A Student-centred Conceptual Model of Service Quality in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT This article considers the longitudinal service-quality experience of a sample of part-time postgraduate students over a 3-year period of study at a large UK business school. The qualitative research design is shaped by concepts in both the service quality and the educational quality literatures. The research identifies important aspects in students’ evaluation of service quality and considers the role played by expectations in this process. The findings highlight three distinct stages in the educational service experience. First, the pre-course position, which is centred on service expectations. Second, the in-course experience and, third, post-course service value assessment. From these stages a conceptual model of service quality in higher education is developed. Finally, recommendations for further research are offered.

Introduction

This article is concerned with service quality in the context of higher education. It focuses on the expectations, experience and evaluation of the one particular consumer of higher education: the postgraduate business student. The research reported seeks to explore gaps identified in both the service and educational quality literatures.

There is little evidence that the literature on service quality has had much impact on higher education ... The application of service quality models to education and training is an area which requires further research and evaluation. (Harvey et al., 1992a, p. 47)

Specifically, the research seeks to understand which aspects of the higher education experience are important to postgraduate part-time students’ evaluation of service quality. Second, it examines if, and in what ways, expectations change over the duration of the student’s study. The research design is qualitative and longitudinal involving in-depth interviews with 10 students on multiple occasions prior to and during their 3-year period of study on a master of business administration course at a large UK business school. As Oldfield and Baron (2000, p. 94) recommend, ‘further qualitative research with students is needed to assess the relative importance of technical and functional service quality’. In comparison with much of the quantitative empirical research in the area, this study provides an understanding of how certain consumers experience service quality in the education context over time.
Service Quality and Educational Quality Concepts

The rise in interest in quality in higher education follows a similar chronological pattern to the rise in legitimisation of the discipline of service marketing. In 1964, the Council for National Academic Awards was established to guarantee quality and standards in the new polytechnic sector. The first book on service marketing was written in the same year by Johnson (1964), and was followed by an influential article by Rathmell (1966) in which he described services as deeds, performances and effort. More than 30 years on, services are defined similarly, ‘services are deeds, processes, and performances’ (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2002, p. 5). However, there has been a substantial growth in the service-marketing literature, with service quality becoming a significant issue (Fisk et al., 1993; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2002). Drawing on this literature, several conceptual frameworks for service quality will be considered for their usefulness in the higher education context (Langeard et al., 1981; Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Service Characteristics

By the mid-1980s, service marketing was treated as a separate subdiscipline within the overall marketing domain because of the now widely accepted service characteristics of intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Fisk et al., 1993). Shostack (1977) emphasised the relative dominance of intangible attributes in the make-up of the service product. Teaching is classified as highly intangible, because services are performances or actions rather than objects: they cannot be seen, felt or tasted in the same way that one can sense a tangible good. Many services, including education, are also difficult for consumers to comprehend (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2002). Therefore, managers need to manage physical evidence to provide tangible cues to service quality, reduce service complexity where possible and encourage word-of-mouth recommendations from other students. A second distinctive service characteristic is inseparability. Services very often have simultaneous production and consumption, as with lectures, which emphasises the importance of the service provider. In addition, Langeard et al. (1981), in their servuction system model, highlighted that consumption of a service often takes place in the presence of other consumers, as in a seminar. Therefore, satisfaction is not only dependent on the inanimate service environment and the service provider, but also on other consumers as well.

Therefore, it is important to identify and reduce the risk of possible sources of dissatisfaction. For example, seminars designed to encourage prior student preparation to increase the quality of debate, and thus student-to-student interaction. A third characteristic, heterogeneity, means that it is very difficult to standardise the service that consumers receive. This is a particular problem in a labour-intensive industry such as education as many different employees will be in contact with an individual student. This emphasises the need for rigorous selection, training and rewarding of staff. There is also a need for evaluation systems that give the consumer the opportunity to report on their experiences with staff and processes, as monitoring reliability becomes very important in maintaining quality levels.

