

Comparing Service Quality among EU and International Postgraduate Management Students

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Abstract

Relatively little has been concluded regarding the impact of price fee differentials in a service quality and higher educational context, particularly among postgraduate students. In response the paper reports on an investigation to directly compare EU and international students: the former paying significantly less in course fees than the latter. The findings reveal a consensus from non-EU students that UK higher education's historical reputation, high fees, and knowledge of the UK (or a lack of it) were factors that led to high expectations. EU students in general have more knowledge and experience of the UK which leads to more realistic expectations. There was some agreement among the sample that education in the UK is similar in quality to elsewhere in Europe. Overall, perceptions of service are not influenced by price, but are more related to whether or not students pay themselves. Hence, despite paying considerably less, EU students tend to have lower overall perceptions of the quality of service compared with international students. In contrast international students appear more tolerant in terms of service provision and are less inclined to voice complaints. Several managerial recommendations are extracted, and directions for future research suggested.

Key words: SERVQUAL, action research, service quality, services marketing.

Introduction

Over recent years postgraduate programmes are increasingly making a significant fiscal contribution for many UK business and management schools. Whilst under-graduate programmes tend to predominantly attract home and European Union (EU) students, and universities are somewhat influenced by the government who cap student fees, no upper limit exists in terms of the price charged for postgraduate education. Despite state support via the funding council, which frequently enables UK institutions to pass on reduced course fees to home and EU students, the vast majority of postgraduates studying in the UK reside outside the EU and therefore pay significantly more in fees for their educational experience.

This research investigation aims to analyse service quality among a sample of EU and non-EU (international) postgraduate students. It is believed that by undertaking the exercise a better understanding can be gathered of the quality that is expected, as well as the perceptions of service among both sets of students. This will help to broaden our understanding of postgraduate education when price and to some extent geographic distance are considered conjointly. With an overall aim to bridge service quality gaps and enhance the learning and teaching experience for both sets of students, the research will help identify where service improvements can be made, and where resources could be better allocated.

The paper is organised as follows: the literature relating to quality in higher education and service quality in a business and marketing context will initially be discussed. Then, in congruence with the context of the study, a review of the literature relating to service gap

analysis in higher education will proceed. The research approach is then described, prior to the findings, discussion, and research conclusions.

Service Quality in Education

Quality initiatives have been the subject of an enormous amount of discourse over the last ten years, and at various levels have found a way into higher education (Avdjieva & Wilson 2002). During this period, a stream of academic research has explored aspects of service quality in teaching and learning and the environmental aspects that influence higher education (Shank Walker & Hayes 1995; Harrop & Douglas 1996; Narasimhan 1997). For example Ford, Joseph & Joseph (1999) suggest that because of high competitive intensity, institutions need to better understand the nature and quality of service offered. Their work demonstrated that reputation, career opportunities of graduates, programme issues, physical aspects, and location were important factors that contribute towards an excellent university. However, the researchers warn that because different cultures have different service quality needs, such attributes may not be applicable internationally. Research undertaken by Vidal, Diez and Vieira (2003) would support this notion, as it was found that 'professional', 'academic' and 'personal' guidance were valued among Spanish students.

Adee (1997) suggests that certain university characteristics may be helpful for explaining the quality experienced, with emphasis on teaching, staff-student consultation sessions, library, computing and recreation facilities, class sizes, level and difficulty of subject content, and student workload. In response to some US institu-

tions experiencing a loss in students not returning to campus to complete undergraduate programmes, Lau (2003) developed a conceptual model consisting of three factors based on learning, teaching and resources. Her work suggests that these attributes influence student involvement/learning, and in turn, this leads to student retention, and eventually graduation. Earlier, in attempting to create a useful framework for measuring service quality at a conceptual level, Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) arranged thirty quality characteristics into six dimensions which they labelled as tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery, and reliability.

Measuring Service Quality

Developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), SERVQUAL is probably one of today's most commonly used instruments for measuring service quality. It is a multi-item scale that has been extensively used on a broad spectrum of services for measuring consumer expectations and perceptions. The authors defined service quality as the discrepancy (or gap) between a consumer's expectation and experience of service. In developing the instrument, extensive statistical analysis revealed five dimensions, which the researchers labelled as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

SERVQUAL consists of twenty-two expectation (E) and perception (P) statements related to the five service quality dimensions. Consumers are asked to respond using Likert scales, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, to indicate their feelings for each statement. The difference score can then be calculated for each statement on each measure and dimension. The difference ($P - E = Q$) is a measure of the customer's service quality (Q). If Q is negative, then a service gap exists, and where Q is positive, customer expectations are being exceeded. A further section of the instrument allows for the assessment of the relative importance of each dimension.

