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The Massification of Higher Education in the UK: Aspects of Service Quality

Abstract

This article explores several aspects of service quality for the provision of higher education. Alongside the trend of the massification of higher education over the past two decades, higher education institutions are required to review quality across a range of outputs, besides teaching and learning. The study was undertaken within the undergraduate placement programme of a UK higher education institution and investigated aspects of service quality through students' surveys conducted over a five-year period and staff questionnaires and interviews. The findings of the study point out that, amongst other factors, the increase in student numbers implies a deterioration of higher education service quality. Based on the findings, several areas that can potentially improve the quality of higher education services in modern universities are identified.

Keywords: Service Quality, Higher Education, Survey, SERVQUAL

Introduction

The intensified economic pressures that universities are faced with to cope with the increasing number of students, has led to a reliance on non-governmental resources for their survival. This growth presented new challenges for higher education institutions and implications for their operation. Such challenges are manifested naturally in relation to the quality and standards of teaching and learning, but also in the quality of the full range of student services (from IT support and accommodation to cultural events, counselling and career advice). With the introduction of the revised fee system by the UK government, the level of expectations that students have in terms of the demands they place on the education service provider has also been elevated. Higher education institutions have started to adopt a corporate management approach in the provision of education. This has given rise to a changing phenomenon; that of the marketisation of higher education and the perception of students as customers purchasing a service (Clayson and Haley, 2005, Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

This paper explores how higher education institutions can adapt to this mass system (and to the ensuing phenomenon of marketisation of higher education). In particular, it investigates how the increasing number of students has impacted on several dimensions of service quality and generates insights that can assist higher education institutions to cope with this phenomenon. With an expanding higher education system, quality assurance is under increasing scrutiny. Questions relating to quality are regularly raised by stakeholder groups: government, employers, the media, students and parents. Discussions emanating from industry on operations management and production quality, have now entered the higher education services realm in relation to aspects of the quality of delivery of a range of services (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003, Lagrosen et al, 2004). The focus of the study is on the operational dimensions of higher education service quality and not on the quality of higher education as a form of '*paideia*'.

The study has been undertaken within an undergraduate "sandwich" programme with an integral placement year at the business school of a prestigious UK higher education institution. Over the past few years there has been a sharp increase of these programmes across the UK. The level of employability of the students of the programme has arguably

increased the reputation of the programme that has been built over the years. This has enabled the school to recruit higher calibre students and in larger volumes. However, the growing number of students is creating a tension between mass higher education and the quality of the services which can be delivered within operational and resource parameters. Given the economic value and competitive advantage that programmes with integral placements may yield for the university, this research has been undertaken with a view to better understand quality issues and to identify ways of better operationalising such programmes in the future.

The remainder of the paper is organised in three sections. Firstly, the literature within the fields of both service quality and higher education quality is critically explored. This is followed by a discussion on the research design and methodology that has been employed for the study and the results of the analysis of the two sets of stakeholder data analysed – that of the students, and staff involved in the design and delivery of the service. Finally, the implications of these findings are presented and possible further research is suggested.

Literature Review

From Elite to Mass

A starting point for this research is rooted in the shift from an élite to a mass higher education, borne out of the UK government's policies to enhance the number of students at higher education institutions and to include strata of society previously excluded from them (Scott, 2005). This transformation has been significant and has taken place in a relatively short period of time Elias and Purcell (2004). Along with government policy to transform higher education, came demands from employers (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). In essence, the need for highly skilled labour is at the heart of state policy.

This notion of the globally demand-led economic view created the need and demands on higher education, to provide the students with the necessary skills required in labour markets, along with wider access from segments of their societies. Higher education has, therefore, become the norm and a university education is no longer the domain of a select few. Participation rates have increased phenomenally (Douglass, 2005, Scott, 2005). The Dearing report (1997) of higher education in the Learning Society, proposed its vision for higher education: *'gaining in strength through the pursuit of quality and a commitment to high standards... (in an era where) ...the national need and demand for higher education will drive a resumed expansion of student numbers'*. This vision calls for not only the expansion of higher education but also the quest for a quality system. However, the number of British universities that are unable to respond to the growth in student numbers along with a mandated increase in quality is apparent.