Service-Quality Definition and Models

Researchers in the service-marketing field argue that because of the distinctive characteristics of services, a distinctive approach to defining and measuring service quality is
required. A service-marketing definition of quality revolves around the idea that quality has to be judged on the assessment of the user or consumer of the service. This results in the most common definition of service quality as being a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985). However, other researchers argue that service quality is derived from perceptions of performance alone (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). This indicates a significant weakness of the research conducted to date in the marketing literature; despite 15 years of research, there still exists no consensus regarding the best way to define and measure service quality. In addition, no single model of service quality is accepted. However, Gronroos’ (1984) and Parasuraman et al.’s (1985) conceptual frameworks are widely cited and introduce ideas for application in the higher education context.

Perceived Service Quality

Gronroos (1984) introduced the concept of perceived service quality in the development of his widely cited model of service quality (Figure 1). The model suggests that the quality of a given service is the outcome of an evaluation process where the consumer compares what they expected to receive with what they perceive they actually received. Consumer expectations are influenced by marketing mix activities, external traditions, ideology and word-of-mouth communications. Gronroos also suggests previous experience with the service will influence expectations. He suggests there are two principal components of perceived service quality (technical and functional), with a third (image) acting as a mediating influence. Technical quality is what the customer is left with when the production process is finished. Functional quality involves an evaluation of how the consumer receives the technical quality in the interactions between consumer and service provider and other consumers. Although the model is useful in highlighting that quality evaluations involve outcomes and processes, it can be criticised for over-simplification. Neither the role of other consumers in the process nor any longitudinal aspects of the service experience are included.
The Gaps Model of Service Quality

Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed the most widely applied model of service quality (Figure 2), based on qualitative interviews with 14 executives in four service businesses and 12 customer focus groups.
The interviews with marketers resulted in the idea of four gaps that are potential hurdles for a firm in attempting to deliver high-quality service.

- Gap 1: customer expectations and management perceptions gap.
- Gap 2: management perceptions and service-quality specification gap.
- Gap 3: service-quality specifications and service delivery gap.
- Gap 4: service delivery and external communications gap.

Identification of gap 5 resulted from the customer focus groups, which supported the notion that the key to delivering quality is to meet or exceed customer expectations.

- Gap 5: expected service and perceived service gap.

This gap was defined as service quality. The authors argue that gap 5 is the sum total of the preceding four gaps; thus if management want to close the gap between performance and expectations, it becomes imperative to design procedures for measuring service performance against expectations.

Parasuraman et al. (1988), developed the servqual questionnaire, which purports to be a global measure of gap 5 across all service organisations including higher education. Servqual consists of an expectation and perception section with 22 pairs of Likert scales that is based on the authors’ suggested five generic dimensions of service quality as follows:

1. Tangibles: physical facilities, equipment, appearance of personnel.
2. Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
3. Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
5. Empathy: caring, individualised attention.

The servqual instrument has been applied in a number of sectors, including financial services, tourism, health care, utility companies, pest control, dry cleaning, fast food, professional services, libraries, information systems and higher education (Hill, 1995; Cuthbert, 1996a, 1996b; Caruana & Money, 1997; Robinson, 1999; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; O'Neill & Palmer, 2001).

Despite servqual’s wide application, the various replications undertaken have highlighted a number of areas of both theoretical and psychometric concern (Caruana & Money, 1997). Robinson (1999) provides a review of the main areas of agreement and disagreement in the service-quality measurement debate. The only areas of agreement, appear to be that service quality is an attitude and is distinct from customer satisfaction, that perceptions of performance need to be measured, that the number and definitions of dimensions depends on the service context, and that negatively worded statements should be avoided unless the survey is ‘short’.

(Robinson, 1999, p. 29)

Unresolved issues in the servqual literature are many and varied. They include the appropriate definition of service quality, the ‘correct’ model for service-quality measurement, unresolved issues related to expectations, the format of the measurement instrument and the dimensionality of service quality in different contexts. As with the Gronroos’ model, longitudinal aspects are also not considered.

In summary, from the marketing literature, important concepts for further study in higher education include the role played by expectations, the context-specific rather than
generic functional and technical quality dimensions, and the role played by other consumers; that is, students in the service experience.

Educational Quality Dimensions

As Rowley states:

While the quest for service quality dimensions has an attractive simplicity, it is important to recognise that this is but a part of the complex jigsaw associated with managing and measuring service quality in higher education (1997, p. 7).

Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002), in a recent review of student satisfaction studies, also highlight the complexity of the concept in the higher education context. Within the service-quality literature, a dominant paradigm exists with the definition of quality focused on the consumer (Grapentine, 1999; Robinson, 1999). This is not the case in the educational quality literature. Harvey and Green (1993, p. 28) state there is ‘no single correct definition of quality’, but rather quality should be seen as a ‘stakeholder-relative’ concept. Tam (2001) more recently discusses the contested views over quality and its measurement in higher education.

Three contrasting approaches to the measurement of quality in education can be identified. The first approach adapts the servqual instrument (Rigotti & Pitt, 1992; Donaldson & Runciman, 1995; Cuthbert, 1996a, 1996b; Owlia & Aspinall, 1996; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; O’Neill & Palmer, 2001). The second uses methods for assessing the quality of teaching and learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Ramsden, 1991; Marsh & Roche, 1993). The third uses methods for assessing the quality of the total student experience (Harvey et al., 1992b; Roberts & Higgins, 1992; Hill, 1995; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; Gaell, 2000; Watson et al., 2002; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002).

In the studies where servqual is applied the questionnaire needs to be amended, and currently no consensus exists about the dimensions of service quality or the importance of each dimension in the higher education context. However, the studies lend some support to the importance of reliability. Tan (1986) conducted a review of the assessment methods used to assess teaching quality in US higher education, in which three types of studies are differentiated: reputational (subject evaluations from ‘experts’), objective indicator and quantitative correlate studies. He concluded that:

the best way to measure quality is by the use of multiple variables. Yet little success has been gained. Part of the problem lies in the fact that there is little theory to guide researchers in their selection of the ‘right’ combination of variables to measure quality. (Tan, 1986, p. 259)

It is still the case today that the majority of universities use different variables, questions and evaluation methods, many of which are developed internally without consideration of reliability or validity (Ramsden, 1991; Cuthbert, 1996a; Rowley, 1996, 1997; Oldfield & Baron, 2000).

The literature on student learning reveals many well-validated, if contrasting, questionnaires that highlight important dimensions of quality in education (Hattie & Watkins, 1988; Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Ramsden, 1991; Marsh & Roche, 1993; Pike, 1993; Cuthbert, 1996a; Rowley, 1996). Widely reported and applied methods that focus on assessing teaching and
TABLE 1. Factors in total student experience satisfaction surveys

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Learning include Ramsden’s (1991) Course Experience Questionnaire, and Marsh and Roche’s (1993) Students Evaluation of Educational Quality instrument. Both methods can be criticised for only focusing on the teaching and learning experience in assessing quality, and so neglecting the wider student experience incorporating such aspects as the accommodation situation and social life.

Many higher education institutions evaluate aspects of the student experience beyond the quality of teaching and learning (Roberts & Higgins, 1992; Hill, 1995; Harvey et al., 1997; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). A comparison of four UK student satisfaction surveys reveals that, while there are similarities between the factors used, each has its own unique characteristics (Table 1). As in the service-quality literature, there is still no general agreement regarding the dimensions or measurement approach for assessing quality in education.

In summary, a few recent studies (Oldfield & Baron, 2000; O’Neill & Palmer, 2001) have begun to explore the value of applying service-marketing concepts and models to the higher education sector. Other studies apply concepts from the educational literature and consider the quality of teaching and learning or the total student experience to be more valid. As Wiers-Jenssen et al. state:
student satisfaction approaches may be a tool for building a bridge between more traditional and academic views on how to improve higher education, and more market-orientated perspectives. (2000, p. 193)

Many questions remain unanswered. Which quality dimensions are most important to postgraduate, part-time students? Should researchers measure expectations or performance alone? Should researchers focus on the teaching and learning experience or the total student experience? What effect does the highly interactive and longitudinal nature of the service experience in education have on all the earlier questions? Clearly a major opportunity exists to deepen our understanding, and ultimately inform improvements in practice, by applying both service-quality and educational concepts, thereby trying to integrate and synthesise these two distinct literatures.

