

Assessing the Impact of Non-Teaching Services on Postgraduate Students' Satisfaction: A Case of alternative Providers of Higher Education in the UK

Pius A¹, Nwaogbe O², Alharahsheh H³, Ntia A³ and Manian C⁴

¹School of Innovative Leadership and Strategic Management: The Academy for Advance Studies (TAAS), UK.

Email: apius@taaslt.com

²Department of Marine Transport and Logistics: Nigeria Maritime University, Okerenkoko Warri.

Email: nwaogbe.obioma@nmu.edu.ng

³School of Business Management: University of Wales Trinity Saint David London (UWTSD), UK.

H.alharahsheh@uwtsd.ac.uk

³School of Innovative Leadership and Strategic Management: The Academy for Advance Studies (TAAS), UK.

Email: antia@taaslt.com

⁴School of Innovative Leadership and Strategic Management: The Academy for Advance Studies (TAAS), UK.

Email: cmanian@taaslt.com

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Abstract - The research sought to assess the impact of non-teaching services on postgraduate (Pg) students' satisfaction, focusing on the alternative provider of higher education in the UK. The 'service provision' is known generically as the 'students support department' and is argued to provide a more effective means of engagement between the learning process of Pg courses and students. The study is underpinned by the conceptual model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1995), where it was proposed: A Multiple - Item Scale for Measuring Service User Perceptions of Service Quality.

The argument proposed in this research project is that non-teaching services currently delivered by alternative providers of higher education are subject to many shortcomings. In a refinement of the SEVQUAL model, the study showed that there was a low level of student satisfaction with the current level of non-teaching services delivered at the alternative institutions; on all the key service dimensions to reduce the existing gap between expectation and service encountered. The current study argues that a new approach is needed to improve and sustain a positive learning experience for Pg students through the effective delivery of non-teaching services.

For this study, the service gap is assessed as the average perception score (APS), perceived service, minus average expectation score (AES); students' expectations from the alternative providers, and the difference is the service gap (SG). The service dimension gap equation is (1) $ASP - AES = SG$ ($1.90708 - 2.7559 = - 0.84882$). The results reveal that the overall perceived service quality is low with a value of (-0.8415), with students' expectations score of 2.7559, and a perception score of (1.90708). While the overall service gap at Pg school is (-0.84882). The respondents' overall level of service quality shows that the median gap is (-0.6942), with a gap of (-1.53) for most students sampled. It means that the level of service encountered during the programme is lower than what learners expected; as a result, there is a low level of satisfaction with the overall service quality provided by the non-teaching staff.

The study concludes that alternative providers need to invest more in non-teaching systems and processes. For instance, in the development of personnel at the front desk and management levels, for a better understanding of students' learning needs and demands. Also, leverage technology for improved and sustained service delivery through investment in critical learning infrastructures. The findings present empirical data for regulators, senior managers, academia, and students; it would be informative and educative for the service providers (university), and service users (Pg students), who demand improved quality in all aspects of the non-teaching service assessed. The study recommends continual review and enhancement to sustain the development process of the core elements; knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs), in the postgraduate learning journey that guarantees a positive experi

1.0 Introduction

The Higher Education sector plays a major role in the socioeconomic development and social integration of nations (OCED, 2022), and it is regarded by scholars (Jellenz et al., 2020) as one of the fundamental factors in the advancement of humanity and society in the last century. In fact, no nation can attain meaningful economic development, and a sustainable technological advance without substantial investment in human capital development. It deepens individuals' understanding of concepts and practices in their chosen fields while improving the quality of their lives and leading to broad social benefits to individuals and society at large.

The sector's contribution to community cohesion in our nation is immeasurable and priceless. The OECD (2022) suggests that the HE sector is at the vanguard of poverty alleviation. As of 2021, the UK higher education sector employs 233,930 academic staff (excluding atypical), an increase of 4% from 224,530 on 1 December 2020. The number of academic staff (excluding atypical) employed on full-time contracts on 1 December 2021 increased by 2% relative to 1 December 2020 (HESA, 2023). Higher Education in the UK has seen steady growth in demand.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Tse and Peter (1988) argued that staff in service-based sectors are under tremendous pressure and within what has been termed the 'coping zone'. Conventional studies have tended to focus mainly on measuring undergraduate students' perception of teaching but largely neglected non-teaching services for Pg students. As a result, not much in-depth research exists in this field of inquiry. Thus, several government policies and working papers suggested the upsurge in the Pg studies and the preferred destination in the UK. This phenomenon has created some challenges for the HE manager, who are constantly striving to meet students' demands and expectations (Vi êt, 2021). Therefore, alternative providers are not insulated from these problems. They are faced with providing a better experience for the service users and meeting key

stakeholders' needs and demands, whilst keeping up to date with the industry's global trends (Pius et al. 2017b).

