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Education Service Quality and Management Practices at Universities of Pakistan: Perspectives of Service Delivery Staff

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ABSTRACT

Since the last few decades, the trend of service and marketing in higher education is self-evident. Universities are viewed as markets and students as customers. This research aims to explore education service quality (ESQ) at universities of Pakistan. Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan having 60 universities. The study is delimited to 29 general public universities of Punjab. Six universities were randomly selected i.e. – University of the Punjab, Government College University Lahore, Islamia University Bahawalpur, University of Sargodha, University of Gujrat, and Government College University Faisalabad. Research relied on the perception of 33 service delivery staff of these universities. A semi-structured interview schedule mainly based on the HEdPERF model (Abdullah 2006b) was used, which included six indicators – admissions, academic aspect, non-academic aspects, reputation, access, and program issues. Interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis. It was found that overall ESQ for all six indicators was perceived to be poor and non-academic services were reported to be in a very discouraging state; however, admissions services were found comparatively better. The study recommends that ESQ should be improved by continuously assessing students' needs and observing trends and demands operative in the contemporary higher education scenario.

Keywords: HEdPERF, Education Service Quality, Service Delivery Staff, HEC, Punjab, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is now the most rising sector due to the increase of student enrolment and expansion in its infrastructure which is serving all segments of life in terms of producing graduates, research and development and knowledge-based economy. In this regard, tough competition has aroused especially after the intervention of the

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private sector in the higher education market. Since then the service quality has also become an important point of consideration in higher education. In this situation, the well-informed student customer started evaluating the universities on the basis of the quality of its services (Owino 2013). Halberstadt, Timm, Kraus & Gundolf (2019) concluded that service-learning (SL) has been relevant but it seems neglected in research and practices of higher education. Thus, the universities are now responsibly refining and improving the services to make students' experiences more fruitful (Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, & Seebaluck 2016). Therefore, a combination of three main goals of the university which include; education, research and service can substantially help students, faculty and wider society (Brooks & Schramm 2007). It is fact the environment of education is becoming more competitive and progressive day by day and institutions need more efforts to assure the best education services (Cheung, Yuen, Yuen, & Cheong Cheng 2011). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) stated that service quality is now an indispensable role in the current market of higher education. Rising universities of the world that have been ranked high in QS world ranking are the models of service quality. Most of these universities realized that students are required to be treated as potential clients so that their expectations can be met accordingly (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak 2005). Nadiri, Kandampully & Hussain (2009) argued that it is the responsibility of the universities to understand the perceptions and expectations of the student customers to improve the education service quality (ESQ). Digitization of services is indispensable to manage the services successfully in the education sector which will improve the satisfaction level of the customers (Bogoviz, Lobova, Alekseev, Prokofiev & Gimelshtein 2019). Moreover, the international university rankings are increasingly becoming the yardstick for assessing the quality of education and services in universities. Universities have adopted the trend of the corporate sector which promoting intrapreneurship by knowledge creation, knowledge services and knowledge transfer (Chen, Xu & Zhai 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The service quality research is relatively new in higher education as compared to

the pure marketing and commercial sector (Sultan and Wong 2010). Since the last decade, noteworthy changes have taken place in higher education which reveals that this sector must be treated as a business like other service sectors to meet the needs and expectations of student customers (Gruber et al., 2010). Generally, a culture of traditional service has changed and shifted to smart service which possesses characteristics like customer care, privacy, enjoyment, and service delivery with adequacy (Kabadayi, Ali, Choi, Joosten & Lu 2019). All kinds of service companies should take clear decisions and develop informed policies for their customers which must be technology-oriented (Van Riel, Zhang, McGinnis, Nejad, Bujisic & Phillips 2019, Heo, Blal, & Choi 2019). Services in higher education are very versatile which includes, admissions, academic aspects, non-academic aspects, access, reputation and program issues. Academic services are a core part of educational activity in the university. The academic staff is normally more involved in the provision of these services. Academic services include learning materials, (Abdullah 2006a, Banwet & Datta 2003) consultation and facility of information communication technologies (Gatfield, Barker, & Graham 1999, Koilias 2005, McClelland, & Davies 2008). The administrative services normally support all kinds of activities at the university. The non-academic staff of the university delivers the services to students, which is known as administrative service (Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi 2003, Abdullah 2006b). It also includes the office hours for the facilitation of students (Sahney, Banwet & Karunes 2004, Koilias 2005, Abdullah 2006a) delivery of service according to given deadlines (Oldfield & Baron 2000, Koilias 2005, Ahmed, Gamage, Suwanabroma, Ueyama, Hada & Sekikawa 2008). Yavuz and Gülmez (2016), Zaim, Turkyilmaz, Tarim, Ucar, and Akkas (2010) and Kang and James (2004) report that reputation includes the campus facilities, industrial linkages, and employability of graduates, therefore, it has a great influence on students' perception and satisfaction, which lead them towards institutional loyalty. Whereas, Ushantha and Kumara (2016) reveal that reputation has no significant impact on the perception of students pertaining to ESQ. Marketing research (Copeland & Bhaduri 2019) revealed that the most familiar brand hugely influences the commitment and trust of the customer. Hesse and Teubner (2019) suggested that Personal Information Management Systems (PIMS) and digital

technology to improve reputation portability.