Quality: fitness for purpose

Describing and defining quality within the context of higher education is a complex issue. It can either mean providing students with high levels of employability, or providing them with analytical and practical skills that can be used in different work related contexts, or providing them with education that will make them independent and critical thinkers. It is also context specific in that these can be interpreted differently in higher education institutions with different focus and strategies. Harvey and Green (1993) posit that there is no single correct definition of quality and that quality is 'stakeholder-relative'" and individualistic in nature. It can be measured in terms of the prestige of the university (perspective of innate excellence), the value added (employability, knowledge acquired), the effectiveness of processes of the provision of education (specification perspective).

Within a university, the term ‘fitness for purpose’ is often cited as a descriptor for and of quality (Barnett, 1992; Green, 1994). Barnett (1992) talks of ‘fitness for purpose’ as a relativist concept, with both hierarchical and parallel forms. The former refers to higher education institutions as different and not equal in status – the fact that some institutions attract greater esteem and are considered to be of higher quality than others. The latter shows higher education institutions as different and equal. Green (1994) concurs with the fitness for purpose definition, arguing that quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s) and specifically in terms of meeting customers’ needs. Some caution ought to be exercised, however, as Harvey and Green (1993) suggest the notion that fitness for purpose is misleading as it raises questions connected with whose purpose and the assessment of fitness – the customer is not always the right person to determine their requirements and so cannot judge, therefore, if their needs are being met.

Students as evaluators and co-producers of service quality

In a service environment, the customer is also a participant in the service encounter. With the customer as co-producer, quality control becomes more complicated. Zeithaml et al (2006) express the importance of examining the role the student plays in the service experience, and how this affects perceptions. Quality in services is defined not by the organisation itself but rather by the customer. In the case of higher education institutions, a customer may be one of a number of people – students, employers, governments and the economic society (Abdullah 2005, Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

The evaluation of the quality of services is primarily made by customers in terms of whether their perceptions that their expectations have been met. The view of expectations is discussed by a range of authors. Barnett (1992, p34) for example talks of some students having “*a dependency orientation, suffering from an overestimate of what can be done for them...in these consumer-oriented times, many quite rightly want their money’s worth out of their attendance*”. Oldfield and Baron (2000, pp.93-94) conclude that “*the service experience that is higher education is complex, and students undergoing higher education likewise have a complex set of expectations*”.

Zeithaml et al (2006, p34) talk of the expectations which customers bring with them into service encounters, with perceptions being those “*subjective assessments of actual service experiences*”. Therefore, the need to manage customers’ expectations is critical (Hill, 1995) for those devising and managing advertising campaigns, promotional materials and websites. Service employees need to be mindful that they are not sending out messages about the quality of the service which they might not be able to deliver.

Dibb et al (2006) contend that in certain types of service contexts, customers may be unable to evaluate the service even after having experienced it. This theory of customer evaluation of service quality resonates within higher education institutions. Students’ lack of direct, first-hand experience of higher education means that they may be unable to evaluate the service they have received. With this argument in mind, students may find it difficult to define what quality is in certain higher education service contexts. As the customer is central to the assessment of quality (Dibb and Simkin, 2004), these issues point to a shift in power in the determination of quality and the new role acquired by the university’s staff (academic and administrative) as facilitators rather than providers of the educational service.

In assessing service quality Parasuraman et al. (1985) provide key insights from their research into consumers’ experiences and expectations of service quality. Their gap model involves

comparing what is required of the operation by the marketplace against the levels of performance the operation is currently achieving (Zeithaml et al, 2006). Five major gaps (Figure 1) between expectations and perceptions of a service are identified. For example, Gap 1 exhibits the discrepancies in the perception of the expectations of the customer of the delivered service and the management of the perception of customers by the service provider. The gap model has been used extensively in the service management literature and can be used in assessing the quality of higher education.

