Searching for excellence in business education: an exploratory study of customer impressions of service quality

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Examines the concept of service quality in business education with data collected from 388 students. Identifies seven factors which influence student evaluations of service quality. In descending order of importance these factors are: reputation, administrative personnel, faculty, curriculum, responsiveness, physical evidence and access to facilities. Describes the implications for controlling quality and for achieving excellence in business education.

Introduction

The identification of the dimensions which signal quality and the achievement of excellence in business education have emerged this decade as key issues facing the academy. Indeed, as many other organizations, business schools must be concerned now with market share, productivity, return on investment and the quality of services offered to their customers. Service quality can lead to excellence in business education and can have lasting effects on the institution and the students it serves. This can influence student recommendations of their programme to others, as well as their future monetary contributions in support of their university (Allen and Davis, 1991).

Despite the importance given to service quality, Stern and Tseng (1993) report that few business schools have adopted a total quality management (TQM) philosophy. As such, this has resulted in much criticism directed at business schools where curriculum and course contents, teaching methods and pedagogy, and the relevance of academic research have been questioned (Cannon and Sheth, 1994). Interestingly, given the stature of business schools and the tendency to place professional service providers on a pedestal based on their reputation and perceived quality (Swartz and Brown, 1989), it is surprising to discover that little research has been reported on the quality of services in business education.

From the perspective of TQM, educational offerings should be improved continually in order to reflect the latest methods and trends (Cannon and Sheth, 1994) and better to satisfy the needs of customers. To that end, Brown and Koenig (1993) recommend that customer evaluations of the quality of their education should be an integral part of TQM programmes in business education. Indeed, a better understanding of how customers form impressions of quality can provide valuable information to management for designing service delivery systems that enhance customer satisfaction (Seymour, 1992) and for adapting the university environment to the students’ needs (Hampton, 1993). In the design of quality improvement programmes it is thus the customers’ definitions of quality which count, since management may make the wrong assumptions as to how customers actually assess service quality. Assumptions such as these could lead to the establishment of improper priorities with regard to quality control standards in business education (Nightingale, 1983). Taking customer satisfaction into consideration, a knowledge and better understanding of the process and the various characteristics, qualities and attributes which underline students’ perceptions of quality are warranted.

The main purpose of this study is to gain more insights into the dimensions used by business students evaluating service quality and to identify which components of the service delivery process are most important in their judgement.

Review of the literature

Service quality is an elusive construct, mainly because of the unique features that differentiate services from goods. Intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability are the four well-documented features of services acknowledged in the service marketing literature (Berry, 1980; Bitner, 1992; Lovelock, 1983; Zeithaml et al., 1985). Because of these unique features, and the difficulties of defining and delimiting quality as it applies to intangibles, the measurement of service quality in specific service industries still remains a challenge (Babakus and Boller, 1992).

A review of the services marketing literature reveals that Parasuraman et al. (1988, 1991, 1993) have undertaken significant work to measure service quality across a broad spectrum of services. The authors developed and refined SERVQUAL, a 22-item instrument which captures customers’ expectations of service and their perceptions of the service received. Accordingly, Parasuraman et al. define expectations of service as what a customer believes excellent service companies in a particular service industry should offer and perceptions of service as the evaluation of the service offered by a particular firm in that
industry. Factor analysis of customers' difference scores, i.e. the difference between expectations and performance ratings on the items, is then used to identify the dimensions that signal quality to consumers. From this work, Parasuraman et al. conceptualize service quality to be a five-dimensional construct consisting of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. These five factors are described as follows:

1. **Tangibles** consist mostly of items that are associated with the physical environment where the service is produced and consumed.
2. **Reliability** concerns items which relate to the service providers’ ability to perform dependably and accurately.
3. **Responsiveness** comprises items which are associated with the service employees’ willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. **Assurance** is made up of items which describe the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
5. **Empathy**, for its part, is loaded with items which correspond to the caring, individualized attention which service companies give to their customers.

From this work, Parasuraman et al. (1991) found reliability to be the most important factor affecting judgements of quality in five of the consumer groups they surveyed.

