

Service Quality in Indian Higher Education : A Comparative Study of Selected State Owned and Private Universities

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Abstract

Purpose : Imparting higher education in India, not so long back, was largely the prerogative of the state as the payment capacity of the masses prevented too many private players to venture into the education sector. Of late, however, the education sector has become one of the most sought-after businesses for both novice entrepreneurs as well as established players of corporate India. These are pouring money into the said sector to fetch reasonable return on their investment. The traditionally reliable state players too have started making efforts to add on to their image of reliable education providers. Already, it has become a debatable issue as to whether the private universities would be able to match the state owned universities on the reliability front and how will these counter the extremely low fees being charged by them. State universities, on the other hand, also have a task cut out for them as to how these will counter the excessive promotion being done by private entrants and deal with the tangibles created by the private players. The best way under the prevailing circumstances is to impart quality in educational services. The present study essentially aimed at assessing service quality as perceived by the students of selected state owned and private universities in the state of Haryana.

Research Type : Empirical ; **Model Used :** Self - Designed

Findings : Both the sample state as well as the private university of Haryana had not yet come up to the expectations of the students on various service quality dimensions. Comparatively speaking, the relative position of the state university was better on the following fronts - service bonding, service value, service security, and service competence. The sample private university had a slight edge on service impressiveness and service promptness fronts.

Practical Implications : The Indian education service providers should start viewing service quality from the viewpoint of the students and start bringing in necessary changes in their existing endeavours on the said front.

Research Limitations : The technicalities involved in understanding the concept of service quality might have acted as a handicap for the students in giving prompt and accurate answers to the questions at hand.

Keywords: service quality, service bonding, service value

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Indian higher education, to a great extent, has remained the prerogative of the state in the past. This is evident from the fact that out of 620 universities in the country, 44 are governed by the Central government and 298 are governed by State governments. There are 148 private and 130 deemed universities in the country (University Grants Commission, 2013). Even the said number of private universities in the country are the outcome of sudden inclination of the private entrepreneurs in this field in the last decade or so. The number, however, in all the above categories is likely to witness a manifold increase in the next decade or so. The gross enrolment ratio (GER, that is, percentage of 10+2 pass outs joining college) in the country was 15% only, but the same is likely to be 30% by 2020 (Tandon, 2012a). India needs 800 more universities and 40,000 more colleges to meet the target GER of 2020 (Tandon, 2012b).

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The above discussion proves that the quantity aspect has been taken note of by most of the stakeholders of higher education in the country. More important than quantity, however, is the quality of higher education in which the country is certainly lacking. This is evident from the following facts:

- ↳ As per the QS World University Rankings of 2012, there was no Indian university which figured in the top 200 universities of the world (Dhar, 2012).
- ↳ All the leading Indian universities saw their rankings falling drastically in 2012 in comparison to 2011 (Dhar, 2012).
- ↳ Indian universities scored very badly on academic reputation and quality aspects (Dhar, 2012).
- ↳ Sixty five percent of Indian employers have trouble finding required competency in Indian graduates ("Wanted only qualified help," 2012).
- ↳ Only 17% of the Indian graduates are industry ready and 30% are trainable (Tandon, 2012b).

It is high time to take note of the above mentioned negative trends. One of the best ways under the prevailing circumstances is to seriously consider and improve the quality of higher education. Quality, as a matter of fact, does not improve unless it is measured. However, unlike the quality of manufactured goods, education service quality is an elusive and distinctive construct. As students do not easily articulate institutes' service quality, the recipient of the service can only really assess it, thereby making its measurement more subjective than exact. Hence, the measurement of education service quality has to be based on perceived quality rather than objective quality because services are intangible, heterogeneous, and their consumption and production occurs simultaneously. The present study includes an examination of students' expectations and perceptions of Indian higher education service quality.

Review of Literature

Customers are the sole judge of service quality of any service organization (Parsuraman, Zeithmal, & Leonard, 1988). However, service quality measurement differs from customer satisfaction measurement. Whereas, customer satisfaction is a short term, transaction specific measure, service quality is an attitude formed for long term, overall evaluation of performance (Hoffman & Bateson, 2008).