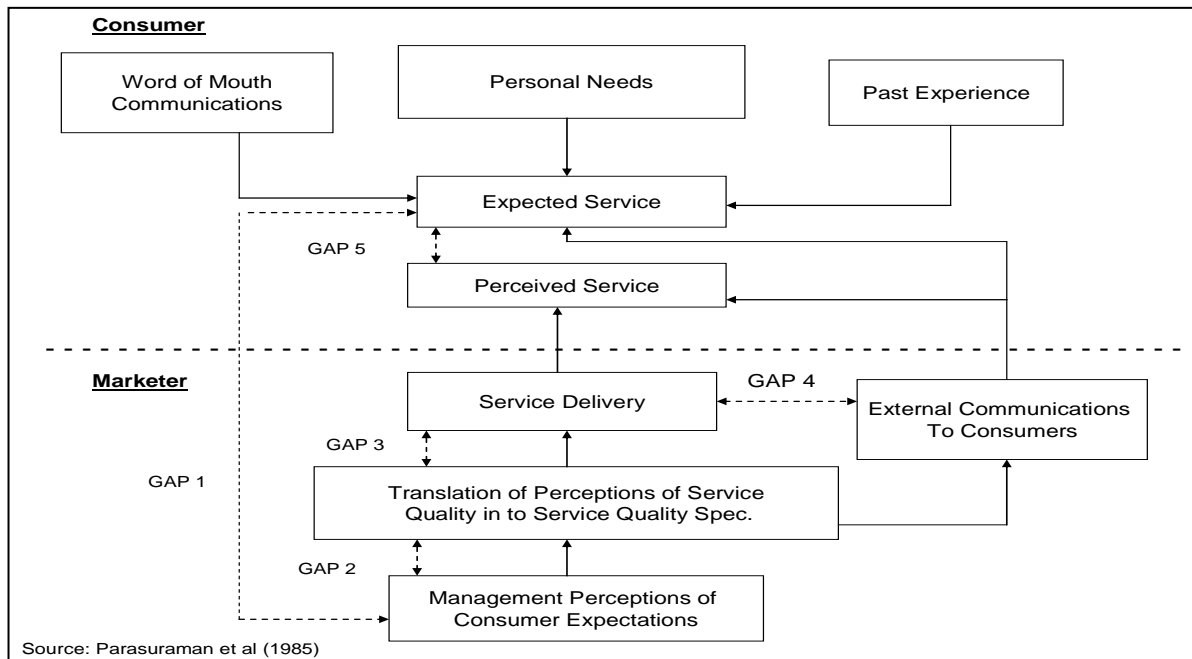


Figure 2 The Service Quality Model

In light of the current environment of mass higher education, this paper explores the impact of the rising number of students on the level of quality. The study is also complemented by an analysis of the level of quality of the service processes related to the placement programme, based on the gap model, to assist the higher education institutions to increase their quality levels. The following propositions are explored:

P1: The increase in student numbers impacts negatively on the quality of higher education

P2: There is a discrepancy between staff and students on the quality of service process related to the placement programme.

The “operational” aspect of quality of a higher education service is conceptualised in terms of the students’ expectations and perceptions of quality of the services that they are provided with and their associated processes. Quality is conceived as fitness for purpose and is assessed by taking into account the perspective of the service providers (placement officers and academic staff) as well as the students’ point of view.

The literature highlights the relevance of service quality within the current higher education environment and therefore underscores the need for higher education institutions to ensure that they are well positioned in the eyes of their stakeholders to deliver services at a high quality to gain competitive advantage. Students entering higher education today are entering a system which is different to the one their parents did – this is now education for all and in a society which is now far more led by consumer demands. There is a need to understand the

expectations and indeed the experiences of the student – or to use consumer led terminology, the customer - so that gaps can be identified and strategies on how to manage the gaps can be formulated and put into practice.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to explore the proposition that quality is impacted as the number of students on the placement programme increases and to analyse the operational implications of the mass higher education system, a process for assessing the quality of service has to be defined. By considering quality as “fitness for purpose” of the placement programme, the perceptions of not only students but also the staff tasked with delivering a service have been examined. The gap model of Parasuraman et al. (1985) has been used to highlight and assess the possible disconnects between students’ expectations of a service prior to using a service and their experiences, as well as staff’s perception of the nature of the placement programme and the service quality delivered to the students.

Two types of data have been collected. Data relating to students’ views has been analysed first to assess the students’ experience of the provided service. This used the results of an annual student survey over a period of five years. Student numbers increased rapidly during that timeframe, therefore providing ample information to test the first proposition. The views of students’ perceptions of the service received were evaluated and a comparative year-on-year analysis was undertaken to ascertain if quality/fitness for purpose has been affected or compromised in any way during the period where student numbers have increased. Subsequently, primary data relating to the views of staff was collected through a survey and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the primary research were analysed in order to triangulate the findings of the students’ survey, to explore the second proposition and also to provide some guidance on the selection of the most appropriate service process for the programme under investigation.