After the individual differences have been determined, the average for each dimension can be calculated to represent the SERVQUAL score for that dimension, and the relative importance score can then be used to calculate a weighted average score for each dimension. The instrument is applicable for a broad range of services, and like Babakus and Mangold (1992), several academics and practitioners alike have extensively adapted the content of SERVQUAL by changing words and adding new or taking out items, to find a fit with their own research particularities.

Gap Analysis in Higher Education

Researchers in the field of higher education have drawn on aspects of the SERVQUAL instrument to develop their own research agendas. Long, Tricker, Rangelcroft and Gilroy (1999) performed 'gap analysis' to compare what students expect and what they experience on a course. Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) similarly examined expectations and preferences among

undergraduates with regards to teaching, learning and assessment. LaBay and Comm (2003) evaluated expectations and perceptions of the tutor, using a cross sample of students on campus, as well as others on a distance learning programme. Lampley (2001) meanwhile developed a number of question statements relating to responsiveness/caring, records/paperwork, university services, accessibility/safety, knowledge/scheduling, facilities/equipment, and public relations to measure expectations and perceptions among doctoral students in six US universities.

On a small sample of UK accounting undergraduates, Hill (1995) discovered a 'mismatch' between students' expectations and perceptions. He found that the institute failed to live up to expectations in terms of course content, teaching quality, teaching methods, personal contact with academic staff, feedback, and student involvement with curriculum. However, performance exceeded student expectations for careers counselling, welfare, health services and physical education. Pariseau and McDaniel (1997) used the SERVQUAL framework to draw comparisons between faculty members and undergraduate students in two private business schools. Also adapting SERVQUAL, O'Neill (2002) undertook longitudinal research on a sample of Australian undergraduates and found that perceptions of quality in higher education decreased over time.

In recent times the higher education sector has become more quality conscious, and this has been somewhat influenced by a reduction in state funding, greater consumer demands, and intense competition (Ford *et al.* 1999; Kanji & Tambi 1999). In response, an increasing number of researchers have attempted to address some of the key concerns (Oldfield & Baron 2000; Lau 2003). However, relatively few studies have analysed service quality specifically. Although to some extent a number of academics have used 'gap analysis' at various levels, only a few decided to adopt the SERVQUAL instrument. Overall it appears that service quality in a higher education context has been somewhat under-researched. Where investigations have been undertaken, SERVQUAL tends to have been ignored. Also, with the exception of Lampley (2001), very little data have been collected from postgraduate students. This is surprising bearing in mind their economic importance and the significant course fees that tend to be associated with postgraduate compared to undergraduate higher education in Europe, particularly for international students.

The research therefore aims to bridge this gap by using a modified SERVQUAL instrument to investigate the expectations and perceptions of service quality among EU and international postgraduate students at a leading UK business and management institution. The findings will help to compare the two groups and identify service quality gaps where improvements can be made.

Methodology

Action research was used for this study. Carr and

Kemmis (1986) explain that such an approach can be useful where

- a) some form of action can contribute towards improvements;
- b) a project passes through several stages that consist of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, and
- c) the investigation calls on wider participation involving others.

Kember and Kelly (1993) warn that very rarely do things go perfectly the first time around in education. Therefore once improvements have been made, these need to be evaluated and reflected upon. Action research consists of a number of phases: initial reflection, planning, action, observation, reflection etc. McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) thus summarise this as a mechanism to describe, interpret, and explain events, while seeking to change them for the better.

Action research was considered to be appropriate for this investigation on two counts. First, very little had been concluded among postgraduate students of different nationality, hence a multi-purpose approach was judged suitable. Second, it was perceived that action research provides the opportunity for 'triangulation'. This allows the researcher to obtain data from different groups of respondents, and combine different methods of data collection (c.f. Gill & Johnson 1991; Yin 1994). To undertake the project, both 'respondent' and 'data' triangulation would be required. The former in order to develop and test the instrument, and the latter to collect a complimentary range of 'hard' and 'soft' data.

The Research Stages

Initially, secondary data were collected with the intention of exploring service quality and focusing on quality in higher education. The exercise proved useful in terms of providing direction. In attempting to develop a research framework, it was decided to primarily use a modified SERVQUAL instrument. However, a number of items taken from the higher educational literature were added in order to provide more relevant focus. These tended to relate to the university campus, facilities and supporting services (Hill 1995; Cuthbert 1996; Aldridge & Rowley 1998; Ford *et al.* 1999), guidance, advice and counselling provision (Hill 1995; Pariseau & McDaniel 1997; Ford *et al.* 1999; Vidal *et al.* 2003); and institutional performance attributes – as perceived among students (Pariseau & McDaniel 1997; Long *et al.* 1999; Oldfield & Baron 2000; O'Neill & Palmer 2001; Schmidt 2002).

