



Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

## **Beyond the Classroom: A SERVQUAL Based Assessment of Cambridge Schooling System in Quetta, Pakistan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explored service quality among A/O level students in Quetta using SERVQUAL model. The sample comprised 148 students of O/A levels in Quetta. The results were obtained using paired sample t-test. Findings revealed significant service quality gaps across all five SERVQUAL dimensions, with tangibility showing the largest gap, followed by reliability, empathy, responsiveness, and assurance. The findings will help policymakers design targeted interventions, such as improving teacher training, strengthening school accountability, and enhancing infrastructure to reduce dependence on after-school tuition academies.

**Keywords:** Service Quality, SERVQUAL Model, Cambridge Schooling System, Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

Education plays a vital role in protecting the future of generations, who contribute to various sectors of the economy (Sahin et al., 2024). Pakistan offers compound systems of education at parallel levels, which are diverse in nature with respect to educational opportunities, curriculum, and instruction (Khan et al., 2023). By the current estimates more than 26 million children between the ages of 5-16 years are out of schools in Pakistan (ASER, 2024). The current literacy rate is 62.3% according to the Ministry of Federal Education, which means that a predictable population of 60 million is uneducated in the country (Majeed, 2023). Despite the disturbing figures the country spent only 1.77% of its GDP on education in 2024 (Turk, 2024), the country has faced numerous challenges when



## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

it comes to quality education specifically including insufficient resources, deprived infrastructure, and most importantly, a scarceness of skilled educators (Akhtar et al., 2024). The Cambridge International Education (CAIE) schools provide their students an academic break-through, opening doors to several prominent higher education institutions both within Pakistan and abroad. Although these institutions struggle to fulfil the expectations of their students, with service quality being a central aspect of achieving excellence (Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024), these students can only benefit if the required service quality is made available according to their desired expectation. According to British Council, till January 2019, it has registered 750 schools across Pakistan as “O” and “A” level schools, out of which it has 4 operational schools in Quetta offering both O/A level studies (Siddiqui & Mustafai, 2019).

CAIE schools foster critical thinking and analytical skills among students by providing a comprehensive learning experience (Sain & Serban, 2024). As the trend among Pakistani students to attend after-school tuition centers has certainly escalated to a level of obsession, the demand for O-Level and A-Level tuition particularly is much greater (Ali et al., 2024). This legitimately casts doubt regarding the service quality being provided by the Cambridge schools in Pakistan, making it imperative to evaluate the service quality gaps that have mushroomed the prospects of tuition culture in this sector. One framework that can be used to assess service quality is SERVQUAL, which measures the gap between the expected service quality and the perceived service quality (Parasuraman, 1985).

The present study intends to explore the service quality gaps within the Cambridge Schooling System in Quetta, Pakistan using the SERVQUAL framework. The SERVQUAL model is extensively recognized and frequently utilized by researchers to explore service quality in various service industries like; medical (Yousefi, 2023; Ahmed, 2018), hospitality (Sangpikul, 2023; Gupta, 2019; Gabrow, 2021), banking (Raza et al., 2020) and higher education (Khan et al, 2021; Raza, 2020; Khan et al, 2020).

The SERVQUAL model is effective as it can identify gaps in dimensions like Reliability and Empathy, offering actionable insights for enhancing service delivery in diverse educational settings (Mamun-ur-Rashid, 2023; Shetu & Hamid, 2021). Shadow education can be seen as a coping strategy against bridging the service quality gaps, the present study will also examine the prospects of shadow education within the Cambridge Schooling System in Pakistan. Shadow education is a term that figuratively signifies private tuition (Yousaf et al., 2023). Hence, private supplementary tutoring occupies a key standing in this context as it has been increasingly availed by parents and teachers as part of wider strategies to assist their children and students’ educational careers (Mustafa et al., 2021), which is why it is now considered an emerging market for the numerous struggling students who are striving to fit in the Cambridge System.

This study aspires to add in to the rolling discussion on the quality of education being offered by the Cambridge Schooling System in Pakistan together with presenting a significant analysis on the service quality gaps and their contributing factors.

### Literature Review

The Cambridge System of Education had emerged as an inventive system of education that not only provided a better alternative to the conventional local education system but also appeared as the only system of education providing an internationally recognized degree. This system of education operates in 160 countries around the globe (Siddiqui & Mustafai, 2019). The rigorous curriculum and international recognition of CAIE have acquired a substantial acceptance and an ever-growing demand in Pakistan too. With less than 60% of children enrolled in schools and a student-teacher ratio exceeding 35 in the public



## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

schools of the country, there are already signs of stress and hence private schools can play a role in breaking these institutional constraints (Akhtar et al., 2024).

Service quality is identified as "the degree to which the service meets or exceeds expectations" (Parasuraman, 1985). In the context of education, service quality gaps can occur due to numerous factors such as inadequate facilities, lack of qualified instructors, poorly designed curriculum, and inadequate resources (Mukherjee et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2024). Service quality gaps can have an undesirable effect on student learning outcomes, which can lead to poor academic performance and lower student satisfaction. It is therefore important that academicians should prioritize the needs of their students. With this, these academic institutions can evaluate their students' perception of service quality, effectively allocating their resources, thus prioritizing the major elements of service quality.