Research Design

The research is qualitative and longitudinal in design, using semi-structured interviews (Powney & Watts, 1987; McCracken, 1988). The case for this study is a postgraduate business student’s service-quality experience before, during and at the end of each year of study, on a 3-year MBA programme in a large UK business school setting. A sample of 10 students was used because it was a number that would permit tracking over time and could be coped with in a study that would involve five interviews over 3 years, and hence potentially generate 50 transcripts. Although quantitative sampling is driven by the imperative of representativeness, qualitative sampling is concerned with depth and richness of data (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Hence this study was not designed and does not claim representativeness of the entire postgraduate student population, but does aim to present deep and rich findings. The approach is consistent with research designs recommended for gathering data on dynamic, experiential, interactive service processes such as education (Gilmore & Carson, 1996; Swan & Bowers, 1998).

The 10 informants who agreed to participate were interviewed prior to the start of the first year, 10 weeks after and at the end of year one. Eight continued with their study and were interviewed at the end of the second year, and two informants continued into the final year and were interviewed when they completed 3 years of study. The topics that were covered in the interviews include definitions of service quality, expectations about the service, importance of different aspects including library, computing, catering, social, course information and content, assessment, lecturers and other staff, the value of the experience, and change in any and all of these aspects. Each interview lasted between 36 and 95 minutes, and a tape recorder was used each time. This resulted in 41 transcripts, which were analysed following an iterative process to summarise, develop themes, discover relationship and develop explanations of the phenomena under investigation (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 1998). The analysis emphasised the description and explanation of respondents’ perceived service-quality experience. To avoid excessive quotation, only representative and illustrative quotations are included.

Stages of Experience

Three clearly differentiated stages in the postgraduate students’ service-quality experience emerged. These stages are linked and evolve over time as the proposed student-centred model of service quality in postgraduate higher education demonstrates (Figure 3).
The first stage is the student’s pre-course position, which are the inputs to the process and centre on the student’s service expectations. The second stage is the in-course experience, which is the educational process in which students highlight particularly satisfying and dissatisfying service experiences in their assessment of overall process quality. The third stage is the outcome of the service process, which results in the students’ assessment of post-course service value.

Pre-Course Position

The first interview with the students took place before they had started the course. The objective of the interview was to explore what they were expecting from the course. Several common expectations were evident; influenced by three factors (Figure 3), students expect to:

1. Develop or confirm management skills.
2. Obtain the qualification.
3. Experience other sectors and people.
4. Acquire new knowledge.
5. Experience a co-ordinated, progressive course.

For example, one unprompted expectation was:

A good standard of education at the end of the day ... feeling that you’ve learnt what you haven’t already known ... that’s going to forward my management skills’ (Adam, interview 1)

Stated expectations are what the students believe using the service will accomplish for them, and are thus predominantly outcome related. The vast majority of questions on survey instruments used to assess service quality ask consumers about their expectations related to process dimensions of the service experience. Very little discussion centred on
what the students’ expected the process to be like. The one exception is the expectation to experience a co-ordinated, progressive course. Only one informant, unprompted, mentioned lecturers and the library, which he considers to be ‘the basics’. However, very few unprompted expectations from interview one relate to the university facilities, course content and assessment or staff (administration and lecturers). Typical responses when asked what was expected were:

I don’t know yet. (Jackie, interview 1)

It’s very difficult to describe particularly what I am expecting. (Andrew, interview 1)

These help to support the contention that expectations of the process aspects of an educational service experience prior to the commencement of the course are not strong. The factors highlighted by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1994) affecting service expectations are consistent with the findings of this study. Personal needs and service philosophy influenced students’ expectations. However, in the first interview, past educational experiences had little influence. They only became important once the students began the course and could use this as a point of reference.

When informants’ initial stated needs are tracked through the 2 or 3 years, the areas remain very stable over time but, not surprisingly, each year students expect a progression and development from the previous year. While past educational experiences now have a greater influence, expectations are still predominantly outcome related. This leads to the proposition that expectations may not play a large role in service-quality evaluations related to process or technical dimensions in the educational-service context. However, expectations do influence service-value assessments (Figure 3)—outcome or functional dimensions of the service experience (Gronroos, 1984).

