Service Quality in Malaysian Public Service: Some Findings

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Abstract— **This study tries to identify the most important dimension and to examine the level of service quality, expectation and perception of the external customers towards the Malaysian public services. Ten SERVQUAL instrument was distributed to each 300 public organizations throughout Malaysia. From 992 copies of usable questionnaire, the overall service quality is quite good. It is found that tangible is the most important dimension. It also has the lowest scores of perception. On the other hand, service quality gap is neither the lowest nor the highest. Finally, these external customers have the highest expectation on the reliability of the Malaysian public service.**

Index Terms— **service quality, public service, SERVQUAL, Malaysia.**

I. INTRODUCTION

At the moment, there are quite a high number of complaints filed by the public due to delays in taking actions and providing services to them by the Malaysian public organizations (Public Complaint Bureau (PBC), 1999-2006). Headlines of some main newspapers also highlighted complaints from the public regarding to their dissatisfactions with the provided services (Berita Harian, 2003-2004). Consequently, service quality is not as expected by the customers and therefore, it is quite low. This matter is a concern to the public since they are the taxpayers and therefore; they expect good services are provided to them as the return (Abdullah, 2006).

Thus, this study is carried out in order to identify the most important service quality dimension as it seems that responsiveness is the most important dimension. This is because delays in taking actions and providing services to customers are of responsiveness dimension. The study also tries to determine the level of service quality as assessed by the external customers and their expectation and perception towards services provided by the Malaysian public organizations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Service Quality as a Dimension of Organizational Performance

Service quality is an important dimension of

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organizational performance in the public sector as the main output of public organizations is services. Moreover, profit is not the ultimate goal of these public organizations as they have to play different roles such as facilitator, pace setter and socio-economical developer (Arawati, Baker & Kandampully, 2007).

B. SERVQUAL

The most dominant instrument in measuring service quality is SERVQUAL. It was proposed by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithmal in 1985 which comprised of 10 dimensions with 97 items and later reduced to 5 dimensions with 22 items. The dimensions are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

C. Service Quality in Malaysian Public Service

At the moment, there are limited studies published on service quality in Malaysian public sector that applied SERVQUAL scale such as Aliah and Tarmize (1998), Sharifuddin (1998/1999; 1999a, 1999b), Sharifah Latifah, Mokhtar and Arawati (2000) and Sharifah Latifah (2001).

Aliah and Tarmize (1998) adapted SERVQUAL (1985, 1988, 1990) to be comprising of 25 items. They named it as KualKhi to measure service quality provided by an income tax payment department in Malaysia. Using convenience sampling technique, 300 copies of KualKhi questionnaire were distributed to the customers. Result of the studies showed the existence of significant gaps between the expectations of the income tax payers and the services they accepted such as reliability, responsiveness and empathy. These three gaps are bigger than tangibility and assurance dimensions. However, the overall service quality is high. This shows that zone of tolerance exists as the income tax payer are willing to compromise with quality.

On the other hand, Sharifudin (1998/1999; 1999a; 1999b) used SERVQUAL (1994) instrument to measure service quality at ten public transportation departments. By using stratified sampling technique, 400 copies of SERVQUAL questionnaire were distributed to the customers and also service providers of six state departments in Selangor, Penang, Perlis, Terengganu, Pahang, Melaka, two branches at Taiping and Muar and two sub-departments in Kuala Kubu Bharu and Tapah. He found that even though the public transportation department understands the needs of the customers but the perceptions of the customers are higher. Therefore, this showed that the customers' expectations were not met.

Sharifah Latifah et al. (2000) used SERVQUAL instrument (1988) with 10 Likert scales to determine customer satisfaction as a result of TQM implementation in

six ministries. From 330 copies of questionnaire distributed, they managed to collect 290. The results indicate that responsiveness is the second lowest dimension after empathy which indicates need for improvement.

