

TREND ANALYSIS OF SERVICE QUALITY INDEX: A CASE STUDY OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT UNITS IN ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY OF THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

It's been more than 5 years that Service Quality Index of academic support units in Assumption University of Thailand has been measured. The results were the reflection of how service was delivered in such a means to satisfy each customer. Good and appropriate service was what they expected but the perceived creation and delivery of the expected service might not meet expectations.

This study is about analyzing the trend of service quality index and the RCA (Root Cause Analysis) of the 7 main academic support units in Assumption University of Thailand for the academic years 2007 to academic year 2011. Data was collected from the university's students and personnel (lecturers and staff) based on the units' performance in various aspects. The overall university results (means of 3.51, 3.50, 3.49, 3.52 and 3.45) for the 5 years showed a negative slope trend. Specifically, Responsiveness aspect, Assurance aspect, Empathy aspect, and Information aspect scores decreased. The causes will be analyzed using the RCA and the possible solutions with the recommendations will be provided.

Keywords: Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Trend Analysis

Introduction

Generally, students are the main customers in the educational industry. Not only knowledge from teaching-learning process they acquire, but the services from academic support units in a university they experience also. Those services from the academic support units can create the learning environment and support system. It was suggested by Cronin and Taylor (1992) that service quality plays a greater role in many businesses and industries. The service quality of the academic support units in a university perceived by students is nowadays what cannot be left behind. Besides the curriculum, good service can differentiate a university from other universities. It as well can create good reputation to a university for the competitive advantages. Customer satisfaction has been taken into account and it is one of the key performances that a university has to consider closely. When service providers deliver good service to its customers repeatedly, satisfaction on service can be created. Thus, service quality is emerged at the end of the day.

Literature Review

There are a lot of definitions of the term 'Quality' used in management context and service context. Dumas (1989) described that quality concerns evolving stages as 1) Extra features – additional features to the base, 2) It works – meeting customer specification, 3) It satisfies – going beyond meeting the customer's needs, and 4) It develops – making it better through exposure to products/services with greater value.

Garvin (1988) separated the definition of quality into 1) Transcendental approach – synonymous with excellence, 2) Product based approach – precise, measurable, and inherently present in the natural characteristics of the product, 3) User based approach – defined by the user i.e. 'fitness for use', 4) Manufacturing based approach – conformance, reliability, and efficient production, and 5) Value based approach – related to what one paid for. Reeves and Bednar (1994) described service quality in 4 facets as 1) Excellence, 2) Value, 3) Conformance, and 4) Meeting and/or exceeding expectations. International Standard Definition (1994) described quality as the totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.

So, service quality can be described as a process of providing

service to the customers to satisfy customer need, to give customers the value added, to cope with customer specification, to meet and/or going beyond customer expectation, and to be worth for what customer paid for.

Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990) studied about the service quality and came into the ultimate conclusion for a model named SERVQUAL which finally consisted of the combination of five aspects --- Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy.

Kaye (1995) indicated that a certain organization needs information both about its own internal process, in order to ensure effectiveness and efficiency, and about its environment, in order to respond and adapt to the actions, attitudes and decisions of external agencies. As well, information has meaning when it was perceived and interpreted by human recipient to take action or not.

It was considered that those five aspects of SERVQUAL were not enough for the Service Quality Index of Assumption University. It was considered to add one more aspect --- that is information, according to Kaye, in the model. So, Information aspect was included as a part of Assumption University's service quality.

Research Methodology, Conceptual Framework, and Purpose

From academic year 2007 to academic year 2011, the 7 academic support units --- Administrative Affairs (Admin. Aff.), Office of Information Technology Service (Off. ITS), Assumption University Library (AU Lib.), Financial Affairs (Fin. Aff.), Office of the Registrar (Off. Reg.), Student Affairs (Stu. Aff.), and Office of Human Resource Management (OHRM) --- were assessed by their customers based on their performance in various aspects using SERVQUAL model by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990). Not only original five aspects --- Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy --- were used, but an additional aspect, Information, was included also.

The population was the university's students (both undergraduate level students and graduate level students) and personnel (lecturers and staff) and the numbers of the respondents were shown in the following table.

