

HR

by Hafiza Ukm

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Service Quality and Internal Customer Satisfaction: From the lens of Public University's Human Resource Management

(Kualiti Perkhidmatan dan Kepuasan Pelanggan Dalam: Daripada Sudut Pandang Pengurusan Sumber Manusia Universiti Awam)

ABSTRACT

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The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about substantial changes in service quality within Higher Education Institutions, particularly impacting Human Resource Management (HRM). In light of these effects, it has become imperative to swiftly initiate measures aimed at elevating the quality of services. This is of paramount importance, as the quality of HRM services plays a pivotal role in determining organisational performance. Therefore, there is an ongoing need for vigilant monitoring and continuous enhancement of HRM service quality to align with organisational objectives. This study sets out to gauge the levels of satisfaction among HRM customers concerning the quality of HRM services at a specific public university in Malaysia. To achieve this objective, a meticulously crafted questionnaire was developed, taking into account the fundamental determinants of service quality and the dimensions outlined in the SERVQUAL model. A pilot study was undertaken to ascertain the questionnaire's reliability, revealing a commendably high Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of 0.957. Subsequently, an online survey was conducted, reaching out to the entire population of 17,000 respondents. Employing purposive sampling, the study gathered 802 completed questionnaires. The research methodology hinged on correlation and regression analyses to scrutinise the intricate relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. The findings underscored the significant influence of all dimensions - Responsiveness, Assurance, Access, Empathy, and Reliability - on customer satisfaction, with the exception of Tangible. This study provides invaluable insights for managerial decision-making, presenting a strategic roadmap to pinpoint areas for enhancement and to develop forward-looking strategies that adapt to the ever-changing landscape of HRM service quality amid uncertain conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Public University, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, SERVQUAL Model.

ABSTRAK

Kehadiran wabak COVID-19 telah membawa perubahan yang ketara dalam kualiti perkhidmatan di Institut Pengajian Tinggi, terutamanya Pengurusan Sumber Manusia. Justeru, langkah segera perlu dilaksanakan bagi memastikan penyampaian perkhidmatan berkualiti. Ini adalah sangat penting, kerana kualiti perkhidmatan HRM memainkan peranan penting dalam menentukan prestasi organisasi. Oleh itu, terdapat keperluan berterusan untuk memantau dan meningkatkan kualiti perkhidmatan HRM dengan teliti agar seiring dengan objektif organisasi. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menilai tahap kepuasan pelanggan HRM berhubung kualiti perkhidmatan HRM di sebuah universiti awam di Malaysia. Untuk mencapai objektif ini, instrumen kajian (soal selidik) telah dibangunkan, dengan mengambil kira penentu-penentu asas kualiti perkhidmatan dan dimensi-dimensi yang diterangkan dalam model SERVQUAL. Satu kajian rintis telah dijalankan untuk menilai kebolehpercayaan soal selidik ini dengan hasil pekali Alpha Cronbach yang sangat tinggi iaitu 0.957. Kemudian, satu tinjauan dalam talian telah dijalankan, dengan merangkumi seluruh populasi responden sebanyak 17,000. Dengan menggunakan pensampelan bertujuan, kajian ini telah mengumpulkan 802 borang soal selidik yang lengkap. Metodologi penyelidikan ini bergantung pada analisis korelasi dan regresi untuk menyelidik hubungan yang rumit antara dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan dan kepuasan pelanggan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan pengaruh signifikan bagi kesemua dimensi - Responsif, Jaminan, Akses, Empati, dan Kebolehpercayaan - ke atas kepuasan pelanggan, kecuali dimensi Tangible. Kajian ini memberikan implikasi praktikal kepada pihak pengurusan untuk mengenal pasti ruang penambahbaikan dan merangka strategi menghadapi situasi luar jangka seperti wabak COVID-19.

Kata kunci: Pengurusan Sumber Manusia, Universiti Awam, Kualiti Perkhidmatan, Kepuasan Pelanggan, Model SERVQUAL.

INTRODUCTION

The pivotal role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in achieving organisational success has never been more evident, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. HRM practices have evolved to encompass a strategic focus on an organisation's goals, sustainability, competitiveness, and the delivery of exceptional customer service (Mutiso & Kilika 2017). Moreover, HRM activities are instrumental in enhancing service efficiency (Redman & Mathews 1998). The fusion of HRM practices with a culture of innovation has played a significant role in influencing an organisation's ability to innovate its services, a need magnified by the pandemic (Alosani, Al-Dhaafri & Abdulla 2020). Sustainable HRM practices are indispensable in elevating customer satisfaction (Wikhamn 2019), a critical aspect amid the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 era.