In-Course Position

Following the pre-course interview, informants’ experiences were captured at three or four subsequent times. Very many positive and negative dimensions of the experience at the business school were discussed in depth. From all the areas prompted, memorable service experiences revolved around lecturers, course content, assignments and organisation. Two further unprompted factors, student-to-student interaction and personal time, arose as important aspects of the service experience.

Most time was spent talking about the quality of lecturers on the course. Lecturers, whether good or bad, play a vital role because:

you tend to judge a lot on the quality of the actual lecturer simply because, that is what you feel as though you are paying for. (Chris, interview 4)

All informants, except one, highlighted the poor quality of one particular lecturer. Lecturing style was the main criticism with a perceived lack of clarity in communication through using confusing terminology, unanswered questions and a generally dismissive approach of student challenges and questions:

The whole approach was this superior, I am the guy at the front so you will listen to what I have to say. And quite often he would skate over what other people wanted to say because, perhaps, their opinion didn’t agree with his. (Adam, interview 2)
Other aspects of poor-quality lecturing include unenthusiastic style, giving the appearance of being bored with the material, getting models wrong, material that was difficult to relate to the work situation and a lack of thought for student’s background. The opposite characteristics were also highlighted for lecturers who were considered to offer a high-quality service. Two lecturers were frequently offered as examples of high quality:

She could lecture and relate to the students. It was interesting over the two years, how she progressed from a very practical-based thing into getting more academic and more theoretical ... there was a lot of group discussion ... she would challenge what you said ... it was very good, very interesting. (Andrew, interview 4)

Being able to relate to the work of the students through practical examples is regarded as very high quality, together with sensitivity to the academic level and abilities of the students. The second lecturer had a somewhat contrasting style, less directly work related (which was a very important aspect for all informants), but was still considered to be high quality. The key differentiation for this lecturer was that he challenged the way students thought, he presented new ideas and was engaging:

He challenged other lecturers’ comments, he challenged what we were being taught, he didn’t just stand at the front and reel it off ... he got you talking, challenging things. (Rob, interview 4)

Challenging the way students think is regarded very highly, and this influences students’ overall ratings of the experience as they stand out as particularly satisfying aspects of the course.

Linked closely to how lecturers deliver is what they deliver, which was an important aspect of the overall experience. The over-riding determinant of high quality for part-time postgraduate students is their ability to be able to apply material within their work environment:

... the actual course content, I found, the kind of learning experience has been fantastic as far as I’m concerned. I really feel as though I’ve been able to apply that kind of experience within my work situation. It’s been good in that respect. (Tony, interview 3)

On the poor-quality side, certain module content was criticised for lacking relevance, having a private-sector bias, being confusing and not providing any new learning for the informants,

My key factors are getting in there, the level of teaching, the quality of teaching and what I’ve come away to think, have I developed from the beginning of the course or from the beginning of the session to the end of the session. If I’ve come away with something, no matter how small, then the quality is good. Obviously the more I’ve learnt the better the quality. (Adam, interview 4)

This quote illustrates the importance of learning something new in relation to a high-quality educational experience. Another significant and related theme is assignments, which includes the assignment brief, feedback and grading. Unlike lecturers and module content, most discussions around assignments focused on poorer quality aspects of the course, highlighting the importance of clear assessment criteria, the application of assessment regulations and detailed, readable and consistent feedback to students.

Similar to assessment, discussion of organisational issues only negatively impacted on
the quality of the student experience. Two memorable incidents were mentioned by informants, room double booking and the large size of the group—around 40 students.

Students talked about two factors, not specifically included on the interview guides. The first, ‘student-to-student interaction’, was seen as a particularly satisfying aspect of the service experience by the majority of the informants. The second, ‘personal time’, was highlighted as a factor that negatively affected the quality of the experience. Student-to-student interaction can be defined as the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge with other course members through class discussions, learning set activities, group work and informal communication. This was a very important aspect in relation to the quality of the experience for all the informants.

It was the other people on the course, the group work that we did together, that kind of thing was quite a strong influence, certainly for me. Working with the other people more closely, that’s what made the experience as useful as it was. (Jackie, interview 3)

Things like meeting other people from the private and public sector; meeting people and an exchange of ideas was very, very good. (Chris, interview 5)

Phrases such as ‘broaden my experience’ and ‘team spirit’, and words such as ‘camaraderie’, ‘support’ and ‘network’ were used to express dimensions of the student-to-student interaction that resulted from enrolling on the course.

