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# Superqual

## *A tool to explore the initial expectations of PhD students and supervisors*

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**ABSTRACT** In recent years there has been growing concern to improve standards in postgraduate research. Much of this has focused on generic research skills training. However, there are other, equally important, supervisory aspects such as welfare, mentoring and support arrangements. This article focuses on the initial expectations, of both students and supervisors, of their roles and duties at the start of the supervisory process. Using concepts from the service quality literature, an instrument 'Superqual' is developed aimed at exposing any gaps in expectations that, if not resolved, could generate problems during the life of a doctorate. The use of Superqual in a number of case studies is reported. The results are mostly positive, and suggestions are made for its improvement and adoption.

**KEYWORDS:** *expectations, postgraduate supervision, service quality, SERVQUAL*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been growing pressure to improve standards in postgraduate research programmes. The recent joint consultation process, initiated by the four UK higher education funding bodies (JFC, 2003), invites higher education institutes to develop threshold standards across a range of practices.

Much of the focus has been on generic skills training, and the 'NewRoutePhD' along the North American 3+1 framework is one product of this thinking. However, there is another aspect that is equally important – the supervisory relationship itself, 'a good relationship between supervisor and student is one of the most powerful and lasting relationships you can have. Get it right and the bond will be sealed for life' (Bassnett, 2003: 23). The joint funding bodies' consultative paper suggests that 'there should be regular structured interactions between student and supervisor' (JFC, 2003: 9) but gives little guidance on the nature of the interaction. The literature on studying for a PhD, however, stresses the desirability of a

negotiated model of student supervision where expectations are made explicit as early as possible. For example Wisker talks about setting up a learning contract that clarifies the ‘ground rules of expectations and behaviours’ (Wisker, 2001: 54). Yet Phillips and Pugh (2000) acknowledge a common problem, that meetings between supervisor and student tend to be dominated by technical and logistic elements whereas issues concerning expectations and behaviours can become taboo topics. So it is perhaps unreasonable to expect the student to initiate discussion on these taboo subjects. Supervisors too may have problems broaching these subjects. They may have poor interpersonal skills, or poor listening skills, or they simply may not realize that there are any differences between their expectations and those of the student.

Although it is commonly agreed that ‘a good supervisor–student relationship can only thrive if both parties share mutual expectations and have established ground rules about the regularity, type and focus of supervisions’ (Wisker, 2003: 24), it is not so easy to create these conditions. Hence a tool in the form of an inventory of expectations may prove useful in initiating discussion especially if it is seen as being independent of both the supervisor and student. In this article the development and testing of a tool named Superqual is reported. The goals are to make explicit the initial expectations of PhD student and supervisor, to promote discussion and to expose problems at an early stage. It is hoped that this simple tool will help ease and structure this process.

## **Development of Superqual**

The instrument used in these case studies is based on the SERVQUAL instrument, developed by Zeithaml et al. (1990) to measure customer service quality.

SERVQUAL is the best known example of the disconfirmation approach, wherein service quality is measured by how well the service delivered ‘disconfirms’ the customer’s expectations. Hence Parasuraman et al. (1988) define service quality in terms of the gap between customers’ expectations of service and their perceptions of the service experience. There are a number of critiques of the instrument and of the underlying model (see, for example, Cronin and Taylor, 1992); however, it has been widely used in measuring service quality in a vast array of contexts including higher education.

The SERVQUAL instrument measures five underlying dimensions of customer service expectations and perceptions:

Tangibles:	Facilities, equipment, materials and employee appearance.
Reliability:	On time, first time.

Responsiveness: Prompt, willing service.  
 Assurance: Knowledge, courtesy, trust and confidence.  
 Empathy: Tailored, caring personal attention.

Are these dimensions of customer service appropriate in the postgraduate setting? Pole and Sprokkereef (1997) used in-depth interviews to examine PhD students' expectations of supervisors and found that among the desirable qualities for a supervisor were:

Organization and structure (Reliability).  
 Availability, uninterrupted meetings (Responsiveness).  
 Expertise, knowledge, reassurance (Assurance).  
 Interest, passion (Empathy).