Although SERVQUAL has gained notoriety, its validity as a five-dimensional construct and its general applicability across service industries have nonetheless been questioned (Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Teas, 1994). For example, the use of difference scores has been described as suspect (Carman, 1990) because of the potential threat of low reliability of the difference score variable. Difference scores are said to present poor reliability because positive correlation between the component scores diminishes the reliability of difference scores (Brown et al., 1993). Similarly, since expectations vary over time (Carman, 1990), both the expectations and performance measures should not be captured during the same administration of the instrument as with SERVQUAL. In addition, performance-based measures of service quality were found to be better for measuring the service quality construct (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

The design of quality measures for specific service providers should lead to a better understanding of the construct and to the adaptation of quality improvement programmes which correspond to service company needs. From the design perspective, dependable measures of service quality for specific service industries are a viable research strategy to pursue (Brown and Koenig, 1993; Carman, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). To that end, Parasuraman et al. (1993, p. 145) state that “SERVQUAL items are the basic skeleton underlying service quality that can be supplemented with context specific items when necessary”.

From a review of the services marketing literature, alternative conceptualizations of the service quality construct are identified. Grönroos (1984), along with Lethinen and Lethinen (1982) identify corporate image as an important quality indicator for customers. Image is described as the over all impression made on the minds of customers (Dichter, 1989). It is related to tradition, ideology, business name, reputation and variety of services, and to the impression of quality communicated by each person interacting with customers (Solomon, 1985). Given that services are intangible, investigating how reputation relates to quality appears warranted. Reputation is described by Herbig et al. (1994) as the consistency of an organization’s actions over time. As such, reputation stems from the guarantee of reliable service; it is comparable to the zero defects philosophy. The reputation of a service firm is built through the credible actions of management, i.e. the believability that management will carry out stated intentions such as when unconditional service guarantees are offered to customers (Hart, 1988). Management plays a pivotal role in building reputation through a set of noticeable indicators such as leadership style, personality, and the fostering of an organizational climate directed at meeting the needs of the customers it serves. Therefore, reputation is closely tied to image in that it affects customer expectations with regard to the quality of the service offering (Yoon et al., 1993).

The performance of contact personnel and the personnel-customer interactions which take place during service delivery are deemed to be important indicators of quality (Heskett, 1987; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Bitner et al. (1990) report that the human interaction component has an important effect on the customer’s evaluative process with regard to the service offering. Similarly, relationship quality is crucial when the service is complex and customized (Crosby et al., 1990), as in the dynamics of business education. In this light, Cannon and Sheth (1994) stress the importance of building and maintaining relationship quality with the various stakeholder groups which interact with the organization.
The nature and the quality of the relationships developed during the service encounter are also influenced by the physical environment. In the analysis of "servicescapes", Bitner (1990, 1992) proposes that cues from the physical surroundings are indicative of the service firm's capabilities and the quality of its services. In studies of faculty office designs, for example, students’ beliefs about the person occupying the office and their personality traits were found to be influenced by such cues as diplomas on the wall, tidiness of office and desk placement (Ward et al., 1989). Physical evidence has, therefore, a strong influence on employee motivations and the quality of the service encounter.

The review of the literature provided the basis for an exploratory study of service quality in a business education setting. Its objectives were to identify the underlying dimensions used by students in their evaluation of the quality of education they received and to determine the importance of these in their evaluative process.

Methodology

The literature review, along with three focus group interviews which were held with a total of 32 students, provided the basis for developing the questionnaire used in this study. Students are the logical group to use for generating items and ideas on how business schools can improve the quality of their services. To this end, the general guidelines recommended for these interviews were followed (Fern, 1982) and participants of both sexes were selected, representing each year of the business programme offered by the business school. During these group interviews, participants were asked to describe their expectations with regard to the business school, questioned on various aspects surrounding the services and facilities offered, and queried on what they considered excellent service encounters to be in the context of their business school.

The questionnaire contained 38 variables related to different aspects of the business school's service offering, such as projected image, physical facilities and instruments, operating procedures, service delivery, along with faculty and administrative personnel. Care was taken to include items that corresponded to the five SERVQUAL dimensions identified by Parasuraman et al. (1991). The items were measured on a 7-point, Likert-type scale that varied from 1 = much worse than expected to 7 = much better than expected, and mid-points on the scale were not labelled. Although this scale is reported by Oliver (1981) to be more meaningful to respondents in terms of making comparisons between perceptions and expectations, Prakash and Lounsbury (1983) warn that it could be biased in that respondents might rationalize their pre-purchase expectations at the post-purchase stage.