In tandem with these developments, the demand for efficient and high-quality services has surged, especially in the public sector, where ensuring the delivery of exceptional services while minimising quality assurance lapses is paramount (Mukhtar & Ali 2011; Thommana, Dey & Dock 2015). Any divergence between the services provided and the expected service levels is characterised as "service quality" (Ramseook, Naidoo & Lukea-Bhiwajee 2010).

A plethora of studies has sought to explore the intricate relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality (e.g., Awan, Bukhari & Iqbal 2011; Bashir, Wai, Hossain & Rahaman 2020; Fida, Ahmed, Al-Balushi & Singh 2020). Extensive research across various service sectors has aimed to understand how customer satisfaction and service quality interact (e.g., Famiyeh, Kwarteng & Asante-Darko 2018; Fida et al. 2020; Othman, Harun, Rashid & Ali 2019; Wikhamn 2019). Remarkably, within the context of public universities, there has been a relative scarcity of research addressing customer satisfaction concerning HRM service quality, particularly amid the challenges imposed by the pandemic.

The Ministry of Education Malaysia, recognising these challenges, has embarked on initiatives to enhance the service delivery systems of public universities (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 [Higher Education], 2015). The public services are expected to be characterised by integrity, citizen-centricity, accountability, and responsiveness to the unique needs of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable, thus fostering transparency and enabling public access to high-quality services (Engw 2020).

In the midst of these transformative changes, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the delivery of services by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Ironically, the pandemic has expedited the adoption of virtual technologies by HEIs, making investments in new technology and online infrastructure essential to maintain service quality and adapt to the pandemic's challenges (Camilleri 2021). In light of these extraordinary circumstances, understanding and assessing HRM service quality and customer satisfaction at public universities in Malaysia becomes not just important but essential. Hence, this study aims to evaluate HRM service quality and customer satisfaction at a specific public university in Malaysia, considering the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on service delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section critically examines relevant studies that shed light on the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality. The review is divided into two main areas of focus: service quality within the domain of HRM and the dimensions that constitute service quality.

While there is no universally accepted definition of service quality, it generally involves a comprehensive evaluation by customers of a particular service's ability to meet their expectations, subsequently influencing their level of satisfaction (El Saghier & Nathan 2013). The SERVQUAL model is a commonly employed framework for assessing service quality and customer satisfaction (Raza, Umer Qureshi & Dahri 2020). Initially, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) identified ten determinants encompassing reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, realization of customer needs, and tangibles. However, a subsequent study by Parasuraman et al. (1988) refined these determinants, condensing them into five dimensions within the SERVQUAL model: Reliability (the ability to consistently deliver services accurately), Tangibles (encompassing equipment, physical facilities, and employee appearance), Responsiveness (willingness and readiness to assist and promptly respond to customer needs), Empathy (demonstrating noble values like trustworthiness, believability, honesty, caring, and providing personalized attention to customers), and Assurance (staff abilities, including knowledge and courtesy, that inspire trust and confidence in customers). Literature review highlights the considerable emphasis placed by researchers on exploring the relationship between customer satisfaction and the various dimensions of service quality (Famiyeh et al. 2018).

Ostensibly, the quality of services is a matter of significant concern, not only in the private sector but also within the public sector. Key aspects of public service quality encompass service accessibility, transparency, employee attitudes and actions, service adaptability to evolving demands, reliability, employee expertise, knowledge and trustworthiness (Zahari et al. 2008; Martinović, Pavlič & Šuman Tolić 2017). Engdaw (2020) investigated the impact of public service delivery quality on customer satisfaction, revealing varying perspectives between customers and service providers regarding service delivery quality and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction was found to be positively linked with responsiveness, tangibility, assurance, and reliability, while displaying a negative correlation with empathy. The provision of quality service significantly contributes to customer satisfaction, with an average satisfaction rate of 84%, in stark contrast to the mere 3.89% when quality service is lacking.

From an organisational perspective, employees are viewed as a strategic component in the machinery of delivering top-notch services, making them a fundamental factor in achieving the desired quality outcomes. HRM activities serve as the principal conduits through which organisations adeptly manage their human resources (Alosani et al. 2020). Organisations harness and deploy resources through their personnel, with a dedicated focus on crafting and delivering goods and services that cater to the demands of clients. In addition to acquiring the knowledge requisite for comprehending their roles in this intricate process, human resources must also deliver high-quality goods and services. Consequently, effective communication emerges as a pivotal tool in fostering quality (Wagner et al. 2017).