Research found that students who participate in student-led social organizations and/ or have sound interaction with academics are perceived as more satisfied and learned (Seng & Ling 2013). Universities should immediately introduce social media as learning space because research reveals that student users of social networking sites were sharing positive online reviews of their respective universities (Lee, Ng & Bogomolova 2019). Researchers believe that access is one of the important indicators of the students' satisfaction (Telford & Masson 2005, Diamantis & Benos 2007). Academic programs and study courses provide a basis to have a good future for the graduates. The better quality of programs and their orientation in the job market is an indicator of graduate employability. Students feel satisfied if they find courses that are highly relevant to their objectives and job prospects, therefore, reputation is a strong predictor of students' recruitment (Mavondo & Zaman 2000, Kassens 2019). Now, due to competition and advancement of knowledge, the universities are offering a comprehensive list of academic programs (Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne, & Brown 1998, Chua 2004, Koiliias 2005, Abdullah 2006a) with emerging specializations demand (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph 1999, Joseph, Yakhou & Stone 2005) according to the current market (Ahmed, et al. 2008)

2.1. Higher Education in Pakistan

Currently, 207 (124 public and 83 private) universities are recognized by Higher Education Commission Pakistan with an approximate enrolment of 1,576,087, which depicts that the country has large higher education systems. (www.hec.gov.pk/english/universities/pages/recognised.aspx; accessed on 26.10.2019). Khalid and Khan (2006) stated that a huge number of educational committees and commissions have been constituted by the Government of Pakistan in the last 58 years. Besides this, eight national educational policies have been formulated to bring innovation and change in education but, unfortunately, failed to get the desired results. Pakistan is a youthful country having youth bulge between the ages of 15 to 30 years; hence, still, enrolment in higher education is miserable. Moreover, the level of education quality is very low which is failing to impact the society socially and economically. Conclusively, these policies

were failed to bring technological change, economic development, cultural and religious harmony, and peaceful coexistence.

Keeping in view the challenges of higher education the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established in 2002. The motive to establish HEC was to facilitate the higher education institutions and universities in order to develop them at the level of the international centre of innovation and development in various fields of studies. In this connection, the HEC framed Medium Term Development Framework (2005-10) to increase education access by expanding the higher education institutes. Moreover, the objectives of the framework were to impart technical and market-based skills to youth and helping the state to improve governance and management of the public institutions (HEC 2005). Whereas, Rahman (2007) expressed that HEC has been focusing to ensure academic quality through proper accreditation of academic and research programs of all recognized universities. Raza, Farooq, Malik and Anwar (2019) argued that it should be a national agenda to uplift the standard of education in Pakistan. Quality and productive education are now a matter of life and death to survive Pakistan in rapidly changing global world to make itself a powerful and sustainable future state. On the other hand, Western European governments have given huge space to higher education by designing their public policies for the last two decades (Capano, Pritoni & Vicentini 2019).

It is observed that ESQ in Pakistani universities is questionable. The institutes of higher learning in Pakistan should pay special focus to improve education service quality (Shah 2013). Afridi, Khattak, and Khan (2016) conducted research on universities of Pakistan and found that perceived service quality is lesser than student customers' expectations and the identified gap was found -0.974. Therefore, present research intends to explore the quality of education services in general public universities of Punjab (Pakistan). The study would provide a better understanding of the state of ESQ at public universities. It would add to the university administration's understanding of their customers' (students) needs.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative approach to explore education service quality (ESQ) at universities of Pakistan. The qualitative method demands in-depth data that can be collected through a well-structured interview schedule (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2005). Moreover, qualitative research explains the existing conditions and/ or state of any phenomena (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun 2011). Silverman (2013) says that qualitative research helps to understand complex social phenomena and gives useable information. The qualitative data give great insight into the phenomena in its original context. And, qualitative research is the best for the exploration of the individual and group's opinion about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Table 1: Detail of universities of Pakistan (HEC 2019)

Chartered By	Public	Private	Total
Federal	27	10	37
Punjab	34	26	60
Sindh	23	33	56
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	27	11	38
Balochistan	8	1	9
AJK	5	2	7
Pakistan	124	83	207
Source HEC: (www.hec.gov.pk/english/universities/pages/recognised.aspx ; accessed on 26.10.2019)			

Pakistan has 207 universities (124 public and 83 private) in its five provinces Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Gilgit Baltistan and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. And, total 1,548,949 students are enrolled in Pakistani universities (Economic Survey of Pakistan 2018-2019). However, Punjab is the biggest province of Pakistan and it has a total of 60 universities under its administrative control. About 515,155 students are enrolled only in Punjab province. This study is delimited to 29 general public universities of Punjab because these universities possess similarities in their academic faculties and administrative processes.

Table 2: Detail of universities of Punjab, Pakistan (HEC 2019)

	General	Technical	Total
Public	29	05	34
Private	25	01	26
Total	54	06	60

Multistage sampling has been used to select the sample of service delivery staff. Bernard (2017, 2013) considers 30-60 participants sufficient for qualitative studies; whereas, Creswell (2007) recommends this number to be 20-30. Firstly, the researchers randomly selected the following six general public universities.