The respondents were asked to what degree the quality of the service offered by the business school corresponded to their expectations on the 38 variables related to service. This approach agrees with Carman’s (1990) proposition that both expectations and perceptions of service be captured in one administration in terms of the perception/expectation difference.

The sample of respondents was taken from a small business school. This business school offers both undergraduate and graduate programmes and has an enrolment of approximately 700 students. To select the sample, classes across the business school were stratified on the basis of department and class level, and a convenience sample of students was selected to survey. Questionnaires were administered in class during the mid-term of the fall semester after students had received the grading of their first series of exams. The sampling yielded 388 usable questionnaires, which represent 55 per cent of the business school’s student population.

A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the 38 variables related to service quality. This analysis yielded a seven factor solution which explained 56 per cent of variance. The decision to include a variable in a factor was based on factor loadings greater than 0.50 and all factors whose eigenvalue was greater than one were retained in the factor solution (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989). To assess reliability of measures, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for the variables retained for each factor and coefficients greater than or equal to 0.70 were considered acceptable and a good indication of construct reliability (Nunnally, 1978). The seven orthogonal factors were then used in a stepwise regression analysis. The dependent variable, measured on a 7-point, Likert-type scale, was the students’ overall evaluation of the quality of services offered by the business school, and the independent variables were the standardized factor scores created for each individual, corresponding to the seven factors.

Results

Of the 388 students who responded to the questionnaire 52 per cent were male, and 51 per cent were enrolled in the second and third
The seven factors identified in Table I can be explained by each factor. The results of Cronbach’s reliability coefficient are also shown. Factor 1 (F1), contact personnel/faculty, consists of items which are related to the performance of professors and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Factor 2 (F2), reputation, relates to the business school’s capacity to position itself in the minds of its customers and is closely associated with the image projected by the organization. For its part, factor 3 (F3), physical evidence, is loaded with variables which describe the tangible cues associated with the business school’s service delivery system and its facilities. Factor 4 (F4), contact personnel/administration, is concerned with dimensions which are linked to management’s ability to provide personal attention to students in a professional and caring manner. Factor 5 (F5), curriculum, involves dimensions related to management’s and faculty’s capacity to plan and deliver services which meet student needs. Factor 6 (F6), responsiveness, is concerned with management’s ability to provide service in a prompt and timely manner. Factor 7 (F7), access to facilities, describes the ease with which students can approach the service facilities without having to wait for service.

The results presented in Table I are related to the determinants of service quality and support the existing knowledge. Indeed, contact personnel (F1 and F4) is proposed as an important quality indicator by Surprenant and Solomon (1985), and Crosby et al. (1990). Reputation (F2), for its part, is related closely to the institution’s corporate image, and image is described as an important determinant of perceived service quality by Grönroos (1984) and Lethinen and Lethinen (1982). Similarly, the tangible cues provided by the facilities where services are produced and delivered (F3) are said to be indicative of the quality of service (Bitner, 1990, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1991). Responsiveness (F6) is also identified by Parasuraman et al. as a quality indicator. Results also identify curriculum development (F5) and access to facilities (F7) as potential determinants of service quality in a business school setting.

Table II presents the results of regression analysis and shows, in order of importance, the factors which explain the business school’s service quality, based on standardized beta coefficients. Results indicate that service quality is derived mainly from reputation (F2), a factor which is tied closely to management’s capacity to foster an organizational climate directed at serving the needs of its customers and to the image of the business school. Faculty and administrative personnel (F4 and F1), through their ability to inspire trust and confidence and provide personal attention to students in a professional and caring manner, also influence quality. Other factors such as curriculum (F5), responsiveness (F6), physical evidence (F3) and access to facilities (F7) are also significant quality factors.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The concern for excellence in business education and the lack of empirical research on the cues that signal quality to students were the bases for this exploratory study on service quality. Although the SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988, 1991) has been the focus of considerable attention in recent service quality research, the literature review revealed alternative conceptualizations of the service quality construct and acknowledged the need to identify the determinants of service quality in specific service organizations in order to develop quality improvement programmes better adapted to the expectations of their customers. To that end, the present study captured student evaluations of the quality of the educational experience with a 38-item questionnaire designed to fit the specific nature of the business school under investigation. The study contributed to a better understanding of the service quality construct in business education. Perceptions of quality were measured on a 7-point scale that varied from “Much worse than expected” to “Much better than expected”. Since expectations vary over time, this agrees with Carman’s (1990) proposition that both expectations and performance measures should be collected directly in terms of the perception-expectation difference during the same administration of the questionnaire. As such, the study identified seven factors which have an impact on quality evaluations and which have implications for controlling and achieving excellence in business education.