Sharifah Latifah (2001) studied the internal and external customer satisfaction in six ministries. Out of 523 questionnaires distributed to the employees in the support group and the grade three professional management group, about 222 completed questionnaires were collected. Questionnaires were also distributed to the middle managers and head of divisions or units. For the customers, a total of 289 completed questionnaires were collected from 300 copies distributed. From the factor analysis, she extracted three factors. Factor one is tangibility. Factor two is a combination of reliability, responsiveness and assurance dimensions. Finally, factor three is empathy. However, she did not rename the second factor. The results also revealed that even though the employees are highly satisfied with the organization, they are not necessarily able to translate their satisfaction to delivering quality service to the customers. Furthermore, winning quality award does not guarantee that external customers will be fully satisfied with their service provision.

On the other hand, other studies like Noor Hazilah and Phang, Firdaus (2005, 2006), Arawati, Baker and Kandampully (2007) and Wan Zahari, Maziah and Newell (2008) did not use SERVQUAL instrument in measuring service quality in Malaysian public hospitals, higher education institutions and public departments.

Noor Hazilah and Phang used an instrument which was developed by the Institute of Health Management (IHM). The questionnaires were distributed to in-patients and out-patients using convenience sampling. About 646 useable questionnaires were collected and the rate of response was 71.8 per cent for the out-patients whereas for the in-patients 570 responses were collected and the rate of response was 63.3 per cent. For both type of patients, they managed to extract two dimensions of health care service quality which they labeled as physical and clinical dimensions of service. They also found that there is a positive relationship between waiting time and out-patients satisfaction. Patients expectations in public hospitals were low since they were aware that they were paying a minimal fee in comparison with private medical care.

On the other hand, Firdaus (2005, 2006) compared the reliability and validity of three instruments which are SERVPERF, HEdPERF and combination of the two instruments. HEdPERF contains 41 items whereby 13 items were adapted from SERVPERF and 28 items were generated from literature review and various qualitative research inputs. About 381 useable questionnares were collected from two public universities, one private universities and three private colleges. He found out that HEdPERF is the best instrument in measuring service quality provided by higher education institutions due to its unidimensionality, realiability and validity. However, he only managed to extract four factors from six original dimensions.

Arawati et al (2007) used SERVPERF in determing the relationship between service quality, service performance and customer satisfaction in 86 Malaysian public departments. From nine of ten service quality dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al. in 1985, they only managed to extract three dimensions. They labeled the three dimensions as responsiveness, access and credibility. They also found out that all these three dimensions are related to service performance and customer satisfaction.

However, Wan Zahari et al. (2008) developed a new instrument which they named as FM-SERVQUAL in measuring facility management services provided by a local authority in Johor. The formula that they used was adapted from Carman in 1990 where the perception and expectation were combined into every item of the instrument. Initially, the instrument consists of 90 items which comprise five dimensions namely, human, technology and ICT, property and process. Data were collected in two phases. Later, after the second phase, the items in the instrument were reduced to only 40. The findings of the study revealed that five elements in technology and ICT and six elements of property were identified to be below the service quality level. On the other hand, 29 elements of other services were achieved with minimum quality level.

Most of these previous studies used external customers as the respondents as they are the best persons to assess the service quality provided by a department or organization. This is because the internal customers or the staff might not able to foresee the results of their own service provision to these external customers (Sharifuddin, 1998/1999; 1999a; 1999b).

III. METHODOLOGY

The SERVQUAL scale that was designed by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1991) was used in entirety (Orwig, Pearson & Cochran, 1997; Parasuraman et al.; 1991) in this study in order to measure the expectations and perceptions of service quality of the Malaysian public service as perceived by the external customers. The instrument comprises three sections. Section one consists of 22 items on expectations and perceptions. The questionnaire was prepared in a two column format due to most respondents commented on the lengthiness of the instrument (Ilhaamie, Zainal Ariffin, Yuserrie & Zuhal, 2007). Wisniewski (2001) also agreed that there was anecdotal evidence that some customers are deterred from completing the questionnaire because of its apparent length and complexity.

