should recognise the importance of the quality of every single service encounter or moment of truth experienced by customers, which forms part of their overall impression of the entire service offering (Dale, 2003). In order to deliver total student satisfaction, all staff should adhere to the principles of quality customer service in every aspect of the service delivery (Gold, 2001). Where possible, it may be worthwhile to introduce explicit standards of service to various aspects of the services (Douglas et al., 2006). For example, staff should respond to all student e-mails within a specified timeframe.

Staff Motivation and Development

Staff with good performance in evaluation of teaching by students should be rewarded accordingly. For example, a prize and the title of "Lecturer with Excellent Teaching Skills" can be offered to them. Periodic training should be provided to improve the teaching methods of staff and seminars organised to share good teaching practices. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on the effective use of case study to facilitate the connection between theory and practice. Moreover, staff development strategies should be formulated to improve knowledge and practices in cross-cultural teaching and learning (Ryan, 2008). Relevant information and guidance should be identified and disseminated. Research into ways of enhancing teaching and learning for international students should be promoted (Ibid). There is also a necessity to investigate how the curriculum can be internationalized to better meet the needs of overseas students.

Limitations with the Study

The limitations of this study should be raised to provide possible directions for future research. First, the sample was only confined to international postgraduate business students within one UK university. Further research is needed to cover a larger sample on a greater variety of courses. Attention also needs to be drawn to the inability of this study to capture the change of students' perceived service quality over time, which is one of the key differences between higher education and other service sectors (Telford and Masson, 2005). "Education may be unique in the sense that is difficult for the customer to assess the quality and relevance of the service. A University course is unusual in that the buyer, i.e. the student, may have only a general idea of what lies ahead and may not fully comprehend the content or relevance of a course until the later years of study or potentially long after graduation" (Dickson et al., 1995, p. 63).

Additionally, participants in the research came from different countries in Asia and Africa with different culturally bound educational values. By grouping them together, this study may have overlooked the impact of cultural differences on their perceptions towards higher education (Barnes, 2007). Therefore, it is suggested that future research should examine in detail the similarities and differences in service quality perceptions of students on the basis of nationality.

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APPENDIX

The following statements are used in the “Student Satisfaction Questionnaire”:

The Teaching on My Course

1. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.
2. Staff possess adequate subject area expertise.
3. Staff possess adequate teaching skills.
4. Staff are happy to help students with their questions.
5. The academic content of my course is well-designed.
6. Vocational topics (e.g. career planning) are adequately addressed to enhance job prospects.
7. The student workload (including lectures, tutorials and assignments) is appropriate.
8. Class sizes are appropriate – neither too big nor too small.
9. Adequate supporting lecture and tutorial materials are provided.

Assessment and Feedback

10. Assessment arrangements and marking are fair and transparent.
11. Assignment feedback is provided within the set timeframe (within 5 working weeks after the end of the assessment week).
12. The assignment feedback is useful.

Academic Support

13. Sufficient arrangements are made to clearly explain the university’s academic conventions (e.g. referencing) and expectations of student (e.g. expected amount of independent learning).
14. It is convenient to make appointments with staff (e.g. by email or in person).

Organization and Management

15. The course is well organised and running smoothly.
16. Student feedback are gathered and used to improve the quality of teaching.

Learning Resources

17. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.
18. General IT resources and services are good enough for my needs.

Personal Development

19. The course has helped me to develop transferable skills (e.g. team working, communication, problem-solving skills).
20. My English language skills have improved.