Student survey

Over the five year period, the content of the questionnaire has remained consistent, so that key comparisons can be made on these aspects of service quality. Students were asked to rate their perception of the quality of services provided to them using a Likert scale. Nine services were explored (Table 1). They were also asked to comment on their experience of their placement as well as the processes and resources of the university regarding the facilitation of their selection and to rate a range of services offered by the placement office (Appendix A).

Table 1 – Services provided to students of the placement programme

a. <i>The website for jobs</i>	This refers to the university’s intranet website for job placements’ vacancies
b. <i>Timetabled briefing sessions</i>	This refers to the scheduled workshops and presentations by the administration team regarding the placements. There are four sessions throughout the year.
c. <i>Employer presentations / sessions</i>	This refers to the presentations of invited potential employers that are organised by the placement managers.
d. <i>Placement student reports</i>	This refers to the comprehensiveness of the form given to the students to provide their reports on their placement
e. <i>One-to-one appointments</i>	This refers to the individual face to face appointments between the students and the academic coordinator and the manager of the placement programme
f. <i>Briefing pack / Advice sheet</i>	This refers to the brochures and guidelines that are provided to the students regarding their prospective placement. It has information about the application process, the host institutions, funding sources, administrative issues whilst abroad
g. <i>Placement event</i>	This refers to the event organised by the administrators for students seeking a placement to meet students who have just returned from placement.

h. <i>Resource room</i>	This refers to the usefulness of the room dedicated to the placement programme. It has information about the host institutions, news and announcements boards
i. <i>Placement office events</i>	This refers to 'finding your placement' workshops, psychometric tests, etc.

The secondary data offered internal validity as it was collected in the same way – via questionnaire – and that all the participants were placement year students. The students surveyed had access to and used some or all of the services. The sample, for each of the five years, is homogenous in this respect. Table 2 outlines the number of students on placement in each of the five years being examined.

Table 2 – Total number of students

Year	Number of students on placement	Response rate
2008/9	307	36.8%
2009/10	388	37.1%
2010/11	407	22.1%
2011/12	450	36.2%
2012/13	439	67.7%

Linear regression analysis was performed on this data set in order to explore the proposition that the growth in numbers (the independent variable) has impacted upon student satisfaction levels (the dependant variable), and to examine the link between these variables.

Primary Data

The staff survey was designed to seek views on what process type they believed the service is, what it should be and what impression they understood the marketing of the service/programme gave to students in respect of the service process (Appendix B). This survey was smaller in scale as only responses from those who know the service i.e. placement office staff, undergraduate programme staff and placement tutors would be valid. A self-completion questionnaire was used, given the need to gather as many suitable responses as possible, from a small population.

The model used to provide descriptions of the different service process types was the service process model (Silvestro, 1999) (Figure 2) as it links clearly with the proposition of volume impacting upon quality. The questionnaire did not provide respondents with labels for each of these process types (this could have influenced choices), but instead focussed on the descriptions of the service process types.