Furthermore, the implementation of HRM practices assumes a pivotal role in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviours (Gudermann 2012). Additionally, sustainable human resource management practices have been identified as a critical driver for enhancing the capacity for service innovation, ultimately leading to satisfied internal customers (employees) (Wikhamn 2019). It is imperative to highlight that employee satisfaction is integral to bolstering performance, productivity, customer loyalty, and, as a result, business profitability (Krekel, Ward & De Neve 2019)

1 DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY

This study examines six dimensions of service quality (Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness, Tangibles, Empathy, and Access) that have been empirically demonstrated to impact customer satisfaction. The aim is to identify the influential factors that significantly affect the service quality of the respective public university's HRM. These dimensions intentionally include the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, with an additional dimension added to align with the specific requirements of the organisational context.

1) Reliability: As highlighted by Hennayake (2017), reliability refers to an organisation's capacity to consistently and accurately deliver its promised services. In the realm of reliability, numerous factors contribute to clients' perceptions of accuracy and integrity, including the precision of service delivery. To instil confidence in their clients, organisations must deliver on their promises. In today's digital age, convincing customers that organisations can deliver on their commitments is of paramount importance (Omar & Seman 2015; Siali, Wen & Hazaji 2018). Previous research suggests that, according to the SERVQUAL model, the most crucial dimension of service quality is reliability (Lam 2002; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry 1996). Empirical evidence also indicates that service providers should prioritise all aspects of service quality, particularly reliability, to enhance customer satisfaction (Khan, Lima & Mahmud 2018). Additionally, service reliability, physical appearance, and accessibility all contribute to increased customer satisfaction (Yilmaz, Ari & Gürbüz 2018).

2) Assurance: Assurance encompasses the courtesy and knowledge of employees, as well as their ability to convey trust and confidence to customers (Parasuraman et al. 1994). Moreover, keeping customers informed and communicating with them in their preferred language, regardless of their educational background, age, or nationality, constitutes part of the assurance attributes (Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp & Oláh 2019). Consequently, assurance strongly influences employees' attitudes and behaviours and their ability to provide polite, friendly, confidential, and competent services (Parasuraman et al. 1994). Furthermore, it has been found that customers who have interacted with the service provider for more than a year, consider every aspect of employee professionalism critical in assuring their satisfaction (Kamarudin & Kassim 2020).

3) Responsiveness: Parasuraman et al. (1994) highlighted that responsiveness entails willing employees informing clients precisely when tasks will be completed, giving them undivided attention, promoting programs, and promptly responding to their requests. Chou and Han (2011) posited that responsiveness was among the two most important service dimensions. Furthermore, research by Rezaei et al. (2018) on quality assessment revealed that responsiveness is considered one of the most significant aspects of service delivery. In a separate study, Pakdil & Aydin (2007) found that the "responsiveness" dimension is the most critical facet, supported by several studies indicating a high degree of responsiveness is linked to high-level customer satisfaction and happiness. Interestingly, it was observed that increased public satisfaction resulted from improvements in tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy simultaneously (Mamuaya, Tumiwa & Kawatu 2018). Sura & Ahn (2019) revealed in their study that assurance, responsiveness, and reliability significantly impact perceived usefulness, subsequently influencing customer satisfaction through responsiveness. Ramamoorthy, Gunasekaran, Roy, Rai and Senthilkumar (2018) validated previous research findings that reliability and responsiveness are crucial dimensions of service quality, finding that responsiveness significantly impacts both customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Similarly, Chakrabarti, Trehan and Makhija

(2018) disclosed that the responsiveness dimension substantially influences customer satisfaction, albeit with a service provider focus on tangibles over responsiveness. Ahmad and Sungip (2008) discovered that the primary drivers of service quality concerns in the Malaysian insurance context were reliability and responsiveness, with reliability having a greater impact on customers' expectations and perceptions. Previous findings also suggest that service providers should prioritise the responsiveness dimension to enhance customer satisfaction (Khan et al. 2018).