TABLE 1: The numbers of the respondents who completed survey questionnaires in each academic year.

Academic Year	The Numbers of the Respondents			
	Students	Lecturers	Staff	Total
2007	2,698	188	256	3,142
2008	2,776	305	558	3,639
2009	2,225	236	460	2,921
2010	2,470	385	455	3,310
2011	2,770	340	188	3,298

¹ All academic support units were assessed by students, lecturers, and staff. Except, Office of the Registrar was assessed by students and lecturers. Student Affairs was assessed by students. Office of Human Resource Management was assessed by lecturers and staff.

The questionnaire was constructed to cover the contents of those six aspects. The respondents were asked to rate the items concerning the service quality. The questionnaires were distributed to the samples which were drawn from the population statistically and systematically. The data was collected in each academic year and the respondents were asked to rate the performance of academic support units. The rating scale varied from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) concerning the service quality provided by each of those units. After those respondents finished receiving the service from a unit, they were asked to fill the questionnaire.

After the data collection done, the data was analyzed and the results were interpreted statistically. The mean scores were computed to represent the service quality score. The results of the assessment from all units were statistically computed as the overall university results.

The conceptual framework can be portrayed as the following diagram.



FIGURE 1: The diagram portraying the conceptual framework of the survey.

The terms and meanings of those aspects are as the following.

<i>Tangibles aspect</i>	Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, service providers, and communication materials.
<i>Reliability aspect</i>	Ability to perform the promised service dependability and accuracy.
<i>Responsive aspect</i>	Willingness to help customer and provide prompt service.
<i>Assurance aspect</i>	Knowledge and courtesy of service providers and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
<i>Empathy aspect</i>	Caring, and individualized attention the service providers provides to each customer.
<i>Information aspect</i>	Availability, accessibility, accuracy, and timeliness of information provided by the units and service providers.

The purpose of this study was to find out the trend of service quality index of the academic support units from academic year 2007 to academic year 2011. The scores of each academic year were analyzed by the meaning of trend analysis. Discussion would be made, then, recommendations for improving the service would be provided.

Results

As shown in the Figure 2, the Overall aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

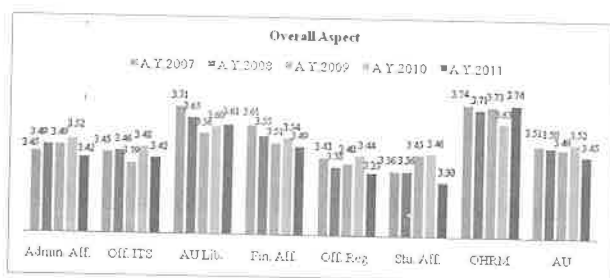


FIGURE 2: The graph showing score of Overall aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the Figure 3, the Tangibles aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

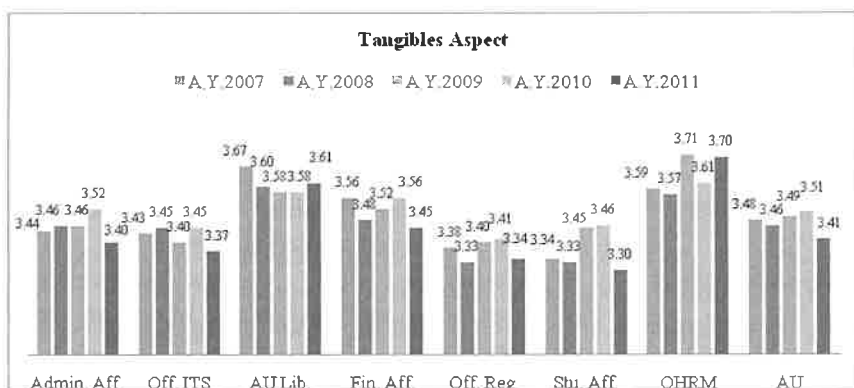


FIGURE 3: The graph showing score of Tangibles aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the Figure 4, the Reliability aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