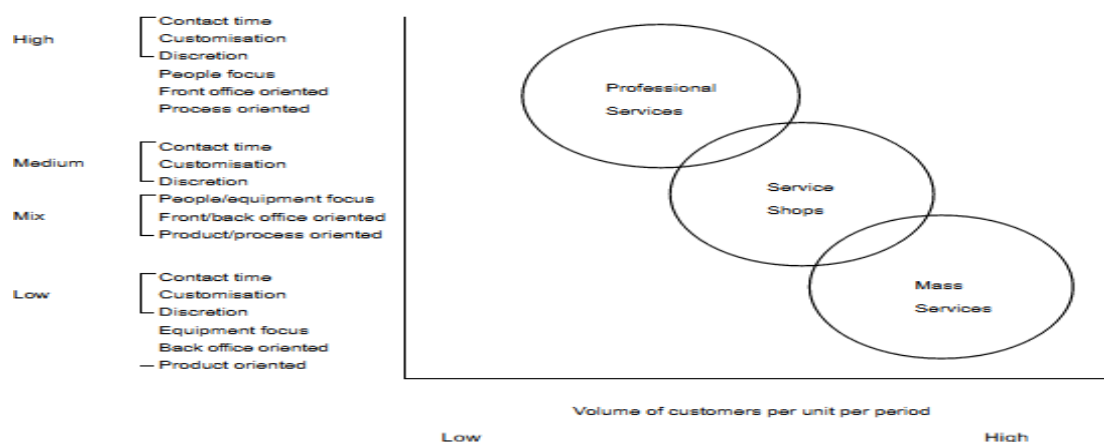


Figure 2 – The service process model (Silvestro, 1999).

The questionnaire focussed on three areas:

1. Which description best fits the placement office?

2. Which one should the placement office ideally be?
3. Which one best describes how the placement office is marketed to prospective students?
4. A combination of more than one of the above.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were also conducted in order to complement the staff survey and to enable the probing of the responses more deeply. A purposive and stratified sample of four members of staff was contacted: the director of the UG programme, the manager and the advisor of the placement programme and the academic placement tutor. The interviews were reasonably short in duration (ranging from 20-35 minutes), aiming to encourage participants to elaborate on the reasons for their questionnaire responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the pattern matching and codification techniques were used to identify similarities and/or differences in the interviewees' responses.

Results and Analysis

Students' Survey

The response rates in 2008/9, 2009/10 and 2011/12 are broadly consistent and although they are not high, there are minimal implications for the analysis. Firstly, no population sampling has taken place – every student within the student cohort was invited to complete the questionnaire. Secondly, all responses have been used in the analysis. The profiles of the students every year has been similar and therefore the different response rates do not substantially increase the bias in the findings.

The ratings used were *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, and *poor*. Table 3 shows each of the services students were asked to rate and the combined percentage of students who rated the service as either “Excellent” or “Good” by year. The figure in bold text indicates the highest percentage in the data set and the figure in italics denotes the lowest percentage. The figure in brackets after the year indicates the overall number of students taking placements that year.

Table 3 - Results of Students surveys to services received

Service Year	Website for jobs	Briefing Sessions	Employers Sessions	Placement Reports	One-to-one Support	Briefing Pack	Advice sheets	Resources Room	Placement Fair/Event
2008/9 (307)	93% (286)	82% (252)	66% (203)	No data available	50% (154)	86% (264)	83% (255)	No data available	No data available
2009/10 (388)	92% (357)	77% (299)	59% (229)	<i>58%</i> (225)	53% (206)	78% (303)	75% (291)	63% (244)	<i>44%</i> (171)
2010/11 (407)	96% (391)	79% (322)	55% (224)	77% (313)	81% (330)	92% (374)	84% (342)	70% (285)	55% (224)
2011/12 (450)	95% (428)	81% (365)	61% (275)	92% (414)	44% (198)	<i>61%</i> (275)	76% (342)	75% (338)	94% (423)
2012/13 (439)	<i>90%</i> (395)	<i>66%</i> (290)	<i>51%</i> (224)	62% (272)	<i>29%</i> (127)	74% (325)	<i>73%</i> (320)	<i>46%</i> (202)	47% (206)

Three services achieved their highest rating by students in 2011/12 – the year of the largest cohort of students. Four out of the nine services rated have their highest score in 2010/11, which saw the third largest cohort of students take placements. Two services achieved their highest rating in 2008/9. This academic year saw the smallest cohort of students take placements within the data set being analysed in this study.

Six services have their lowest score in 2012/13, which saw the second largest cohort of students (439) take placements. The *placement year briefing pack* received its lowest score in 2011/12; the year with the largest number of students taking a placement. The most notable of those services is the *one-to-one support*, rated as “Excellent” or “Good” by just 29% of students 2012/13 (except in 2010/2011 where one-to-one support has the highest score). It

should also be noted that this service, along with the *employer sessions*, is consistently rated as the service with the lowest or second lowest satisfaction rating.

In 2011/12, the *one-to-one support* was rated as “Excellent” or “Good” by less than half of the students surveyed, and was the service students were least satisfied with (or most dissatisfied with). The *placement fair/event* and the *placement reports* were rated lowest in the year where the smallest cohort of students took placements.

