Service Quality in Higher Education: Comparing the Perceptions of Stakeholders

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Due to the increasing competition between higher educational institutions, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of enhancing service quality to ensure the institutions continuous survival and success. However, nowadays, providing precise and adequate services to the customers from various backgrounds in the stakeholders list (e.g., faculty, students, parents, and employers) has become a major challenge to higher educational institutions. This paper empirically examines the issues and some critical aspects concerning the development of service quality measures for educational institutions, which includes various members of stakeholders as customers. This paper is expected to provide a better understanding of the improvement strategies of service quality in the higher educational sector.

Keyword: Higher Education, Satisfaction, Service Quality, Stakeholders, Trends in Education

1. Introduction

There has been consistent recent growth in higher educational institutions (HEIs) worldwide, generally, and in Asia, particularly. In most countries, the HEIs are predicted to contribute to the growth of the country and provide vast job opportunities to both the local and expatriate communities. However, descriptions of the HEIs environment provide cause for considerable concern in respect of the prominent issue of service quality (Pereda, Airey and Bennett, 2007). In particular, emphasis on service quality is reported to be an expense of stakeholders' satisfaction, performance, loyalty and retention (Pezeshki, 2010). Such findings from the existing studies on the service quality of HEIs have limited focus on the perceived scope of service quality. Most of the studies mainly examine the service quality from the students' perception. However, there is little guidance in the literature about other stakeholder's perception of service quality and their subsequent satisfaction with the providing HEIs. Furthermore, the service quality measurements for HEIs are underdeveloped and appear to be adopted from studies examining various industries. Therefore, this paper reports on a study that compares the perceptions of the students and academic staff as members of the stakeholders concerning the quality of service offered by administrative staff at the HEIs.

This paper was judged as the third best paper among papers presented at the Ninth AIMS International Conference on Management.

2. Higher Education Growth in Malaysia

The higher educational institutions in Malaysia can be classified as public and private institutions, as shown in Table 1. An analysis of the trends from 2000 to 2008 shows that the HEIs in Malaysia are growing rapidly.

Table 1 *Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia*

Institution - Public	**2000**	**2005**	**2008**
University	11	18	20
Polytechnic	11	20	24
Community College	0	34	37
Total	**22**	**72**	**81**
Institution – Private			
University/ University College/ Branch Campus	8	27	37
College	632	532	487
Total	**640**	**559**	**524**
TOTAL	**662**	**630**	**605**

Source *Malaysia Higher Education Statistic (MOHE), 2000-2008*

Table 2 *Enrolment in Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia by Study Programmes*

Enrolment in Public HEI	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**
Ph.D	12,243	14,669	17,718
Masters	36,094	44,880	49,676
Advance Diploma	2,956	6,230	-
Bachelor	270,156	272,012	274,690
Diploma	83,833	82,208	94,026
Matriculation	10,242	12,115	20,196
Professional	1,249	1,426	1,725
Others	2,561	3,880	1,581
Total Enrolment in Public HEI	**419,334**	**437,420**	**459,612**
Enrolment in Private HEI			
Ph.D	1,331	2,278	3,804
Masters	8,540	13,372	14,038
Bachelor	151,591	198,760	220,299
Advance Diploma	-	1,548	1,787
Diploma	177,773	190,689	216,788
Certificate	60,662	77,011	83,711
Professional	-	683	1,202
Total Enrolment in Private HEI	**399,897**	**484,377**	**541,629**

Source *Malaysia Higher Education Statistic (MOHE), 2008-2010*

However, the number of private HEIs is declining while the number of public HEIs is increasing. This is because in recent years many private HEIs in Malaysia have been upgraded to public HEIs in recognition of the quality and accreditation obtained for the programmes offered in the private HEIs.

Throughout the years, the number of enrolments in the public HEIs and private HEIs has increased tremendously, as shown in Table 2. These enrolments comprise local and international students. In the mid 1980s, only about 12 percent of the 17-23 age cohort had access to higher education in Malaysia. By 2000, this figure increased to nearly 23 percent and by the end of 2006, this ratio had increased further to 29.9 percent. It was the aim of the Malaysian government to increase the ratio of the 17-23 cohort group in tertiary education to 40 percent by 2010. The Ministry also aimed to increase the ratio of science and technical students to 60 percent by 2010. Both these aims were achieved.