It has become imperative to assess the link between non-teaching services and student satisfaction. This was achieved by adjusting SERQUAL perceptions- expectations and factoring in the impact of other situational and personal factors (Nwoegbe et al, 2017). Specifically, the study looked at a range of independent variables and sought to determine the influence they exerted on service delivery. With the conclusions gathered from this study, it is hoped that universities, professional service providers, and government bodies will look more closely at the factors that influence the successful delivery of service in Pg schools and take the appropriate measures.

This research sets out to assess non-teaching services provided by the student support team for Pg students as well as the factors influencing the smooth delivery of quality education. While the scope of this research was limited to an institution with multiple support networks across five campuses. It is hoped that this study will prompt further research to look at more universities, to address the specific needs of Pg students more fully, and to curricular authorities understand better how to use technology in adding real value to improve the service quality with a greater degree of success. Therefore, to inform the research, two questions were posed:

1.3 Research Questions

- To what extent, do non-teaching services influence the provision of quality education for Pg students in alternative providers of higher education?
- How do non-teaching services affect Pg students' satisfaction with the alternative providers of higher education?

2. Theoretical approach and the notion of quality in higher education

This paper adds to the existing body of knowledge by using a multiple-item scale for measuring service user perceptions, as a framework to consider the role of non-teaching service in student satisfaction. The SERVQUAL or the Service Gap Model was

developed in the mid-1980s as a model to assess service quality in an organisation (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Students' expectations and perceptions are used by SERVQUAL to assist alternative providers of HE in identifying strategies to improve the most important aspects of learning support. From this perspective, satisfaction is a fulfillment response, and the level of student satisfaction will depend on the prior assessment of the probability of success in performing specific learning tasks and Pg students how they perceive their learning will result in certain outcomes and the value they place on learning.

Education is generally based on humanistic and mechanistic approaches. The humanistic method is concerned with students' views and the transformative learning encountered; quality is regarded as transformation. In contrast, the mechanistic approach focuses on the assessment of the teaching and learning process, predominantly carried out by experts and agencies. For instance, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) utilizes quality improvement to assess the quality of alternative providers' teaching and learning.

Vi ết (2021) suggests that there have been few applications of quality as student transformation and human potential in the alternative provider of higher education because quality has often been used as a management concept to differentiate institutions and to attract students in the face of increased competition at the national and international levels. From this insight, quality is associated with Pg students' satisfaction and has been deduced as fitness for purpose. This has supported the general view that higher education is a service product, and the quality of service has been correlated with students' perception of the overall educational experience and service outcomes at the alternative providers.

2.1 Connecting non-teaching services with Pg student satisfaction.

The link between the quality of education (non-teaching services) and student satisfaction attracts a lot of debate. One of

the views is that, if the delivery of high-quality learning is a service, then it is connected to levels of student satisfaction (Nwoegbe et al, 2017), and that quality also results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance (Pius et al., 2017; Vi ết 2021). This implies that Pg students' perceptions of quality may result from comparing expectations formed prior to receiving the education with the actual encountered during the programme.

Yet, if the service quality (non-teaching services) of the alternative providers of higher education is defined by perceptions, assessing student perceptions is normally based on a snapshot of the service encountered during the course, but only a handful of researchers attempt to measure how the perceptions of Pg students change over time. Oldfield and Baron (2000) argued that over time students might become more critical of the quality of service provided by non-teaching staff, but this is focused on postgraduate school. Another line of argument is that service quality and student satisfaction may vary from one institution to another so it can only be assessed quantitatively. Both arguments depend on core services like academic services, teaching, and learning, as well as research (Nwoegbe et al, 2018). In recent years, an improved learning approach and student satisfaction have been often linked and used to foster a culture of continuous quality improvement to stimulate student choice.

3. Data Source and Analysis

The primary data was gathered through online questionnaires using a survey approach, based on random sampling, geographically targeting Pg students from five different campuses across the Southeast region. The study gathered samples from service users only (Pg students) and a total of 350 responses were recorded over a three-week period, but 243 responses were finally used in the study analysis. Also, the Academy for Advance Studies (TAAS) and Kesmonds International University (KIU) databases were used to retrieve up-to-date literature. A modified and multiple-item scale for measuring service user perceptions of education quality also known as

SERVQUAL, supported by regression analysis, gap score analysis, and descriptive statistics was used for data computations. The formula for multiple regression models is as follows:

$$\hat{Y} = b_0 + (x_1) + b_2(x_2) + b_3(x_3) + \dots + b_n(x_n) + e_n$$

Where, y = dependent variable

x_n = independent variable

b_0 = constant

b_n = coefficient of x

e_n = error term

Where the dependent variables are: Y1 = Affordability; Y2 = Consistency and Y3 = Accessibility. The independent variables (x_1 , x_2 , x_n) are given as follows; the quality of non-teaching support provided for Pg students at the UK alternative providers of higher education.