- Government College University Lahore
- Government College University Faisalabad
- Islamia University Bahawalpur
- University of Sargodha
- University of Gujrat
- University of Punjab

Secondly, service delivery staff i.e. Directors of Admissions, Academics, Career Development Centre, Co-curricular, Sports and Registrar, Chairpersons, and/or academics (faculty members), etc. from each university were conveniently selected. Literature reveals that most of the studies conducted to explore ESQ mainly relied on the perspective of students only and a few studies considered the service delivery staff i.e. academic and non-academic (Khodayari & Khodayari 2011). Therefore, the researcher decided to explore the ESQ through the perspective of service delivery staff. Moreover, the staff was considered as a key informant in this qualitative study because they are important stakeholders of the universities. A semi-structured interview schedule chiefly based on the HEDPERF model (Abdullah 2006b) was developed to explore the perception of service delivery staff about ESQ, as services quality literature rely on perception to explore service quality (Nadiri, Kandampully, & Hussain 2009). In this research, ESQ includes the following indicators – admissions, academic aspect, non-academic aspects, reputation, access, and program issues.

Qualitative research uses a different mode of data collection and interviews are one of them (Merriam & Tisdell 2009). The researchers visited the staff in their offices for the interview. However, a few interviews were conducted via a telephone call. During this process of interviewing the respondents, the researcher kept on carrying a thematic analysis of these interviews, which helped a lot in deciding the sample of the present research. As the researchers noted that saturation point (no new information was being produced) reached after having interviews of 33 participants. The researcher stopped

interviewing when he noted that information by the respondents was adding nothing to previously collected information through the interviews. The thematic analysis makes the researcher informed about saturation level which is important to determine how many participants are enough in an underlying study (Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles & Grimshaw 2010, Fusch & Ness 2015).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the interviews are given below on the identified indicators – admissions, academic aspect, non-academic aspects, reputation, access, and program issues. The coding/labelling procedure was applied to the interview participants for analysis. The service delivery staff was labelled category wise for example; Registrar 1/ Registrar 2, Director Academic 1/Director Academic 2/ Director Academic 3 and Academics1/ Academics2, etc. Detail of the participants is given in the below table.

Table: 3 Details of the Participants			
Participant No	Coded/labeled	Participant No	Coded/labeled
1	Registrar 1	18	Academics 4
2	Registrar 2	19	Academics 5
3	Director Academics 1	20	Academics 6
4	Director Academics 2	21	Academics 7
5	Director Academics 3	22	Academics 8
6	Director Co-curricular 1	23	Academics 9
7	Director Co-curricular 2	24	Academics 10
8	Director CDC 1	25	Academics 11
9	Director CDC 2	26	Academics 12
10	Director Admissions 1	27	Academics 13
11	Director Admissions 2	28	Academics 14
12	Director Admissions 3	29	Academics 15
13	Director Sports 1	30	Academics 16
14	Director Sports 2	31	Academics 17
15	Academics 1	32	Academics 18
16	Academics 2	33	Academics 19
17	Academics 3		

A. Admissions Services

The analysis of admission services reveals the following sub-themes.

a) Transparency and Online System

Present study records that universities have developed an online admission

system to provide the best admission services to prospective students. The online admission system assured transparency and reduced human hardship. The universities make special arrangements for annual admissions once a year and completely focus on the services of admissions. Further, it has been reported by the participants of the present study that universities have fewer financial resources, therefore, more funds are required to provide better facilities. The opinion of the service delivery staff is given below:

“We have updated our online admission system which ensures the transparency and brought ease in the admission process. The applicants can easily submit an admission application and easily access the merit list which is publically available on the website. We don’t keep prospective students in doubt regarding their admissions” (Director Admissions 1, Academics 7)

And conversely,

“University has a lack of financial resources, otherwise the admission system can be more improved according to modern lines as I observed in my foreign university, I have done my PhD. The current online system has several deficiencies” (Academics 3)

b) Scholarships

Respondents said that universities offer limited scholarships and financial aid to students. Therefore, financial services for students in the universities are not up to the mark. They believe that most of the brilliant students failed to get admission due to the unavailability of funding to their studies. The universities have limited funding opportunities for students with disabilities and orphans etc. Staff said that

“Sometimes I have dealt with the students having extraordinary academic achievements but due to unavailability of funding, they could not enroll. I was also unable to help them because such policy of internal and external funding was unavailable” (Director Academics 1)

And,

“The Higher Education Commission and other government agencies should fully fund the prospective students through merit scholarships and on a deserving basis. I believe that universities have limited financial resources and they are running at the cost of student fee, therefore, it is impossible for universities to give fee waiver to all of the

students” (Director Admissions 1, Director Academics 2)

c) Hostel facilities

It has been reported that particularly old universities have hundred percent accommodations for all students who intend to avail hostel facilities. However, the newly established universities have a deficiency in space for students’ accommodation. It is also revealed that the universities are more concerned to accommodate the female students because they have difficulty living in the private hostels and their parents are not willing to leave their daughters at the mercy of private hostels. Therefore, universities have focused on the accommodation of female students. However, the quality of services in hostels like the internet, food and room facilities are not up to the satisfactory level. Respondents’ opinion is given below

“We provide a hundred percent of accommodations to female students, but the university does not have sufficient space for males. The universities have not been funded by HEC since long; therefore, we could not establish hostels for male students” (Academics 5, also working as the warden)

And,

“The university is unable to provide a more conducive environment in the hostels. The rooms are not well furnished and equipped with the best living facilities. Moreover, the well-resourced study rooms also lack in the hostels.” (Director Academics 1, Academics 16)

B. Academic Aspects

In the analysis of academic aspects, further sub-themes have been generated which are given below.

a) Professional Academic Staff

The service delivery staff reveals that the university has qualified academics. The academics are not treating students as immediate customers and preparing them as a marketable product for the job industry. They further said that the academics overall and specifically young lecturers’ need more training to enhance the pedagogical skills to raise the academic standard. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) and universities should take initiative to arrange training at the national and international levels for their faculty

members.