The Cambridge education system is becoming popular in Pakistan, with many schools offering Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) as an alternate to the local education system. Even though Cambridge studies offer better subject knowledge with enriched learning opportunities and a holistic approach to process-based learning of numerous subjects (Malik et al., 2020), poor percentage scores because of the conversion criteria make it difficult for O-level and A-level students to get admissions in top engineering and medical institutions (Ghias et al., 2024). Seemingly no service quality gaps can be identified in areas such as curriculum, teaching quality, assessment, and facilities in the CAIE, however concerns show that parents and students have high expectations of the Cambridge education system (Bashir & Zakar, 2024), but these expectations are not always met.

Shadow education refers to private tutoring or coaching, which is often used as a supplement to formal education (Ajmaine, 2024). Shadow education can play a role in overcoming the service quality gaps within the Cambridge education system in Pakistan. Research has shown that shadow education can improve student academic performance (Hajar, & Karakus, 2024; Mustafa et al., 2021). therefore, it is important to examine the prospects of shadow education in addressing the service quality gaps in the Cambridge Schooling System in Pakistan from a SERVQUAL perspective.

Several studies has adopted SERVQUAL model to measure quality in service industries as it offers a strong foundation that can be modified to fit the field being studied (Yousefi, 2023; Ahmed, 2018; Sangpikul, 2023; Gupta, 2019; Gabrow, 2021; Raza., 2020). Few studies conducted in Pakistan adopted SERVQUAL model to evaluate the service quality gaps in the education sector, particularly targeting the public and private universities (Khan et al, 2021; Raza, 2020; Khan et al, 2020), which indicated that scant studies targeted schools of the country. Although few studies examined the comprehensiveness and precision of the Cambridge Schooling System (Malik, 2020; Bashir & Zakar, 2024; Ghias et al., 2024), none of these highlighted the flawed features within the system. The shadow market, traditionally known as the 'academy culture', has grabbed a greater slice of its market share from private schools in contrast to the public schools (Ali et al., 2024), which generates an utter curiosity pertaining to the belief that the Cambridge Schooling System is flawless.

Henceforth, this research merely intends to evaluate the service quality of the Cambridge Schooling System in-context to the SERVQUAL dimensions and locate the service quality gaps that compel the students to undertake shadow education.



## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

### Theoretical framework

The SERVQUAL model generated by Parasuraman in 1985 acts as the underpinning structure of this theoretical framework. It is one of the most widely acclaimed models to evaluate service quality across various industries including education. Using this widely accepted model, the below-mentioned dimensions can be adapted and applied to the educational services:

**Reliability:** signifies consistent delivery of the curriculum.

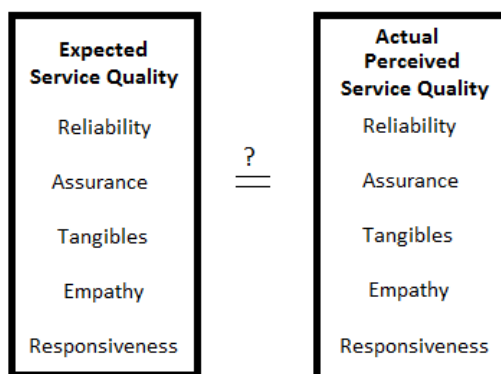
**Assurance:** examines the subject-knowledge, qualification and professional competence of faculty.

**Tangibles:** considers the tangible aspects of educational services, including physical amenities and mechanization of resources.

**Empathy:** evaluates the level of individualized attention, care, and consideration provided to students.

**Responsiveness:** assesses the compassion of the educational institution to address student inquiries, feedback, and requests for support.

The above-mentioned dimensions of service quality are the most crucial aspect of this research, consequently understanding the relationship between each of the dimensions and service quality is integral to evaluate the perceptions and expectations of the students.



The theoretical framework above shows a graphic relationship between the expected and perceived service quality. Keeping in view this illustration, the model of this research can be devised from the idea that service quality can be measured by the gap between students' expectations and their perceptions of the service they receive. The 'question mark and equal sign' between the two columns suggest that the goal of the SERVQUAL model is to determine whether the perceived service quality matches the expected service quality. Any discrepancies or gaps between these two components can indicate areas where the service provider may need to improve to meet customer expectations.

Following hypotheses were tested in the study:

There will be a significant difference between O/A levels students' expected and perceived reliability.

There will be a significant difference between O/A levels students' expected and perceived assurance.

There will be a significant difference between O/A levels students' expected and perceived tangibility.

There will be a significant difference between O/A levels students' expected and perceived empathy.

There will be a significant difference between O/A levels students' expected and perceived responsibility.