4) Tangibles: Tangibles refer to physical facilities, including equipment, staff, and communication materials, as well as representations of services in the service delivery process (Parasuraman et al. 1985; 1988; 1994; Pakurár et al. 2019). It represents the physical appearance of the service that customers use to evaluate quality (Pakurár et al. 2019). Modern-looking equipment may be important as a tool that enables error-free and efficient service delivery, from the customers' perspective (Kakouris & Finos 2016). The most crucial factor in assessing the overall level of customer service is tangibles (Bhanugopan 2004; Akbaba 2006; Syed Ahmad, Ahmad & Papastathopoulos 2019; Carvalho & Medeiros 2021). Comparatively, Chakrabarti et al. (2018) found that the tangibles dimension significantly influences customer satisfaction in the service industry. Another study revealed a significant gap between users' expectations and the existing level of service quality in the tangibility domain (Jadayil, Shakoor, Bashir, Selmi & Qureshi 2020). In the higher education sector, the tangible dimension was found to be a major influence on service quality, impacting students' satisfaction. Moreover, Eresia-Eke, Pretorius, Korkie and Pretorius (2020) recommended prioritising performance improvements through the service quality dimensions of tangibles to achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction. Similarly, Lau, Cheung, Pires and Chan (2019) examined seven dimensions of customer satisfaction and revealed that tangibles may have a significant positive impact. Munim and Noor (2020) also discovered a positive relationship between the tangible dimension and customer satisfaction, which was positively associated with young people's life satisfaction. The physical facility is deemed vital, as a substantial body of literature asserts that it is one of the most critical components in service organisations for internal customers to perform daily tasks (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Mang'anyi & Govender 2017; Khalid, Ali, Makhbul, Ali & Wahid 2021).

5) Empathy: Empathy embodies the notion that each client is distinct and unique (Pakurár et al. 2019). It entails showing care, providing personal attention (Parasuraman et al. 1994), and offering special treatment and consideration during customer interactions (Perule, Shetty, Naik, Maddodi, Malarout & Jain 2020). Most quantitative studies that have identified dimensions of the service quality model typically include measurements of credibility, security, access, and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1994). Further investigation has revealed that empathy significantly impacts customer satisfaction (Nag & Joshi 2020). Empirical evidence also underscores the importance of the empathy dimension in customer satisfaction (Slack, Sin & Sharma 2020). For instance, Haverila, Haverila and Twyford (2020) discovered the significant role of empathy in contributing to service quality performance. However, in a different study, Engdaw (2020) revealed a negative association between empathy and customer satisfaction in the context of public service delivery quality.

6) Access: Access implies the ease and convenience of services that customers can utilise, encompassing approachability and ease of contact (Pakurár et al. 2019). Accessibility can significantly contribute to direct or indirect effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Flavian, Torres & Guinaliu 2004). It is noteworthy that access to information has been a significant predictor of customer loyalty and the department's brand image (Twum, Yalley, Agyapong & Ofori 2020). According to Abdullah (2006), rather than focusing on various

distinct traits believed to be key predictors of service quality, tertiary institutions should concentrate their efforts on essential components confirmed by previous research, such as access, which encompasses aspects like approachability, availability, ease of contact, and convenience.

Drawing from the theoretical and literature review, we hypothesise that the six service quality dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 1, have a significant influence on customer satisfaction. The inclusion of the access dimension in this study aligns with the research context's critical nature, highlighting that public universities must consider approachability, availability, ease of contact, and convenience to meet the needs of their internal customers (Abdullah 2006; Pakurár et al. 2019), particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This study comprises three key components. Firstly, a comprehensive review of the existing literature was conducted to establish the adapted SERVQUAL measurement model consisting of six dimensions: Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness, Tangibility, Empathy, and Access (as illustrated in Figure 1). Prior research strongly suggests a significant association between service quality and customer satisfaction. Hence, these dimensions were chosen to assess HRM service quality at the respective public university in Malaysia.

Secondly, the specific items corresponding to each dimension were tailored to align with the context of the respective public university. Subsequently, these scale items were formulated and validated by an in-house HR expert to ensure content validity. A survey-based questionnaire designed to evaluate HRM service quality was then finalised, incorporating feedback and recommendations gathered during the assessment of both overall and individual dimensions. A detailed description and sample items for the six dimensions can be found in Table 1. The reliability of the scales was primarily assessed through the Cronbach-alpha coefficient test, utilising a set of items that gauged overall customer satisfaction via a pilot study involving 30 respondents.