“I strongly believe in the student-centric approach, but I am not in favour to consider the student as a customer. Faculty has a respectful relation with their students; therefore, we don't make it a potential threat to our social values” (Academics 2, Academics 11)

And,

“Prior training of the lecturers who are just starting their careers is badly needed. The universities are recruiting academics at a higher level without any training. I recommend that each lecturer should be trained a minimum two to six months before starting a career in the university” (Director Academics 2)

Moreover,

“The HEC system of evaluation of academics is good which somehow informs the situation of academic services being offered. But it has some negative impact; like, the teacher who is strict in the evaluation of student's assignment is always negatively rated by the students” (Academics 6)

b) Entrepreneurial Services

It has been narrated by the respondents that our academic services for promoting entrepreneurship are hopeless. The trend of entrepreneurship is visible in the world and developed universities are promoting it through industrial linkages. Our students are weak because the focus is on the theoretical aspects only instead of entrepreneurial skills. Further, the HEC has also not given any roadmap in this regard. Students are very disappointed because they have no forums or ways to make space in the corporate industry.

“I believe that entrepreneurship skills and services can make the graduates' life prosper and happy because this is an industry and economic era. So, only the teaching of content and theoretical models is insufficient at tertiary level education” (Academics 17, Director Career Development Centre 2)

c) Equipped Lecture Rooms

The present study reports that classrooms are not well equipped with the latest teaching learning resources. Classrooms have insufficient facilities to control weather

conditions; therefore, students are bound to attend the classes in difficult weather conditions. The respondents said that universities are autonomous, but they are facing the shortage of budget for infrastructure development. Even though, most of the academic departments do not have multimedia and digital resources for presentations, etc. Academics' opinion is given below.

“Honestly speaking, the classroom infrastructure is sub-standard which does not inspire students and make them comfortable. Moreover, the academic facilities in the rooms are not available. My previous institution (a private university) was better regarding classroom facilities. (Academics 2, Academics 9, Academics 12)

d) Quality of Content

Study reveals that the universities are teaching graduates with outdated content in various programs of studies. Moreover, student access towards the latest knowledge is very difficult because Pakistani universities have less digital access to international hubs of knowledge and research journals. It was also obvious from data, since, last decade all course outlines and content have been revised following HEC, National Curriculum Revision Committee (NCRC) guidelines. But, most of the participants still believe that the content is still direly needed to be improved according to market needs. Respondents said that

“I believe that content must be improved with the help of potential employers and a leading person in the corporate industry. It is my strong observation that the potential employers of the relevant fields should be in the Board of Studies and Academic Council of the university. Otherwise, the current content will produce the jobless graduates” (Director Academics 1)

And

“The university is updating the content of all courses on a yearly basis; therefore, the content of the university is better now. However, due to the absence of other supporting things, which help content delivery, we are unable to achieve the desired objectives. Like, the latest content demands the competence of the academics and sufficient infrastructure as well” (Academics 14)

C. Non-Academics Aspect

Sub-themes of the non-academic aspects are being described below.

a) Administrative Processes

Respondents of the present study narrated that universities are trying their best to improve the administrative processes; however, the present state of service quality is very poor. All the processes are publicly accessible through the website. But due to some official constraint and involvement of other government institution, universities are bound to follow some processes which take time to deliver the services. They said that sometimes they have to purchase a few urgent items for students, but they have to follow procurement procedures which are lengthy and negatively affect well in time delivery of services. Decentralization within universities and from the government to universities is needed. Overall, respondents believe that the quality of administrative services is very discouraging. Respondents' opinion is given here

“Mostly administrative processes are approved by the higher regulatory bodies and as a public university, we are bound to follow. These processes are fair, but, it is also a fact that most of the time these are time taking and hurdles in the provision of quality services” (Registrar1, Director Sports 2, Academics 10)

And,

“Decentralization of power within universities and outside universities is very important. This thing will be helping in better service quality. The centralized system of governance delays the service” (Academics 18, Director Academic 3, Registrar 2)

b) E-management services

It has been reported that universities have not improved service delivery by using digital technologies and adopting the e-management system. The paper and file system is old and time taking, further, universities are well crowded with students, therefore, the e-management system is an only workable solution for quality services. Respondents reported that universities are unable to purchase expensive software due to a lack of funding. So, it is the responsibility of the government to support the universities financially.