To ensure the quality of education given to the increasing number of students, the number of academic staff is also being increased. More teaching staff with PhD and Masters qualifications are being recruited as academic staff in the HEIs (see Table 3).

Table 3 *Academic Qualification of Academic Staff*

Public HEI	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**
Ph.D	6,601	7,060	8,031
Masters	13,800	14,803	15,986
Bachelor	4,165	4,551	4,247
Diploma	9	133	134
Others	509	133	173
Total Staff in Public HEI	**25,084**	**26,700**	**28,571**
Private HEI			
Ph.D	2,116	2,360	2,449
Masters	10,370	11,755	14,344
Bachelor	8,485	9,880	11,228
Diploma	2,342	1,239	1,271
Others	483	3,789	3,700
Total Staff in Private HEI	**23,796**	**29,023**	**32,992**

Source *Malaysia Higher Education Statistic (MOHE), 2008-2010*

Malaysia's Higher Education Development Plan (2011-2015) under the 10th Malaysia Plan has set goals to attain competencies in three key areas, which are presented briefly as below:

- To improve the competence of graduates.
- The quality of academic staff will be improved by increasing the number with PhDs. The target is 75 percent in research universities and 60 percent in other public universities.

- The higher education institutions in the country will play a pivotal role in moving and providing the impetus for research, development and commercialization activities.

In this regard, the Government will implement holistic measures to strengthen education and training systems, starting from early childhood to tertiary education. In addition to providing the best teaching and learning infrastructure, the Government in the 10th Malaysia Plan will also ensure that the quality of teachers and educators are of a high level.

3. Branding of Higher Education in Malaysia

Branding is powerful in providing competitive advantage. Stensaker (2005) indicates some benefits of branding for higher educational institutions, such as attracting students from high income families, providing information and image, improving institutional cooperation, instigating internal change, and re-discovering what they are and their basic purpose. Several studies have been done in the educational field referring to the phenomenon of repositioning or revitalising the brand.

Table 4 *Branding of Public Universities in Malaysia*

Research Universities	Comprehensive Universities	Focus Universities
Universiti Malaya Universiti Sains Malaysia Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Universiti Putra Malaysia	Universiti Teknologi MARA Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia Universiti Malaysia Sabah Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia Universiti DarulIman Malaysia Universiti Malaysia Kelantan	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Universiti Utara Malaysia Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris Universiti Tun Hussien Onn Malaysia Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka Universiti Utara Malaysia Perlis Universiti Utara Malaysia Terengganu Universiti Utara Malaysia Pahang Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia

Source *Malaysia Higher Education Statistic (MOHE), 2008-2010*

Rosenthal (2003), in his study, claimed that the literature on marketing in HEIs pertaining to the significant areas of the branding process and the change process within the educational institutions' settings has been discussed since the early 1980s. Kotler and Fox (1995) indicated the importance of branding in the educational environment and believed that "branding can add value to an educational institution and provide more satisfaction for the customers". In fact, Whisman (2007) states that in today's complex and highly competitive marketplace, universities and colleges have turned to branding as a solution for dealing with today's global challenges.

In 2002, a dedicated Ministry of Higher Education was created in Malaysia and was given the responsibility to formulate policies and regulations and implement

strategies and programmes on tertiary education. One of the foremost changes brought by this ministry is that in recent years the public universities have been rebranded to achieve various visions – the public universities have been categorised as Research Universities, Comprehensive Universities and Focus Universities. The public universities which have been categorised as *Research Universities*, will focus on research activities and teaching is based on research and development (R&D), *Comprehensive Universities,* will offer courses in various fields of studies for all levels of education including pre-undergraduate, undergraduate, and post graduate degrees, and *Focused Universities*, will focus on specific fields such as technical, education, management and defence.

The categorization of the university is depicted in Table 4. In addition to these three categories, one university in Malaysia has been chosen and given an Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) status for the first time. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was inducted into the APEX status in 2008. APEX is a transformation plan to uplift the standard of public universities in Malaysia one step higher. USM has been selected and given additional assistance to compete with the top ranked global institutions and to build its image as Malaysia's first world-class university, which, in turn, will serve as a catalyst to help other local higher education institutions (HEIs) to achieve excellence.