The next stage involved a combination of in-depth personal interviews and focus group discussions with the school's Quality Manager, Marketing & Communications Manager, Director for Postgraduate Programmes, Programme Managers and students¹. Such qualitative inductive approaches are often useful for generating ideas and providing further insights that build on the literature (Aaker, Kumar & Day 1995; Churchill 1996). Following each interview and focus group, minor modifications were taken on board to refine and improve the

research instrument. The framework was then later tested with a small sample of EU and international students who formed part of a staff-student quality committee. The process was invaluable for creating and testing the instrument and provided a significant contribution towards the research process.

The research instrument that was eventually used for the main investigation had three sections. The first, modified from SERVQUAL, consisted of nineteen statement questions designed to measure students' expectations prior to their arrival in the UK. Based on the literature, two additional factors were also included in this part relating to the guidance and support services, and the facilities that the university provides. A set of modified parallel statement questions were later used in part two of the instrument to obtain student perceptions. This section also included questions relating to the institution's performance. To reduce respondent confusion, seven item Likert scales were used in this study, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree, to 7 = Strongly Agree. Section three was used to collect classification data and information related to each respondent.

The subsequent stage of the research process involved the administration of the survey, and based on recommendations from Carr and Kemmis (1986), participation from others affected by the research was sought. Thus, several teaching staff at the school were briefed and asked if they could help to administer the survey by handing out the questionnaire at the beginning of a lecture. The data were collected during weeks nine and ten of semester two. Although those concerns from O'Neill's (2003) research regarding time and its negative influence on perceptions were considered, it was felt that at this stage of the academic year students were ideally placed to reflect on their experiences.

The Director of the School's Postgraduate programmes provided the opportunity for all respondents to win a significant cash prize, and this proved to be a useful incentive for stimulating student response. A short covering letter that explained the rationale for the investigation was provided to each student along with a copy of the questionnaire. The letter clearly marked that confidentiality and anonymity was assured, and participation in the survey was voluntary. In total 242 surveys were returned, and 241 were used for the data analysis. A response rate of 60.25% was calculated based on the number of postgraduates studying at the school, and this was considered a satisfactory response for such a survey. Of the responses, 68 were EU students, whilst 173 were classified as international students that normally reside outside the EU.

Data were entered into SPSS and statistical analysis undertaken. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests were performed to discover the extent to which the two groups shared similar characteristics. The resulting data generated the need for a further research stage to reflect on the statistical outcomes, i.e. to investigate 'how' and 'why'. An inductive approach was therefore considered the most useful method to investigate the

nature of the problem in more depth, and obtain further qualitative insights (Zikmund 2000). At this final stage, three one-to-one in-depth student interviews and three focus group sessions (each with four students) were conducted to probe further on the quantitative findings.

Results

The expectation and perception items were measured using a seven point scale, anchored by 1 = Strongly Disagree, to 7 = Strongly Agree, with 4 serving as a mid-point/neutral opinion on the scale. Mean scores greater than four identify a tendency for respondents to agree with a particular statement, whereas means of less than four indicate disagreement. The mean expectation scores for the EU and the international sample of students are illustrated in Table 1, along with the Mann Whitney U (Z-values) and Kruskal Wallis (Chi Sq) statistics and *p* values.

Expectations

Data in Table 1 reveal that students *per se* are somewhat in agreement with the statements (all means >4), and the expectations generally are quite high (the means range from 4.26 to 6.37). Interestingly, EU students had higher expectations for only seven statements. Just one of these tested statistically significant at $\alpha < .05$, suggesting that EU students are significantly more inclined than international students to feel that services are delivered on time (at a 95 per cent confidence level). International students have significantly higher expectations for sixteen measures. Seven of the items i.e. staff willingness to help, staff instil confidence, materials visually appealing, adequate sports / recreational facilities, suitable class sizes, comfortable lecture theatres and guidance on personal matters were found to be significant at $\alpha < .05$. It can be concluded that international students have significantly higher expectations than EU students for these variables at a 95 per cent confidence level.