In the education sector, customers are the students (Hill, 1995). A customer, as a matter of fact, is one who pays money to acquire an organization's products or services (Giffin, 1996). In education, students are customers who come in contact with service providers of an educational institution for the purpose of acquiring goods or services (Kitchoren, 2004). It would thus be ideal to conduct students' survey for assessing service quality in educational institutes, especially those imparting higher education. Some eye-brows, however, have been raised in this regard. Waugh (2002) observed that viewing students as customers may make universities look too aligned with business. Some other researchers have viewed academic faculties as customers of university administration. Pitman (2000) examined the extent to which university staff perceived students and academics as customers in Australia. It may be said that service quality in higher education is a relative concept as it involves a number of stakeholders (Tam, 2002). Stakeholders in higher education range from students as primary customers (Hill, 1995) to the other entities of the society such as parents, staff, business, and legislators (Rowley, 1997).

Barring a few exceptions, students are thus considered to be the best judge of service quality in higher education institutions. There are no such exceptions though in bringing higher education under the quality purview. Seymour (1993) opined that educational institutions are similar to other service organizations as these serve students and hence, concepts of service quality are directly applicable to higher education. Cuthbert (1996) observed that higher education, like other service industries, is characterized by intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability and hence, should be subjected to service quality assessment.

Parsuraman et al. (1988) were of the view that the sole judge of service quality is the customers, and they look

for five imperatives in service to judge its quality. These five imperatives discussed in the SERVQUAL model are Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness.

Since its inception, SERVQUAL has been widely used across services industries such as travel, hotels, higher education, real estate, accountancy, construction, and hospitals and so forth to judge service quality therein (Foster, 2001). In fact, various dimensions of SERVQUAL are considered to be relevant to many service industries (Setó-Pamies, 2012). Asubonteng, McCleary, and Swan (1996) rated SERVQUAL as a popular instrument to measure service quality because of its ease and flexibility. SERVQUAL has also been used to measure service quality in B-schools (Rigotti & Pitt, 1992) and higher educational institutions (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph, 1993; McElwee & Redman, 1993). It has been detected through SERVQUAL that poor educational service quality has an adverse impact on popularity of the university and hence, on the status of application it receives (Zammuto, Keaveney, & O'Connor, 1996). SERVQUAL has even detected service quality in libraries and information centers of the universities (Kettinger & Lee, 1994; Nitecki, 1996).

Although SERVQUAL has remained a popular tool to measure service quality in the education sector, yet, its use has also been questioned by many. Ford et al. (1993) argued that the service organizations differ in their nature and scope, and hence, need different types of instruments to measure service quality. SERVQUAL may not fit in all the service organizations. Brown, Churchill Jr., and Peter (1993), Cronin Jr. and Taylor (1992), and Teas (1993) maintained that it is more viable to base service quality assessment on measurement of perception alone as expectations of customers are usually sky high and the same is depicted in perception itself. Ladhari (2008) observed that SERVQUAL has its focus on the process of service delivery instead of the result and outcome of the service encounters. Clow and Vorhies (1993) opined that customers can overstate their expectations score if they are not satisfied with earlier services of the organization, and hence, SERVQUAL measure may result in psychometric problems. In fact, numerous attempts have been made to assess service quality in different service industries, including the education sector using different scales (Baccarani, Ugolini, & Bonfanti, 2010; Calabrese & Scogilo, 2012).

Various researchers, as a matter of fact, have either relied on SERVQUAL or have devised their own scales to assess service quality in the higher-education sector. Earlier research studies on assessing service quality in higher education were largely related to academic aspects rather than administrative aspects. These researchers were confined to assessing service quality on the basis of quality of course, quality of teaching, course delivery, and so forth (Athiyaman, 1997; Bourner, 1998; Varey, 1993; Yorke, 1992). However, later on, research studies on service quality relating to administrative aspects were also undertaken (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002). This is considered important as students' initial interaction takes place with administrators and not teachers (Anderson, 1995).

