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Toward A Greater Understanding of how Service Quality Drives Students Satisfaction in Higher Learning Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to investigate the relationships between service quality and students satisfaction at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Kedah, Malaysia. This study emphasizes on the service quality (SERVQUAL) instrument involving five dimensions, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy that contributing to students' satisfaction. Hence, this study provides a knowledge to the student's decision before entered for enrolment in any university on future.

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INTRODUCTION

Ministry of Higher Education plays an active role in devoting totally for the education of the youth. Higher learning institutions considered their role in providing the education to the youth as a business, like service industry, where it mainly focuses on the satisfaction of the client in order to retain and increase the profit. As mentioned by Hanaysha, Haim and Ari [1] the service quality in educational industry was defined on the basis of students overall evaluation on the services they received which is part of their educational experience.

Besides that, it is important for the institution to meet the needs of their students as well as provide a quality of education which they are demanding at this level of education. Therefore, satisfaction is not only dependent on the inanimate service environment and the service provider, but also on other consumers as well [2].

The universities increasingly emphasis on the study of the satisfaction of the students and it became a major issue particularly for the administrations of the university and policy makers to develop the services and opportunities. Students' satisfaction is an indicator to portray the good image of service provider among students in the university.

The measurement of the students' satisfaction is important as it helps the university to pinpoint their strengths and identify any areas for improvements. Students' satisfaction approaches may be a tool for building a bridge between more traditional and academic views on how to improve higher education, and more market-orientated perspectives [3]. This study attempts to explore the relationship between the service quality and the student's satisfaction at public higher educational institutions in Malaysia.

Problem statements:

Malaysia higher learning institution act as a service industry in which it emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of the customers. In higher learning education, students are the main customers of universities. Thus, it is very important for the university to provide better quality of output that can satisfy the customers. As mentioned by Ali *et al.* [4], in the context of higher education, the matter of satisfaction is what students expect from their educational institution, in fact, everything that makes them eligible to become productive and successful person in their practical lives.

Thus, satisfying students need as well as expectation are vital for universities to succeed from the increasing competitiveness of this industry [5]. As discussed by Carey *et al.* [6] the satisfaction actually covers issues of student's perception and experiences during their academic years. Due to increase pressure of the competition in the education service industry, the higher education institutions are focusing more on the student satisfaction.

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However, organizational performance of the Malaysia higher learning institution still obtained many complaints that show the inability of this sector in providing the quality of services in term of the education as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Number of Complaints Received Against Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia

Year	Total Complaints
2014	71
2013	178
2012	249
2011	268
2010	259

Sources: Public Complaints Bureau Annual Report (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)

The above annual reports show the incompetency of the Malaysia higher learning institution based on the number of complaints made by the public for the past five years. In fact this is true that as an issue on the incompetency of the Malaysia higher learning institution has been raised in the newspaper.

As mentioned by Gooch [7] the ministry has issued fines to 47 private education institutions after doing the regular audits, inspections and complaints from public from January to March 2011 and 48 institutions received fines in the year 2010 and 49 institutions received fines in the year 2009. This shows that the higher learning institutions does not paying more attention to achieve the customers need. Therefore, this study intention to examine the relationship between the variables of service quality and student satisfaction among bachelor degree students studying at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Kedah.

Research objective:

Students' satisfaction is one of the most important things in an educational field. Thus, it is essential to investigate the effects of the service quality on the student's satisfaction. This study mainly aims to understand the difference in student perception towards the service quality rendered by them. In addition, it discusses the conceptual basis of student satisfaction and perceived quality also identify the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction. Finally, in this study it will determine which of the service quality dimensions are most important to the students. The research question can be stated as follows: What are the relationships between service quality provided by the university that influence the students' satisfaction?

Literature review:

Service Quality:

Azleen *et al.* [8] mentioned that service quality is commonly noted as a critical prerequisite for establishing and sustaining satisfying relationship with valued customers. The service delivery being delivered to the target customer must be performed with high standard and the companies which are referring to the university itself must know how to build a good relationship with the customer and they must know how to satisfy the customer if they want the company to survive. Therefore, every academic institution must make every effort toward meeting and exceeding student's expectation in order to ensure their sustainable operation and development [9].