With the possible exception of 'tangibles', the dimensions covered by SERVQUAL appear to be relevant to PhD students. Indeed, SERVQUAL has already been used in higher education with some success.

Cuthbert (1996a, 1996b) used it to measure undergraduate perceptions in Manchester. The instrument was quite heavily modified, especially by use of negative statements. Cuthbert found that his version had poor reliability and, more worryingly, different dimensions emerged other than the five Zeithaml et al. had suggested. Brown (1998) used it to measure postgraduate perceptions on an MBA course in England. He used only slight modifications of SERVQUAL but did not test the reliability of the instrument. Slade et al. (2000) used it on Australian undergraduates looking, in particular, at differences in expectations between students who left and those who completed their studies. They made only slight changes and reported good reliability. Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003) also used it on Australian undergraduates, concentrating on differing student perceptions of administrative and academic staff. They used slight modifications but reported no test of reliability. Finally, Sherry et al. (2003) used the instrument to look at differences between the expectations and perceptions of home and foreign students among New Zealand undergraduates. Their study, based on work carried out by East (2001), reported good reliability using only a slight modification of the classic SERVQUAL instrument.

The work carried out so far using SERVQUAL in a higher education context would seem to suggest that the instrument can be used successfully, as long as the modifications are kept to a minimum. However, the author could find no work specifically using SERVQUAL on PhD students or on supervisors and there may be good reasons for this.

PhD supervision differs from both undergraduate and even taught postgraduate courses in terms of the complex and subtle relationship between supervisor and student. This makes the simple view of PhD students as

customers problematic. In the standard company–customer relationship the service provider provides a service to the customer. This may include an element of training but service providers do not generally train the customer to replace them! Yet this is precisely what the supervisor is aiming to do. Gurr (2001) argues that the goal of supervision is ‘competent autonomy’ so that the student is able to become an autonomous but competent researcher. Phillips and Pugh (2000) argue that supervisors are training postgraduate students to become their own supervisor while Pole and Sprokkereef (1997) say that the supervisor acts as a kind of gatekeeper for entry to the academic world.

In order to develop the instrument, Superqual, to explore initial supervisor–student expectations SERVQUAL has been amended in two ways. Firstly there have been some minor changes to the actual statements used. Secondly there have been some major changes in the way the instrument is implemented.

Superqual comprises 22 statements covering all five of the service quality dimensions (see Appendix 1). Institutional functions (tangibles) are covered as well as supervisory functions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy). Tangibles are included to help establish some commonality and to make the use of the tool less confrontational. The response format was a seven-point Likert scale, couched in terms of importance rather than agreement. A caveat to be realistic and to prioritize was added, as it would be easy to give maximum importance to the majority of the statements.

The evidence of the research cited earlier is that changes to the statements should be kept to a minimum and so the wording was kept as close as possible to that used in previous research using SERVQUAL in a higher education setting. In particular all the statements were positively phrased, as the evidence was that these were more reliable. Nevertheless it is important that the instrument covers all the important issues and in, particular, acknowledges the specificity of the PhD experience. This was reflected in a number of non-standard statements, for example statements about constructive criticism (Q21), competent autonomy (Q19) and the concept of a research culture (Q18).

Although there were few changes to the actual statements, there were two major changes to the way Superqual was implemented. Firstly the classic use of SERVQUAL asks customers to respond to the statements twice, once about ‘excellent companies’ (their expectations) and once about the actual company (perceptions). Analysis centres on the gaps between customers’ expectations and perceptions. This is inappropriate to the early stages of the supervisor–student relationship as perceptions have not yet formed. However, Zeithaml et al. (1990) note that the gap between

customer expectation and perception may be due to a number of smaller gaps and they suggest ways that SERVQUAL can be adapted to measure these. One of these sub-gaps is between customer expectation and management perceptions of customer expectation and SERVQUAL can be used to ascertain the expectations of both. Superqual is used in this fashion, to compare the expectations of supervisor and student.

Secondly instead of using the SERVQUAL statements in a standardized structured questionnaire, Superqual uses them as a template for a semi-structured qualitative discussion in a one-to-one setting. The introductory rubric emphasizes that both supervisor and student should complete the questions in private making explicit their own expectations. The concluding rubric explains that they should then come together to discuss their expectations, uncover any gaps and hopefully resolve their differences (see Appendix 1).