Research studies on academic and administrative aspects have revealed that poor service quality perception reduces the popularity of an educational institute, and in the long run, the same has a bearing upon the number of student application the institute receives for admission. The ultimate effect of the same is on financial position of the institute (Kitchroen, 2004; McElwee & Redman, 1993). It has been observed that stakeholders of higher education institutes can ill-afford to ignore service quality aspects anymore, and they would have to give proper evidence to the students in this regard to get them enrolled for their academic programmes (Koslowski, 2006). In fact, service quality has been considered to be the main determinant of overall student satisfaction and their behavioural intentions (Phadke, 2011). It is because of their service quality that private institutes are challenging and outshining their public counterparts (Al-Alak, 2009). It is strongly recommended that higher educational institutes' resources should be directed towards improving service quality so as to make it better (Prasad & Jha, 2013).

Objectives of the Study

The study primarily aims at assessing service quality in selected state and private universities. In the backdrop of this main objective, the following sub-objectives have been set for the study:

- ↪ To explore the service quality expectations of students of selected state and private universities.
- ↪ To measure the actual perception of students in this regard.
- ↪ To see if the selected universities come up to the expectations of the students on the service quality front.
- ↪ To see which category of universities, that is, state or private enjoy an edge over other on the service quality front.
- ↪ To give some practicable suggestions to the universities under study so that these may improve themselves on the service quality front.

Hypothesis

Keeping in mind the objectives of the study, the following hypothesis has been tested:

- ↪ There is no significant difference in the expectations and perception of the students of the universities under study on the service quality front.

Research Methodology

This is an empirical study. I made use of both primary and secondary data to arrive at the necessary conclusions. The primary data were collected with the help of a structured questionnaire addressed to randomly approached 300 students (150 each of selected categories of universities). My initial judgment, however, played a role before random selection of the students as only the students of professional courses (engineering, management, and so forth) constituted the sample. The questionnaire was designed after conducting a pilot study and keeping in mind prominent areas that govern service quality in the education sector. The secondary data incorporated in the research is the outcome of literature on service quality taken from various published and unpublished reports/journals and books, and so forth. The data so collected were analyzed with the help of SPSS software using various statistical techniques like mean, standard deviation, combined *t*-test, and so forth, and is presented with the help of appropriate statistical tables.

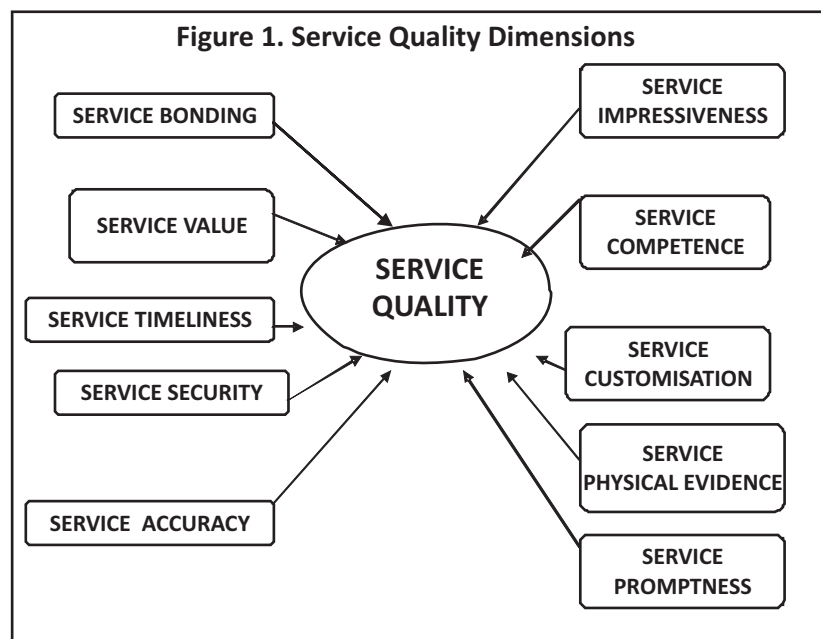


Table 1. Service Bonding

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	4.2467	6.3600	- 2.11333.	1.039	.08489	-24.894	149	.000
B (PVT.)	2.8333	6.5200	-3.68667	1.538	.11744	-31.391	149	.000