There are many evidences on the importance of the service quality in the higher learning institution (Angell *et al.*, 2008). The concept of quality had been evolved from 'excellence' to 'value', to 'conformance to specification', and to 'meeting and exceeding customer expectations' [10]. The service quality in the field of education and higher learning particularly is not essential and important, but it is also an important parameter of educational excellence [11].

Service quality has been defined as the differences between customer's expectations of services provider's performance and their evaluation of the services they received [12, 13]. Apart from that, the service quality also can be referred to the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations [14, 15]. Czepiel [16] stated that the basic concept of service quality is the customer perception of how does a service meets or exceeds their expectations. This is known as the perceived quality. The researchers identified that there is a quality gap occurs if there happened to be any mismatch in the quality and the customer's perception on the quality might be influenced by various gaps. As discussed by Saghier and Nathan [17] perceived quality has been defined as a form of attitude, related but not equal to satisfaction, and fallout from a consumption of expectations with perceptions of performance.

Asaduzzaman *et al.* [11] claimed that if an organization regularly provides service at a level that exceeds customer expectations, the service will be evaluated as high quality. However, if an organization fails to meet customer expectations, the service will be judge as poor quality [18]. The customer usually made their own expectation about the services based on the norms, values, wishes, etc. All these expectation are not stable and always change due to the changes in aspirations levels at a certain time. Thus, the customers who are unhappy or feel dissatisfy with the services that has been provided to them will be likely to switch to another service providers.

Student Satisfaction:

Hishamuddin *et al.* [19] claimed that satisfaction is a function of relative level of expectations and perceives performance. According to Elliott and Shin [20] student satisfaction can be defined as the favorability of a student's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education. Student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life. The expectation may go as far as before the students even enter the higher education, suggesting that it is important to the researchers to determine first what the students expect before entering the university [21]. As mentioned by Brewer and Carnes [22] assessing overall student satisfaction involves more than a student's assessment of the "academic" experiences but also satisfaction with administrative processes, the social environment, the physical environment and other aspects of the university environment as well. Therefore, the universities has increasingly emphasizes on the student's satisfaction.

According to Petruzzellis *et al.* [23] students are generally satisfied if the quality and facilities provided meet their expectations otherwise, they are dissatisfied from the educations as well as the institutions providing them the services. Thus, students will have a high tendency in providing positive comment and will recommend to new students for their admission in the university. However, Arambewela and Hall [24] stated that student satisfaction has become a major challenge for the universities and it has been recognized that student satisfaction is the major source of competitive advantage and this satisfy action also leads towards student retention, attraction for new students and positive word of mouth communication as well.

Service Quality and Student Satisfaction:

Parasuraman *et al.* [13] had contributed a great influence in defining and measuring service quality. Besides that, Oliver [25] also addresses the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. According to Oliver [25] he proposed a conceptual model that attempts to integrate both service quality and satisfaction by suggesting that perceived service quality is an antecedent of satisfaction. The outcome of the model showed that the service quality leads to the satisfaction. Meanwhile, as mentioned by Parasuraman *et al.* [12] perceived service quality is a global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service. It shows that there is a comparison between the service quality and satisfaction.

On top of that, Hasnizam [26] mentioned that in previous studies were conceptual in nature and strictly focus on mainstream student satisfaction faculty as well as university level. Little study has been researched to understand service quality among adult learners. SERVQUAL instrument has been used by most scholars (e.g. Abdullah[27]; Athiyaman[28]; Hill[29] to measure the students' satisfaction. This SERVQUAL model has been developed by Parasuraman *et al.* [12] which consist of five key determinants of perceived service quality. The service providers need to identify all the key determinants which are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles in order to enable them to improve their quality of service.

Reliability is referring to the ability to perform the services that has been promised in an accurate way and dependably. Reliability also brought the meaning of performing services right the first time in regards to the delivery, service provision also problem resolution. It shows that the firm should honors for its own promises that have been made to the customer.

Responsiveness means that the willingness and readiness of the employees in providing the services to the customer. This dimension emphasizes on the ability of the service providers in dealing with the customer requests, questions, complaints also problems.

Assurance is defined as knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence [13]. It enables the customers to use all the tangible evidence to get assess to the assurance dimension at the early stage. The tangible evidence will act as a tool to convince the consumers about the services provided by the firm. All the tangible evidence such as furniture, interior and facilities, certificate and recognition received by the organization, organization's activity board, the vision and mission of the firm will be place and display in inanimate environment as an evidence to convince the consumer about the services that has been provided.