The increase in participation rates in higher education would point to the assumption that student numbers have potentially impacted negatively on quality and student satisfaction. The analysis of the data shows that of the nine services analysed, only one of these – the *briefing pack* – had its lowest student satisfaction rating in the year of the largest placement cohort, 2011/12 (450 students). This is a rather unexpected finding as the pack is provided to every student, through the same means and at the same time.

Three out of nine of the services received their highest student satisfaction ratings in the year where the largest cohort of students took placements. These services were: the placement fair/event, the placement resources room and the placement reports. Six of the nine services were rated lowest in the same year, 2012/13. This year saw the second highest number of students that took placements – 439 compared to 450 in 2011/12. This data links closely to the assumption that as student numbers increase, quality is negatively impacted and student satisfaction decreases (or, dissatisfaction increases).

The lowest rating for any of the services was the one-to-one support in 2012/13, which was rated as “excellent” or “good” by just 29% of students. The second lowest rating received for this service was in 2011/12 which was rated as “excellent” or “good” by 44% of students. In the two years that the largest number of students took placements, the one-to-one aspect of the service provision was rated lowest of all. The data would therefore point to this specific dimension of service – being able to respond appropriately to students’ individual needs – being most compromised as student numbers have risen.

Along with the questions designed to assess levels of satisfaction with a Likert scale, students were also surveyed on other areas of satisfaction. In each of the five years, they were asked:

1. Did the placement exceed, meet or fall below your expectations?
2. Has the placement assisted you in making a career decision?
3. Would you recommend your placement organisation to future students?
4. Was your placement tutor helpful?
5. How did you find your placement? Was it:
 - a) on the placement website
 - b) through your own contacts/sources

The results are shown in Table 4. The numbers show the percentage of students who answered “yes”.

Table 4 – Survey Results on areas of satisfaction

Dimension	Did the placement meet/exceed your expectations?	Has the placement helped you determine your career path upon graduation?	Would you Recommend your placement to future students?	Did you find your placement tutor helpful?	Did you find your placement through the placement office?
Year and no. of students on placement					
2008/9 (307)	86%	66%	86%	77%	85%

2009/10 (388)	87%	76%	88%	69%	88%
2010/11 (407)	87%	70%	87%	78%	90%
2011/12 (450)	86%	74%	82%	77%	79%
2012/13 (439)	85%	71%	90%	82%	78%

Most notably, fewer students secured their placements through the placement office in the two years where the largest number of students have undertaken placements, with more students finding their placements through using their own contacts or seeking placements independently. There are numerous reasons as to why this might be the case. One explanation could be that as the number of students increases, it is less easy for placement office staff to engage with students as individuals, hence there is a need for students to become more independent. Linking with this is the fact that a number of students, each year, secure placements very late in the year, some after the academic year has ended. As few companies are proactively seeking to recruit students at this point in the year, students are advised by the placement office on strategies to approach companies directly and speculatively.

There is a difference in the percentage of students who found their placement tutor helpful. However, this does not seem to be attributable to the rise in numbers. This might, however, be accounted for in the growth of the student population but indirectly, through another variable. In 2010/11, compulsory training for all new placement tutors was introduced. Given the data shown in Table 4, this aspect of the quality of the programme has increased, despite the growth of the programme.

The data underscores the one-to-one support as the service which students are most dissatisfied with. Therefore, regression analysis was used to further examine this service. The regression output is shown in Table 5:

Table 5 – Regression output

SUMMARY OUTPUT									
<i>Regression Statistics</i>									
Multiple R	0.215364149								
R Square	0.046381717								
Adjusted R Square	-0.271491044								
Standard Error	0.213739732								
Observations	5								
<i>ANOVA</i>									
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>				
Regression	1	0.00666598	0.00666598	0.145912838	0.727924569				
Residual	3	0.13705402	0.045684673						
Total	4	0.14372							
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>	
Intercept	0.800837407	0.756971428	1.057949319	0.367727671	-1.608183517	3.209858331	-1.608183517	3.209858331	
X Variable 1	-0.000720335	0.001885766	-0.38198539	0.727924569	-0.006721684	0.005281014	-0.006721684	0.005281014	
<i>RESIDUAL OUTPUT</i>									
<i>Observation</i>	<i>Predicted Y</i>	<i>Residuals</i>	<i>Standard Residuals</i>						
1	0.579694554	-0.079694554	-0.430539253						
2	0.521347417	0.008652583	0.04674443						
3	0.507661052	0.302338948	1.633346043						
4	0.476686646	-0.036686646	-0.198194735						
5	0.484610331	-0.194610331	-1.051356486						

The correlation coefficient, the multiple R statistic, shows that there is a weak correlation between the variables. The coefficient of determination (0.046) shows that almost all of the variation in student satisfaction with the one-to-one service is not attributable to the rise in student numbers and must therefore be due to chance or other factors.