The results of this study suggest a significant relationship between perceived quality
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International Journal of
Educational Management
11/2 [1997] 72–79

and reputation; i.e. the business school’s
capacity to position itself in the minds of
students as being innovative, up to date,
involved with the business community
and having the students’ needs at heart. Since
reputation is built through the credible
actions of each member of the organization
(Herbig et al., 1994), management working in
close harmony with personnel and faculty
should set quality standards for all compo-
nents of the service delivery system to ensure
that student expectations are met. Given the
importance of expectations in the establish-
ment of quality standards, internal market-
ing research should be undertaken to ensure
that management and faculty expectations of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor name</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>Percentage of variance explained</th>
<th>Cronbach’s reliability coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1 Contact personnel: faculty</td>
<td>Appearance of professors 0.71</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors are friendly and courteous 0.69</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professors research productivity 0.59</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communication skills: courses are well taught 0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic credentials of professors 0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors are innovative and agents of change 0.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F2 Reputation</td>
<td>Business school is innovative 0.75</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational culture, beliefs and values 0.72</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business school’s involvement in community 0.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree to which curriculum is up to date 0.64</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administration has students’ best interest at heart 0.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F3 Physical evidence</td>
<td>Layout of classrooms 0.74</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lighting in classrooms 0.69</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance of building and grounds 0.66</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Overall cleanliness 0.64</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Degree to which classrooms and study rooms are comfortable 0.61</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Décor and atmosphere 0.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F4 Contact personnel: administration</td>
<td>Availability of personnel 0.75</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendly and courteous personnel 0.75</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Capacity to solve problems when they arise 0.68</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personnel has a good knowledge of rules and procedures 0.66</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance of personnel 0.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5 Curriculum</td>
<td>Orientation of programmes and course content 0.68</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of courses offered 0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree to which objectives of programmes are explained to students 0.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F6 Responsiveness</td>
<td>Students are informed promptly of changes 0.77</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registration is timely and error-free 0.57</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Records are kept accurately 0.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F7 Access to facilities</td>
<td>Available of parking 0.70</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to computer facilities 0.66</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to study rooms 0.55</td>
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</table>

Table I
Seven service quality factors identified by principal components factor analysis

Table II
Regression results based on factor scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Betas</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact personnel: administration (F4)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact personnel: faculty (F1)</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum (F5)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness (F6)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical evidence (F3)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to facilities (F6)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Dependent variable: respondent’s overall evaluation of business school’s quality
Independent variables: seven orthogonal factors representing the components of perceived quality

\[ R^2 = 53\text{ per cent} \quad F = 43.82 \quad p < 0.001 \]
service are closely tied to student expectations (Cannon and Sheth, 1994). Expectations should be examined and analysed so as to set standards from the customers’ perspective (Swartz and Brown, 1989). Similarly, the process by which students acquire their education should be improved continuously (Seymour, 1992). For example, the fostering of liaisons with the business community and the offering of co-operative business programmes that emphasize hands-on experience should help build a strong reputation for the organization. Making a favourable impression on students and on various stakeholder groups such as prospective employers, government and research agencies, alumni, individuals and organizations which donate funds to the university should be a key objective of management (Allen and Davis, 1991; Cannon and Sheth, 1994). Once a strong reputation has been built, management should ensure that every step is taken to promote and maintain its standing (Bitner et al., 1990).