“Campus management information system (CMIS) is the only solution to ensure

quality services. I don't think that in the absence of CMIS we can say that university is providing quality administrative services" (Registrar 2, Director Academics 1)

And

"It is, unfortunately, stated that our students require a physical appearance in the offices for resolution of their queries in the age of digital technology, which is a question mark for universities' management" (Director Co-curricular 1, Senior Academics 8)

c) Staff Development

Respondents of the present study said that non-teaching staff required administrative and technical training to deal with students. Staff needs digital computing skills to ensure quality services. They said that most of the old staff badly lacked managerial skills; however, newcomers are quite better in service delivery due to computing skills. Another alarming thing is that most employees are not knowledgeable about their professional responsibilities. Participants reported that a performance-based mechanism of accountability and a system of reward should be introduced. Respondents believe that still a lot of efforts are required to improve service delivery. Ensuing lines provide robust evidence on it

"I have met the students who have complained against the behaviour of supporting staff. I have no hesitation to tell that our supporting staff is not yet trained enough to deal with the student customers. The old recruited staff is not well educated, and they don't have the necessary customer care skills. Therefore, this area immediately needs improvement. (Registrar 1)

And,

"Now, the higher education is being dealt on commercial lines in worldwide, therefore, the universities should make effort to hire the professionally trained staff who can deal and care the student as customer" (Director CDC 2, Director Sports 1)

Moreover,

Unfortunately, the role and responsibilities are not well defined and most of the staff does not know their primary professional responsibilities. Therefore, it is impossible to make anybody accountable if the key performance indicators (KPIs) are not defined.

KPIs of all academic and non-academic departments should be developed in the universities (Registrar 1, Academics 19, Director Academics 2)

D. Reputation

The reputation generates the following sub-themes which are analyzed as under:

a) Library and lab services

The respondent of the present study said that the institutional reputation is based on quality research productivity and quality of educational services, but, our scientific labs are not up to the mark to support the research activities of higher degree by research. The severe shortage of modern scientific equipment in the labs is a question mark for HEC Pakistan. Scientific and technological developments are rapid; hence, our universities are still so behind. Moreover, libraries should be equipped with technological resources instead of thousands of books in their racks. The university libraries are not connected with digital knowledge hubs; therefore, our students face difficulty to access the latest knowledge. Further, a few respondents stated that academics have failed to train their students to utilize existing library facilities. The service delivery staff unanimously said that university services in the library and scientific labs are poor which raises the question of universities' reputation. The respondent opinion is given below

Unfortunately, scientific theories cannot be tested in our universities due to the unavailability of modern labs and equipment. Our graduates are suffering, and they are unable to compete with the world, in science and technology. This thing is badly affecting the reputation of our universities. (Academics 15, Director Admissions 1)

And,

The HEC should establish the centre of excellence in the respective departments of universities with the provision of maximum funding. Since my joining of this university after completing a PhD from foreign university I could not publish my research because the relevant equipment is not available even in any public sector university of the province. Therefore, the students are also affected due to this shortcoming and they have no opportunity to get skills in the emerging fields of sciences. (Academics 16)

Furthermore,

"It is fairly stated that public sector universities have not good professional

image because their graduates do not carry sufficient skills which may inspire the corporate sector. The universities should understand the role and responsibilities in the advance and competitive arena of the higher education” (Director CDC 1, Director Academics 1)

b) Support Services

The present study indicates that universities are trying to focus on support services. However, this is merely a new thing in our universities before this they have completely ignored this area. Now mostly universities have career counseling, financial aid, and business incubation centres which have been established to improve support services. The respondents think that universities should properly establish the directorate of support services as a full-time project instead to take it as a formality. Respondents also believe that most of the initiatives have not been taken seriously by the institutions. Respondents’ voices are being narrated here

“The universities are creating support service caters for students which are good initiative, but, this should be fruitful and visible through tangible output. Since now, I believe that our efforts in promoting support services are not appreciable which can be valued in achievements” (Directors CDC 1, Director Co-curricular 2)

Respondents further said that universities are doing their best in the field of sports and co-curricular activities. The inter-varsity competition of sports and co-curricular create the opportunity of celebration for students and the public as well. All universities have vibrant sports and co-curricular offices which are funded by HEC as well as universities. But a few respondents said these activities are never marketed by the universities at large scale; therefore, it is a perception that universities are doing nothing in the field of sports. Moreover, it is evident that most of the university sportsmen leave the programs of study before completion due to inflexibility in study plans and structure. Ensuing lines

“The sport is a very important part of the academic activity of the university. The university provides full opportunity to sportsmen, even; the university has reserved seats in all programs for sportsmen with the concession of a fee. I should admit that mostly they leave the study before completion because they have less time to pay in the

department like regular students. Ultimately, they feel difficulty to adjust in it. The university teaching departments should have flexible learning plans for sportsmen as compared to regular students. Moreover, the government is not linking the sports department with the universities, therefore, our students always failed to make their space in the national teams. Mostly, the players of other government institutions make space in national teams". (Director Sports 2)

And,

"University is providing best co-curricular services which not only harness the talent but also provide the opportunity of celebrations. We have trained our students in many respects including event management. But we need to connect these with international universities; currently, it is confined to the university level. (Director Co-curricular 1, Academics 7)

c) Internationalization of the University

Respondents of the present study perceived that internationalization of the universities for development of students is also a great service that can positively contribute; however, the public sector universities, except a few, are not making significant efforts in this regard. Further, they believe that many forums are available at the global level which can be used to internationalize the universities. The global linkages of our higher institutes could be useful to enhance the institutional reputation, employment and gateway of further studies for our graduates and academic staff. One of the opinions given by the respondents is produced here.