The scores for expectation and perception items were ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) on a seven point Likert scale. Service quality is obtained by subtracting expectation score from the perception score for each item (Q=P-E). Therefore, if perception exceeds expectation (P>E), service quality is very satisfactory. If perception equals expectation (P=E), service quality is satisfactory. However, if expectation exceeds perception (E>P), service quality is poor.

Section two is on the overall service quality and the importance of the five service quality dimensions where the customers were required to indicate the importance by allocating a total of 100 points to the five dimensions.

Weighted score is more effective than ranking method as correction and improvement actions can be decided and made based on the weighted scores by dividing them into two categories which are the most important and the most unimportant (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithmal, 1990). Finally, section three is on demographic details of the respondents.

Convenience sampling technique was used for sample selection as it was difficult to determine the external customers of the public organizations as they do not regularly use the services (Wisniewski, 2001a; 2001b). Thus, 3,000 copies of SERVQUAL instrument were distributed to 300 Malaysian public organizations whereby ten copies were distributed to each public organization selected (Tsaur & Lin, 2004).

IV. FINDINGS

A. General Findings

From 1,115 returned questionnaires, however; only about 992 copies were usable. Thus, the response rate is 33.07 %. Majority of them are Malay males (54.20%) in between 26 to 35 years old (32.10%) and are SPM (Malaysian Education Certificate) holders and others (37.80%). Please refer to Table 1.

Majority of them were federal department's external customers (29.90%) and were located in Kuala Lumpur (22.50%). Most of them requested for administration services (7.90%).

Despite of so many complaints, the overall service quality is quite good (5.29). This shows that Malaysian public service customers are tolerable towards the service quality provided by the public sector organizations (Aliah & Tarmize, 1998). This finding confirms that SERVQUAL (1991) is adequate to measure service quality in Malaysian public organizations.

TABLE 3: EXPECTATION SCORES FOR DIMENSIONS

Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha	Min	Max	Mean
Expectation	0.95	2.44	6.16	5.15
Tangible	0.83	2.00	5.60	4.69
Reliability	0.85	2.40	7.00	5.81
Responsiveness	0.82	2.00	5.60	4.67
Assurance	0.90	1.40	5.60	4.81
Empathy	0.86	2.20	7.00	5.73

TABLE 1: BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

Gender	Total	Percentage
Male	538	54.20
Female	436	44.00

Age	Total	Percentage
Below 25 years	242	24.40
26 to 35 years	318	32.10
36 to 45 years	223	22.50
46 to 55 years	167	16.80
56 years and above	28	2.80

Race	Total	Percentage
Malay	843	85.0
Chinese	86	8.70
Indian	33	3.30
Others	16	1.60

Education	Total	Percentage
Diploma	293	29.50
Degree	244	24.60
Masters Degree	48	4.80
PhD	5	0.50
Others	375	37.80

When the respondents who were asked to allocate 100 points across the five service quality dimensions, tangible (21.10) emerged as the most important service quality dimension followed by reliability (20.63), responsiveness (20.51), assurance (20.05) and empathy (18.11) as shown in Table 2. However, the difference is not quite significant as the mean of the three dimensions which are reliability, responsiveness and assurance are quite close to tangible dimension.

TABLE 2: THE MOST IMPORTANT DIMENSION

Dimension	Mean
Tangible	21.10
Reliability	20.63
Responsiveness	20.51
Assurance	20.05
Empathy	18.11

B. Expectation Scores

The level of expectation and perception among the respondents with respect to the five dimensions of service quality were examined and results are shown in Table 3 and 4. The level of expectation is between 4.67 to 5.81 where it is the lowest for responsiveness and the highest for reliability.