3.1 Students' Expectations, Experience, and the Existing Gap Score - Alternative Providers

Dimension	Statement	Expectation	Perception	Gap Score
Visibility	V1	2.81	2.04	- 0.77
	V2	2.78	2.12	-0.66
	V3	2.75	1.93	-0.82
	V4	2.69	2.11	- 0.58
Consistency	C1	2.76	1.94	- 0.82
	C2	2.78	2.05	- 0.73
	C3	2.80	2.03	- 0.77
	C4	2.75	1.39	-1.36
	C5	2.78	1.33	- 1.45
Approachability	A1	2.79	1.26	-1.53
	A2	2.79	2.10	- 0.69
	A3	2.72	2.09	- 0.63
	A4	2.64	1.48	- 1.16
Guarantee	G1	2.79	2.23	- 0.56
	G2	2.76	2.17	- 0.59
	G3	2.76	2.17	- 0.59
	G4	2.76	1.54	- 1.22
Compassion	C1	2.73	2.12	- 0.61
	C2	2.73	2.05	- 0.68
	C3	2.78	2.14	- 0.64
	C4	2.67	2.13	- 0.54
	C5	2.81	1.39	- 1.42
Service at the desk	S1	2.78	1.97	- 0.81
	S2	2.77	1.99	- 0.78

Source: Field Data (2022)

Postgraduate students' expectations and perceptions were measured using the (0 - 3 point) Likert scale whereby the higher numbers indicate a higher level of expectation or perception. Generally, consumer expectations exceeded the perceived level of service shown by the

perception scores. This has resulted in a negative gap score (Perception – Expectation). Parasuraman et al., (1988) study on consumer satisfaction described how student's expectations exceed the actual service perceived and this signifies

that there is always a need for improvement.

The service with the highest expectation score was that accessibility should be opened always (2.81), and learning material should be of the highest quality

(2.81). It is imperative to carefully consider the service gap that exists between students' expectations and perception, the gap scores can be measured with a range of values between -6 to +6 (service quality with an alternative provider of HE and Pg students' satisfaction).

Table 3.2
Service quality (average gap scores)

Dimension s	Visibility scores	Consistency Score	Approachability score	Guarante e Score	Compassi on score	Service at the desk score
Mean	-0.7075	-1.026	-1.0025	-0.74	-0.778	-0.795
Median	-0.74	-0.77	-0.66	-0.59	-0.64	-0.795
Std. deviation	0.2815	0.4276	0.39575	0.32575	0.3178	0.351
Skewness	-1.5033	-1.3414	-1.3133	-1.2545	-1.6354	-1.667
Std. Error of Skewness	.157	.157	.157	.157	.157	.157
Kurtosis	2.1615	1.3026	0.603	1.03275	4.4418	3.0765
Std. Error of kurtosis	0.313	0.313	0.313	0.313	0.313	0.313

Source: Field Data (2023)

4 Gap Score Analysis

The gap score analysis enables us to determine how service users (Pg students') perceived the quality of service in the Pg school and attempt to identify service dimensions that students are satisfied with. Parasuraman et al., (1985) argue that the higher the scale of positive perception (P), the lower the scale of minus expectation score. This translates into higher perceived service quality that leads to her level of Pg student satisfaction with the services offered by the alternative providers. The gap scores for this study calculation were based on the difference between the service users' perceptions and expectations.

To this effect, the study found that students' perceptions of the service quality offered by the Pg school, were short of their expectations (gap score dimensions were mostly negative). Besides, six dimensions of descriptive statistics were used in assessing the gap scores; the highest mean gaps respectively were consistency (-1.

026); second by responsiveness (-1. 0025); and service at the desk (-0.795). While the lowest mean gaps were tangibles (-0.7075), assurance (-0.74), and empathy (-0.778). In summary, the above gap analysis shows that the perceived service quality is less than students' expectations. Parasuraman et al., (1988), suggest that overall service quality can be measured by obtaining an average gap score of the SERVQUAL dimensions and to effectively measure overall service quality as perceived by the Pg students for this study, another dimension was added to the list, 'Service at the desk', as a result the study assessed a total of six dimensions (Pius et al. 2017b).