Table 2. Service Value

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	4.5733	6.4533	- 1.88000.	0.948	0.07738	-24.294	149	.000
B (PVT.)	2.8933	6.5	-3.60667	1.263	0.10315	-34.966	149	.000

Scope of the Study

The present study is confined to two universities situated in the state of Haryana. The first university selected in the study is the oldest university of Haryana and falls under the category of “State University”. This university has been accredited as A Grade University by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The university has more than 50 teaching departments and has 431 affiliated colleges. For convenience, this university has been denoted as A. The second university selected for the study is a private university. The present day university initially was started as an educational trust in the year 1993. The university primarily focuses on medical, technical, and managerial education. This university has been denoted as B. For the sake of convenience, students have been termed as customers of educational services in the study. The study is based upon a survey carried out in the second half of the year 2013.

Research Thrust

After reviewing literature on service quality, the dimensions concerning the same were devised to garner the views of the respondents. The said dimensions are discussed with the help of Figure 1.

Analysis and Results

↳ **Service Bonding** : Service bonding is the outcome of reliable services. It occurs when the service providers fulfill their promises made for the services. When the service providers keep their promises made to the customers, they also give privilege to the service providers by becoming loyal to them. Hence, a sort of bond is established between the service provider and the customers. Reliability, and hence service bonding, are the pillars of any service quality pursuit.

The Table 1 suggests that both the state as well as the private university under study failed to meet the expectations of their customers (students) on this front. This is evident from application of the combined *t* - test, which detected a significant difference in perception and expectations of the customers (students) of both these universities. However, comparatively speaking, the position of the private university was more precarious as it got an extremely low mean rating of 2.8. A further investigation from the students revealed that the said private university made tall claims to woo the students for admission. However, those promises were often not being kept. The university needs to realize that such an approach can fetch students for it only for once. Negative word of mouth being spread by them subsequently may de-motivate future students to take admission in the same institution.

↳ **Service Value** : The education service provider must strive to give true value to the students for the fees they are paying to the institute. The best way to create value in the minds of the students is by giving them better

Table 3. Service Accuracy

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	3.6467	6.4733	-2.82667	2.68165	0.21896	-12.910	149	.000
B (PVT.)	4.0400	6.5267	-2.48667	2.66908	0.21793	-11.410	149	.000

Table 4. Service Timeliness

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	2.3333	6.4467	-4.1133	1.34382	0.10972	-37.488	149	.000
B (PVT.)	3.1867	6.4933	-3.30667	1.15245	0.09410	-35.141	149	.000

Table 5. Service Security

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	5.7333	6.6133	-0.8800	1.12876	0.09216	-9.548	149	.000
B (PVT.)	2.9000	6.6800	-3.78000	1.46030	0.11923	-31.703	149	.000

education at the same price or same education and facilities at a lower price. If the students get the desired educational value, their service quality perception improves automatically.

The Table 2 again indicates a huge gap between the perception and expectations of the students of the private university. A negative mean rating of 3.61 is indeed a shocking one and must act as an eye-opener for the university. A further investigation revealed that fee being charged by the said private university is comparatively high and till date, it has not earned the desired name and fame in imparting education. Although a significant difference has also been witnessed in case of perception and expectations of the students of the state university, yet, the negative mean difference of 1.8 is somewhat manageable. The private university under study must try to give value to the students to sustain itself for a longer period.

↳ **Service Accuracy** : Errors in services, on account of their unique characteristics, that is, intangibility, inseparability, perishability, and inconsistency are very difficult to be controlled completely. The errors in the education sector may pertain to teaching errors and non-teaching errors such as issuing wrong results, and so forth. The education providers must make all possible efforts to keep these minimum possible to gain privilege of the customers. Accurate services, undoubtedly, may prove to be a real asset for the education providers.

