



STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN SELECTED COLLEGES: A RELATIVE IMPORTANT INDEX ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

To determine the satisfaction of students, as well as academic outcomes, service quality in higher education has become a very important determinant. To identify the institution's strengths and areas requiring improvement, one must understand students' perceptions of the quality of the services provided. The main objective of the study is to determine students' perception of service quality in selected colleges using the Relative Important Index (RII) method. Two government colleges in Aizawl with the highest enrolment of students were selected. RII was used to rank items across various service quality dimensions that affect students' perceptions. The findings showed the important factors of various service quality dimensions affecting students' perception.

KEYWORDS: Service Quality, student perception, higher education, Relative Important Index, student satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of service quality for shaping the experience of students as well as the reputation of the institution has been increasingly recognized by higher education institutions. As the higher education sector expands with increasing competition among colleges, students are now acting as key stakeholders whose perceptions and expectations influence institutional effectiveness (Baranidharan, V.E., & Sriharan, R, 2017). Thus, indicating that understanding students' perceptions of service quality has become an important area of research in higher education.

Service quality in higher education comprises various academic and non-academic aspects (effectiveness of teaching, infrastructure, library facilities, and administrative support). Service quality is primarily determined by the gap between customer expectations and their actual perceptions of the service (Parasuraman et al, 1988). But, in the context of higher education, students are the customers who evaluate the quality of services provided by the college.

An effective analytical approach that can be used in the assessment of service quality is the Relative Importance Index (RII) method. This method enables ranking the various service attributes according to their relative importance based on the students' evaluation. A rapid expansion of the higher education sector in India intensified the need to monitor and improve the quality of services provided to the students (Kotler, P, Fox, K.F.A, 1995). Providing academic knowledge was not enough anymore. Institutions/colleges were also expected to ensure accessible facilities, supportive administrative services, and adequate learning environments. Thus, perceptions of students served as a valuable indicator for determining institutional performance and quality improvement (Abdullah F, 2006).

Therefore, the present study examines students' perception of service quality in selected colleges using the Relative Importance Index Analysis. The study aims to provide meaningful insights for assistance in educational institutions for improving their service delivery. The findings in the present study are also expected to contribute to the literature on service quality in higher education and also offer suggestions for policymakers and institutional administrators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Apart from general conceptualizing, service quality has been tackled by researchers in a broad spectrum of disciplines. Education, especially higher education, is one of the service sectors where the role of institutions is increasingly viewed as that of a service provider. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) have developed one of the most popular measurement models of service quality, SERVQUAL. It understands service quality as a customer's perception of a service performance that is contrasted with his/her expectations. The model singles out five fundamental service quality dimensions that are comprehensively utilized in the service evaluation of educational establishments.

Nevertheless, SERVQUAL has not only been criticized but also attempted to be refined. Cronin and Taylor (1992) questioned the gap perspective and brought forward the SERVPERF model which is grounded exclusively on performance-based perceptions. They stated that performance indicators are a truer reflection of service quality and made a point that service quality should be seen as a source of, not synonymous with, customer satisfaction.



Likert (1932) initially came up with a well-organized scale that since then has become a basis for social science investigations, particularly for measuring the perception and attitudes of people. The Likert scale makes it possible for researchers to transform subjective concepts and attitudes into numerical format, which in turn facilitates educational institutions in the assessment of students' perceptions of service quality.

The University's provision of quality service reflects in student satisfaction. Through their research, Yusof et al. (2012) were able to relate students' satisfaction with a host of factors with one of these being academic support. They emphasize that both academics and non-academics, play a big part in students' rate of satisfaction with their university experience.

Nowadays, more and more scholars are resorting to quantitative approaches for instance the Relative Importance Index (RII) when it comes to analyzing and ordering factors impacting service quality. Mahat et al. (2021) clearly showed the RII method's usefulness in determining key elements of online learning. RII is a very helpful tool in education through assessing and comparing the multiple dimensions of service.

Essentially, Marzouk and El-Rasas (2014) have concentrated their attention to construction industry, but it wouldn't be unrealistic to apply some of their insights to performance evaluation and factor prioritization. They demonstrated the value of RII in bringing out the issues that need to be prioritized in any given situation. With that in mind, similarly to their findings, the importance of systematic analytical tools in the identification of key performance is well recognized across sectors including education.