Used in this way, as a basis for discussion and negotiated agreement, the statements themselves are really of secondary importance, what matters is the process of asking, leading to reflection, discussion, negotiation and resolution.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of the case studies reported here was to evaluate Superqual. There are a number of possible approaches to evaluation, formative evaluation, summative evaluation, illuminative evaluation and integrative evaluation (Jackson, 2003). The approach taken here is largely illuminative evaluation, trying to discover those aspects of Superqual that work best by identifying the issues that are most pertinent to the participants. However, the four categories of evaluation often overlap and there are also elements of formative and integrative evaluation with the aim of modifying either the content or the implementation of Superqual. The method adopted was semi-structured interviews of a small number of student-supervisor pairings which is particularly suitable for this type of evaluation.

Twelve students were selected from a cohort of 24 who were all in the first few months of their PhDs. While the sample was small and clearly limited, a great deal of care was taken to ensure that key variables such as gender, ethnicity, subject area and supervisor experience were adequately covered. The supervisor and student were both asked to complete Superqual and then meet to discuss the results. Seven out of the 12 did so giving a response rate of 58 per cent. All seven of the supervisors were British; two were female and five male. There was a range of experience with two of the supervisors being very new and three very experienced. Two of the seven students were UK nationals, four were European and one Asian. There were

four males and three females. They ranged from mature students returning to full-time education after a period of employment to those coming directly from undergraduate courses. Three of the students were registered in the Business School, one in Education, one in Social Sciences and two in Science.

Respondents were contacted in mid November and the meetings between supervisor and student were supposed to take place before Christmas. In fact there was a much wider range of timing with the first pair meeting in November, three in December, one in January and two in March. The discussion that follows is based on semi-structured interviews with the supervisors. The views of the students will be the subject of another paper that compares the experiences later in the postdoctoral process between those who have and those who have not used Superqual.

## Results

There was a good deal of variation in supervisors' overall perception of Superqual. Two were very positive, two were reasonably positive, two were neutral and one was negative. A typical neutral comment was:

I didn't really learn anything about the student that I didn't already know. (S6)

However, even here there was some positive feedback:

I didn't really learn anything new but it did firm up a number of ideas (about the student) I already had in my head. (S4)

On the other hand there was more positive feedback, for example:

He is quite a serious student and it is difficult to know what he really feels . . . I learnt a lot about how he thinks of research. (S2)

I really felt that I began to understand his problems, coming here to study in a strange country. (S3)

Only one of the supervisors was antagonistic but admitted to

an aversion to training for supervisors which predates receipt of this form. (S1)

Overall perceptions were related to the length of the meeting with students, which varied from 20 minutes up to an hour; to when the meeting took place; and to level of experience of the supervisor. It was noticeable that the later the meeting, the shorter and less useful it proved to be; for example the feedback from those who met in March was at best neutral. It was also noticeable that the longer and most productive meetings came with the least experienced supervisors.

Analysis of the completed forms from both supervisor and student showed that there was little overall disagreement, the overall mean gap was

just over 1. However, even when there was agreement this could be an important factor. For example many supervisors reported that question 19: ‘Supervisors . . . will ensure research students eventually become competent autonomous researchers’ was a key question. The fact that there was little disagreement on this was openly welcomed:

I was very pleased that we were at one on this . . . I hadn’t had time to discuss this with the student and I was pleased that the question had been aired and the result was harmonious. (S2)

The answer was not a bolt from the blue but I was very pleased about it. This was one question that I wasn’t so sure about. (S7)

The student was more independent than I thought she might be . . . and I was pleased about that. (S6)

Supervisors also welcomed the opportunity to discuss the full range of topics even if there was little disagreement:

It put all the issues clearly on the table . . . in future we will both be happy to raise those issues again. (S2)

Although there was little disagreement in terms of mean scores – only five of the 22 questions (Nos 7, 10, 11, 20 and 21) elicited no disagreement from anybody – most questions led to some disagreement between at least one pair of respondents (disagreement is defined as a gap of at least two in the scores). There were also a number of questions that fairly consistently caused some discussion (in at least three separate cases). These will be considered under the five dimensions.