Lastly, the questionnaire was distributed and collected from HR department customers (internal employees) across various branches throughout Malaysia from the 9th to the 30th of July 2020. The purposive sampling method was employed, resulting in a total of 802 eligible respondents for subsequent data analysis (Krejcie & Morgan 1970). The survey was administered online, with Likert Scale ratings assigned to each dimension (5: Strongly Agree; 4: Agree; 3: Neutral; 2: Disagree; 1: Strongly Disagree) to determine scores. The demographic analysis in this study presents respondent distribution based on gender, age, position, location, and other relevant factors. Additionally, correlation and regression analyses were conducted to thoroughly examine the intricate relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction.

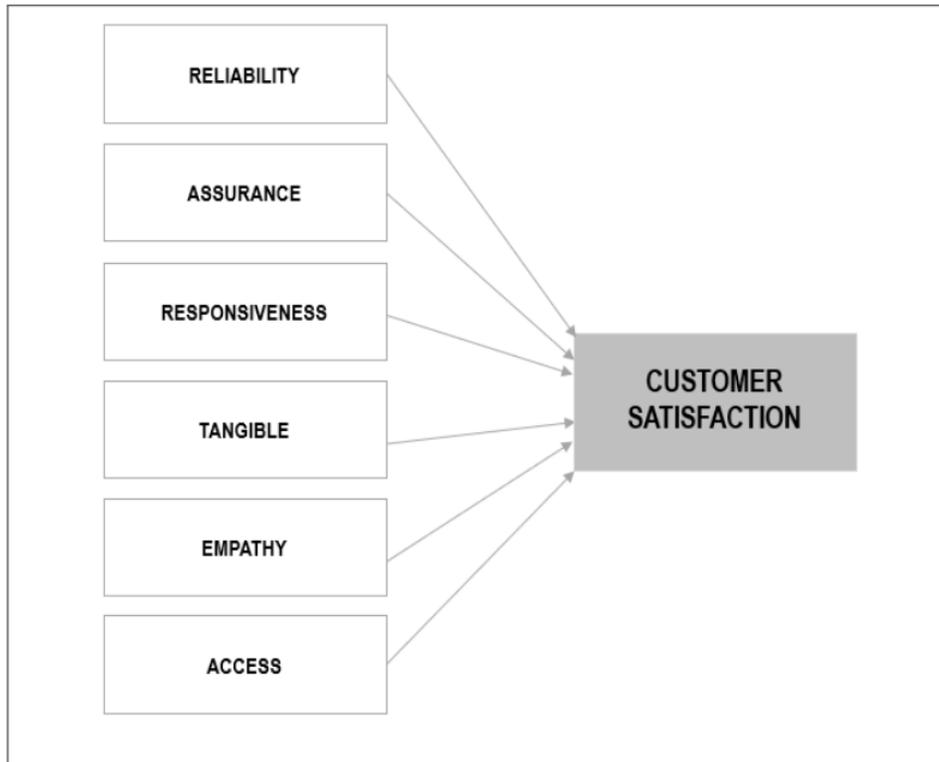


FIGURE1. The modified SERVQUAL model for HRM

TABLE 1. Description of the respective dimension

Dimension	Description	Sample Items
Reliability	Ability to deliver services accurately and reliably as promised	The services are provided in a timely manner
Assurance	The courtesy, knowledge and professionalism of employees	The HRM' employees acquired the desired knowledge
Responsiveness	The readiness and willingness of employees to assist the customer	The HRM' employees demonstrated a willingness to assist during the process
Tangible	The physical equipment including tools or mechanisms to deliver services	The appropriate tools and mechanisms are provided to deliver services
Empathy	The ability of employees to demonstrate the empathy values	The HRM' employees provided individual attention to the customer
Access	The accessibility of information and services	The services provided are easily accessible

RESULTS

The reliability test stands as a crucial component of data validation (Nunnally 1978), underscoring the consistency between two measures. Moreover, the results from the pilot study indicate that the overall Cronbach's Alpha value for the items is 0.957, thereby affirming compliance with the minimum threshold of 0.60 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black 1998).

13 This study encompassed a total of 802 participants, spanning ages from 20 to 60 years. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were examined in terms of age, gender, location, position, and visit frequency (see Table 2). Notably, the majority of respondents were female (62%), marking a distinctive feature of the study profile. Furthermore, the largest proportion of respondents fell within the age range of 30 to 39 years (46%), with a predominant presence at campuses in Shah Alam (37%), followed by Negeri Sembilan (15%) and Selangor (14%). Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of mechanisms employed by customers to access HRM services, with the online system being the most widely utilised, accounting for over 70% of respondents. Figure 3 offers an overview of the types of services availed by HRM customers, with Performance Appraisal ranking highest among the options.