Finally, many students mentioned time pressures. Considering the part-time nature of the course this should come as no surprise because these students have to fit a full-time job into their week as well as a personal life and the course demands. It is an important theme to consider in relation to the negative effect this has on the quality of the student experience:

At the moment I am finding it heavy going, purely because I am probably not putting in as much time as I would like to do into the assessments. That is purely a personal thing—with family commitments. (Robert, interview 2)

Both work and personal commitments make part-time study less satisfying for many students. Words such as ‘stamina’, ‘going the distance’ and ‘staying power’ were used to describe how studying felt at times. Similar to organisational issues, students only talked about the negative impact that part-time study places on overall quality. It is placed outside the central box in Figure 3 because it is highly student dependent rather than in the control of the service provider.

The dimensions highlighted do not change from interview to interview. While each year there are different satisfying and dissatisfying experiences due to changes in lecturers and personal circumstances, informants do not think that certain aspects become more or less important as their experience increases.

There is a lack of mention of certain factors included in many other questionnaires assessing quality in higher education (Roberts & Higgins, 1992; Hill, 1995; Rowley, 1996; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). It might be expected that the administrative staff and ancillary services such as the library, computing facilities and student support services would be important in student evaluations of quality. However, only one informant briefly mentioned administrative staff and another the library as being important. Other support services were not seen as important determinants of quality by any of the part-time students [1]. This supports the focus in the student learning literature and Cuthbert’s (1996b) suggestion that research should focus on the educational element for course-level
quality assurance. However, not only the educational process, but also the outcomes of the process are important in students’ evaluation of service quality.

Post-Course Service Value

Outcomes of the service process are a key component of service-quality evaluation in higher education. In the three end-of-year interviews, five important outcomes for students were discussed that, it is proposed, together make up overall service value. Value is derived from the service experience in one or more of the following ways: by gaining the qualification, by learning, by being able to apply new learning back in the workplace, through an expanded social network and from a sense of personal change and progression.

Students believe the qualification will enable them to gain promotion with their current employer and improve their external job prospects:

One of my reasons for doing it was that I needed the qualification to progress here but what it has also done is changed how I think and how I evaluate things. (Jackie, interview 5)

The qualification is a tangible outcome for successful students, so too is an expanded social network. This incorporates a new network of friends and business contacts as well:

The main thing has to be the qualification and the new network of friends, which was good … I think they are the main things I got out of the course. (Rob, interview 4)

Informants talked about the value of the learning that takes place:

I am thinking about how I felt at the end of each session. Whether or not I felt it was worthwhile to me. Whether I learnt something from it … Whether, the way it was presented was understandable to me. (Tony, interview 4)

It’s what I actually get out of it and not actually what I’m given. What I feel after each module. I’m developing, personally getting benefit out of it. (Chris, interview 3)

Not surprisingly, learning is an important dimension of service value in higher education. From the presented quotes it is possible to see that learning is assessed at different points, after each session, at the overall module level and for the course experience as a whole. Those sessions where students learn a lot are valued highly and the opposite is true. At each interview, several informants discussed the value derived from applying ideas introduced on the course at work. This is linked to the fact that for many informants their employers are completely, or partially, funding the course. Learning and application of this in the student’s job is closely linked to the final dimension of service value discussed by all the informants, personal change. A range of change was expressed, with one student feeling essentially unchanged as a result of the experience. He did not feel he could apply course material to his job, which resulted in a lack of interest:

you go to college to know more than you knew but I am not convinced that I do and I am not saying that because I knew it already. I am saying that I don’t think I have taken a lot of the information in. To some extent it was a practical-based course as well, you apply what you learn at work … I often don’t get that opportunity so I didn’t get to put it into practice. (Rob, interview 4)
The effect of students’ job situations is also illustrated here. All the other informants did express feelings of personal change around one or more of the following themes; becoming more analytical, self-confident, challenging and critical, and having a broader view of management. Service value from the consumer’s perspective is clearly linked to change, which could be thought of as transformation (Harvey & Burrows, 1992). Perhaps more helpful is the idea of progression. Progressive quality can be applied to students’ skills (analysis), feelings (self-confidence), approach (challenging) and perspective (broader view, new ideas).