4. Internationalization of Higher Education

It was only in the mid-1980s that higher education in Malaysia was liberalized and opened to private sector involvement. However, the 1990s saw a significant shift in the development of tertiary education in Malaysia in which efforts were made to internationalize Malaysian higher education. By 2006, there were approximately 42,000 foreign students in Malaysia.

The Malaysian government has taken a new initiative to make Malaysia a Regional Centre of Educational Excellence. In line with this effort, the Government set up education promotion offices in four countries – China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Dubai. Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) also established the Malaysian Education and Promotion Council to promote Malaysian higher education abroad. Visa arrangements for foreign students were simplified and other incentives were given to these students. The government also provides subsidies and incentives for the promotion of universities and colleges in overseas markets. These incentives are important to enhance and advance the branding of Malaysia's education in the overseas markets.

The Seven Broad Thrusts of the education system to meet the challenges of globalization and the emergence of the K-economy are listed below:

- Expanding the supply of highly skilled and knowledgeable manpower.
- Increasing accessibility to quality education and training.
- Improving the quality of education and training delivery system.
- Promotion of lifelong learning.
- Increasing the supply of science and technology manpower.
- Developing and promoting Malaysia as a regional centre of educational excellence.
- Reinforcing positive values.

Consequently, private universities and colleges have been playing a very significant role in complementing and supplementing the efforts of the public sector in its social responsibilities of providing higher education opportunities and accessibility to quality education to Malaysians, and more recently to foreign students. In recent years (between 2008 and 2010) the number of international students' enrolment in public and private HEIs has increased from 69,164 to 86,919 and within the three years a total of 236,833 international students registered as tertiary students in HEIs in Malaysia (see Table 5).

Table 5 *Enrolment of International Students in Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia*

Enrolment of International Students	Public Higher Education	Private Higher Education	Total
2008	18,485	50,679	**69,164**
2009	22,456	58,294	**80,750**
2010	24,214	62,705	**86,919**
TOTAL	**65,155**	**171,678**	**236,833**

Source *Malaysia Higher Education Statistic (MOHE), 2008-2010*

5. Service Quality in Higher Educational Institutions

With the changing scenario of higher education towards globalization and world-class recognition, the service quality issue has become an important concern. Every HEI needs to take the necessary steps to ensure that the service quality is being offered at a satisfactory level to all the stakeholders of the respective HEIs to ensure that the aim of the education ministry in transforming the educations sectors in Malaysia can be achieved in a short period of time.

There are many assumed stakeholders for higher education, and based on previous research, the service quality and its dimensions have to be determined by the stakeholders of higher education organizations including students, their parents and families, academic and administration staff, and society, (Ruben, 1995; Quinn, Lemay, Larsen and Johnson, 2009). Stakeholders' demands and expectations for service quality vary in terms of their attitudes, needs and experience. The various stakeholders can be differentiated as being the students who are the primary customers who receive the educational services, while other customers are parents who pay for their children's education, corporations who hire the students and faculty members who teach students the knowledge needed to perform the job (Quinn, et al., 2009). To meet the demand and expectations of the stakeholders, it is necessary to identify the stakeholders' perception of the quality of services provided before attempting to improve them.

One of the sources of revenue in higher education is earned from the students as the customers; therefore, understanding the service factor used by the customer to evaluate service quality is vital. If we accept students as customers, we have to stress the importance of the relationship between the students and the academic staff and administrative staff (Sines and Duckworth, 1994). The academic staff also greatly depend on the administrative staff to perform their task. In this study, the researcher believes that the service quality of administrative staff should not only be studied from the students' perspective but also be examined from the perspective of the

academic staff. Thus, the aim of the study is to compare the perceptions of the students and academic staff towards the quality of service offered by the administrative staff in a reputable higher educational institution.