"I have completed my Bachelor through an exchange program (UGRAD) but there was no support of my universities, even, I have faced the challenges when I returned to join last semester at home university. Now I am as academics trying to help my students in finding such opportunities. But these are individual efforts only. The universities should make policies for the promotion of institutes and students at global level" (Academics 5)

The respondents perceive that public sector universities lack in better professional image in the higher education market due to several reasons which are narrated above.

E. Access

Data of access indicator generated the sub-themes (freedom of thoughts and equality) which are analysed as under.

It has been said by the respondents that student has freedom of thoughts pertaining to academics' discussion in the universities. They can express their feeling and thoughts in classrooms and seminars which are normally organized by the universities. Moreover, respondents believe that all students are treated equally in the public sector universities and all students avail the same facilities of the university. There is no privilege for anyone in the name of the social, financial or racial status. The rules, regulations, and policies pertaining to students are transparent which are publicly accessible for all students and stakeholders. Nevertheless, most of the respondents said that the formation of students' unions is banned by the government and we are also in favour of this decision because it is evident from history that these unions became violent groups. In contrast, a few respondents said that ban on students' unions causes the scarcity of visionary and true representative political leadership in the country. Respondents said that there is no system of student-led development for the improvement of university services because students can only give the original feedback about services being offered. The respondent said that

"I believe that students are key stakeholders in the university. The students are equally treated in universities. We have published all regulations and opportunities pertaining to students on the university website. The university is basically in favour of welfare of the students as they are the product of the university and institutions have always great hope from them" (Registrar 2)

And,

"The students have freedom of expression in university through different forums; even, I have noticed that university students use the Facebook pages, Twitter and WhatsApp groups to share their thought and ideas. Nevertheless, the formation of students' unions is extensively discussed and banned on logical grounds; therefore, it should be kept on. However, the educational and literary societies should be more promoted. (Director Academics 3)

On the other hand,

“I have studied in UK wherein, university itself promote the students’ unions and social clubs which sometimes raise their voices against the polices of universities. But still they believe that these forums are in best and wider interest of the society. Unfortunately, I should say that we have illegally banned the student unions. If there is any real issue, it can be resolved, and unions can be run under the given guidelines and regulations. These are fruitful if we want to progress democracy and political system in the country” (Academics 13)

F. Program Issues

The program issues generate the following sub-themes which are analyzed as under:

a) Skills Oriented programs

Respondents reveal that universities are launching limited emerging specializations in different disciplines because they think that due to financial constraints, it is difficult to offer any specialization to a few students. Furthermore, they said that HEC has given criterion to start a specialization which is definitely demanding the availability of relevant academics, labs and infrastructure. Respondent also unanimously accepted that most of the academics programs of the universities have no market demand because these do not carry any specific skills which can be sold out. The universities should introduce the technical and vocational graduate programs. Which consist of market-oriented skills. Study reveals that paradigm shift is urgently required from postgraduate programs to highly skill based undergraduate programs, so that the youth bulge may be accommodated through jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities.

“In past, our universities remained focused on the number of research publications by the academics and postgraduate students. Consequently, the universities ignored the undergraduate programs which led the unemployment among graduates. It is time to rethink and make the undergraduate programs as centre of attentions. The undergraduate programs should be highly professional, and skill oriented that may provide reasonable employment opportunities to graduates” (Academics 10, Director Admissions 1)

Moreover,

“I perceived that our academic programs have mismatched with the market demands. Universities should analyse the requirement of the job market and then, universities should launch the degrees with specified these skills. I wonder to see that universities are not negotiating with the current job market and potential employers. Especially, skill-based professional programs should be launched after coordination of emerging corporate sector” (Academics 1, Academics 16)

5. DISCUSSION

A. Admissions Services

The present study reveals that universities have been moved on the online/web-based admission system to improve admission services and to make it more transparent. The university official websites are the most important source of information for the prospective students, but, the uploaded information and online system should be easy to use (Al-Hawary & Bataynehs 2010, Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza 2012). The present research found that the general public sector universities are weaker in marketing their academic programs and admission services. They arrange the admission desk once in a year. Information about courses and future scope of the program as well as the availability of physical facilities for prospective students must be part of admission planning by higher education institutes. It is an indicator of competitive marketing in higher education (Joseph & Joseph 2000). In this connection, Bennett (2007) survey which was conducted on students of 100 UK universities revealed that admission guides, promotional material, and other marketing strategies are important services that make students satisfied and improve university reputation. Present research recorded that universities offer limited scholarships and financial help to students. In this research, service delivery staff believes that most of the brilliant students failed to get admission due to the unavailability of funding to their studies. It is found that poor service delivery is caused by financial constraints of universities. The financial support services offered by higher education institutes are one of the most important features which prospective students expect from the desired university and/or college (Yusof, Ahmad, Tajudin, &

Ravindran, 2008). It is observed that older universities have more space for students' accommodation as compared to newly established universities. However, they try hard to accommodate all female students because it is difficult for them to reside outside the university due to cultural barriers. Nevertheless, housing facilities in the hostels are of poor quality. Research reveals that quality higher education institutes provide quality and secure bordering facilities to their students (Seng & Ling 2013).

