

## PERCEPTIONS OF PART TIME STUDENTS (EPJJ) TOWARDS THE SERVICE QUALITY OFFERED AT UiTM DUNGUN, TERENGGANU

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*Abstract:* In this new era of globalization, service quality in any industry especially in the service sectors, has become an increasingly important issue. Customers are now focused on what the company can offer and whether needs and wants can be satisfied. Usually, service quality is related to the customer satisfaction in many dimensions and aspects and somehow it is difficult to fulfill those aspects. Service quality, emphasizing consumer satisfaction, is a newly emerging field of concern. In order to attract customers, serve their needs and retain them, service providers and researchers are actively involved in understanding consumers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. Service quality is a feature of the literature in marketing and operations management, but is just starting to gain attention in higher education. The educational literature suggests that there is mounting pressure from the customers of higher education, which include students, parents, alumni, employers and legislators, to close the widening gap between their expectations of institutional performance and the actual performance (Brigham, 1994). Education industry, both lower and higher education institutions cannot run away from the topic of service quality, especially where the students (customers) are concerned. In Malaysia, this issue has a great impact to the education industry especially with the large birth of private institution. As many of the public institutions in Malaysia remain in a conservative manner, the issue of service quality may be a threat to them. Service quality is not a new issue in service industry but where the higher education institution in Malaysia is concerned, again service quality is a pressing subject. With many players in the higher education institutions in Malaysia, ranging from public universities to private colleges to branches of foreign universities, the competition among them is great. Nowadays, customers choose higher learning institution that can deliver more than what they expect. Therefore, quality plays the major role to differentiate them from competitors and at the same time gain competitive advantages. In view of this development, the researchers decided to engage in a study of evaluating the perceptions of the E-PJJ (*Pengajian Jarak Jauh*) students towards the services offered by the Education Development Center (EDC) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Dungun campus, Terengganu. The researchers conducted the research based on the SERVQUAL model proposed by (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). The model suggested that the Service Quality of any industries consists of five dimensions, which included Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. Based on this model, the researchers evaluated the gap between the expectations and the perceptions of the students towards the five service quality dimensions. The students' perception is defined as their perceptions on the actual service experience received by them from the EDC at UiTM Dungun. A sample of 53 students was chosen from a total population of 77 students. Data were analysed using the SPSS software. The researcher discovered that even though there were gaps between the expectations of the students with their actual experience of receiving the service (perceptions), the majority shows a high degree of satisfaction towards the service provided by the EDC at UiTM Dungun.

Keywords: Perceptions, Expectations, SERVQUAL, EDC Programme

### INTRODUCTION

In the current economic climate, university departments and course managers are giving serious thought to the issue of service quality (Cuthbert, 1996) [5]. This has come about for two reasons. The first reason is that the expansion phase in higher education has now ended and there is real competition for students. Where there is competition, the quality of the service experience becomes an important factor in buyer decision-making (Bateson, 1995) [1]. Students report that word-of-mouth recommendation plays a big role in their choice of institution, and course managers are in a key position to influence customer perceptions. The second reason is that the university quality assurance systems place emphasis on the students' experience as one of the assessment criteria (Higher Education Quality Committee, 1995) [8].

### *Distance Learning*

Distance learning has been described as the “physical separation of student and instruction during the education delivery and focuses on independent and self-directed learning” (Holmberg, 1980 as cited in Low and Wilkinson, 2000) [9]. According to Mohd Trudin (1991) [10] distance learning is a mode of study which makes use of teaching-learning techniques not dependent upon traditional face-to-face encounters between student and teacher. Similarly, Syed Othman (2002) [15] said that in a distance learning program, students received print-based materials in modular form and are required to attend regular face-to-face tutorials at different centers conducted by lecturers from qualified academics employed by the university on part-time basis.

### *Distance Learning in Malaysia*

Distance learning in Malaysia has its history back in early 1970's with the first off-campus program at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The reason for the establishment of distance learning is to cater students sitting for public examination but could not gain entry into government funded schools (Sharifah Alwiah, 1996) [16]. Despite that those in employment who aspire to be successful in their career development have painstakingly worked for external degrees offered by universities of repute such as University of London, UK as early as the 1960's or earlier (Syed Othman, 2002) [15].

With the establishment of the first distance learning in Malaysia at USM, MARA Institute of Technology followed suit to become the second public of higher institution in Malaysia to come out with their own distance learning program in 1990 by offering diploma programs in public administration, banking and business studies (Hamidah J., 1991 as cited in Sharifah Alwiah, 1996) [16].