6. Service Quality and Satisfaction

Services have been described as a business deal that takes place between the service provider and the customer to achieve an expected outcome that satisfies the customer (Ramaswamy, 1996; Nadiri, Kandampully and Hussain, 2009). The service quality model suggests that service quality is the gap between the customer's expectations and their perception of the service provider's performance. Parasuraman's (1985) SERVQUAL model has been used extensively to measure service quality across a broad range of businesses including higher education institutions (Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry, 1985; 1988). Researchers found that the SERVQUAL model is useful when evaluating performance in higher education institutions (Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Quinn, et al., 2009; Gallifa, and Batalle, 2010). The SERVQUAL model, applies the expectancy-disconfirmation theory, which is a popular instrument for measuring service quality. Initially, Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) SERVQUAL scale for assessing customers' perceptions of service quality included 22 dimensions, but after two stages of scale purification, Parasuraman et al. (1988) revised and redefined the service quality scales into five dimensions, as shown below.

- **Tangibility** – 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; and
- **Empathy** – caring, the individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

Service quality is a predictor of customer satisfaction. Based on previous studies there is a positive and significant relationship between tangibility (Mostafa, 2005), reliability (Wisniewski and Wisniewski, 2005), responsiveness (Wisniewski and Wisniewski, 2005), assurance (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Nadiri and Hussain, 2005), empathy (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Nadiri and Hussain, 2005), and customer satisfaction. These studies showed a positive relationship between the service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction while their results indicate that service quality should be considered as an antecedent of customer satisfaction.

7. Gaps Model Analysis of Service Quality in Higher Education

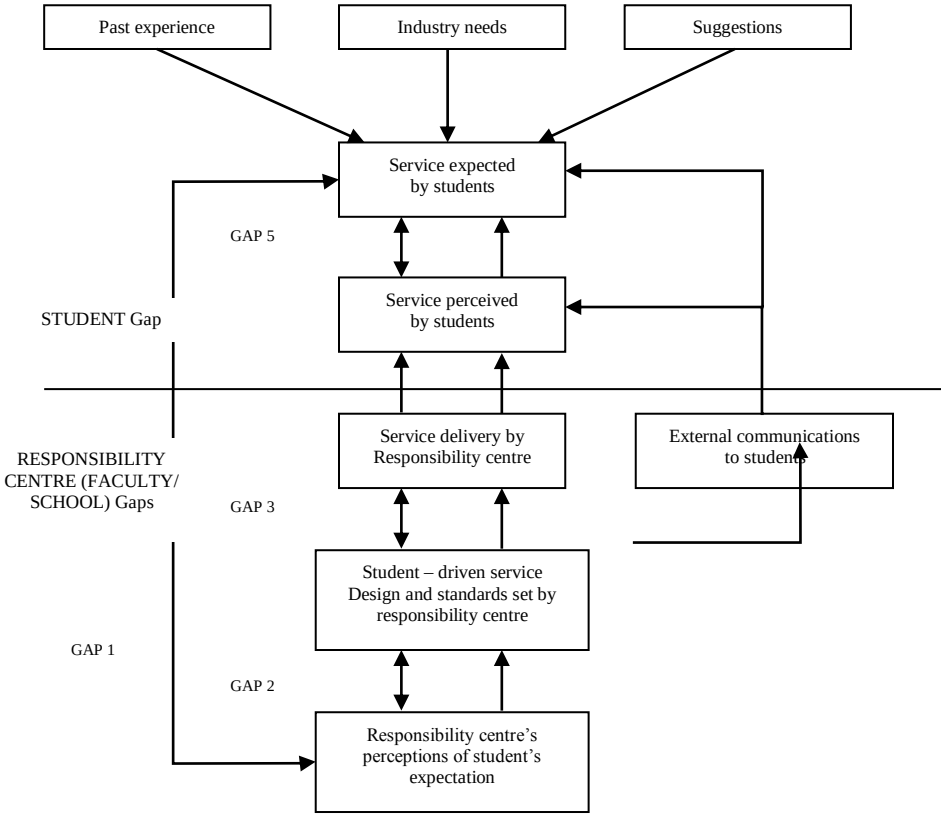
The basic objective of the responsibility centre in a higher educational institution is to develop the strategies in such a way that they can influence a student's expectations and perceptions so that all the gaps, as listed below, that take place due to the differences in expectations and perceptions can be addressed. In this study, provider refers to the responsibility centre, the faculty or school. Figure 1 present the gap model of service quality in higher educational institutions for students and

Figure 2 shows the gap model of service quality in higher educational institutions for academic staff.