Results of the study also reveal that faculty and administrative personnel have a direct bearing on perceptions of quality. For administrative personnel, management should start by setting quality standards for process-related variables such as registration, records, and rules and procedures which are easier to control than the academic delivery of service (Coate, 1990). As for faculty, since academics are perceived as being individualistic and loyal to their academic units (Winters, 1991), management should convince faculty that concern for quality is part of their job (Shetty, 1968) and all contact personnel should be involved when setting goals and quality standards for the institution. Faculty should continuously follow training sessions and seminars on effective teaching methods and should be encouraged to exhibit exemplary attitudes and behaviour with students so that student experiences with service are to their satisfaction. Similarly, since student course evaluations must be an integral part of quality improvement programmes (Brightman et al., 1993), evaluations need to address not only the performance of faculty, but also the various aspects surrounding the educational experience, such as objectives of the business programme, physical and computer facilities, and the multitude of support and advisory services offered by the university. Moreover, management working closely with faculty should prepare brochures which outline the quality standards each member of the organization must adhere to in the delivery of service and promote these standards to various stakeholder groups.

Results also reveal curriculum, physical evidence, responsiveness and access to facilities as additional factors which explain service quality. These factors are related directly to the process of service delivery, are high in experience qualities (Nelson, 1974) and reinforce the belief that quality control measures must be applied along the service delivery system. The orientation of programmes and course contents have a direct bearing on the business school’s capacity to meet the needs of prospective employers and must be managed carefully to build reputation. Similarly, the institution must be responsive and endeavour to provide prompt reliable service, since waiting for service can have negative effects on service evaluations (Taylor, 1994) and quality, especially in situations where the service provider is perceived as having control over the wait, as in the case of business education. Assuring that facilities are accessible to students and providing students with new and innovative services such as automated telephone registration are examples of how business schools can improve quality on process-related variables. As for the elements associated with physical evidence, management must realize that atmospherics have a direct bearing on customer expectations (Baker, 1987) and give attention to detail. At this stage, faculty and students should have a say since they are, for the most part, experiencing the service in the classroom. Hence, attention must be given to details to ensure that the physical environment is comfortable, adequate for the delivery of service and that it sends out appropriate cues to students. Indeed, the physical environment can become a surrogate indicator of the institution’s capacity to offer service in an organized and professional manner (Bitner, 1992).

As for the limitations of this study, the results represent students’ perceptions of service quality in a small business school, and perceptions of service could easily vary according to the size, history and stature of the business school in question. Consequently, since it is the measures of service quality for specific service providers that count, due care must exercised so as not to generalize results to all institutions (Brown and Koenig, 1993; Carman, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Similarly, the research measured only perceptions of service, and studies should attempt to identify how students form expectations of business schools, how expectations vary over time and how information sources influence customer expectations of service (Murray, 1991). Results might vary if analysed for different segments of the student population, such as class level; elected major; males and females; and part-time and full-time students. Accordingly, analysing quality
Perceptions for different segments should help management in the formulation of strategies which promise to meet the specific expectations of these various groups. The low reliability of the access to facilities factor is another limitation. A more reliable measure might accentuate the relationship between this factor and the overall judgement of service quality. The convenience sample of respondents must also be acknowledged. At this stage, some might argue that students are not the logical group to survey with regard to what excellent business schools should be offering. Since they are in the process of acquiring their education and, for the most part, may have little knowledge of what should be expected of universities along key quality dimensions. Consequently, in future studies, the overall performance of business schools should be assessed from the perspective of the various stakeholder groups which interact with the institution. Indeed, a better understanding of how various stakeholder groups, such as the business community, alumni, government agencies, along with the community, form quality judgements is warranted from the TQM perspective. Additional research is needed on the interrelationship that exists between quality and reputation. Although these two constructs are related, research should address the dynamics of the relationship. For example, are factors such as contact personnel, curriculum, responsiveness and physical evidence determinants of service quality or of reputation? Similarly, a better comprehension of how reputation impacts students when choosing a business school, and the importance given to this criterion by prospective employers, should concern management.

The achievement of excellence in business education and the need to control the quality of services offered to students formed the basis of this study on the cues which signal quality. The research shows that reputation, management, faculty and process-related variables are important to students in their judgement of quality. The results are encouraging and will lead us to pursue our quest for excellence in education.

References