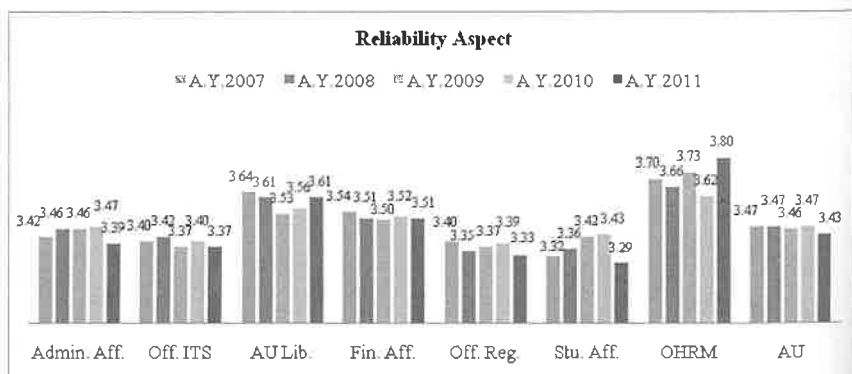


FIGURE 4: The graph showing score of Reliability aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the figure 5, the Responsiveness aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

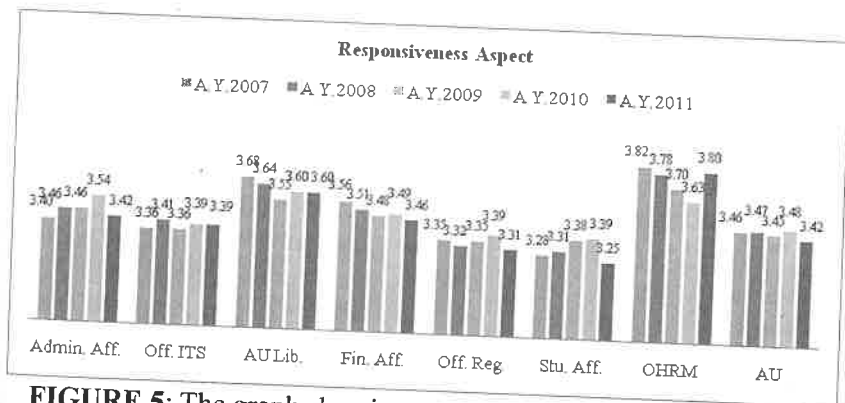


FIGURE 5: The graph showing score of Responsiveness aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the figure 6, the Assurance aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

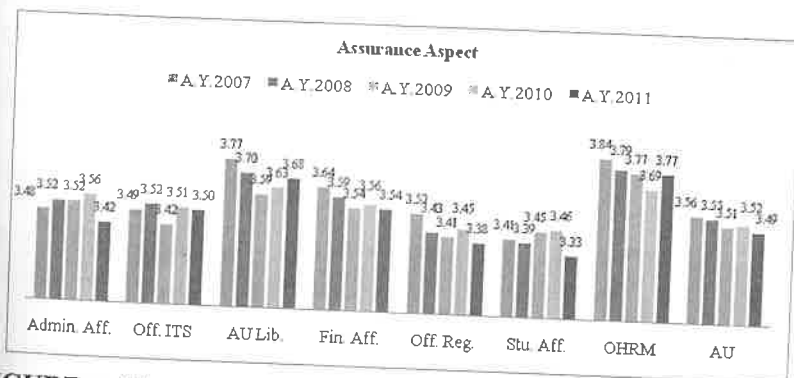


FIGURE 6: The graph showing score of Assurance aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the figure 7, the Empathy aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Assumption University Library, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