TABLE 2. Demographic background of HRM customer

Item	n (%)
Location	
Shah Alam	297 (37%)
Negeri Sembilan	118 (15%)
Selangor	111 (14%)
Perak	67 (8%)
Johor	33 (4%)
Sarawak	32 (4%)
Terengganu	31 (4%)
Pulau Pinang	30 (4%)
Pahang	20 (2%)
Kelantan	17 (2%)
Perlis	16 (2%)
Melaka	12 (2%)
Kedah	10 (1%)
Sabah	8 (1%)
Frequency of acquiring services	
> 10 times	549 (68%)
4 - 6 times	86 (11%)
7 - 10 times	85 (11%)
1 - 3 times	82 (10%)
Age	
20 - 29	60 (7%)
30 - 39	367 (46%)
40 - 49	224 (28%)
50 - 60	151 (19%)
Gender	
Male	306 (38%)
Female	496 (62%)
Position	
Supportive staff (1-40)	404 (50%)
Academician (51-54)	142 (18%)
Administrative staff (41- 48)	82 (10%)
Academician (41- 48)	81 (10%)
Administrative staff (52-54)	47 (6%)
Contract	22 (3%)
Temporary	13 (2%)
Professor/Special Grade (VK7-VK5)/(VU7-VU4)	11 (1%)

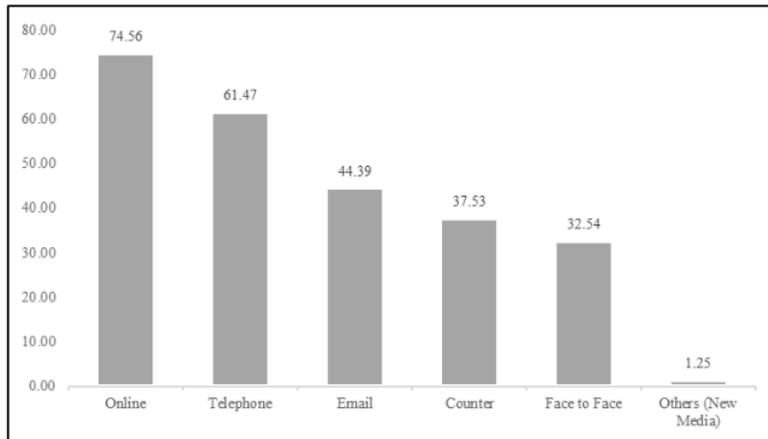


FIGURE 2. The frequency of mechanisms utilised by HRM customers

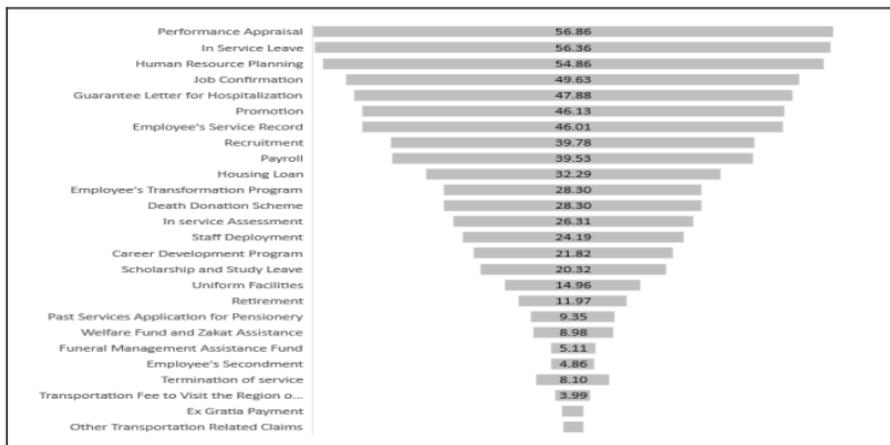


FIGURE 3. The type of services obtained by HRM customers

TABLE 3. Inter-item correlation matrix

Dimension	Access	Tangible	Reliability	Assurance	Empathy	Responsiveness
Access	1.000					
Tangible	0.863	1.000				
Reliability	0.738	0.777	1.000			
Assurance	0.722	0.713	0.738	1.000		
Empathy	0.691	0.662	0.701	0.833	1.000	
Responsiveness	0.747	0.734	0.730	0.775	0.802	1.000

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The primary concern regarding the validity of the service quality measure employed in this study is construct validity. As per Churchill (1979), when assessing construct validity, it is crucial to consider both convergent and discriminant validity. Table 3 reveals strong positive correlations among the dimensions, signifying convergent validity. Convergent validity implies that closely related constructs are indeed correlated, which aligns with our expectations. For instance, there exists a robust positive relationship between Access and Tangible, as evidenced by their correlation of 0.863.