B. Academic Aspects

The study reports that universities have highly qualified academic staff and among them, several are foreign qualified. Lomas (2004) states that competent academic staff is an indicator of quality services because this provides the best academic services to their student for their professional and skill development. But, unfortunately, the academics of public sector general universities are not taking students as potential customers like the universities of the developed world. Paswan and Ganesh (2009) found that many universities realized that they would have a competitive advantage if they consider students as a client. And, Gruber et al. (2010) said that university education is now considered as service. The induction of new academics without training is another serious which needs to address. The universities are a weaker side in industrial linkages to place their graduates on internships and collaborative study projects. These weak linkages are taking students and academics away from market exposure. For example, Kassens (2019) identified the gap between theory and practices of econometric education. Findings are supported by another research conducted on Pakistani universities in which Saleem, Moosa, Imam & Ahmed Khan (2017) it is stated that strong industrial collaboration is direly needed to make arrangements for students' study tours to their relevant industry for enhancement of their understanding in the practical field. Moreover, the professional programs are not promoting entrepreneurship among the graduates. Only theoretical teaching with outdated content especially in professional and technological programs is also causing unemployment and bad reputation of the public sector universities. Balle, Steffen, Curado, & Oliveira (2019) found that only old universities of science and technologies refrained in market-based knowledge sharing. Similarly, Gundersen, Heide, & Olsson (1996) found that academics stressed conceptual theories

and their processes only and they neglect the activity-oriented learning experiences. It is also recorded that HEC has directed universities to revise their curriculum through following recommendations given by the National Curriculum Revision Committee (NCRC) recommendations but still these do not meet the market requirement. In this regard, Ching-Yaw, Sok & Sok (2007) believe that the best curriculum means the best for the career of the graduate. And, the skill-oriented academic program is the heart of quality education (Seng & Ling 2013). The present research found that academicians believe that senior people from the corporate and job market industry should be part of the university academic bodies like BOS and Academic Council to give market-based insight. The present study reports that the academic facilities are not satisfactory according to students' needs and the global higher education market. Manea and Iatagan (2015) reveal that postgraduate students give huge importance to technologically equipped labs, libraries, and classrooms. This research found that teaching departments demand digital and scientific instruments. But universities have failed to provide due to financial crises. Research students do not have digital access to the latest published research in the world. Research indicates that modern teaching tools based upon Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and access to periodicals and/ or journals are key services that support the students and researchers in learning (Heyneman, 2001). However, quality education is subject to the availability of sufficient financial resources and material infrastructure (Ebrahim & Karimi 2006).

C. Non-Academics Aspect

The present research found that administrative services quality is extremely poor in universities. The dominance of centralization and patronage culture in the universities is causing poor service quality. The rules, regulations and educational processes are fair and publically accessible, but, these prolong the service delivery. Al-Dulaimi (2016) pointed out that quality educational processes and services are the indicators of growth and sustainability of the higher education system. The present research found that procurement is one of the difficult tasks in the public sector universities. Most often, it creates difficulty in the provision of services. The present research found that one of the key reasons behind poor administrative service quality is the ignorance of digital

technologies in service management. It is found that the university officials resist this technological change due to their ulterior motives. Moreover, supporting staff does not possess the required skills which make them compatible with the e-governance system. However, the participants are in favour to launch the e-governance system immediately and they proposed that the government should support universities in purchasing the latest softwares. Similarly, smart services supported by the technology can bring the efficiency in service delivery by reducing the human workload (De Keyser, Köcher , Alkire , Verbeeck & Kandampully, 2019) and also secure the privacy of customer data (Ostrom, Fotheringham, & Bitner 2019, Wiegard and Breitner 2019). Smart service system offers an interface to service providers and beneficiaries to make liaison on service activities (Anke 2019), this joint venture will also provide an opportunity of improvement of smart services (Dreyer, Olivotti, Lebek & Breitner 2019) and smart service also offers self-reconfiguration and self-management (Laubis, Konstantinov, Simko, Gröschel, & Weinhardt 2019). In another study, Al-Dulaimi (2016) suggested that modern technical instruments of information technology can be used to improve ESQ in universities. The present research found that staff is required to be trained in all respects i.e. technical and professional training, marketing and customer care skills. These attributes were also found relevant in a service sector research study (Troisi, Sarno, Maione, & Loia 2019). Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales (2008) explore that the sincere interest of staff in helping students will ultimately make a student more satisfied. The present research found that proper job specifications for employees and key performance indicators for different academic and non-academic units are not defined by the universities.

D. Reputation

The study explored that general public universities have not a good reputation in the corporate sector as well as in their counterpart higher education market, but, it is an important indicator of ESQ as identified by numerous researchers (Helgesen & Nettet 2007, Nguyen & LeBlanc 2001, Hoyt & Brown 2003). Research conducted on Pakistani universities explored that university reputation determines the worth of institute which positively affects the students' loyalty and satisfaction (Saleem, Moosa, Imam & Ahmed