In light of recent works, the value of service quality as a dimension of student satisfaction and institutional performance has only been further documented. Rouf et al. (2016) found a significant link between service quality and student satisfaction, illustrating that the latter can be improved through service quality, enhancing the overall learning experience. Sultan and Wong (2014), taking the discussion further, came up with a model that integrates academic and non-academic service quality aspects, which clearly depicts the complexity of students' views in a higher education setting. Cherian and Mathew (2020), through the use of the SERVQUAL model, found that service quality dimensions not only add to the attractiveness of educational institutions but also to their competitiveness. Feifei et al. (2022) conducted a recent review and among other things, they looked into changing service quality dimensions in the post-pandemic world, which includes additional challenges and new ways for higher education institutions to get accustomed to the environment of digital learning.

Overall, the existing literature highlights the importance of measuring service quality and student satisfaction using robust theoretical models and analytical tools. While SERVQUAL and SERVPERF provide foundational frameworks for understanding service quality, techniques such as the Likert scale and Relative Importance Index offer practical methods for data collection and analysis. These approaches collectively support the evaluation and improvement of service quality in higher education institutions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse and rank the service quality attributes using the Relative Importance Index (RII).
2. To identify key areas where colleges need improvement in service delivery.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the perception of students in selected colleges (Aizawl College and Hrangbana College). The sample size comprises 214 undergraduate students studying at Government Hrangbana College and 204 undergraduate students studying at Government Aizawl College. Both colleges were selected as they were the only state government colleges with the greatest student enrollment. The research mainly relied on primary data collected from the students. A structured questionnaire was used for the collection of data, which included items related to different dimensions of service quality. A five-point Likert scale was used to capture their perceptions of the quality of services provided by their institutions. The study sample consists of 418 students from selected colleges.

To determine the relative importance of various dimensions, the Relative Importance Index (RII) method was used. The index is calculated using the following formula:

$$RII = \frac{\sum W}{A \times N}$$

Where,

W = weight assigned to each factor by respondents

A = highest possible weight

N = total number of respondents

The RII values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater importance of the attributes/items. This method enables researchers to identify and prioritize the most significant service quality attributes influencing students' perception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For evaluating and determining the importance of different service quality attributes, the Relative Important Index (RII) method was used. Table 1 shows the Relative Important Index of the Tangible dimension in both select colleges.



Table 1
Relative Important Index of Tangible dimension

Service Quality attributes	Aizawl College		Hrangbana College	
	RII Value	Rank	RII Value	Rank
Appearance of buildings and premises	0.64	4	0.65	4
Appearance of employees	0.74	1	0.74	1
Availability of educational equipment	0.71	2	0.72	2
Accessibility of library facilities	0.69	3	0.70	3

Source: primary data

The findings in Table 1 showed that the ranking given by the students is the same in both colleges. Among the items/attributes under the tangible dimension, the appearance of employees is the most important factor in both colleges, securing the highest RII value (0.74). This indicated that a strong emphasis was placed on the professional appearance and presentation of staff by students, which influences their perception of service quality. The lowest attribute with the lowest RII values of 0.64 (Aizawl College) and 0.65 (Hrangbana College) was observed for the appearance of buildings and premises. This showed that students appear to prioritize functional and human-related aspects over physical infrastructure. Overall, the similar RII values indicate a consistent perception pattern across both institutions, with Hrangbana College showing slightly higher scores in most attributes.

The Relative Important Index of the Reliability dimension in both colleges is shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Relative Important Index of Reliability dimension

Service Quality attributes	Aizawl College		Hrangbana College	
	RII Value	Rank	RII Value	Rank
Regularity of classes	0.70	5	0.64	5
Adequacy of working hours	0.73	4	0.71	4
Support and assistance provided	0.76	2	0.75	1
Accuracy of academic records	0.75	3	0.72	3
Timely communication	0.77	1	0.74	2

Source: primary data

It is observed in Table 2 that the attribute timely communication is ranked as the most important attribute (RII = 0.77) in Aizawl college, while, support and assistance provided ranks highest (RII = 0.75) in Hrangbana College. Regularity of classes is ranked lowest (0.70 and 0.64) in both colleges. Overall, the RII values suggest that responsiveness-related factors, particularly communication and support, are highly valued by students in both colleges. Overall, the RII values suggest that responsiveness-related factors, particularly communication and support, are highly valued by students in both colleges.