## **Tangibles**

There was one question that caused discussion, Q4: ‘Excellent universities should help provide a good living environment for research students’. Foreign students tended to rate this higher than their indigenous supervisors, interpreting the question more widely, meaning help in coming to terms with a new environment. With indigenous students the opposite often occurred, with supervisors scoring more highly. Comments included:

He mentioned things like opening a bank account while I just took it to mean finding a place to live. (S7)

She’s a local girl, she didn’t need any help but I was answering this more generally, about all students. (S4)

## **Reliability**

There was disagreement on two questions, Q8 ‘When a research student has a problem, supervisors at an excellent university will show a sincere interest in helping to solve it’



and Q9 ‘supervisors at an excellent university will ensure that research students plan an adequate programme of work and keep records’. In fact the disagreement in both questions is related to the level of independence that a student should exhibit. Sometimes there was disagreement because the supervisor felt that the student was in danger of becoming too autonomous too early. In these cases the supervisors felt that this should be flagged as a potential concern:

He (the student) felt that when any problem arose within his research he should first try and solve it himself and only seek help when he failed but I was worried that he would waste a lot of effort going down blind avenues. (S3)

There’s a real danger that she will go off on a tangent if I don’t keep some check over what she does. (S4)

However, in other cases the problem seemed to be that the supervisor was anxious to encourage independence and not to solve all problems too quickly:

I didn’t want her to feel that I was pushing her in a particular direction but she felt that I wasn’t taking an interest. (S5)

The disagreement over the keeping of records was also related to levels of autonomy. Students often felt that record keeping should be their duty while supervisors felt it was their responsibility to ensure that students had some structure to their work. One supervisor, from the science faculty, explained that keeping accurate records was critical as often experiments may not be reproducible and this should not be left entirely to the student.

### **Responsiveness**

There were two questions that generated disagreement, Q12 ‘Supervisors at an excellent university will be willing to help research students’ and Q14 ‘Supervisors at an excellent university will never be too busy to respond to research students’ requests’. Both these questions are very similar and in all cases students rated them higher than supervisors. In the former there was often a difference in interpretation; supervisors would emphasize that they may not always be able to ‘help’ while students would emphasize the word ‘willing’. In the latter, supervisors argued that they could not realistically be expected to answer questions immediately whereas students tended to view ‘respond’ as meaning at least an initial acknowledgement. They recognized that supervisors could not always respond quickly; however, receiving no response or a vague response was frustrating, and an acknowledgement of the problem should be received quickly, together with an indication of the likely timeframe for addressing the problem.

## Assurance

Q17 'An excellent university will offer research students a range of support and training services' generated some disagreement. Students tended to rate this more highly than supervisors. There was also some disagreement over Q16 'Supervisors . . . will always be courteous and polite' although, curiously, supervisors always rated this more highly than the students.

She [the student] seemed to welcome bluntness and honesty. (S5)

This may be related to the general consensus around Q21 'Supervisors . . . sometimes need to be constructively critical in the best interests of the student'.

## Empathy

Q22 'Supervisors . . . should . . . understand the needs of both international and domestic students' also generated some disagreement. Foreign students in particular valued empathic understanding of their wider needs, especially with respect to their integration into Scottish society.

A number of themes seem to emerge from this analysis. Firstly there were few serious disagreements, a great deal of the disagreement occurred because of differences in interpretation of the questions, in the meanings ascribed to them, and could be resolved fairly easily. Secondly the issue of the relative autonomy of the student came up in discussions over a number of questions, although, interestingly, not in response to the direct question on the goal of 'competent autonomy' (Q19). It would seem that the pertinent issues were to do with timing rather than the eventual goal. Finally issues surrounding the wider needs of foreign students came up a number of times.

## Conclusion

The case studies reported here have looked at Superqual very much from the supervisors' perspective. A complete evaluation of Superqual also needs to consider the longer-term student perspective and that work is on-going. However, supervisors' consent to the process is clearly crucial if the use of Superqual is to be accepted and these case studies can help shed light on this. In this regard a number of positive factors have emerged about the use of Superqual.