This adjustment is aligned with the Gronroos, (1982) who proposed two main dimensions of service quality and functional quality, and the service at the desk dimension was added, to a modified SERVQUAL model, in order to assess service quality from multiple dimensions. This approach is appropriate in measuring

service quality within the HE sector, regarding the fact that the level of service quality determines Pg student satisfaction level. From Table 4.2 above, the standard deviation scores were distributed and consistent with the six dimensions, it suggested a wide range of opinions on the service quality among the respondents surveyed for this study.

4.1 Service quality dimensions - alternative providers

4.1.1 Visibility

In the visibility variable, a mean score of -0.7075 and a median gap of -0.74 were recorded. The standard deviation of the analysis is 0.2815, indicating the spread of gaps away from the mean. The distribution is positively skewed with a value of -1.5033, which indicates that the figures deviated more to the right. The kurtosis value was 2.1615, which means that there is clustering somewhere away from the mean as shown in the Table.

4.1.2 Consistency

In the consistency aspect, the mean was -1.026, which means that service users (Pg students) are not satisfied with the quality of services. The standard deviation is 0.4276, which means that the gaps are spread away from the mean. This dimension has the highest deviation, but it does show a great deviation from the mean. The median gap for consistency is -0.77. The gap distribution is positively skewed with a value of -1.3414, indicating that the gaps deviate to the right of the mean, and clustered close to the mean with a kurtosis value of 1.3026 as shown in Table 4.2.

4.1.3 Approachability

On average, students are not satisfied with the level of services offered by the alternative providers, with a gap of -1.0025 for responsiveness. With a median higher than the mean with gaps of -0.66. The standard deviation of the responsibility

dimension is 0.32575, which indicates that the gaps are not widely deviated from the mean. But the deviation is to the right with a skewness of -1.2545. The gaps are clustered at a point different from the mean of the distribution with a kurtosis value of 1.03275 as shown in Table 4.2.

4.1.4 Guarantee

The mean gap for this dimension is -0.74, which is the least mean gap, indicating that the students are reassured enough by the level of services offered. The median gap for this dimension is -0.59 and it is lower than the mean. The standard deviation is 0.32575, showing little deviation from the mean, which is spread towards the right as the distribution is skewed with a value of -1.2545 and the gaps clustered at some point away from the mean with a kurtosis value of 1.03275 as shown on table 4.2.

4.1.5 Compassion

The mean gap score for this dimension is -0.778, with limited empathy in the delivery process from the student support teams. While the median gap for this distribution is -0.64. The standard deviation of the dimension is 0.3178, which means that the gaps deviate from the mean. They have deviated to the right because the distribution is skewed with a value of -1.6354 and clustered away from the mean, with a kurtosis value of 4.4418 as shown in Table 4.2.

4.1.6 Services at the Desk

For this dimension, the Pg students surveyed were not satisfied with the quality of service encountered at the desk with -0.795. While the median gap has a value of 0.795. The standard deviation is 0.351, meaning the gaps deviate from the mean. The deviation is to the right because the distribution skewed with a value of -1.667 and clustered around a value other than the mean. The kurtosis value is 3.0765 as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.3

Perceived Level of Service Quality (Overall)

Analytical Tools	Mean	Standard Error	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Sample Variance	Kurtosis	Skewness	Min	Max
Quality of Service	-0.8415	0.17667	-0.6942	0.82	0.3499	0.71788	-2.1523	-1.4525	-1.42	1.53
Study Sample Size	243	243	243	243	243	243	243	243	243	243

The above table shows that Pg students expect more from their service providers in the schools, evident from the negative mean of -0.8415, indicating that students' expectations exceed experience. The respondents' overall level of service quality shows that the median gap calculated is -0.6942, with a gap of -1.53 for the highest number of students. The standard deviation is 0.3499, which is much lower than when we attempted to work with individual service dimensions, it confirms that there is homogeneity among the sampled population. The deviation gap is more to the right because the distribution is skewed with a value of -1.4525, and the gaps are clustered at some point away from the mean. The standard deviations of individual dimensions are around the common average making them consistent with the six specified service dimensions and this suggests a range of opinions on the service quality among the students surveyed (Osman and Saputra, 2019). Furthermore, the overall perceived service quality is low with a value of (-0.8415), meaning that the level of service received is lower than what they expected, this simply means that there is very little satisfaction in the overall level of service quality offered by alternative service providers in the UK. This may probably be because of the low quality of service encountered by the Pg students over the period of their course.