The Table 3 indicates that the private university with a mean rating of 4 plus enjoys a slight edge over its public counterpart. The negative mean scores of 2.82 (public university) and 2.48 (private university), however, do not argue well for both of these. The same clearly indicates that both the universities were far from being accurate with respect to the expectations of their customers (students). A further investigation revealed that non-teaching errors, as mentioned above, were quite common in both the universities. The same must be looked into with a right earnest to create a better image in the eyes of the customers (students).

↳ **Service Timeliness** : Adhering to time schedule is of paramount importance in the education sector. It calls for completion of syllabi, announcement of results, and so on in time. Non adherence of the same may irritate energetic youths and adversely affect service quality endeavors of the education provider.

The Table 4 clearly indicates that adherence to time schedule was not in the scheme of things of the selected universities. The sample universities received miserably low perception scores of 2.33 (public) and 3.18 (private) from their customers. The major resentment of the customers was found to be with reference to delay in declaring results in case of both the universities. This is rather surprising as India, which is considered to be quite strong in the IT sector, has failed to use the same to prevent uncalled for delays in the education sector. Needless to say, negative mean ratings of 4.11 (public) and 3.30 (private) must act as an eye-opener for the selected universities.

Table 6. Service Impressiveness

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	3.3533	6.4133	-3.06	1.08207	0.08835	-34.635	149	.000
B (PVT.)	4.1267	6.5133	-2.38667	1.21394	0.09912	-24.079	149	.000

Table 7. Service Competence

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	4.38	6.64	-2.26	1.05824	0.0864	-26.156	149	.000
B (PVT.)	3.1267	6.6400	-3.5133	1.43652	0.11729	-29.954	149	.000

Table 8. Service Customization

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	4.1867	6.24	-2.0533	1.36979	0.11184	-18.359	149	.000
B (PVT.)	4.2867	6.2733	-1.9867	1.32598	0.10827	-18.350	149	.000

↳ **Service Security** : Safety and security relating to money being spent on education, job security, recognition of degrees (setting up infrastructure), and so forth are immensely desired in the education sector. Any loopholes in the same are not desired by the educational customers.

The perusal of the Table 5 indicates that the public university with a perception mean rating of 5.7 and negative mean rating of less than 1 almost matched the expectations of its students on the service security front. Contrary to it, the plight of the private university is clear to one and all as it got an extremely low perception mean score of 2.9 and an extremely high negative mean score of 3.78. A further investigation revealed that the case pertaining to de-recognition of the degree of the said private university is pending in the court on account of some irregularities committed by it in the past. Moreover, few students also complained of financial irregularities. This only puts the career of the students in lurch. Timely action is warranted from the selected private university to improve its image on the security front. There was no such issue though with the state university on the said aspect.

↳ **Service Impressiveness** : Serving customers will satisfy them, but serving them impressively will delight them. The behavior of the employees should be such that the same instills confidence in the customers. There is no denying the fact that serving customers with a smile on the face may enhance the perceived quality of the service.

The Table 6 makes it clear that both the state as well as the private university under study failed to meet the expectations of their customers on the impressiveness front. The combined *t*-test indicates a significant difference in between the perception and expectations of the customers in case of both the selected universities. Comparatively speaking, the position of the private university with a perception mean rating of 4 plus is better than its public counterpart. Still, there is an ample score in case of both the universities to make their employees and their services more impressive.

↳ **Service Competence** : Ensuring service quality without competent employees is a distant dream in the education sector. It is thus imperative for an educator to judge the incumbents, especially faculty for competency before selecting them and further giving them continuous doze of training. This will not only enhance their skill set, but will also keep their customers happy and satisfied.

The Table 7 reveals that the public university got a near to satisfactory perception score of 4.38 on the competence front. However, the private university struggled with a mean score of 3.12. The customers of the private university complained that the university struggled to retain qualified teachers, and they witnessed new teachers quite often during their course of the studying at the university. There is definitely a scope for both the

Table 9. Service Physical Evidence

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	4.4533	6.4867	-2.0333	1.12576	0.09192	-22.121	149	.000
B (PVT.)	4.5467	6.54	-1.9933	0.99998	0.08165	-24.414	149	.000

Table 10. Service Promptness

UNIV.	PERCEP. SCORE	EXPECT. SCORE	MEAN (P-E)	S.D.	STD. ERROR MEAN	t	df	SIG.
A(STATE)	2.1733	6.3267	-4.1533	1.25712	0.10264	-40.464	149	.000
B (PVT.)	3.46	6.4333	-2.9733	1.63003	0.08165	-22.341	149	.000

universities, especially the private university, to strengthen themselves with competent staff.