The briefing pack received its lowest satisfaction rating in 2011/12 i.e. the year with the largest cohort of students taking placements, and is the only service which received its lowest rating in this year. The regression analysis is shown in Table 6. The correlation coefficient shows that there is a stronger link between the two variables. The coefficient of determination is 0.457, showing that almost half of the variation is attributable to the growth of the programme – however, more than half of the variation is therefore attributable to other factors and, indeed, chance.

Table 6. Summary Output

SUMMARY OUTPUT								
<i>Regression Statistics</i>								
Multiple R	0.676354379							
R Square	0.457455246							
Adjusted R Square	0.276606995							
Standard Error	0.125492094							
Observations	5							
ANOVA								
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F			
Regression	1	0.039835203	0.039835203	2.52949776	0.209962146			
Residual	3	0.047244797	0.015748266					
Total	4	0.08708						
	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	1.453192546	0.444437394	3.269735095	0.046786377	0.038794402	2.86759069	0.038794402	2.86759069
X Variable 1	-0.001760905	0.001107182	-1.590439486	0.209962146	-0.005284452	0.001762641	-0.005284452	0.001762641
RESIDUAL OUTPUT								
Observation	Predicted Y	Residuals	Standard Residuals					
1	0.912594576	-0.052594576	-0.483942719					
2	0.769961235	0.010038765	0.092370494					
3	0.736504032	0.183495968	1.688416264					
4	0.660785098	-0.050785098	-0.467293025					
5	0.680155058	-0.090155058	-0.829551015					

Staff Survey results

The staff survey achieved a 69% response rate. The Service Quality Model (or gap model) (Parasuraman et al, 1985) has been used, through a comparison of answers to question one with the responses given to question three. This analytical process highlights gap 4; that is:

- the gap between actual service delivery and external
- communications about the service will affect service
- quality from a consumer’s standpoint. (Parasuraman et al, 1985)

Question One

The majority of respondents (58.6%), believed that the placement office fitted the service shop description. 20.7% of respondents believed that the service was “a combination of more than one of the above”.

Question Two

Question 2 asked the survey participants to state what the ideal service process type was for the placement office. Over half (51.7%) chose the professional services process type. The next most popular answer was the service shop process type (34.5%), with only 3.4% of respondents choosing the mass services process type. 10.3% of people chose option 4, “a combination of more than one of the above”.

Question Three

Question 3 asked respondents to state which of the three service process type descriptions best matched their perceptions of how the placement programme is marketed to prospective students.

Again, a large majority (58.6%) felt that the placement office was marketed in a way which showed it to have professional services process type characteristics. The next most popular answer (24.1%) was for the service shop process type. Only 6.9% of respondents chose the description for the mass services service process type. Once again, survey participants could opt for a combination of these service process types – 10.3% of respondents chose this.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Four of the fourteen respondents who were willing to take part in further research, were contacted and interviews were arranged. The interviews enable the examination of Gap 5 in the Service Quality Model, through probing the answers respondents gave to the questionnaire on questions one and three, evaluating these in light of the model.

Themes

A number of themes from the interviews have been identified (Table 7).

Table 7. Themes identified from interviews

The design of the Office in terms of the processes used to deliver the service to a variety of students with individual needs and a large volume of students is relevant
Staff felt that there was a large volume of students to support
Students have individual needs. There is a need to customise the service to meet those varying needs
Resources – this is a broad area given the range of responses and here it encompasses service personnel, time and those tangible resources such as facilities, web pages and so on used by the placement office
The office was a high-contact service process type provider
Reputation of the service
Expectations and perceptions of students
Marketing of the programme
Impact of the placement year

Some of these points are very closely intertwined – marketing is based on reputation; reputation impacts on customers’ expectations of the service. The available resources in turn have a bearing on the perceptions of the service, as compared with the expectations set at the time of marketing, and so on.