International students also have statistically higher mean scores than EU students (significant $\alpha < .01$) in terms of expecting the following: prompt response to requests, modern looking equipment, neat looking employees, accommodation of a reasonable standard, the university to be suitably located, the campus to have an ideal layout, adequate healthcare service, provision of financial services, and guidance on cultural issues. This illustrates a statistically significant difference between the two groups of students at the 99 per cent confidence level.

In attempting to understand why international students have such high expectations, the personal interviews and focus groups revealed the following:

There is a belief that European countries have better standards and higher quality education.

Expectations are high because of the rich history and background associated with UK education.

Coming from far away I have an image that I can't

visualise. European students may find this picture easier.

It's probably because British and European education is similar. Students from Europe have a better idea of what to expect compared with non-European students who have a lack of knowledge and awareness.

Of course paying more money comes into the equation, and also levels of economic development also play a part.

As we travel so far, and pay so much – these factors build up our expectations. We are also inspired by TV, the internet and other mass communications.

Perceptions

In studying the data presented in Table 2, given the exception of suitable refreshment areas, reasonably priced refreshments, and financial service provision, international students have a tendency to agree with the statements (means >4). EU students also tend not to disagree with the statements, albeit they were more inclined to do so than international respondents. Mean score statements averaging less than four among the EU sample include: staff have their students' best interests at heart, the school has convenient operating hours, the university provides sufficient financial services, students are treated as a client, comfortable lecture theatres are used, there is adequate media support, suitable refreshment areas and reasonably priced refreshments are available, suitable career guidance, and guidance on personal matters.

EU perceptions were higher than the international students' mean scores for just three statements. One tested statistically significant ($\alpha < .01$), demonstrating that EU students perceive the school to have significantly more modern looking equipment than international students. Despite this, the data tends to follow the earlier trend associated with the expectation mean scores, whereby international respondents have higher views than the EU student sample.

Two further items were found to be statistically different ($\alpha < .01$) at the 99 per cent confidence level. These suggest that international students have significantly higher perceptions than their EU counterparts with regards to the standard of accommodation/housing and the provision of reasonably priced refreshments. Seven items including the on-time delivery of services, informing students of events and services, being treated as a client, the comfort of lecture theatres, suitable refreshment areas as well as suitable career guidance, and guidance on personal matters were found to be significantly different between the two groups ($\alpha < .05$) at the 95 per cent confidence level.

When the respondents were asked during the personal interviews and focus group discussions why they felt perceptions were higher among international students compared with EU students, the following items were

	EU	Int'l	Z-value	Chi Sq	p-value
Responsiveness					
1. Prompt service	5.72	5.96	-1.54	2.38	.12
2. Staff willing to help	5.81	6.14	-2.05	4.21	.04*
3. Prompt response to requests	4.71	5.43	-2.95	8.70	.00**
Assurance					
4. Instil confidence	5.16	5.49	-1.94	3.75	.05*
5. To be courteous	5.40	5.62	-1.10	1.20	.27
6. Have knowledge	6.06	6.16	-0.84	0.70	.40
Empathy					
7. Teach staff provide individual attention	5.09	5.29	-1.16	1.35	.25
8. Support staff provide individual attention (summed means calculated for items 7 and 8)					
9. Understand needs	5.10	5.22	-0.79	0.63	.43
10. Have best interests at heart	5.32	5.28	-0.16	0.02	.88
11. School has convenient hours	5.74	5.97	-1.84	3.37	.07
12. School office has convenient hours (summed means calculated for items 11 and 12)					
Tangibles					
13. Modern looking equipment	5.44	5.89	-2.96	8.76	.00**
14. Neat employees	5.09	5.74	-3.06	9.35	.00**
15. Materials visually appealing	5.32	5.73	-2.30	5.28	.02*
Reliability					
16. Deliver services on-time	6.26	6.03	-1.97	3.87	.05*
17. Help to solve problems	5.62	5.92	-1.32	1.75	.19
18. Perform right the first time	5.54	5.65	-0.43	0.19	.67
19. Inform of events and services	5.71	5.90	-0.64	0.40	.53
University					
20. Reasonable accommodation/housing	4.94	5.73	-4.40	19.34	.00**
21. Adequate sports/recreation	5.16	5.53	-2.02	4.09	.04*
22. Campus suitably located	5.18	5.75	-3.00	9.02	.00**
23. Suitable campus layout	5.01	5.60	-2.99	8.96	.00**
24. Suitable library facilities	6.21	6.35	-1.34	1.78	.18
25. Adequate books	6.16	6.37	-1.82	3.31	.07
26. Adequate healthcare provision	5.00	5.50	-2.62	6.87	.01**
27. Adequate financial services	4.38	5.11	-3.45	11.89	.00**
28. Suitable class sizes	5.56	5.96	-2.17	4.71	.03*
29. Appropriate level/difficulty of study	5.90	5.90	-0.07	0.01	.95
30. Appropriate Master's programme work load	5.87	5.86	-0.36	0.13	.72
31. Treated as a client	4.53	4.97	-1.56	2.42	.12
32. Comfortable lecture theatres	5.71	6.06	-2.34	5.47	.02*
33. Adequate computing facilities	6.24	6.20	-0.77	0.59	.44
34. Adequate study areas	6.09	6.09	-0.03	0.00	.98
35. Adequate media support	6.07	6.03	-0.16	0.00	.99
36. Suitable refreshment areas	5.29	5.49	-0.87	0.76	.39
37. Reasonably priced refreshments	5.60	5.53	-0.33	0.11	.74
Guidance					
38. Suitable career guidance	5.79	5.84	-0.79	0.63	.43
39. Suitable academic guidance	6.12	6.07	-0.17	0.03	.87
40. Guidance on personal matters	4.26	4.90	-2.54	6.47	.01*
41. Guidance on cultural issues	4.72	5.55	-3.88	15.12	.00**
42. Suitable induction	5.35	5.51	-0.75	0.56	.45

