Students' Perception of Quality Education: A Review[1]

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Abstract

This article presents review of scholarly works on students' perception of their learning environment. Particularly, the literature published between 1990 and 2019 February that examine university level students' perception of the factors that they consider the benchmark of quality education or the causes of poor academics were reviewed.

In total 63 articles were analyzed in terms of four criteria, namely, 1) the methods used to examine students' perception of quality education, 2) the elements that were perceived to impact positively on quality education, 3) the perceived causes of poor academics, and 4) the students' perception of quality education in relation to their demographic characteristics.

The findings related to the methods used to study the issue, students' perception on different aspects of quality education, the causes of poor quality education, and the role of demographic variables on students' perception are derived. We believe that the conclusions from these findings may help not only the researchers interested in perceived quality of education to plan for further research but also the institutions of higher education to execute their activities to improve their students' satisfaction levels.

1. Introduction

Theoretically as well as practically, educational institutions around the globe set their aim to provide quality education. In their endeavor, the institutions provide or claim to provide adequate and comfortable infrastructures, recruit appropriate faculty members, and manage efficient non-teaching staffs, among others. Students, the end-recipients of the services provided by the institutions, appraise the quality of education based on their perception, indicating overall strengths and weaknesses, which in turn are used to assess the level of particular university's performance. In other words, how students perceive the quality of education offered by an institution becomes one of the most important criteria to evaluate the institution's reputation.

Student perception is understood as subjective "thoughts, beliefs, and feelings" related to "persons, situations, and events" (Schunk and Meece xi). Clarifying further, the scholars argued that two types of perceptions operate in classroom – self-perception and social-perception. Quite recent scholars have postulated that students' perceptions should include not only within-the-classroom environment

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but also the environment at the "departments, faculty, and institution both physically and psychologically" (Jawaid et al. 417). In this sense, not only in-class activities but also off-class pedagogical happenings fall within the purview of students' perception.

Scholarly inquiries on students' perception date back to the turn of 21 century, that is to say, nearly three decades have passed since researchers emphasized that systematic inquiry on quality in higher education should be seen from students' perception (See, Aldridge and Rowley; Hill et al.; Schunk and Meece). As stated by other scholars along this line, student-based information is important "to reveal patterns of student satisfaction" (Mazelan et al. 76). After three decades of such advocacy, irrespective of various doubts cast against the usefulness of such research on contribution to the level of students' satisfaction, students' perception as useful indicator of quality education has drawn attention of numerous scholars.

This paper reviews digitally available scholarly studies on students' perception of quality education. Following questions were of particular interest while reviewing the articles: a) what methodological approaches have been deployed to study students' perception; b) how have the students perceived the quality of education in their respective institutions; c) what factors have the students considered important in their perception of quality education; and d) what demographic factors are observed to contribute to the students' differing perceptions? Understandably, these questions are prioritized in this study with the anticipation that researchers interested in students' perception may consider doing further research related to these issues. Importantly, such research might help academic institutions to improve their students' satisfaction levels which would then contribute to strengthen institutional reputation.

2. Methodology

Two electronic databases – Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google scholar – were searched. ERIC was visited with the two key words – "student's perception," "quality education" – combined with the Boolean operator, AND; and Google Scholar was searched with allintitle: "students' perception quality education." The duration defined for the search was January 1990 to February 2019. The first search yielded 136 articles, and the second showed 91 articles.

Abstracts of all the articles retrieved from ERIC were read, paying particular attention to the issues, methods, and conclusions; and, this process reduced the number of relevant articles to 78. Upon reading all these articles, 23 were found non-relevant: some of them dealt with the quality of education at school level, and others tested available instruments to assess students' perception. Further, 9 articles could not be retrieved. Thus, the number of eligible articles from ERIC went to to 46.

Following the same process for 91 articles retrieved from Google Scholar, in addition to excluding duplicate articles found in ERIC, only 17 articles were concluded to meet the criteria. Cumulatively, 63 articles were found relevant and were subsequently reviewed.

3. Findings

The finding of this review is presented, categorizing the themes under four major headings: methodological proliferation, perception of quality education, factors impacting students' perception,

and causes of poor education quality.

3. 1. Methodological Proliferation

Slightly more than five dozen research articles are published in the span of nearly three decades. This figure may not warrant the claim that abundant research has been carried out on the issue of students' perception of quality education. Yet, in terms of the approaches of inquiry used in these researches, it can be said that a promising number of methods have been utilized.

3.1.1 Institutions and participants of study

Students' perception has been studied in very diverse types of institutions. Among these studies, a few have examined distance-education catering institutions (see, for instance, Hamid and YIP; Richardson; Richardson et al.; Swan and Jackman; Smith; Nsamba and Makoe; Yang and Cornelius); and very few have focused on private universities (Vnoučková et al.), open universities (Lawless and Richardson), international branch campuses (Ahmad), management educational institutions (Ravindran and Kalpana), and ISO-Certified and Non-ISO-Certified colleges (Zailani et al.). Substantial number of studies have examined medical institutions (See, for instance, Abusaad et al.; Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu; Jawaid et al.; Miles and Leinster; Pai et al.; Shehnaz and Sreedharan).