The minimum expectation scores are between 1.40 to 2.40 where the lowest is assurance dimension and the highest is reliability dimension. The maximum expectation scores are in between 5.60 to 7.00 where the lowest is for tangible, responsiveness and assurance dimensions and the highest is for the reliability and empathy.

When the items are examined, the level of expectation scores are between 5.35 to 6.09. The minimum score for the items is 2.75 and the maximum score is 7. The sixteenth expectation or coded as E16 has the highest value of expectation. This item is on employees being courteous with customers and is from assurance dimension.

TABLE 4: EXPECTATION SCORES FOR ITEMS

	Min	Max	Mean
Expectation Items	2.75	7	5.35-6.09

C. Perception Scores

On the other hand, the level of perception is between 4.23 to 5.30 where it is the lowest for tangible and responsiveness and the highest for empathy. On the other hand, the minimum perception scores are between .80 to 1.40 where the lowest is the assurance and the highest is empathy. Meanwhile, the maximum perception scores are in between 5.60 to 7 where the lowest scores are for tangible, responsiveness and assurance dimensions and the highest perception are of reliability and empathy dimensions.

TABLE 5: PERCEPTION SCORES FOR DIMENSIONS

Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha	Min	Max	Mean
Perception	0.96	1.12	6.16	4.68
Tangible	0.81	1.20	5.60	4.23
Reliability	0.87	1.00	7.00	5.26
Responsiveness	0.86	1.00	5.60	4.23
Assurance	0.88	.80	5.60	4.40
Empathy	0.89	1.40	7.00	5.30

When the items are examined, the level of perception scores are between 4.96 to 5.72. The ninth perception or coded as P9 (4.96) has the lowest value of perception. This item is on error free records which is from tangible dimension. This shows that the Malaysian public service has not been able to provide error free records and its customers are highly expecting that the employees are courteous while dealing with them. Furthermore, this shows that the expectations of the respondents are higher than their perceptions and therefore, their expectations are not met when the item and construct levels were examined. However, the difference is minimal.

TABLE 6: PERCEPTION SCORES FOR ITEMS

	Min	Max	Mean
Perception Items	2.83	6.89	4.96-5.72

The reliability scores for the expectation and perception for all the five dimensions are all above 0.5 indicating that SERVQUAL instrument is indeed satisfactory for use in Malaysian public service (Low & Lee, 1997).

D. Gap Scores

Table 5 contains the gap scores values for the overall service quality and its five dimensions. These gap scores are obtained by subtracting each perception scores from the expectation scores. The service quality gap scores range from -.08 to -.11 where the smallest gap is assurance and the biggest gap is the reliability dimension. Thus, service quality gap is -0.09 which is neither the smallest nor the biggest.

The minimum scores are in between -.88 to -1.12. The lowest minimum scores are the tangible dimension whereas the highest minimum scores are the empathy dimension.

On the other hand, the maximum scores are in between .40 to .56. The lowest maximum scores are the tangible dimension and the highest maximum scores are the empathy dimension.

TABLE 7: GAP SCORES FOR DIMENSIONS

Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha	Min	Max	Mean
Service Quality	0.929	-1.01	0.38	-0.09
Tangible	0.810	-.88	0.40	-0.09
Reliability	0.875	-1.20	0.52	-0.11
Responsiveness	0.869	-.92	0.52	-0.09
Assurance	0.895	-.96	0.52	-0.08
Empathy	0.870	-1.12	0.56	-0.09

When the items are examined, the level of gap scores are between -.31 to -.67. The biggest gap is the gap of the fourth item of tangible dimension (-.67) which is on visually appealing materials associated with the service and the smallest gap is the gap of the third item of empathy dimension (-.31) which is on personal attention.