** = significant at the 1% level

* = significant at the 5% level

Table 1: Mean Score Comparisons for the Expectation Statements

Responsiveness	EU	Int'l	Z-value	Chi Sq	p-value
1. Prompt service	4.94	4.97	-0.23	0.05	.82
2. Staff willing to help	5.10	5.20	-0.52	0.27	.61
3. Prompt response to requests	4.51	4.76	-1.08	1.16	.28
Assurance					
4. Instil confidence	4.62	4.78	-0.97	0.93	.33
5. To be courteous	4.99	5.15	-0.62	0.38	.54
6. Have knowledge	5.13	5.27	-0.95	0.90	.34
Empathy					
7. Teach staff provide individual attention	4.25	4.17	-0.39	0.16	.69
8. Support staff provide individual attention (summed means calculated for items 7 and 8)					
9. Understand needs	4.29	4.02	-1.31	1.73	.19
10. Have best interests at heart	3.91	4.27	-1.66	2.74	.10
11. School has convenient hours	3.86	4.03	-0.84	0.71	.40
12. School office has convenient hours (summed means calculated for items 11 and 12)					
Tangibles					
13. Modern looking equipment	5.90	5.40	-3.24	10.48	.00**
14. Neat employees	5.31	5.40	-0.55	0.30	.58
15. Materials visually appealing	5.04	5.05	-0.14	0.02	.89
Reliability					
16. Deliver services on time	4.69	5.21	-2.51	6.31	.01*
17. Help to solve problems	4.51	4.61	-0.05	0.00	.97
18. Perform right the first time	4.57	4.72	-0.69	0.48	.49
19. Inform of events and services	4.62	5.13	-2.53	6.39	.01*
University					
20. Reasonable accommodation/housing	4.21	4.69	-3.12	9.73	.00**
21. Adequate sports/recreation	4.12	4.24	-0.64	0.41	.53
22. Campus suitably located	5.18	5.49	-1.28	1.64	.20
23. Suitable campus layout	4.76	5.09	-1.71	2.92	.09
24. Suitable library facilities	5.34	5.59	-0.54	0.29	.59
25. Adequate books	4.56	4.82	-0.69	0.48	.49
26. Adequate healthcare provision	4.53	4.63	-0.61	0.37	.55
27. Adequate financial services	3.79	3.91	-0.67	0.44	.51
28. Suitable class sizes	4.54	4.54	-0.17	0.03	.87
29. Appropriate level/difficulty of study	4.71	4.90	-0.82	0.67	.41
30. Appropriate Master's programme work load	4.56	4.75	-0.85	0.72	.40
31. Treated as a client	3.85	4.43	-2.39	5.72	.02*
32. Comfortable lecture theatres	3.71	4.19	-1.96	3.84	.05*
33. Adequate computing facilities	5.03	5.27	-0.61	0.37	.54
34. Adequate study areas	4.18	4.39	-0.92	0.85	.36
35. Adequate media support	3.89	4.32	-1.92	3.69	.06
36. Suitable refreshment areas	3.35	3.85	-2.23	4.99	.03*
37. Reasonably priced refreshments	2.37	3.02	-2.87	8.25	.00**
Guidance					
38. Suitable career guidance	3.94	4.43	-2.29	5.26	.02*
39. Suitable academic guidance	4.62	4.91	-1.47	2.17	.14
40. Guidance on personal matters	3.51	4.05	-2.25	5.04	.03*
41. Guidance on cultural issues	4.15	4.23	-0.49	0.24	.63
42. Suitable induction	4.41	4.42	-0.03	0.00	.98

** = significant at the 1% level

* = significant at the 5% level

Table 2: Mean Score Comparisons for the Perception Statements

revealed:

I think it is because UK education standards are similar to European standards and norms. However, this level of service in the UK is much better than back home in China, where delays often occur.