Given that many of the studies have focused on medical institutions, the participants in the reviewed articles are predominantly medical students. In addition, students enrolled in mental health service users (Ogunleye et al.), hospitality management (O'Driscoll), business studies (Sardar et al.), research training programs (Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu), foreign universities (Pimpa; Pinheiro; Perry et al.), and international branch campuses (Ahmad) are also studied.

3.1.2 Instruments

In terms of the instrument of study, a substantial number of studies have either deployed synthesized attributes from earlier qualitative studies or adapted particular framework with required modifications to evaluate the quality of educational institutions. Hill proposed that the studies on perceived service quality need to take into account "a range of service factors which the researcher considered would be experienced by the exploratory group during its time at the university in question" (16). Various studies (Akareem and Hossain, *Perception of Education Quality*; Alani et al.; De Sousa; Eser and Bikran; Gamage et al.; Jain et al.; Nsamba and Makoe; Perry et al.; Pimpa; Sarrico and Rosa; Ravindran and Kalpana) examined the constituent components derived from the literature review. Pinhero, on the other hand, examined eight different aspects of teaching-learning process derived from Malcolm S. Knowles' book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*.

Some instruments such as Service Quality (SERVQUAL), Service Performance (SERVPERF), Higher Education Performance (HeDPERF), Dundee Ready Education Environment Measure (DREEM), and Total Quality Management (TQM) are very frequently used to assess perceived quality in higher educational institutions.

Among these scales, the most and repeatedly applied one is SERVQUAL scale (Alani et al.; Gallifa and Batallé; Hamid and YIP; Mai; Sardar et al.; Shekarchizadeh et al.; Soutar et al.; Soutar and McNeil; Tan and Kek). SERVQUAL was developed in mid-1980s by a group of American authors (Parasuraman et al.): the scale conceptualized service quality as the gap between service users' anticipation and their perceptions of the service provided. Initial version of the scale comprised ten

criteria and was used to study for-profit organizations' service users. Reducing the attributes to its half, the revised version measured five dimensions – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – of service quality scale. The use of this scale in higher education was done in the mid-1990 (Hill; Soutar and McNeil). The study of Alani et al. also used this scale, but with the changes to suit the "quality criteria namely faculty staff (academic and administrative staff, curriculum structure, library services and the physical environment" (235). Tan and Kek, on the other hand, presented an enhanced approach to using SERVQUAL for measuring student satisfaction.

Another scale, SERVPERF, was developed in 1992 as an alternative to SERVQUAL by Cronin and Taylor. The scale asserts that "service quality should be conceptualized according to an attitude-based approach" (Clemes et al. 5). Researchers who used this scale have acknowledged the shortcomings of Cronin and Taylor's version, and deployed it after customizing some elements. Ahmad, for instance, modified the original SERVPERF "to take into account the particular service setting" (7-8): this scholar's study assessed students' perception in terms of seven aspects, namely, university reputation/image, program quality, lecturers and teaching quality, student learning environment, effective use of technology, counseling and academic advising support, and social life (direct/indirect) facilities. Hamid and Yip used the model to identify the differences that exist in students' perception of service quality in public and private universities in Malaysia. Shekarchizadeh et al. assessed the service quality perceptions and expectations of international postgraduate students studying in selected Malaysian universities.

The other scale, HeDPERF, is used to measure service quality in the higher education setting (Fosu and Owusu; Duževié et al.). This measure was developed in 2005 as "a new instrument of service quality that captures the authentic determinants of service quality within the higher education sector" (Firdaus 569). The initial version of HeDPERF comprised 41 items, which were then further categorized into six dimensions: non-academic, academic, reputation, access, program issues, and understanding (Firdaus). The latter version (See, for example, Duževié et al.; Fosu and Owusu) dropped the dimension of understanding from the initial one.

DREEM is another prominently used instrument; it contains 50 statements, and consists of five subdomains: students' perceptions of learning, students' perception of teachers, students' academic self-perceptions, students' perception of atmosphere, and students' social self-perceptions. This instrument has been used mostly to examine medical students' perception of quality education (Abusaad et al.; Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu; Demirören et al.; Jawaid et al.; Miles and Leinster; Pai et al.; Shehnaz and Shreedharan). Miles and Leinster used the scale to compare first year medical students' perception of expected and experienced educational environment; Pai et al. studied differences between the pre-clinical and clinical stages; Demirören et al. assessed the perceptions of students about the role of new educational environment; and, Abusaad et al. compared students' perceptions of the academic learning environment in pediatric and maternity courses.