- **Provider Gap 1:** Not knowing what the students and academic staff expect.
- **Provider Gap 2:** Not selecting the right service designs and standards.
- **Provider Gap 3:** Not delivering to service standards.
- **Provider Gap 4:** Not matching performance to promise.
- **Provider Gap 5:** Not knowing what the responsibility centre delivers.

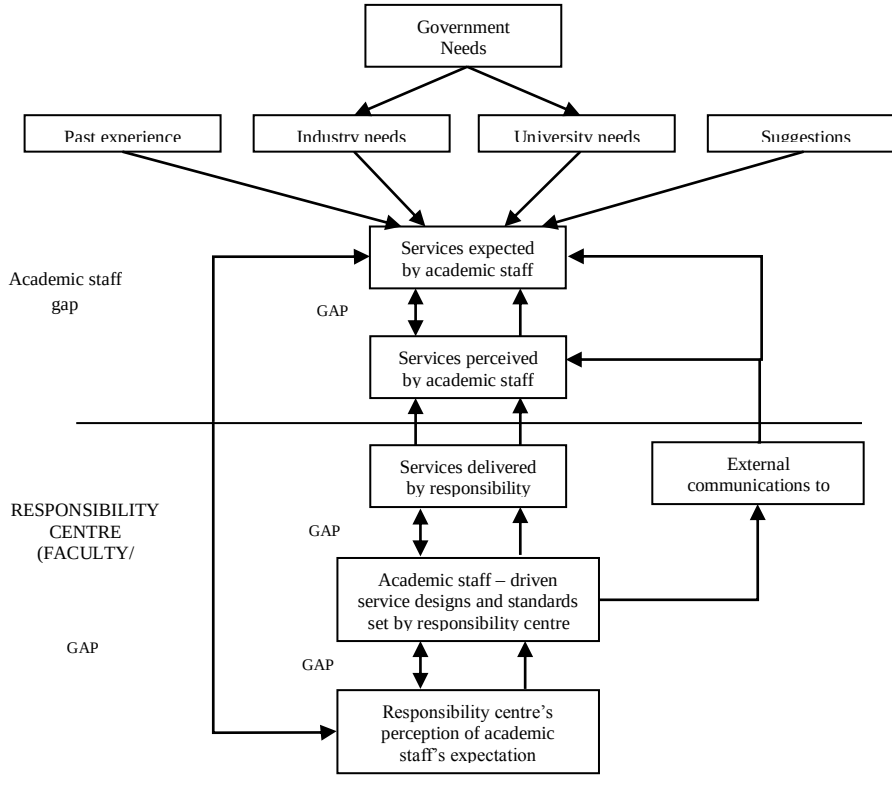
8. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and piloted, using scales for service quality and satisfaction developed based on the relevant literature. The measurement items were customized to measure service quality in the context of higher education.



Source *Modified and extended from Rajasekharan, Muninarayanappa & Reddy (2009)*

Figure 1 *GAP Model of Service Quality in Higher Educational Institutions for Students*



Source *Modified from Rajasekharan, Muninarayanappa & Reddy (2009)*

Figure 2 *GAP Model of Service Quality in Higher Educational Institutions for Academic Staff*

Data were collected from the public university chosen to become the model for future world-class universities in Malaysia.

In order to assess the perception of its students and academic staff towards the service quality of the administrative staff, two sets of questionnaires were developed. The first set aims to investigate the students' perceptions towards the service quality offered by administrative staff. The questionnaire contained 25 variables related to the service offered by the administrative staff to the students. The questionnaire was targeted at local and international students pursing undergraduate and postgraduate studies, either full-time or part-time. Altogether 1,533 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,468 usable questionnaires were returned with a usable response rate of 95.8 per cent. The second set of questionnaires aimed to investigate the perceptions of academics concerning the service quality offered by administrative staff. It has 24 variables related to the service offered by the administrative staff to the academic staff. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed and 372 returned with a usable response rate of 74.4 per cent. Non-probability convenience sampling was employed for this study.