There is a less complaining emphasis associated with non-Europeans.

International students are more tolerant than European students.

In developing countries service is less apparent. It could be related to the undergraduate experience, which in Europe will probably be higher. Coming to the UK is a step-up for international students, but not for EU students.

In the Far East we always think foreign goods and services are of better quality, but Europeans may not think the same about the UK.

Service Quality Gaps (P-E)

A summary revealing the service quality gaps of the dimensions for the two samples of students are illustrated in Table 3. As each dimension has a negative service gap value score, perceptions of service among EU and international students are falling short against their expectations. Results from the non-parametric tests demonstrate where statistically significant differences in service quality between the two samples of students exist. Data are also presented in this Table regarding the relative importance of the dimensions in relation to one another.

The data reveal that only the tangibles dimension demonstrates a statistically significant difference ($Z = -2.94$, $\text{Chi Sq } 8.64$, $p < .00$) suggesting that service quality gaps are greater among international compared with EU students at the 99 per cent confidence level. In general, the data suggests that service quality gaps appear to be wider for international compared with EU students. In attempting to understand why this was the case, the qualitative follow-up was used to investigate further.

The respondents felt that this was closely linked to the earlier findings, primarily high expectations among international students and the relatively lower expectation scores among EU students. Although the higher course fees were mentioned by one individual as being a potential reason, there was a consensus that EU students have a better understanding of what to expect due to their experience of residing within the EU. International students have only an ideal image of what to expect. One commented:

We visualise the UK as having ideal cities like Tokyo, but in fact most cities here are more like towns.

Further, the Reliability and University dimensions are considered amongst both student groups to be of relatively high importance, and the Guidance factor is also of high relative significance for EU students.

Performance

The data in Table 4 suggests that statistically at a 95 per cent confidence level, EU students perceive their UK experience to be less value for money compared with international students ($Z = -2.03$, $\text{Chi Sq } 4.12$, $p < 0.05$). The mean values reveal that international students are more satisfied with their UK higher educational experience. They are also more willing to recommend the institution to others back home compared with EU students. When considering the price differential in terms of fees for EU compared with international students, these findings were quite surprising. It was expected that the opposite would have been more likely to occur.

As a result, the personal interviews and focus group discussions proved extremely useful for extracting the rationale behind the findings.

	MEAN (P-E)			STATISTICS		Relative Importance	
	EU	Int'l	Z-value	Chi Sq	p-value	EU (%)	Int'l (%)
Responsiveness	-0.53	-0.87	-1.78	3.15	.08	13.89	14.35
Assurance	-0.61	-0.69	-0.24	0.60	.81	13.21	12.65
Empathy	-1.06	-1.17	-0.08	0.01	.93	11.10	12.49
Tangibles	-0.25	-0.74	-2.94	8.64	.00**	14.88	13.75
Reliability	-1.33	-1.16	-1.35	1.82	.18	16.00	15.99
University	-1.23	-1.22	-0.43	0.18	.67	15.29	16.81
Guidance	-1.12	-1.17	-0.88	0.77	.38	15.44	13.27

** = significant at the 1% level

Table 3: Comparisons of Service Quality Gaps

	MEAN (1-7)		STATISTICS		
	EU	Int'l	Z-value	Chi Sq	p-value
Value for the fees paid	3.57	4.05	-2.03	4.12	.04*
Satisfaction with the experience	4.65	4.79	-1.22	1.49	.22
Willingness to recommend	4.51	4.85	-1.43	2.05	.15

* = significant at the 5% level

Table 4: Comparisons of Performance

Value

Maybe it's because for international students our parents value education, and are willing to pay.

International students perceive the experience to provide better value because the payer is not the student – it is the family... also for most international students, the facilities are better here than back home.

Europeans are not used to paying for education.

International students come from high social backgrounds. They [their parents] can afford, whereas EU students fund themselves. Even though the price appears less for EU students, because we pay out of our own pockets – the price is relatively more.

Satisfaction

EU students are less grateful... often they fund themselves and have to take cut backs on their expenses.

Europeans complain more and this is normal. Chinese and Indian students prefer to just get on with things.