TABLE 8: GAP SCORES FOR ITEMS

	Min	Max	Mean
Gap Score Items	-6.00	6.00	-.31-(-.67)

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, it shows that tangible is very important to the external customers of Malaysian public organizations. This is due to the highest score gained for the mark allocated for the dimension, the biggest gap for its item, the highest score for its expectation item and the lowest score for its perception item and dimension. However, the most unmet dimension is reliability. This is due to it gained the biggest gap for the dimension. Moreover, it obtained the highest score for the expectation dimension. It is also the second most important dimension. Responsiveness also gained the lowest score for the perception dimension. Furthermore, it is the third most important dimensions. Hence, Malaysian public service should take some actions and measures in order to increase the present level of service quality especially in these three dimensions. This is important as increase in service quality will increase the confidence of the public and investors towards them.

APPENDIX

Figure 1: The SERVQUAL Instrument

DIRECTIONS: This survey deals with your opinions of _____ services. Please show the extent to which you think firms offering _____ services should possess the features described by each statement. Do this by picking one of the seven numbers next to each statement. If you strongly agree that these firms should posses a feature, circle the number 7. If you strongly disagree that these firms should possess a feature, circle 1. If your feelings are not strong, circle one of the numbers in the middle. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best shows your expectations about the firms offering _____ services.

E1. They should have up-to-date equipment.
E2. Their physical facilities should be visually appealing.

E3. Their employees should be well dressed and appear neat.

E4.　　The appearance of the physical facilities of these firms should be in keeping with the type of services provided.

E5.　　When these firms promise to do something by a certain time, they should do so.

E6.　　When customers have problems, these firms should be sympathetic and reassuring.

E7.　　These firms should be dependable

E8.　　They should provide their services at the time they promise to do so.

E9.　　They should keep their records accurately.

E10.　　They shouldn't be expected to tell customers exactly when services will be performed.

E11.　　 It is not realistic for customers to expect prompt service from employees of these firms.

E12.　　Their employees don't always have to be willing to help customers.

E13.　　It is okay if they are too busy to respond to customer requests promptly.

E14.　　Customers should be able to trust employees of these firms.

E15.　　Customers should be able to feel safe in their transactions with these firms' employees.

E16.　　Their employees should be polite.

E17.　　Their employees should get adequate support from these firms to do their jobs well.

E18.　　These firms should not be expected to give customers individual attention.

E19.　　Employees of these firms cannot be expected to give customers personal attention.

E20.　　It is unrealistic to expect employees to know that the needs of their customers are.

E21.　　It is unrealistic to expect these firms to have their customers' best interests at heart.

E22.　　They shouldn't be expected to have operating hours convenient to all their customers.

DIRECTIONS: The following set of statements relate to your feelings about XYZ. For each statement, please show the extent to which you believe XYZ has the feature described by the statement. Once again, circling a 7 means that you strongly agree that XYZ has that feature, and circling a 1 means that you strongly disagree. You may circle any of the numbers in the middle that show how strong your feelings are. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best shows your perceptions about XYZ.

P1. XYZ has up-to-date equipment.

P2. XYZ's physical facilities are visually appealing.

P3. XYZ's employees are well dressed and appear neat

P4. The appearance of the physical facilities of XYZ is in keeping with the type of services provided.

P5. When XYZ promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.

P6. When you have problems, XYZ is sympathetic and reassuring.

P7. XYZ is dependable

P8. XYZ provides its services at the time it promises to do so.

P9. XYZ keeps its records accurately.

P10. XYZ does not tell customers exactly when services will be performed.

P11. You do not receive prompt service from XYZ's employees

P12. Employees of XYZ are not always willing to help customers.

P13. Employees of XYZ are too busy to respond to customer requests promptly.

P14. You can trust employees of XYZ.

P15. You feel safe in your transactions with XYZ's employees.

P16. Employees of XYZ are polite.

P17. Employees get adequate support from XYZ to do their jobs well.

P18. XYZ does not give you individual attention.

P19. Employees of XYZ do not give you personal attention.

P20. Employees of XYZ do not know what your needs are.

P21. XYZ does not have your best interests are heart.

P22. XYZ does not have operating hours convenient to all their customers.

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