Khan 2017). The main cause of the low service quality is the dearth of scientific equipment in the laboratories. Presently, public universities are unable to produce the scientists in the country who can become the reason of universities' reputation. The present research found that libraries are not equipped and linked with international digital hubs of research-based knowledge. HEC should pay special focus to make easy access to their research towards the latest knowledge otherwise, public sector universities shall remain so beyond in further developments. Saleem, Moosa, Imam and Ahmed Khan (2017) stated that Pakistani universities should upgrade the academic facilities and infrastructure. The present study reveals that universities are trying to improve student support services by establishing career counseling centres, financial aid offices, and business incubation centres. Duque and Weeks (2010) stated that support services have a positive impact on students learning experiences and satisfaction. The present research found that universities are much better at providing services of sports and co-curricular. They are arranging different events of competition among the universities at the national level. However, these activities should be linked with sports board and government institutions, so that our sportsmen make space in national teams of various sports. It is also found that sportsmen faced problems in study matter because special study plans and structures are not introduced for them. The study also reveals from participants' opinion that universities are at a weaker side in global linkages. The global linkages are a key source of internalizations of universities to broaden the exposure of academics and students as well. Global linkages will also positively affect the reputation of the public sector universities. Peace Lenn (2000) states that global higher education emphasizes international linkages through opening of different branches or sub campuses and the reason behind their success is quality education.

a) Access

It is obvious from the result of present research that students have freedom of thoughts in the universities, but, it is limited to academic discussion. Students can share their opinion on different academic forums like conferences and seminars etc. It is found that university students are treated equally through the same rules and regulations. However, the students led unions and social clubs are banned in the universities.

Research found that the students who participate in the student led social organizations and/ or have sound interaction with academics are perceived more satisfied (Seng & Ling, 2013). The respondents have divided opinion on it: a few think that these unions became violent in past, therefore, ban on students' union was right decision. Other believes that unavailability of these unions is meant to support the status quo politics and to stop real political leadership in the country. This research found that universities are not framing proper channel to harness the leadership potential among the graduates. Higher education is also considered as a source to develop leadership capacity in youth (Astin & Astin 2000, Morse 2004). Study reveals that public sector universities have no mechanism to get feedback from the students who are primary stakeholder of service quality. For example, higher education need to dialogue with its key stakeholders like students to uplift ESQ (Gill & Singh 2019). Like, Nadiri, Kandampully, and Hussain (2009) found that universities as service providers need to understand the students' (customer) needs and expectations by their words of mouth.

E. Program Issues

Study reveals that universities are offering limited emerging specializations because they have dearth of budget. HEC is also enforcing strict criteria to start a program by observing the quality indicators i.e. availability of relevant academics, labs and infrastructure. Moreover, study plans and structures are rigid which does not make graduates free to choose the courses of their interest. Seng and Ling (2013) favour quality of courses with flexibility in their structure. Vorki Shabani (2006) believes that courses structure and assessment techniques are important factors of service quality and students' satisfaction. Present research found that the academics are not empowered to conduct exams and projects according to their own time schedule. It is also found that universities are offering a few programs with old outline and these programs have no market demand. The universities are not strictly focusing the professional, technical and vocational graduate programs to reduce the unemployment among the graduates. Study reveals that recently HEC has shifted its focus from postgraduate programs to highly skill oriented undergraduate programs. Lund and Karlsen (2019) found that vocational programs are essential to address contemporary needs and manufacturing the competitiveness.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative research explored education service quality (ESQ) among academic and non-academic senior officials (Chairmen of the teaching Departments and/or academic members, Registrars, Directors Academics, Admissions, Sports, Co-curricular, Career Development Centre) at general public universities in (Punjab) Pakistan. In a nutshell, overall the ESQ is found low but the quality of non-academic services is found highly alarming. Financial constraint has been noticed as the foremost curbing factor in offering better ESQ at general public universities. The unions and social organizations are banned, unfortunately, which is challenging to produce the social and political leadership.

Although the universities are offering good and transparent admission services by using online admission system, but, they are not really very successful in marketing their academic programs for their good reputation among prospective students and parents. The universities often have not established a proper Directorate of Admissions (DoA) which is supposed to offer her services like counselling, scholarships and hostel facilities to the prospective students. Universities have, indeed, highly qualified academics but they seem unable to understand the scenario of contemporary higher education in offering better ESQ in fact, universities are required to be viewed as the market, and student as the customer. The academics as well need to train themselves continuously all through their career since the very onset. The industrial linkages are nominal. Therefore, academics and students both lack in real market exposure because of the absence of university-industry interface. Moreover, academic programs are not addressing market demands as the experts from relevant spheres of the market are not taken on board while updating the content. Provision of academic facilities (like advance laboratories, digital libraries and equipped classrooms) are discouraging. Emerging specializations are very limited and study plans are rigid; wherein, students and academics are not free to make their decisions. The vocational and technical programs have not been strengthened in past. This may be the reason that HEC has shifted recently its focus from higher degree by research to undergraduate vocational programs. Service quality in non-academic aspects

is reported to be very poor due to nonexistence of E-management system, and patronage culture. The governing regulations are publically accessible but sometimes these create complexity in service delivery. Training component is direly missing; therefore, the supporting staff has literally no idea of their responsibilities and do not possess at all the marketing and customer care skills. Universities have scarcity of scientific innovation and production of skilful graduates which badly affected their reput in corporate and higher education sector. Although, it is late, nevertheless, universities are trying to improve their support services by establishing career counselling, financial aid, and business incubation centres. Available sports and co-curricular facilities are found satisfactory. Internationalization of the universities is highly needed which will broaden the exposure of this higher education system. This will be giving better opportunities to academics and students.

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