EU students have lower satisfaction because the experience is no different to back home.

In terms of satisfaction - the cultural experience really adds value. Europeans won't have this appreciation... and as a result international students are more willing to recommend because we think studying in the UK is a good experience.

Willingness to Recommend

As international students we are probably more willing to recommend because of the complete experience..... we are also very close to our families. All our relatives want to know and learn about our UK experiences.

Many international students have close family connections and we like to share our experiences. EU students think about themselves.

There is a greater willingness to recommend for international students because the educational experience is just part of the experience... willingness to recommend may also be a cultural trait.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this research and the service quality dimensions investigated, some data presented in this paper may be interpreted differently by individuals. There is an argument to support the view that service quality gaps to some degree are inevitable, especially when expectations are high. As a consequence, the institution tends to underperform. Relatively large service quality gaps are apparent for the empathy, reliability, university, and guidance items measured, and this serves to support the work of Hill (1995), suggesting that mismatches can occur among student expectations and perceptions.

Expectations

Overall, the respondents tended to have quite high expectations about studying in the UK, international students having higher views than the EU sample. This is believed to relate to EU students having more knowledge and a better understanding of the realities associated with UK life. In contrast, international students often have a false preconceived 'ideal' image of life and educational standards in the UK. The relatively higher course fees that international students pay and the high fees in general influence high expectations.

To improve service quality and bridge quality gaps there is an argument for trying to reduce expectation levels among international students. However, this possibly represents one of the most key challenges facing higher educational institutions, particularly in the current economic climate where competition is fierce (Ford *et al.* 1999). On the one hand, lowering students' expectations will help to bridge the quality gap, but on the other, in attempting to shift the mindset of students from their 'ideal' image to a real life portrait, universities may end up shooting themselves in the foot.

Student expectations therefore need to be carefully managed in order to help reduce service quality gaps, but need to be sensitively nurtured to not demotivate willing applicants (Long *et al.* 1999; LaBay & Comm 2003). To appeal to international students, institutions would be wise to draw on some of the added benefits that the international students in this sample felt were particularly important, i.e. the socio-cultural environment of UK life. Such information, along with international student testimonials in prospectus guides, and on universities' literature/websites is likely to be valued. On arrival

in the UK, a longer induction period for international students may additionally prove useful for helping to manage expectations and re-address such misconceptions at an early stage (Adee 1997).

Perceptions

Despite paying considerably less in terms of course fees, students from within the EU have lower perceptions of service quality attributes than international students. Whilst international students have a general tendency to somewhat agree with the items measured, EU students are more inclined to disagree. The reasons for this relate to two key factors. First, lower standards of higher education in many non-European countries may lead many international students to have high perceptions of the UK system. In contrast, EU students have already experienced similar standards during their undergraduate studies, and this may lead to relatively lower evaluations among such individuals. Second, there was a consensus among the international respondents that EU students were less grateful, tolerant, and more inclined to complain.

As many EU students finance their own postgraduate education, they are more inclined to have negative views of service – which may also adversely influence others. In response, more emphasis needs to be geared towards catering for EU students both socially and academically (Vidal *et al.* 2003). Undertaking more research with students from the European Union may also prove fruitful in helping to identify facilities and activities that could provide added value for this segment. From a counselling or guidance perspective, more sincere attention is required at the personal or individual level, and attention is needed to ensure that staff engaging in such activities are adequately trained and provided with sufficient time to undertake these duties. A more comprehensively engaged career guidance service would be beneficial, particularly for the self-financing Europeans who are probably more anxious to find work in order to achieve a rapid return on their postgraduate investment (Vidal *et al.* 2003). Attentive listening is required among staff, so that students are fully heard and an appropriate service is provided and effectively communicated (Langley 2001).

The tendency for an imbalance of EU and international students on postgraduate programmes (in this case approx. 25% EU, and 75% international) may also influence perceptions. By and large, both groups of students may not have expected such an imbalance in this direction, particularly when considering this in relation to their undergraduate experience. In service settings, because consumers frequently have the opportunity to interact with one another to become co-producers of the service, this experience can often influence overall perceptions. As a consequence, to what extent different nationalities of students are more or less willing to interact with one another is therefore likely to influence quality (Ford *et al.* 1999).