The interviews uncovered that there are a number of influences which staff believe contribute towards students’ expectations – marketing, parents, open days, web sites, service personnel, league tables/ rankings, accreditations and the reputation of the school and the programme. Collectively, these combine to form the expected service. However, the perceived service, i.e. what is delivered, is likely to be different, therefore leading to gap 5 in SERVQUAL.

Conclusions

This study bridges a gap in the existing literature, by taking an operational perspective of quality in higher education and providing insights into specific quality issues surrounding an higher education service during a time of significant growth in student numbers. The empirical research has enabled a detailed review and exploration to be undertaken of aspects of service quality within a UK higher education business school. During a period of rapid expansion of the higher education sector, and intense accompanying stakeholder interest, this research contributes to ascertaining an understanding of the impact and effects such growth has on students' perceptions of the quality of the service they receive. This has taken into account the views of students gathered over a five year period, and also the views of staff involved in the running of the service. The findings of this study contribute towards obtaining a much greater and more detailed understanding of aspects of service quality within the higher education sector, and therefore to enable service quality improvements to be made.

The research shows that the rise in student numbers has been a contributing factor to the deterioration of quality in higher education. There may be however a range of other variables which may contribute to this. Students' identities and past experiences can also influence expectations and experiences of higher education can be explored further to examine how definitions of quality in education shifted in the context of mass higher education and how this may influence experiences of higher education courses.

Through the analysis of the primary data, it is evident that there are discrepancies between what the placement programme is currently marketed as to prospective students, and the service in practice. This may account for those areas of the programme where student satisfaction appears low. Understanding students' expectations of the placement service is fundamental. However, the service has been largely designed around management's perceptions of consumers' expectations. When comparing what the service is (in terms of the service process typology) with what the ideal service should be and with how the service is promoted and positioned to students, the results of this research highlights discrepancies.

Useful lessons and insights can be generated from the results of this study for higher education institutions in the way they design and manage placement programmes. The first step in the provision of high quality university placement services would be for the programme and academic directors, to take into account and use as a benchmark students expectations and their perceptions of higher education service provision.

A second implication of the findings is the selection of quality measures (provided services) which both students and management teams can address. Universities should be cautious in the use of technology as an alternative to face-to-face (one-to-one) interactions. The development of an on-line web platform which can be used to automate and monitor the different steps of the placement process may be useful to cope with the increasing number of students and the customised service that is required for their individual needs.

University academic staff need to be supported so that they can provide the adequate level of assistance to the students. This may involve a better balanced teaching load, more focused responsibilities to the pastoral role towards students. At the same time, significant reward and recognition for their pastoral role and job progression opportunities based on their involvement with students could be set in place.

The students (as well as the employers) perception of the quality of the placement programme could also be enhanced by better communicating to the employers the benefits and value that students can add to their business. Equally a better preparation of the students for the placement working environment, through fostering skills such as job hunting, participation in working teams, coping with pressure, or delegation of tasks could minimise the discrepancy between their expectations and perception of the quality of the programme.

There were a number of limitations surrounding the research. Firstly, the use of a questionnaire to survey staff had many advantages but there are restrictions in terms of the parameters of the research. Such a survey tool does not enable the researchers to probe responses with participants. Furthermore, there is no opportunity for the researchers to check the respondents' understanding of questions or terminology. The specificity of the university and the programme, in that it attracts high calibre students, also needs to be highlighted, as the students' expectations as well as the way they experience the provision of the service may be different to the expectations of students in other types of higher education/programmes. However, with the introduction of the fee system in higher education, the differences between different types of higher education institutions have been ameliorated.

Research is currently undertaken to understand the expectations of students prior to entering the service process. Comparisons of these findings can then be made with the findings as outlined. SERVQUAL or a similar tool could be used. Using the service quality model, this will enable potential gaps to be identified between expectations and perceptions. This could lead to services being adapted – where resources and strategy allow – in order to better align the service provision with the expectations that students have or, perhaps more realistically, the service may be marketed differently in order to better manage students expectations.

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