Firstly, Superqual was generally felt to be useful. Most supervisors felt that the meetings with students were productive. Some practical issues were sorted out and a number of concerns were flagged. As well as these practical benefits, the relationship between supervisor and student was subtly strengthened. Even when there was little actual disagreement many still felt the exercise had been useful if only in a confirmatory sense.

It may be argued that Superqual is unnecessary. The same ends could be met by a friendly chat over drinks in the local pub. This is true and the author would not want to discourage this. However, there may be factors such as personality, gender or ethnicity that mitigate against such a cosy relationship. It was notable that some of the most positive assessments of Superqual came from supervisors with foreign students. However, it also found favour among the two supervisors who had known their students for some time prior to the start of supervision because it enabled the issues to be presented in a neutral fashion as emanating from a third party:

I've known [the student] for years but we've never really talked about some of this stuff. (S5)

It was strange to meet and not talk about work . . . the discussion was useful because it explored a range of issues in a non-threatening way. (S4)

Secondly, despite the small size of sample, there is no evidence to suggest that the dimensions and statements used in Superqual are inappropriate. A number of statements across all five dimensions generated discussion; no one dimension seemed more important than any other. In fact, despite the small sample, all but five of the 22 statements generated some discussion among some respondents indicating that there is little obvious scope for cutting out statements. Also the new statements covering autonomy, constructive criticism and research culture were all well received and initiated important dialogue. Indeed autonomy seemed to be a key issue that came up in a number of different questions. Finally there was no evidence that any important elements had been left out. Supervisors were expressly asked if they felt there were any aspects that had been omitted but none were volunteered.

Thirdly, there was general support for the way Superqual was implemented. It may be argued that the approach is overly technicist. As one supervisor stressed,

The student-supervisor relationship is not generic but individual, some students go their own way, others require constant help. (S1)

However, the way that Superqual was used seemed to allow for individual tailoring. As emphasized in the concluding rubric (Appendix 1), the statements are to be taken as a starting point to a more general discussion. Although a number of supervisors claimed that, when talking with the student, many of the disagreements turned out to be 'only a matter of interpretation, of meaning' this is somewhat ingenuous. Conversations, as writers such as Grice (1975) and Bateson (1984) remind us, are essentially a transfer of meaning through the medium of words. Hence sorting out

differences in meaning, of subtleties in interpretation, in face to face discussion, is actually quite a crucial aspect of communicating.

There were also a number of more negative factors that emerged from the case studies. Firstly it was clear that Superqual was found to be more beneficial the earlier it was used. The last two case studies, which took place when the students had been in place over six months, did not find Superqual to be as useful as those that took place in the first three to four months.

Secondly Superqual was taken up more enthusiastically by newer supervisors and it is possible that the tool will not be used by more experienced supervisors. Certainly the response rate of 58 per cent indicates that this may be an important factor. At the institution where the case studies were carried out it is clear that supervisors, especially experienced supervisors, are very busy people. At least two of the non-responders were promoted to senior management positions during the time of the study. This meant firstly that the project was quite low down on their list of priorities and secondly that it was difficult for the author to successfully badger them to complete the study.

What lessons have been learned from this evaluation? Firstly, it seems that it is more useful the earlier in the candidature it is used. It could, for example, be built into the general student induction process. Secondly, it is also likely to be of more immediate benefit to relatively new supervisors rather than established supervisors. Indeed it may be usefully employed in the training programmes for doctoral supervisors, which are now being developed within the British academic system. Thirdly, if it were to be administered universally, there are issues of non-compliance and of late compliance that would need to be addressed.

Finally there is the potential of widening the scope of its use. In this article only a single relationship between supervisor and student has been considered but increasingly PhD supervision is being undertaken by teams of supervisors. The use of supervisory teams has clear advantages, but is not without its problems, especially in terms of the group dynamics between colleagues of differing seniority. The tool, or something similar, may be useful within supervisory teams to make explicit different approaches from different supervisors.