## Methodology

### Sample

In Quetta, two schools offer O/A level education system; The City School Quetta Campus and Beaconhouse Juniper Campus. The sample size for the study was 148 students out of which 74 were male and 74 were female. The age range was 15 to 30 years. Ethical considerations were kept into consideration to judiciously ensure the integrity of this study. Moreover, the participants were clearly informed about the purpose and procedure of the study, they were also taken into confidence regarding the confidentiality and privacy of their responses

### Tool

The tool was adapted from Pariseau and McDaniel (1997) to fit the context to measure the perceived service quality. The tool comprises two parts. The first part includes questions regarding the demographic characteristics of the students while the second part consists of two further sections; the first section evaluated students' expectations and the second evaluated students' perceptions. Each section has a set of 19 items, representing the five service quality dimensions tangibles (4 items), reliability (3 items), responsiveness (4 items), assurance (4 items) and empathy (4 items). Students were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## Results

The data was normally distributed as indicated by the values of skewness and kurtosis (Table 1). Cronbach's alpha for expected dimensions was .94 and for perceived dimensions as well, it was .94. Paired sample t tests for all the measures indicated significant differences between the expected and perceived dimensions of SERVQUAL with large effect sizes (Table 2). The results indicated consistently lower perceived means on all dimensions of SERVQUAL than expected means.

**Table 1. Descriptives**

	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Reliability	148	2.9662	1.03217	-1.4	2.5
Expected Reliability	148	4.3018	0.75727	-.24	-.70
Perceived Assurance	148	3.1368	1.01784	-1.36	2.3
Expected Assurance	148	4.2956	0.74462	-.35	-.69
Perceived Tangibility	148	2.772	1.05742	-1.49	2.5
Expected Tangibility	148	4.353	0.66364	-.19	-.73
Perceived Empathy	148	2.9865	1.05535	-1.52	2.7
Expected Empathy	148	4.2348	0.82336	-.03	-.96
Perceived Responsibility	148	3.0997	1.04765	-1.36	2.7
Expected Responsibility	148	4.3209	0.71431	-1.52	2.7



## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

**Table 2. Paired Sample t test**

	t	df	p	Effect size
Expected reliability- perceived reliability	13.42	147	.000	1.09
Expected assurance- perceived assurance	12.22	147	.000	1.02
Expected tangibility- perceived tangibility	15.23	147	.000	1.25
Expected empathy- perceived empathy	11.02	147	.000	.91
Expected responsibility- perceived responsibility	11.48	147	.000	.94

### Discussion

The findings of current study are both similar and inconsistent with the previous findings. O/A levels or Cambridge education system is considered to be more comprehensive and relevant in today's world than traditional matric/ Intermediate system in Pakistan (Ishfaq & Din, 2011). However the findings of current study show that students do not perceive O/A levels education system as delivered in The City School and Beaconhouse Juniper Campus, Quetta coming up to their expectations on SERVQUAL dimensions.

Likewise, a study was conducted on the secondary schools in Punjab, Pakistan presented a comparative analysis of service quality in the public and private secondary schools. The results showed a significant difference in the mean scores of perceived service quality for both public and private schooling systems across all five SERVQUAL dimensions and further indicated that the respondents of public education institutions had perceived higher service quality than the private (Jabbar et al., 2020). As Cambridge schools operate under the private education system, the results of this study are consistent with current research.

### Conclusion

The key objective of this study was to identify the specific areas where the Cambridge schools fall short of the students' expectations. The analysis revealed considerable gaps across all five SERVQUAL dimensions, specifically in tangibles, where the students felt the most dissatisfaction. This finding highlights the need for Cambridge schools to improve their physical facilities and resources to better meet student expectations. This study further emphasizes the perceived deficiencies in service quality that is a major justification for students' mushrooming inclination towards the shadow education market. Improving service quality in Cambridge schools requires an ongoing effort to enhance physical amenities, teaching quality, and responsiveness to students' needs. It is important to understand that a satisfied student is generally more engaged and motivated to learn, which not only enhances students' academic performances, their trust and ownership in their academic institutions but also school's reputation altogether. These satisfied students that now contribute to a positive school culture, later promote a positive societal culture exemplified by mutual respect, cooperation, and a shared commitment to learning.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

A few limitations of this research include the inadequacy of sample size which might have affected the generalizability of the findings. The sample size in this research was relatively small as it solely targeted the Cambridge schools in Quetta which may limit the ability to



## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

generalize the findings to a broader population of the country. Similarly, results based upon self-reported data that might have affected the accuracy of responses due to recall bias. Likewise, a sole focus on students' perspective neglects the views of other important stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and administrators which is equally crucial to obtain a holistic understanding of the service quality.

Considering these limitations a few recommendations can be suggested. Firstly, expansion of sample size to enhance the reliability of findings by involving multiple schools around the country Secondly, incorporating additional methods such as student interviews and focus group surveys can help obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and experiences. Finally, employing a longitudinal research design will allow researchers to track changes in students' expectations and perceptions over time.

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## Vol. 3 No. 10 (October) (2025)

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