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TABLE 4. Correlations of the six service quality dimensions and the customer satisfaction

Dimension	Customer Satisfaction
Access	.788**
Tangible	.756**
Reliability	.754**
Assurance	.806**
Empathy	.825**
Responsiveness	.850**

Note: **correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In Table 4, the correlation matrix illustrates that all dimensions (Access, Tangible, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, Responsiveness) exhibit positive correlations with customer satisfaction, ranging from 0.754 to 0.850. These positive correlations suggest that as service quality improves across these dimensions, customer satisfaction tends to increase.

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TABLE 5. Regression analysis of HRM service quality on customer satisfaction

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of Estimate
0.906	0.821	0.819	0.332

8
 Table 5 presents the results of regression analysis, providing insights into the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (customer satisfaction) explained by the independent variables (service quality dimensions). An R Square value of 0.819 indicates that 81.9% of the variation in customer satisfaction can be accounted for by these six dimensions. Simultaneously, the remaining 18.1% can be attributed to unexamined factors beyond the scope of this study.

3
TABLE 6. Relative importance of the respective dimensions in predicting HRM service quality level

Dimension	Standardised coefficients (β)	Significant (P)
Access	0.211	0.00**
Tangible	0.033	0.36
Reliability	0.079	0.00**
Assurance	0.116	0.00**
Empathy	0.256	0.00**
Responsiveness	0.327	0.00**

Note: **significant at the 0.05 level

3
 In Table 6, the results of the regression analysis for the dependent variable of service quality, assessed on a scale from 1 to 5 (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree), are presented. The analysis reveals that all coefficients for the six dimensions exert a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Notably, Access, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness exhibit statistically significant positive coefficients (β), signifying that enhancements in these dimensions positively impact HRM service quality. In contrast,

Tangible exhibits a non-significant coefficient, suggesting that it does not have a significant impact on HRM service quality within the context of this study.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Drawing from the empirical findings, it is advisable that HRM services focus their attention on five key dimensions: Access, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness, as these have demonstrated a robust positive correlation with customer satisfaction (with the exception of Tangible). Given the public university's dispersed and extensive locations (as shown in Table 2) coupled with the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, ensuring easy access to information and services becomes paramount for HRM. Therefore, HRM must prioritise approachability and seamless contact (Pakurár et al. 2019). This strategic emphasis on accessibility will have both a direct and indirect impact on customer satisfaction, happiness, and loyalty (Flavian et al. 2004; Twum 2020), ultimately bolstering the public university's ability to retain its high-performing talent.

Furthermore, in the face of a rapidly evolving landscape brought about by the industrial revolution, HRM must swiftly adapt and transform its service delivery systems. Continuous improvement initiatives, including the implementation of quality enhancement programmes (Mukhtar & Ali 2011), fostering an innovation-driven culture (Alosani 2020), and enhancing communication channels with customers, should be undertaken. These measures are crucial for establishing efficient HRM practices and gaining a competitive edge while ensuring employee satisfaction as internal customers (Wikhamn 2019)

To instil confidence in clients, HRM must consistently deliver on their commitments (Hennayake 2017). Prior studies have also highlighted reliability as a pivotal dimension in the SERVQUAL model (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry 1990; Lam 2002;). Therefore, improvement efforts should prioritise delivering on promises made to customers. Additionally, assurance is paramount for HRM to convey by keeping customers well-informed and communicating with them in their preferred language, irrespective of their education level, age, or nationality (Pakurár et al. 2019).

Responsiveness, closely linked to the willingness and readiness of employees to assist customers (Parasuraman et al. 1994), significantly influences both behavioural intentions and overall happiness (Pakdil & Aydin 2007; Roy et al. 2018). This implies that HRM service quality, especially in terms of responsiveness, indirectly affects the psychological well-being of employees and their subsequent behaviour. Despite that, empathy remains a crucial factor, particularly during times of crises like the ongoing pandemic. HRM should convey that each client is unique and distinctive, demonstrating care and offering personal attention (Pakurár et al. 2019). The findings of this study align with the view that empathy is a significant dimension of service quality that positively impacts customer satisfaction (Nag & Joshi 2020; Slack et al. 2020).