↳ **Service Customization :** Higher education quality also calls for customizing the scheme, electives, syllabi, and so forth according to the needs of the students. The same requires offering liberal options/ electives and so forth to the students.

The Table 8 indicates both the selected universities getting a 4 plus perception score on the customization front. Although a significant difference was again detected in between the perception and expectations of the customers, yet, we must keep in mind that there is a limit beyond which giving customized services may not be possible. Still, the selected universities must do whatever best they can in this regard.

↳ **Service Physical Evidence :** Physical evidence (interiors and exteriors, quality of buildings, furnishings, and so forth), many a times, is considered secondary to most other dimensions of service quality, yet, it has its role to play in enhancing service quality.

A perusal of the Table 9 indicates both public and private universities getting a decent perception score in the proximity of 4.5 on creation of physical evidence to tangibilize the intangible educational services. A slight more effort can convert this decent score into a very good score. This is true in case of both categories of universities.

↳ **Service Promptness :** The swiftness with which the educational staff (both teaching and non-teaching) responds to the service needs of students has a definite bearing on the way they rate educational quality. Promptness thus, is an integral part of service quality.

The Table 10 suggests both the selected universities failing to pass the test of promptness. In fact, the position of the state university is precarious as it got a perception score of 2.1. Even the private player is not been found to be a promising one with a mean score of 3.4. Needless to say, the difference between expectations and perception scores is huge and significant one in case of both the universities. The selected universities must realize that prompt services are akin to service quality and lack of efforts in this regard may spell doom for them in their service quality efforts.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the expectations and perception of the students of the universities under study on the service quality front, on the basis of application of the relevant statistical techniques, stands rejected. The study has revealed that customers' expectations on various imperatives of service quality were not matched by the sample universities. It may be said that service quality issues are not yet properly addressed by the Indian higher education sector. Relatively speaking, the public university was found to be enjoying an edge over its private counterpart on dimensions such as service bonding, value, security, and competence. However, the sample private university got a better rating on the impressiveness and promptness

fronts. At the outset, the concerned authorities would have to pump in more money into higher education as Indian spending on the same is much less in comparison to most of the other developed and developing nations of the world. Secondly, the higher education programmes must be designed keeping an eye on their stakeholders', that is, students, industry, and so forth. Above all, the Indian higher education sector, in general, would have to pull up its socks on various imperatives of service quality to get better rating at the global level.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

As discussed earlier, technicalities involved in the concept of service quality could have been a limiting factor of the study as the same might not have been comprehended by the respondents (students) in the way desired by me. Furthermore, the study has been confined to the two universities situated in Haryana and hence, they may not represent the universe in totality. The university culture in other parts of the country may be different to that of those situated in Haryana. Thirdly, the students taken as the sample were from professional courses only. The outlook of the students of non-professional courses may be different. Thus, the findings of the study may not be generalized to traditional courses. In spite of the above limitations, I tried my best to ensure that the same did not adversely influence the outcome of the study.

I feel that there is ample scope for many more research studies related to the present research. In the present study, one state owned and one private university situated in Haryana were included in the sample. Adding a central university in the sample would make the study even more meaningful. Assessing the service quality in premier institutes of India also makes a lot of sense as the same would give us an idea as to whether service quality in these institutes is significantly better in comparison to the average institutes. The present study is confined to one state only. A comparative study across states and zones of India is always desirable to see if service quality is influenced by the geographical location of the institute. Comparing service quality in Indian higher education institutes with that in the institutes of other countries would perhaps be the best bet as the same would throw light on higher education standards in India viz-a-viz other countries.

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