Yet another scale is 5C TQM, originally used to measure customer satisfaction in manufacturing and service organization through two attributes, technical quality and functional quality. A necessary modification in original TQM to measure student satisfaction was done in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The customized versions exist in variety; among them, some comprise attribute like academic resources, competence, attitude and content (Owlia and Aspinwall), and others

include commitment of top management, course delivery, campus facilities, courtesy, and customer feedback and improvement (Sakthivel et al.). The customized version has been applied in various studies (Ardi et al.; Zineldin et al.).

Besides, the scales like Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) and Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) or its modified version Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) (Ginns et al.; Nijhuis et al.; Richardson; Lawless and Richardson), Perceived College Quality Scale (PCQS) (Zailani et al.), Course Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) (O'Driscoll), Academic Engagement Form (AEF) (Richardson et al.), and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) (Al-Issa and Sulieman) are used. Further, researchers who focused on more specific issues such as the perceptions of health sciences students on research training applied tools like Students Attitude towards Research (SAR) questionnaire (Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu).

A few other studies have developed/tested scales to measure students' perception in particular field of study or a country. Oliver et al. developed, validated and implemented a new unit survey instrument which prompted students to "report their levels of motivation, engagement and overall satisfaction" (619); and, Aldridge and Rowley developed and evaluated negative quality model as a framework for response to different types of feedback from students (197). Similarly, Holdford and Reinders developed a scale to assess quality in pharmaceutical education; and, Jain et al. came up with a scale to evaluate Indian students' perception of quality education. Holdford and Reinders' study created 41-item instrument to assess "both perceptions of educational process (functional quality) and outcome (technical quality)" (125). Jain et al. inducted that service quality in higher education setting comprises seven dimensions, namely, "input quality, curriculum, academic facilities, industry interaction, interaction quality, support facilities and non-academic processes" (288).

3.1.3. Methods

All three methods of inquiries – qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods – are used in the available studies. Among them, quantitative studies are overwhelmingly large (see, for instance, Abusaad et al.; Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu; Clemes et al.; Demirören et al.; Dužević et al.; Ginns et al.; Nijhuis et al., Miles and Leinster, O'Driscoll; Sardar et al.; Torre et al.).

Qualitative inquiries are comparatively less in number. Those scholars employing qualitative approach have used thematic analysis (Nsamba and Makoe), grounded theory (Hill et al.), and content analysis (Gregory; Pinhero; Yang and Cornelius).

Nearly the same number of studies have used multi method approach. Ahmad, De Sousa, and Üstünlüoğlu are among the researchers who employed mixed methods. Two varieties of mixed methods – sequential and concurrent – are used.

3. 2. Perception of Quality Education

Educational as well as non-educational qualities are concluded to occupy significance in students' perception of quality education. Regarding the variables, they have considered either particular aspects or the broader facets.

Broader facet focused studies, which outnumber particular aspect focused ones, have examined students' perception on multi-facets of quality education (See, for instance, Alani et al.; Clemes et al.;

Fosu and Owusu; Hill et al.; Miles and Leinster; Vnoučková et al.; Zineldin et al.; Zailani et al.). Particular aspect concerned studies, on the other hand, answered the relationship of any one aspect of education and students' perception. For instance, Valentine and Kidwell analyzed students' perception of academic conduct of college professors; Smith analyzed how students understood the relation of off-campus support and its role in quality education; Ho studied perception on the use of multi-media technology; De Sousa compared students' and teachers' perception of creativity and effectiveness; Richardson et al. investigated the relationship between students' academic engagement and their perceptions of the academic quality; and Al-Issa and Sulieman examined students' evaluation of teaching in terms of non-instructional factors.

Those broader facets concerned studies have examined students in different context and utilized multiple instruments that inculcate numerous factors as the markers of quality. Hence, no synchronously synthesized findings could be presented here.

Some research findings suggested teaching and delivery aspects of education (Zailani et al.) as the most significant element of quality education. Similar conclusion was drawn in the study of Akareem and Hossain (*Perception of Education Quality* 11): they found that administrative and faculty characteristics jointly determined students' perception. In the study of Zineldin et al. the quality of infrastructure, particularly cleanliness of classrooms, was found to be the most critical component for student satisfaction and quality in higher education institutions.

Many other studies observed the role of at least three factors in students' perception. Clemes et al. concluded that quality of education, campus facilities and the environment, and course process were hugely significant. Pinhero observed three overarching domains – role of participation, role of learner's prior experiences, and role of the teacher – as most important. Ardi et al. also found three facets impacting students' perception: commitment of faculty management, the quality of course delivery, and the ease of giving feedback for quality improvement. In research programs, infrastructure facilities, time of faculty members to mentor the students in research, and exposure to basic and advanced statistical tools were found as the most important factors impacting quality of education (Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu).