Surprisingly, the tangible dimension does not seem to significantly impact customer satisfaction in this study. This result contradicts previous findings that identified physical facilities as a critical component in service organisations for internal customers (Khalid et al. 2021; Mang'anyi & Govender 2017; Parasuraman et al. 1985). This shift can be attributed to the current pandemic conditions, which limit physical and face-to-face interactions. Consequently, tangible aspects, including physical facilities, are deemed less critical for accessing services. Therefore, it is vital to focus on intangible service quality dimensions to enhance customer satisfaction.

It is important to emphasise that employee satisfaction is vital for improving performance, productivity, and customer loyalty, ultimately contributing to business

profitability (Krekel et al. 2019). Additionally, such efforts align with the Ministry of Education Malaysia's objective of enhancing public universities' service delivery systems (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 [Higher Education], 2015). As a public institution, the respective HRM is expected to provide quality, adequate, and effective services (Engdaw 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Service quality is considered an integral component of management, playing a crucial role in ensuring customer satisfaction. Consequently, the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality has garnered significant attention in the literature (e.g., Awan et al. 2011; Famiyeh et al. 2018; Bashir et al. 2020; Fida et al. 2020). This study aimed to evaluate the level of HRM service quality and customer satisfaction using the modified SERVQUAL model. The study utilised five core dimensions, encompassing Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness, Tangibles, and Empathy, with the addition of Access as an additional dimension to align with contextual requirements (Abdullah 2006; Pakurár et al. 2019). According to the regression weights in the measurement model, Access, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness demonstrated a significant relationship with customer satisfaction, with the exception of Tangible (refer to Table 6).

The findings support the notion that interpersonal interactions occurring during service delivery, involving service providers' Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness, exert the most significant influence on customers' assessments of service quality (Chou & Han 2011; Rezaei et al. 2018). The results further endorse Pakdil & Aydin's (2007) assertion that the responsiveness dimension holds paramount importance. Multiple studies indicate that a high level of responsiveness correlates with heightened customer satisfaction and happiness. Consequently, HRM should concentrate on enhancing service providers' competencies, especially in interpersonal skills, to bolster their professional attributes, including courtesy, knowledge, and professionalism (Parasuraman et al. 1994). Furthermore, service providers should exhibit the right attitudes and behaviours while demonstrating the capacity to deliver courteous, friendly, confidential, and competent services (Parasuraman et al. 1994). Additionally, it was noted that customers who have interacted with the service provider for more than a year place significant importance on each component of professionalism in ensuring their satisfaction (Kamarudin & Kassim 2020).

Beyond individual employees, HRM must ensure accurate information provision, undivided attention, efficient response to requests, and reliable service delivery as promised, all of which are essential for demonstrating responsiveness and reliability (Parasuraman et al. 1994; Hennayake 2017). Furthermore, the accessibility component has become indispensable for service quality during the pandemic. Efforts to broaden service accessibility should be prioritised, enabling services to be accessible to customers anywhere and anytime, potentially via a virtual platform. Ensuring that the HRM system facilitates quick and reliable service functionality is crucial (Kakouris & Finos 2016).

This research contributes to the field of service quality theory, addressing contextuality, methodology, and practicality. Firstly, in terms of theoretical contributions, this study employed a modified SERVQUAL model that measures context-specific issues. It also sheds light on HRM services literature by acknowledging the roles of human factors in enhancing service quality within a public university setting. Secondly, this study enhances methodology by achieving validity, reliability, and a better-fitting model. The selected respondents were

the appropriate individuals to answer the questionnaire as they represent the primary customers of HRM services, contributing to the development of accurate and credible research findings. Thirdly, concerning practical implications, the research model can serve as a guideline for managers in public universities for future HRM improvements. It provides insights into how service quality can be enhanced by focusing on internal customers and enhancing the relevant service quality dimensions.

While this study accomplished its objectives, several limitations should be considered before generalising the results. Firstly, since it is a cross-sectional study using data collected over a specific period, it could not capture the patterns and trends in the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. Therefore, conducting a longitudinal study is recommended to gain a more comprehensive perspective. Secondly, this study introduced a single additional dimension (Access to the existing model; future research should explore additional antecedents to yield conclusive findings. Lastly, the data were gathered from a specific public university in Malaysia and did not encompass other higher education institutions due to contextual requirements. Hence, future studies should encompass a broader educational institution context, enhancing our understanding of the modified SERVQUAL model's impact on internal customer satisfaction.

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