Performance

In terms of value for money, satisfaction and a willingness to recommend, international students appear to be more favourable than EU students. A major reason for this relates to other factors beyond education and service quality. Firstly, experiencing a different socio-cultural lifestyle in the UK is more apparent for non-Europeans than EU citizens, and this alone has an immense impact on providing value and satisfaction. Secondly, whilst the majority of international students have their fees paid either by their parents, or through some form of scholarship, this is the exception rather than the norm for EU students. EU students felt that being the consumer and the fee payer contributed towards the relatively lower evaluations of the institution, and that international students had higher perceptions because they did not pay their fees from their own money.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the modified SERVQUAL instrument adopted was sufficiently versatile for examining postgraduate education and comparing expectations and perceptions among students from different international backgrounds. Specifically at the practitioner level and as a diagnostic tool, the framework is useful for illustrating areas where institutions are underperforming. In response, decisions can be made accordingly by university planners to commit resources into priority areas, with the aim of bridging service quality gaps and making radical improvements.

Although beneficial, the research does have its drawbacks, particularly bearing in mind that the exploration was undertaken in one academic institution. Therefore due to the heterogeneity associated with services, university planners are forewarned not to draw general insights from this paper. Instead they are advised to undertake similar research at their own faculty.

A further limitation of the research methodology relates to the heterogeneity of the European student respondents, and this has several implications. Firstly, perhaps students that are located within or close to Europe, but do not reside in the EU, may share more similar views with EU than with international students. This could effectively distort the data if a large number of such students were evident. In this data set, just three students fell into this category (two from Turkey, and one from the Ukraine). Therefore due to the limited number of students in this category, it was not felt necessary to take further action. However, should others wish to conduct similar research in the future, it may be wise to consider a strategy for managing data from non-EU Europeans, particularly if they represent a significant number in the sample.

In addition, and linked closely to this, whilst countries within the EU are relatively close in terms of proximity to one another, the vast majority of countries are culturally diverse. This represents a limitation of the existing

research, and warrants further exploration to identify both the similarities and differences among EU students in light of their expectations and perceptions. Such factors will almost certainly have an influence on student recruitment and satisfaction.

This may also be carried forward and should be considered for non-EU students. Altogether over 80% of the international students in this sample normally reside in one of four countries: China, India, Taiwan and Thailand. Whilst such students often share similar cultural traits and educational values, the grouping of these respondents together (as was the case here) could spell danger in terms of missing out on some of the subtle differences associated with one or more of the groups. In order to highlight these differences, it may be necessary to analyse these student groups separately, in addition to the other students coming from elsewhere in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. This is highlighted as a further drawback associated with this study.

Collecting data towards the rear of semester two may also be questioned among educational academics. O'Neill (2002), for example, suggests that levels of dissatisfaction are likely to occur over time, and as a consequence, this may be a reason why perception scores tended to be low for these students sampled. In addition, one could also be critical regarding the timing in which the expectation data were collected. Perhaps before students travel to the UK or the beginning of the academic year may be a better time for obtaining more realistic measures. However, in defence, it was felt that students at this stage have had sufficient experience to provide valid perceptions, yet can still reflect on their prior expectations.

More research is needed within this area in order to provide more data so that better comparisons and stronger generalisations can be made. This is particularly true when attempting to grapple with the influence of culture on response-scaled questions. An obvious problem relates to Likert-type scales which are an integral aspect of SERVQUAL studies (Churchill 1996; Barnes, Kitchen, Spickett-Jones & Yu 2004). Further triangulated methodological approaches are required, and academic researchers in this field need to combine resources and simultaneously undertake more thorough examinations. Research in other UK institutions would make an ideal starting point for such an investigation. Similarly, other EU institutions may also be interested in collaborating within the discipline, which could prove useful in the future for establishing European standards.

In summary, a further action research cycle needs to commence in order to explore and examine in more detail the similarities and differences among respondents based on nationality. The growth of the EU in terms of the member states represents a challenge for such future research. To what extent is it appropriate to really classify students as EU or Euro-students, and surely this raises further questions when considered in light of the cultural diversity that exists in Europe? Likewise, further questions need to be asked beyond

Europe, for instance to what extent do students from China, Taiwan, Thailand and India share similarities, or are they different? Finally, and more specifically, are differences further apparent at a country level? Such factors may need to be considered for academic institutions that have a growing number of students coming from a particular country. The significance of China, with its vast regional differences, is highly relevant and represents a prime example for UK institutions to consider.

Finally, the author hopes that the paper will influence more academics to consider triangulating their research designs and participate in action research. Through using such varied techniques, a more holistic and wider range of complimentary findings can be suitably disseminated to the appropriate academic and practitioner communities.

Endnotes

¹ In the run up to this stage, the intended research was presented at a Faculty Postgraduate Sub-Committee for Learning & Teaching that subsequently approved and supported the plans.

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