Table 3 shows the ranking of attributes/items in the Responsiveness dimension.

Table 3
Relative Important Index of Responsiveness dimension

Service Quality attributes	Aizawl College		Hrangbana College	
	RII Value	Rank	RII Value	Rank
Timely handling of inquiries	0.69	4	0.71	3
Acting in the interest of students	0.70	3	0.71	3
Providing attention and assistance	0.74	1	0.73	1
Availability of library and office staff	0.73	2	0.72	2

Source: primary data

Table 3 reveals that among the attributes or factors, providing attention and assistance is ranked the highest (0.73 and 0.72) by the students in both colleges. This showed that students valued highly direct academic and administrative support. Acting in the interest of students and timely handling of inquiries receive comparatively lower ranks, though their RII values remain close, suggesting moderate importance. Overall, the findings emphasize that immediate support and staff presence are key components of responsiveness in both colleges. Hrangbana College observed slightly higher values for some items, indicating marginally better responsiveness performance.

The RII scores and ranking for the attributes under the assurance dimension are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Relative Important Index of Assurance dimension

Service Quality attributes	Aizawl College		Hrangbana College	
	RII Value	Rank	RII Value	Rank
Knowledge and skills of staff	0.75	1	0.75	2
Standard of education provided	0.57	4	0.83	1
Staff conduct builds students' confidence	0.71	3	0.71	4
Professional and accurate responses	0.72	2	0.73	3

Source: primary data



As it is observed in Table 4, knowledge and skills of staff (0.75) rank the highest among students of Aizawl College, showing that students placed greater trust in staff competence. On the contrary, students of Hrangbana College rank the highest importance to the standard of education provided (RII = 0.83). It can be stated that while students at Aizawl College emphasize staff capability, students at Hrangbana College place greater importance on educational standards, indicating a difference in perceptions of the assurance dimension.

Table 5
Relative Important Index of Empathy dimension

Service Quality attributes	Aizawl College		Hrangbana College	
	RII Value	Rank	RII Value	Rank
Equal and respectful treatment	0.76	2	0.75	5
Politeness, courtesy of staff	0.78	1	0.82	1
Availability and approachability of staff	0.749	3	0.794	3
Understanding of students' needs	0.746	4	0.791	4
Valuing and acknowledging students' feedback	0.73	5	0.80	2

Source: primary data

Table 5 indicates that, in both colleges, staff politeness and courtesy are the most important empathy attributes, with RII values of 0.78 and 0.82, respectively, showing the critical role of respectful and professional interpersonal behaviour in shaping student satisfaction. Valuing and acknowledging students' feedback was ranked the lowest (0.73) by students of Aizawl College, pointing to a relative gap in participatory engagement and student inclusion in decision-making processes. Interestingly, equal and respectful treatment is ranked lowest (0.75) by students of Hrangbana College, though its RII value remains relatively high, indicating that while important, it is comparatively less prioritized than other empathy-related factors.

The findings highlight that while both institutions perform well in maintaining courteous interactions, greater emphasis on student feedback mechanisms, particularly in Aizawl College, could further enhance the overall quality of service.

CONCLUSION

The Relative Importance Index (RII) has consistently proved itself to be an effective and highly accepted instrument in educational research for not only analyzing but also ranking factors that impact student perceptions and institutional performance. The fact that it can change Likert-scale answers into a uniform and comparable index is one of the reasons why it is especially good at picking out the most important points of service quality, student satisfaction, and learning environments in higher education.

Introducing RII into the education sector brings up a whole new dimension of benefits. For one, it becomes a handy tool for ranking major factors such as teaching quality, institutional support, responsiveness, and infrastructure. Basically, this makes it easier for educational institutions to target their spots for improvement and use their resources in the best way possible. On top of that, if accompanied by frameworks like SERVQUAL, RII can offer a 360-degree view of service quality by breaking down the evaluation of different dimensions.

While the RII has its merits, it is essentially a descriptive method and lacks the ability to reveal the cause-and-effect relationship between variables. For this reason, its full potential is unlocked only when it is paired with more advanced statistical analyses. However, owing to its straightforwardness, transparency, and strong link to practice, it remains an extremely valuable tool for researchers and administrators alike.

To sum up, RII is an extremely helpful instrument in supporting educational institutions in evidence-based decision-making by allowing them to identify priorities for change, and, as a result, raising the overall standard of education and enhancing student experience.

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