Service value is considered to be low where service expectations are not met. For example, one student expected the course would be easier to apply at work than he found it to be:

I don’t think it has met my expectations, but to be totally honest, how much of that is my own problem it’s a bit difficult to say. I think I probably expected to be more involved in it and I thought … I would be able to use more at work, which was probably me overestimating things. (Gary, interview 2)

Equally, where the course had exceeded students’ expectations, the experience was deemed to be highly valuable.

I think it has probably gone beyond my expectations … It has been so relevant, is the overriding factor. I have been able to relate well to the course. That has been the most important aspect. And it is developing … (Robert, interview 2)

Financial costs can also affect service-value assessments, particularly where students are funding themselves or where they have budget responsibility. In both cases, this increases the desire for significant and tangible outcomes,

I am paying for this course myself and whereas other people might not feel the need to attend I do because I want to get as much out of the course as possible. (Mervin, interview 3)

Where financial investment is not so important to the student, a final factor that can affect the level of value perceived is the amount of personal time invested. This was discussed more than financial investment but, similar to this, the more time that students invest, the more value they expect to achieve.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

In summary, the proposed student-centred model of service quality contains aspects of both the service-quality and educational-quality literatures. Service expectations and service outcomes have a basis in the service-quality literature (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985), but the dimensions of these concepts have been developed directly from the students’ experience at the business school and thus adapted for the higher education context.

This study proposes that educational service quality stems from perceptions of process quality plus perceptions of service value (outcome quality). Expectations are expressed as desired service (Zeithaml et al., 1993) prior to any course experience. Subsequently, while the dimensions of expectations remain the same (management skills, qualification, experience of other sectors, new knowledge, co-ordinated/progressive course), they are influenced by the most immediate past educational experience. This forms the base level for subsequent expectations and it is proposed that these have a mediating influence on
service-value perceptions. Literature on student learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990) is closest to the dimensions of process quality proposed (lecturer, content, assignment, organisation, student-to-student interaction, personal time). However, the results of this study suggest that the importance of student-to-student interaction is underplayed in this literature. That stated it should be noted that this is not the case in some American literature; for example, the work on collaborative learning (Cabrera et al., 2002).

The total student experience studies expand on teaching and learning dimensions to include other factors including many support services. This study indicates these are not important dimensions of service quality for part-time postgraduate students. However, those additional factors of financial circumstances and social life related to service outcomes included in the UCE student satisfaction survey (for example, Watson et al., 2002) and the recent findings of Wiers-Jenssen et al.’s (2002) extensive survey of almost 10,000 students both highlight the importance of student interaction and the social climate.

The process of teaching and learning is central to students’ evaluation of service quality. However, the teaching and learning literature can be criticised for its lack of inclusion of teaching and learning outcome dimensions. Buttle (1996) makes a similar criticism of the servqual questionnaire for predominantly measuring the process of delivery and not the outcomes of the service. In addition, both the service-quality and educational-quality literatures appear to underplay the importance of service outcomes, (referred to as service value in Figure 3). The dimensions of the service value offered (the qualification, application at work, learning, expanded social network and personal change) and the model of service quality proposed are unique and attempt to rise to Rowley’s (1996) challenge to go someway to integrate the literatures of service quality and educational quality.

A replication of this study in other business schools and other postgraduate courses would facilitate reflection on the general usefulness of the service-quality model proposed. Consideration of whether the dimensions highlighted are important to full-time students and undergraduate students would also be another avenue of further research.

The importance of student-to-student interaction and the time invested by students themselves were particularly important aspects of process quality highlighted in this study and areas where little research has been conducted to date. Further research is required to consider the perspectives of other stakeholders in higher education. In particular, the experience of lecturers in relation to delivering service quality has been highlighted as a vital aspect in achieving a high-quality service. Finally, research is needed to extend our understanding of the importance of service value in service-quality evaluation, and the area of personal change seems a particularly important and rich area for further investigation.

Note
[1] The apparent lack of concern about support services such as learning centres is a function of the postgraduate MBA sample and not typical of undergraduate students.

References