A high demand for higher education in Malaysia as well as the shortage of university places in the country, the distance learning programs is becoming more attractive especially for those who are working either in public or private sectors. Many public and private of higher institutions have been offering the distance learning programs at their main or branch campus. With many players in the higher education institutions in Malaysia, ranging from public universities to private colleges to branches of foreign universities. the competition among them is great especially when distance learning is concern. By looking at the target students of distance learning, money is not an issue for them as most of them are full time workers. They choose the institution that can deliver more then what they expect. Therefore, quality plays the major role to differentiate them from competitors and at the same time gain competitive advantages.

### *Distance Learning in UiTM*

Universiti Teknologi Mara (back then was Institut Teknologi Mara) decided to introduce the distance education at full scale in January 1981, after studying the reaction of its pilot study launched in 1986 at its Sarawak Branch Campus (Mohd Trudin, 1991) [10]. Earlier, the distance program or the PJJ (Pendidikan Jarak Jauh as it is popularly called) was carried out by the Centre of Extension Education (PPL) at the Jalan Othman, Petaling Jaya Branch Campus. Now under new administration, distance programs are being administered by Education Development Centre (EDC) at main campus in Shah Alam. In early 1990, the distance program at the institute had been using manual and tape recorder as a mode of learning. However starting December 1998 intake, PPL has been introducing computers and internet as a mode of teaching and learning. In July 2000, all undergraduate programs which are under PPL, have been using the cyber technology. This is to ensure that the bumiputera students are able to withstand with other races in the new millennium. Since its establishment, PPL UiTM has successfully have 3000 bumiputera alumni.

### *Problem Statement*

Every higher education institutions in Malaysia provide almost the same major service, that is education to the customers (students). They try to provide the best courses/programs available, the best facilities, which include accommodations, library, classrooms, computers lab etc. In addition they deliver the best tangible physical products to the customers. Likewise the distance-learning program

has not left behind. Each higher education institution, which offered these programs to the students, is providing the best facilities and services to them. Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in particular has upgraded their services and facilities in order to cater to the enormous demand from the off-campus students. However, there are a few research or studies on the service quality of distance learning in Malaysia not to say UiTM itself. Therefore through this study, it may identify what are the perceptions and expectations of these students towards the services and facilities offered by UiTM.

#### *Objectives of the study*

There are several objectives of this study. There are:

- To identify the level of satisfaction towards the services offered by the EDC programme in UiTM Dungun.
- To identify the gap between the services expected by the customers and the services experienced by customers.
- To assist the researcher to discover the benefits and elements of the services offered by the EDC programme that is preferred most by customers.
- To assist the management of UiTM Dungun and the relevant authority to enhance the Quality Services of the EDC programme in UiTM Dungun.

#### *Scope of Study*

Under this study, it is important to narrow down several aspects concerning service quality that can be measured. The scope of study is limited into several areas. There are:

The study focused on the perceptions of students of distance learning program on service quality at Universiti Teknologi Mara Dungun Branch and the expectations of service quality that should be provided by Universiti Teknologi Mara Dungun Branch. The study also identified the level of satisfaction of the students concerning the service quality even though it may relate to perceptions and expectations.

The study used the five service quality determinants identified by Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988) – the revised version as the basic determinants.

The respondents were the students who took distance learning program offered by Universiti Teknologi Mara Dungun Branch.

#### *Literature Review*

1. Quality - In general, quality is an objective measurement in manufacturing and a subjective one in the service sector (Pariseau and McDaniel, 1997) [12]. The term “quality” gives different meanings to different people (Ghobadian, Speller & Jones, 1994) [7]. Ghobadian *et al.* (1994) [7], classify the definition of quality into five broad categories as transcendent; product led; process or supply led; customer led, and value led. Ghobadian *et al.* (1994) [7] give a specific definition on quality on a service, which is a measure of the extent to which the service delivered meets the customer’s expectations. The perception of quality is influenced not only by the service outcome but also by the service process. The perceived quality lies along a continuum. Unacceptable quality lies at one end of this continuum while ideal quality lies at the other end. The points in between represent different gradations of quality.
2. Service Quality - Numerous researchers and scholars have agreed that in today’s world of fierce competition, focusing on quality service is a key for survival and success (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985 [11]; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990 [13]; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990) [17]. Service quality has proven to be apparently related to costs (Crosby, 1979) [4], profitability (Rust and Zahorik, 1993) [14], customer satisfaction (Bolton and Drew, 1991 [2], Eoulding *et al.*, 1993), customer retention (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990) [13] and positive word of mouth. The later work on SERVQUAL by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) [17] sought to develop a general instrument for measuring service quality. They identified five dimensions of service quality (three original and two combined dimensions). They suggested the following labels and concise definitions for the dimensions:

- Tangibles: Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel
  - Reliability: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
  - Responsiveness: Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
  - Assurance: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence
  - Empathy: Caring individualised attention the firm provides its customers
3. Online Learning - Cashion and Palmieri (2004) [3] defined online learning as learning that occurs when the delivery of education or training is carried out via an intranet or the internet. It includes whole courses, single subjects and parts of subjects. It includes mixed or hybrid modes, as long as the online component is integral to the learning. Similarly Fang (2003) [6] also defined it as teaching and learning through electronic mail, the Internet, the World Wide Web (www), and multimedia in the higher education sector (Fang, 2003) [6].
4. Service Quality in Online Distance Education - A quality online learning experience is one that provides flexibility and reliable technology. The heart of high-quality, online learning is flexibility. Flexibility not only includes the choice of time and place, but it should include options for face-to-face interaction. There is also the added flexibility of pace choosing to go fast or slow, tackling a lot or just a small segment at any one time. Some students were very aware of what they needed to learn, and for some, the online mode provided an environment in which they could undertake the learning they wished (Cashion and Palmieri, 2000) [3]. Cashion and Palmieri (2000) [3] conclude that online education provides an enormously flexible medium to provide student-centred and appropriate learning structures and supports for many students. The importance of face-to-face education alongside the online medium is very important. As one student identified in relation to the factors making for a quality learning experience:
- A highly interactive course that has a good balance between online and face-to-face.
  - A resourceful and responsive teacher, easily accessible online and offline.
  - A clearly laid out program and assessment.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In line with the research objectives, perceptions and expectations of EPJJ students of the service quality at UiTM Dungun Branch were determined. The service qualities of the EPJJ students are important in order to determine the crucial service factors at UiTM Dungun Branch. Apart from that, the level of students' satisfaction would give an insight view to the administrators what the students' satisfied most. The theoretical framework of service quality conceptualized by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) was being used in this study. There are five dimensions of service quality, which include assurance, responsiveness, empathy, reliability and tangibles, can be applied in online distance learning. Likewise the level of students' satisfaction were also determined in this study. The study was only concentrated on students who enrolled as EPJJ students at UiTM Dungun Branch. A random sample of 60 EPJJ students was derived from the target population. The questionnaires were distributed to the samples via their lecturers during the seminar conducted at UiTM Dungun Branch. A structured questionnaire was developed as the mode of data collection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analysed using several statistical tests which include the One-Way Anova tests, paired sample T-Test and T- test.

*One-Way Anova:* This analysis was conducted in order to determine the relationships between the demographics of respondents and their level of rating in terms of their general satisfaction. The results show that from the six demographics elements i.e., age, gender, marital status, occupation, income level and part, all except gender is not significant factors in determining the level of satisfaction among the students.

*Rank of Important Feature:* Five types of important features of services were asked to the respondent and they were told to rank them according their perceptions of importance. As a result, the researchers discovered that the most important aspect was Physical Facilities and the least important were Promised Service. This result can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Rank of Important Features of Services Provided by EDC

Types of Service Features	Mean Score
Physical Facilities	25.55
Care and Attention	20.11
Prompt Service	19.48
Trust and Confidence	19.39
Delivering Promised Service	18.78

*One Sample T-Test:* This test showed that the majority of the respondents agree that they are generally satisfied with the services provide by the EDC programme. This is shown by the score of 5 and above out of a possible maximum score of 7. The results are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: General satisfaction on the service provided by EDC.

Score	Count
1	3
2	3
3	6
4	8
5	17
6	14
7	15

*Paired Samples T-Test:* The respondents' perceptions of the actual service received were found to be to be lower than their expectations of the service offered by the EDC programme based on the mean score of the T-Test. This is true for all five dimensions of SERVQUAL. However the differences in the mean score were not significant except for the elements of Assurance. For all other elements the significant value were found to be greater then 0.05. This indicates that except for the assurance dimensions, all other service quality dimensions showed the services provided by the EDC is almost equal to the expectations of its EPJJ students. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Perception and Expectation of Service Quality Dimensions.

	Mean(Perceptions)	Mean (Expectations)	Significant Value (2-tailed)
Tangibility	4.8497	5.1101	0.128
Reliability	4.6873	5.0752	0.080
Responsiveness	4.7379	5.0955	0.077
Assurance	4.9769	5.3472	0.028
Empathy	4.5481	4.8852	0.068

As a conclusion as the perceptions of the EPJJ are almost equal to their expectations in all aspects except the tangible factors (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), the management of EDC should take into consideration this finding by making sure that necessary actions will be taken to ensure the tangible elements of service are kept above students' expectation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is funded by Bureau Research Centre (BRC) UiTM Shah Alam. We would like to thank Institute of Education Development (InED), Academic Affairs Department and Finance Division of UiTM Dungun for their support and encouragement in carrying out this research. Deepest appreciation also goes to all the group members for the enormous patient, courage and commitment to make sure this research is complete on time scheduled.

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