As discussed earlier, a complete evaluation of Superqual requires us to consider if its use is of benefit to students. In particular are those who have experienced Superqual better equipped to deal with the doctoral process as it unfolds than those who have not? This question can only be evaluated later after a suitable passage of time and that work is on-going. However, in the meantime, the evidence in this study of the supervisors' perspective indicates that Superqual has some merit and has been found to be useful

in a number of cases. It is also not very onerous. As a practising teaching academic and supervisor, the author is extremely reluctant to suggest to colleagues that they fill in yet another form. However, in the current climate within Higher Education, with the emphasis on enhancement and on audit trails, it is only a matter of time before something similar to Superqual is foisted onto supervisors. If such an instrument is to be used surely it is better to have one that has been developed with some thought and properly tested rather than one that has been devised by administrators.

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## Appendix 1: Superqual

**Introductory rubric:** Thank you for agreeing to take part in this evaluation of Superqual which is being funded by the Academy. The aim of Superqual is to help diagnose potential problems that may otherwise emerge over the course of candidature and to allow the relationship between supervisor and student to develop.

Both the Student and the Supervisor are asked to complete separate copies of this questionnaire.

Please think about the kind of university that would deliver an excellent quality of research environment. Then read the statements below that present features that an excellent university might possess.

There are no right or wrong answers, just select a number that truly reflects your feelings.

Please try to be realistic in your assessment – even excellent universities cannot provide everything so try to prioritize what really matters to you.

If you feel a feature is not very important for an excellent university please circle the number 1.

If you feel a feature is absolutely essential for an excellent university please circle the number 7.

If your feelings are less strong circle one of the numbers in the middle.

- Q1. Excellent universities should provide up-to-date equipment including computing facilities for research students.
- Q2. Excellent universities should provide a good study environment for research students.
- Q3. Excellent universities should provide adequate support and training for supervisors.

- Q4. Excellent universities should help to provide a good living environment for research students.
- Q5. When supervisors at an excellent university promise to do something by a certain time, they should do so.
- Q6. When research students at an excellent university promise to do something by a certain time, they should do so.
- Q7. Supervisors at an excellent university will assess research students' work carefully and accurately.
- Q8. When a research student has a problem, supervisors at an excellent university will show a sincere interest in helping to solve it.
- Q9. Supervisors at an excellent university will ensure that research students plan an adequate programme of work and will keep accurate records.
- Q10. Supervisors at an excellent university will be concerned about the educational progress of their research students.
- Q11. Supervisors at an excellent university will respond promptly to research students' needs.
- Q12. Supervisors at an excellent university will always be willing to help research students.
- Q13. Supervisors at an excellent university will have extensive knowledge in their field of training.
- Q14. Supervisors at an excellent university will never be too busy to respond to research students' requests.
- Q15. Supervisors at an excellent university should keep convenient office hours for all research students.
- Q16. Supervisors at an excellent university will always be courteous and polite.
- Q17. An excellent university will offer research students a range of support and training services.
- Q18. Excellent universities should ensure new research students contribute to and benefit from the research culture of the university.
- Q19. Supervisors at an excellent university will ensure research students eventually become competent autonomous researchers.
- Q20. When research students have problems, supervisors at an excellent university should be sympathetic and reassuring.
- Q21. Supervisors at an excellent university sometimes need to be constructively critical in the best interests of the research student.
- Q22. Supervisors at an excellent university should understand the needs of both international and domestic students.

**Concluding rubric:** Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Remember that the aim of Superqual is to help diagnose potential problems and to allow the relationship between supervisor and student to develop.

Both the supervisor and the student should now bring their answers to a meeting

arranged solely to compare the responses to the statements. In particular you should address the following:

1. In what specific areas is there a lack of agreement between student and supervisor?
2. Is there any more general lack of agreement between the overall views of the student and the supervisor?

The meeting should provide an opportunity to discuss these differences. It is suggested that a record of the discussion is made and any negotiated recommendations be recorded.

Note: the following did not form part of the Superqual instrument but is included for information:

Questions 1 to 4 cover the Tangibles dimension, questions 5 to 9 cover Reliability, questions 10–12 and 14 cover Responsiveness, questions 13, 16, 17 and 19 cover Assurance, and questions 15, 18 and 20–22 cover Empathy.

### **Biographical note**

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