Other studies discerned five to six components as significant factors. Yang and Cornelius identified five elements (flexibility, cost- effectiveness, electronic research availability, ease of connection to the Internet, and well- designed class) interfacing students' positive experiences. Torre et al. also observed five aspects, namely, being on an inpatient rotation, formulating an assessment, proposing a plan, presenting to the attending physician, giving an oral case presentation, and receiving high-quality feedback from the teachers as the benchmarks of quality education. Vnoučková et al. too found five elements – Quality receptionists, Business oriented, Expert innovators, Distance learners and Arrangement oriented – as the most preferred markers of quality education. Fosu and Owusu concluded that excellent and quality program, highly educated educators, timely delivery of promises, reputation of the program, and access to materials at the library were the key service quality criteria that affected the students' perception of service quality (96). Gamage et al. discerned "a university's reputation, quality of academic staff, quality of academic programs and job placement" as quality determining students decision to enroll in a particular university (196). Ahmad observed an institution's international reputation, value at home country, prospect for future employment, and chances for better job opportunities as the markers of quality. Choy et al. study deduced that students placed emphasis on learning outcomes, curriculum, instructional delivery and support, and learning

environment. Nsamba and Makoe reported six themes, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, delivery, assurance and student participation, and thus reiterated the relevance of the service quality dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al.

Interestingly, the available studies in the academia of Asian countries, even in some European countries (Sarrico and Rosa), reveal an eye-opening picture. In most of these studies, except that of Eser and Bikran; Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu, students are reported to perceive the quality of education as wanting. One study that examined perception of students in Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) reported that the quality of UBD was far from being excellent (Alani et al.). Other two studies also reported that the students perceived their university as poorly performing. Both the studies of Demirören et al. at Ankara University Faculty of Medicine, and of Pai et al. in an Indian medical school reported progressive decline in the students' perception of the quality of education in their institutions. A few other studies, however, reported that students in the state colleges such as in Jordan (Assad et al.) positively perceived the quality of education offered in their institution.

3.3. Factors Impacting Students' Perception

Various elements – the country of belonging, the discipline of study, the nature of institution, and the status related to culture, language and academic background – are identified as factors impacting students' perception of quality education. Studies have found national identity relational to students' perception: the students who studied in the US expressed higher levels of satisfaction compared to those who studied in the UK (Mai), and in Turkish Universities (Üstünlüoğlu). Alani et al. noted significant differences in the perception of 'science-based' and 'social sciences-based' students. Similarly, perceived quality of education was discerned to differ in terms of the domain of study (Abusaad et al.), the nature of educational institution (Eser and Bikran), and the year of study (Hill). Abusaad et al. study, which examined the perception of nursing students studying maternity courses and pediatric courses, found significant differences between these two groups. Similarly, Eser and Bikran concluded, "students' perceptions about the quality of marketing education at the state universities were lower than that of private universities" (75).

Background variables such as age, faculty, gender, hearing status, and prior qualification are also reported to contribute in students' perception of quality education (Richardson et al.). Similarly, the age of students' parents, scholarship status, students' age, the university where they studied, and their extracurricular activities are observed to be substantially influencing components (Akareem and Hossain, *Determinants of Education Quality*). Besides these, culture, language and academic background are concluded to impact students' perception (Al-Issa and Sulieman). Contrastingly, however, one study (Üstünlüoğlu) did not find significant variance in students' perception in terms of gender differences.

3.4. Causes of Poor Quality Education

A number of elements are found to be the perceived cause of poor-quality education. Yang and Cornelius observed students perceiving delayed feedback from instructors, unavailable technical support from instructors, lack of self-regulation and self- motivation, the sense of isolation, monotonous instructional methods, and poorly-designed course content as the causes of poor quality. Eser and Birkan noted two factors – large classroom size and older faculty who are reluctant to improve themselves – as the perceived cause of lower quality education. Among the medical

students, on the other hand, stress was found to impact significantly on their perception about their educational institution and the quality of education: the more stressed they were the more they evaluated their institution negatively (Jawaid et al.).

Conclusion

Taken together, at least three conclusions can be drawn. First, contested findings have been reported regarding what particular factors are perceived by students as highly significant elements of quality education. Second, the students' perceptions of quality education are reported to depend on demographic variables of the students. Third, multiple methodologies are tested, validated, and contested again to study various facets of students' perception of quality education.

Given the cacophony of methods and diversity in the findings, it may be challenging for researchers interested to work on Nepali students' perception of quality education to identify the most appropriate method. Interestingly, this conclusion reiterates the age-old observation which argued that the most crucial challenge for researchers is identifying and implementing the most appropriate methods to measure the quality of service experience. Possibly, one approach to addressing this issue might be using concurrent mixed method wherein qualitative grounded theory is complemented by quantitative research.

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