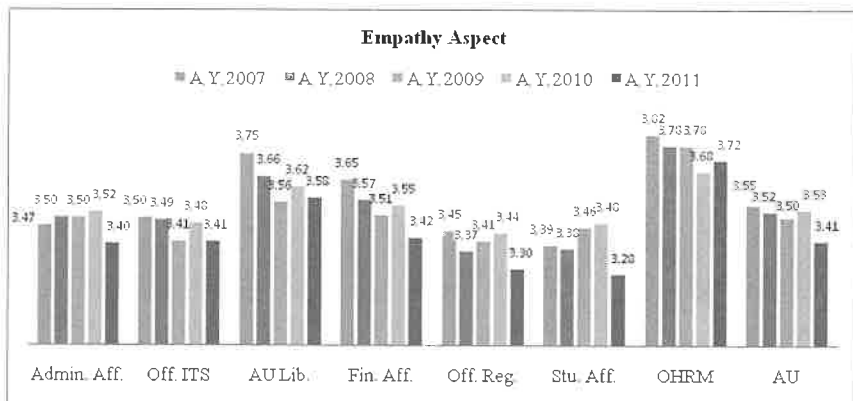


FIGURE 7: The graph showing score of Empathy aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

As shown in the figure 8, the Information aspect of each unit shows the negative slope trend especially Administrative Affairs, Office of Information Technology Service, Assumption University Library, Financial Affairs, Office of the Registrar, and Student Affairs.

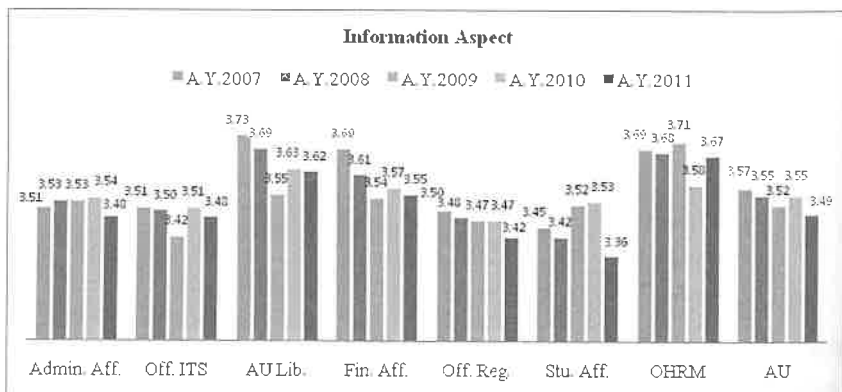


FIGURE 8: The graph showing score of Information aspect of academic support units and the university from academic year 2007 to academic years 2011.

Discussion and Implication

As the change in the university during the academic year 2012, rotation and transfer of staff among the academic support units had taken places. Especially Office of Information Technology Services, a lot of staff was transferred to the other units and some resigned without the replacements. For the units that new staff transferred in, the staff had to work in new environment and needed some time to adjust themselves into new organization and new duties of job. They needed to learn how to work properly. That might be one of causes which affected the decrease in customer satisfaction score and brought down the service quality.

Hill (1995) pointed out that the personal interactions between service providers and customers are crucial in regard to perceived service performance and a key factor which influences consumer's perceptions of service performance in general is reliability. Anyway, other factors cannot be overlooked. As seen from the results from this case study, the aspects which crucially need to be considered for improvement are Empathy aspect and Information aspects.

According to the trend and the score, the units which have to take action immediately to improve the score are Office of the Registrar and Student Affairs because these two units are the frontiersmen who always contact their customers especially students. However, the other units should take the action to improve the service as well. Kelsey and Bond (2001) mentioned that satisfactions is the customers' perspective, the satisfaction improvement must start by defining what customers want and need from service providers. So, each unit should study their customers' need assessment and then, improve their service according to the survey results.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Every unit needs to understand its service and is aware of how to deliver the service to its customer. Improvement in every aspect needs to be considered carefully. Anyway, it depends on the nature of service provided by each unit. Some examples to improve Empathy aspect can be 1) to have the effort of the service providers to understand the need of the customers, 2) to solve the problems with full intention, or 3) to listen to the customers, then to communicate to them with easily understandable language. For Information aspect, information provided to the units should be clear, concise, and

accurate. As well, service providers should understand the contents and the purpose of the information so that they can inform the customers with easy language to create understanding.

As well, the For Assurance aspect, service provider may improve some skills needed for providing better service. For Responsiveness aspect, service providers should deliver the service with a short period of time as possible. For Reliability aspect, service providers should have attention to the detail according to the need of customer and deliver the service to them in a certain time. For Tangibles aspect, communication materials should be maintained in good condition periodically.

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