In both questionnaires, care was taken to include items that correspond to the five SERVQUAL dimensions identified by Parasuraman et al. (1988) with the addition of *accessibility* as a new measure. Some of the items in the questionnaire were modified to ensure the accuracy in measuring the services offered by the administrative staff to students and to academic staff since their job tasks are not similar. All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 16.0). Statistical analyses, such as frequencies, descriptive analysis and cross tabulations analysis, were used.

9. Results and Discussion

Overall, the expectation of academic staff towards the service quality offered by administrative staff at their responsibility centre are below the expectations of the students at the same responsibility centre (see Table 6). In summary, the expectation of the students are much higher than the expectation of the academic staff.

Table 6 *Comparison Analysis on the Expectation of Students and Academic Staff for Quality of Service Offered by Administrative Staff*

Service Quality Dimensions	**Students Expectation [N = 1468] Mean**	**Academic Staff Expectation [N = 372] Mean**
Tangibility	3.80	3.59
Reliability	3.60	3.49
Responsiveness	3.64	3.50
Assurance	3.66	3.55
Empathy	3.66	3.44
Accessibility	3.59	3.43

Table 7 *Students and Academic Staff Extent of Satisfaction with the Quality of Service Offered by Administrative Staff*

Variable (Satisfaction)	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Students (N=1468)	24**[2]**	143 **[10]**	490 **[33]**	679 **[46]**	132**[9]**
Academic Staff (N=372)	3**[0.8]**	27**[7]**	90**[24]**	207**[55]**	45**[12]**

Note *Figure [ ] stands for Percentage of Total*

Since the students have higher expectation of the service offered by administrative staff, the satisfaction of the students is lower compared to the satisfaction of the academic staff for the quality of service offered by the administrative staff (Table 7).

10. Trend of Evolving Perception of Student's on Service Quality in Higher Education

Obviously, student expectations and perceptions of service quality have changed significantly over the last four decades. In the 1970s, students at the higher education level expected a place of scholarly reflection to obtain a degree, enhanced employment prospects and very few expectations of teaching quality (Tricker, 2003). However, the 1980s and 90s were a period of considerable change. The changes may be due to the increase in the level of the new generation of students entering the postgraduate level who had a new set of expectations. The introduction of tuition fees caused students to act more like customers and expect value for money (Tricker, 2003). Furthermore, during the 2000s, students' expectations in respect of service quality reached a higher level, and, according to Davies (2002), they include the following:

- Flexibility and choice in the delivery of education
- Access to cutting edge technology
- A two way communication process between themselves and with the university
- To be consulted about the learning experience
- Accurate information about their courses, assessment procedures, complaints process, etc
- Honesty with respect to whether their needs can be met or not

Measuring student perception of service quality is important since it determines how they assess the service within academic institutions. Since expectations are dynamic in nature, their perception and also evaluation in respect of service quality might change over time (Kimani, Kagira, & Kendi, 2011). In addition, technology is one of the reasons that causes changes in student's expectations and perceptions in respect of their perceived service quality over the last few decades. The students can easily communicate with academic staff via online channels and view all the information through the website. If the educational institutions do not prepare the proper technology based teaching tools that are required to transfer information, then it may not be to the taste of students, especially postgraduate students who use many online databases in order to conduct their study (Jamie, 2011). Thus, the service quality offered by the staff at the HEIs needs to be enhanced and supported with technology.

11. Conclusion

In the context of this study, students and academic staff expectations are the standards of, or reference points for performance, against which responsibility centres are compared, and are often formulated in terms of what students or staff, as stakeholder members, believe should or will happen to improve the quality of service in HEIs. To conclude, by going through the literature, there are some key factors that affect the changes in students' perceptions concerning service quality in higher education. The factors include: the rise of the student as a customer, the rise of part-time postgraduate students, and, therefore, the need for a flexible environment, and the growth of technology, which increases the level of their expectations towards using information and online databases. HEIs need to conduct more studies in the

area of service quality among other stakeholders to evaluate the service quality, investigate the key factors that influence students' perceptions and to identify certain strategies to enhance and upgrade the service quality at the HEI level to the level of world class universities in the future.

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