Empathy is related to the employees of the firm who understand the needs of the customers and their convenience also it relates to the attention given to the customers. According to Parasuraman *et al.* [13] empathy is the caring and individual attention the firm provides its customers. By treating customers as an individual which is the institution provides caring, attention to the customers, they will feel they have been understood by the firm and appreciate from the firm which provides the services to them.

Tangibles have been defined by Parasuraman *et al.* [13] as the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written materials. Highly intangible product like teaching which is cannot be seen, taste or felt just like other tangible product need to be represented physically through the use of facilities, equipment, staff appearance also the communication materials in order to enable the service to be provided to the customers. Services are different from product in which through a product, people can touch and know how to evaluate their satisfaction towards a product. Thus, it is very important in ensuring a good physical environment to be

provided to the consumers in order to reduce complexity also encourages word-of-mouth recommendations made by the students to the others.

Methodology:

A quantitative approach has been used in this research. Quantitative methods refer to designs that are correlational, quasi-experimental, and experimental [30]. As mentioned by Zainudin [31] when a numerical data is required in the study, the research is called quantitative research. The quantitative research provides the information in terms of numbers. Apart from that, quantitative data can also be classified as continuous or discrete. The continuous variables is one with an unlimited number of values that may take place [31].

This study intend to investigate the relationships between service quality provided by the university that influence the students' satisfaction in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Kedah. Thus, the questionnaires were distributed using survey method and respondents were identified through stratified random sampling to represent the population in which the bachelor degree students studying at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Kedah become the respondents for this study.

Conclusion:

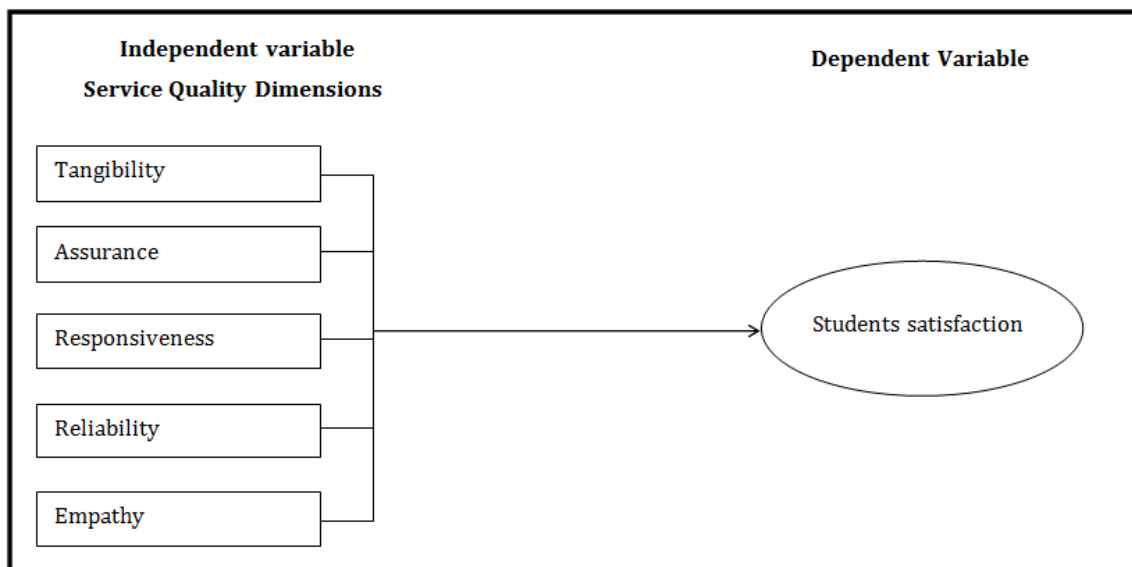


Diagram 1:

Research Framework:

This study adopted Parasuraman's SERVQUAL dimensions. The dependent variable in this study is the student satisfaction over higher learning institutions. Meanwhile, the independent variable in this study is service quality in the higher education that measures the level of satisfaction with service performance. The independent variable included the SERVQUAL key determinants which are tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, reliability, and empathy as illustrated in Diagram 1.

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