5. Discussion of Findings

The research data shows the respondents' overall expectation based on a scale (0 to 3) was 2.7575. This figure is on the high side, it means that Pg students expect a lot from the higher education sector. Based on the individual service dimensions, the Pg students want more from the service dimension with a score of 2.775. This means that the university should endeavor to give more attention to the quality of service and the variety of services rendered to the students.

As noted earlier, consistency, tangible and assurance dimensions have scores of 2.774; 2.7575, and 2.7675 respectively. It is apparent that students are interested in how reliable, tangible, and reassuring their higher education sector is in providing good quality services that meet and exceed their needs and demands for profound learning to be established. In this case, the expectations scores were high and above 2. The students' expectations across the six dimensions were rated at 2.7559, on a scale of (0 to 3), which is an indication that Pg students expect a very high quality of service from the students at all times.

Considering Pg students' perception of service quality, which is more like the SERVPERF model which deals with the perception of service quality in conformity with Pg students' satisfaction (Cronin et al., 1992). The study discovered from the data analysis that Pg students' expectations were higher than their experience, though the difference was not much. Based on the individual service dimensions analysis, Pg students believe service visibility is the most satisfactory dimension when compared to the other dimensions with an average score of 2.05. While the responsiveness dimension was judged the least by the Pg students with an average score of 1.7325. For the current study, the six dimensions recorded an average perception score of 1.90708.

Parasuraman et al., (1985) suggested that when perceived service quality is high, then it will lead to an increase in Pg student satisfaction. It is a fact that service quality leads to Pg student satisfaction, as noted by Twum and Peprah (2020); El Ahmad and Kawtharani (2021), acknowledge the fact that Pg student satisfaction is based on the level of service quality encountered during the programme. Higher perception indicates satisfaction in the delivery process; because service quality and

satisfaction are positively linked (Omidian and Golchin, 2018). For this study, this means that service dimensions with higher perception scores have received higher satisfaction ratings from the Pg students, while those dimensions with low perception scores are viewed by the Pg students as insufficient. The study establishes that Pg students are not satisfied with most of the service dimensions assessed, with an average perception score of 1.90708, when compared to the average expectation score of 2.7559. The service gap is measured as; the average perception score (APS), perceived service; minus the average expectation score (AES), what the Pg students expect from the alternative service providers, and the difference is the service gap (SG). The service dimensions gap equation is $*ASP - AES = SG*$. Evidence for the current study is as follows; $1.90708 - 2.7559 = - 0.84882$.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has provided empirical data and a better understanding of the link between service quality and its impact on students' satisfaction with alternative providers. Six service dimensions were used to assess the impact of service quality on Pg students' satisfaction with alternative providers of HE. The results reveal that the overall perceived service quality is low with a value of (-0.8415), with students' expectations score of 2.7559, and a perception score of (1.90708). While the overall service gap at the alternative provider Pg school is (- 0.84882). The respondents' overall level of service quality shows that the median gap is (- 0.6942), with a gap of (-1.53) for most students sampled for this study. This notion resonates with recent studies by Twum and Peprah (2020); El Ahmad and Kawtharani (2021); Essaoudi and Lotfi (2021), who argue that it is imperative that good quality service that meets and exceeds students' needs and demands is provided in all service dimensions, for profound learning to be established and transferred to the workplace.

The study findings revealed that students perceive service quality in all dimensions as inadequate, meaning that their expectations were not met by the service providers in most dimensions measured for this study. The

ramification for this result is that students are not satisfied with the current level of service. This means that service quality needs to improve in all dimensions to close the gaps between expectation and perception, as this will lead to an increase in student satisfaction. The study discovered that the service users were not satisfied with the current level of service in their faculty. Furthermore, it was found that the overall service quality perceived by service users was not satisfactory meaning expectations exceeded perceptions, and all the dimensions showed students' expectations were higher than the service encountered.

Recommendations

- Alternative providers should continually review and enhance their policies and systems to sustain the development process of the core elements; knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs), in the postgraduate learning journey that guarantees a positive experience, in the era of a transition to a greener economy
- The higher education sector should increase its efforts in fostering on-the-job training and development for professional service staff, to deliver quality services across all spectrums; thus, improving and nourishing service quality can be an expensive and time-consuming practice that needs a sustained investment commitment from the government
- It is imperative for alternative providers to offer good quality service that meets and exceeds students' needs and demands in all service dimensions to increase the level of satisfaction among Pg students, for profound learning to be established and transferred to the 21st-century workplace
- Sustaining government spending on the nation's higher education is essential to meeting students' expectations in alternative Pg schools while contributing to the nation's knowledge economy, to promoting and sustaining creativity and innovation in the nation's workforce for the 21st-century marketplace

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