

Service Quality Assurance Influencing Postgraduate Student Satisfaction in Business School: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract: *This conceptual review examines the multidimensional linkages between quality assurance on academic and administrative service resulting to postgraduate student satisfaction in business school contexts. Recognising the complexity of actual service delivery in higher education, the study synthesises insights from Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and the SERVQUAL model to construct an integrated conceptual framework. The proposed framework delineates five core service quality dimensions that collectively influence postgraduate students' evaluative perceptions and overall satisfaction with their academic experience. By consolidating the key elements of theoretical perspectives, the review highlights a structured foundation in explaining core views on academic and administrative service delivery mechanisms shape satisfaction outcomes in postgraduate business education: perceived price value, student learning environment, employee commitment, assurance, and empathy. Through a systematic synthesis of seminal theoretical foundations and recent empirical studies across diverse higher education contexts, this paper advances theory-driven propositions explaining how postgraduate students form satisfaction experiences by aligning their actual expectations with perceived academic and administrative service quality. By explicitly integrating EDT with the SERVQUAL framework, the review offers a distinct theoretical contribution that extends satisfaction formation mechanisms beyond traditional consumer environments and conceptualises postgraduate students as active evaluators of complex educational services. The proposed integrated framework provides strategic implications for business school leaders and administrators by identifying key service quality dimensions that can strengthen student satisfaction, improve resource prioritisation, and cultivate sustained postgraduate student experiences and loyalty comes with an increasingly competitive learning environment landscape. Overall, the study enriches higher education marketing and service management scholarship by offering a theory-informed and contextually grounded explanation of postgraduate student satisfaction and loyalty.*

Keywords: EDT, Postgraduate student satisfaction, 'Service quality', SERVQUAL, Business school

1. Introduction

In the past three decades, higher education has transitioned from a predominantly academic enterprise to a market-oriented sector characterised by intensified competition for students, financial resources, and institutional reputation (Hill, 1995). Within this competitive environment, business schools face particularly acute pressures in recruiting and retaining

postgraduate students, who constitute a vital source of revenue while simultaneously contributing to long-term alum engagement and institutional prestige (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997; Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024). Contemporary evidence suggests that business schools globally are encountering escalating challenges related to enrolment volatility, financial sustainability, and rapidly shifting student expectations. These challenges have been further amplified in the post-pandemic context as conventional models of educational delivery are increasingly scrutinised (Subekhan et al., 2025). Consequently, identifying and understanding the determinants of 'student satisfaction' has become a strategic imperative for institutional effectiveness and long-term sustainability (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022).

Through practice, postgraduate 'student satisfaction' in business school extends beyond simple evaluations of instructional quality, reflecting a multifaceted construct shaped by academic standards, service processes, learning environments, and interpersonal interactions (Douglas et al., 2008; Wider et al., 2024). For postgraduate business students, many of whom are employed professionals or individuals undertaking career transitions, satisfaction is closely associated with perceived value for money, anticipated returns on investment, and greater congruence between pre-enrolment expectations and the lived educational experiences (DeShields et al., 2005; Rahman et al., 2024). Thus, recent empirical studies further highlight the growing influence of digital integration, blended or hybrid learning modalities, and service transparency on satisfaction outcomes (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Zaidi et al., 2023). Importantly, dissatisfaction among postgraduate students has been linked to higher withdrawal rates, negative, vindictive word of mouth, and diminished alum engagement, all of which pose significant risks to institutional reputation and long-term viability (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Although extensive research on quality academic and administrative service in universities has been conducted, important conceptual and contextual gaps still remain. Much past and existing literature has concentrated predominantly on undergraduate settings or has applied generic service quality models without sufficient adaptation to the distinctive characteristics of postgraduate education. As a result, the complexity of postgraduate students' expectations, professional orientations, and evaluative processes has not been fully captured. Accordingly, there is a need for more theoretically grounded, context-sensitive analyses that reflect the unique dynamics of postgraduate programmes, particularly within business schools, where academic, professional, and industry-linked services intersect. Addressing these gaps can consolidate a precise knowledge of how quality academic and administrative service dimensions influence postgraduate student experiences and related outcomes. (Alemu, 2023; Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1988). Existing conceptual models often fail to adequately capture the distinctive characteristics of postgraduate business education. In particular, many frameworks overlook the heightened consumer awareness, substantial financial commitment, and explicitly career-oriented motivations that typify postgraduate business students, as well as the need for a more comprehensive articulation of service quality dimensions (Aboubakr & Bayoumy, 2022). Although undergraduate student satisfaction has been extensively explored in research studies as a key endogenous variable in higher education, less attention has been given to the mechanisms through which service quality drives loyalty-related behaviours. In particular, the mediating or moderating processes linking service quality to retention, recommendation, and ongoing engagement remain underexplored, especially amid digital transformation and increasingly diverse postgraduate student populations, which shape expectations and evaluative judgments (Khashab et al., 2022).

1.1 Research Objectives

This conceptual review seeks to address the identified theoretical and contextual gaps by developing an integrated framework that explicates the mechanisms by which ‘service quality’ assurance shapes postgraduate student satisfaction and subsequent ‘loyalty’ in business schools. Drawing on contemporary higher education and services marketing studies (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Rahman et al., 2024), the paper advances a structured theoretical synthesis with the following objectives.

First, this study presents a comprehensive and critical conceptual review of the extant literature on quality academic and administrative services and their impact on university student satisfaction in postgraduate business education, with a clear focus on empirical research published over the past five years. By evaluating recent theoretical and methodological developments, it highlights key insights, identifies gaps, and ensures both conceptual depth and relevance to current educational contexts. Second, it integrates EDT (Oliver, 1980, 1993) and aligns with the ‘SERVQUAL’ key dimension (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988) to construct a cohesive, context-sensitive framework tailored to contemporary business school environments characterised by digital transformation and heightened student expectations. Third, the paper identifies and theoretically substantiates five salient service quality predictors, price value, learning environment, employee commitment, empathy, and assurance, as key antecedents of postgraduate ‘student satisfaction’, grounding their selection in recent empirical evidence and evolving sectoral demands (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022; Zaidi et al., 2023). Fourth, this proposed study develops theoretically informed propositions that clearly explain the connections among quality academic and administrative service dimensions, student satisfaction perspectives, and resulting student loyalty outcomes in universities. These propositions are grounded in established satisfaction–loyalty frameworks within higher education research, demonstrating how specific aspects of service quality influence students’ evaluative judgments and, in turn, shape their behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. By articulating these connections, the study provides a structured understanding of the mechanisms through which improvements in service quality can foster satisfaction and encourage long-term engagement, retention, and advocacy among postgraduate students. Finally, the study translates its theoretical contributions into practical implications by offering evidence-informed recommendations for business school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance service delivery, strengthen student experiences, and secure long-term institutional sustainability in an increasingly challenging, market-driven business school environment.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The proposed conceptual framework yields substantive theoretical and practical contributions to the higher education service quality literature. From a theoretical perspective, it advances existing studies by demonstrating how consumer behaviour theory, specifically EDT, can be systematically integrated with service marketing frameworks such as SERVQUAL to enhance explanatory depth and conceptual robustness (Schiebler et al., 2025). While SERVQUAL has been widely adopted to assess perceived service performance, it has been criticised for failing to capture the dynamic processes of expectation–performance comparisons that underpin satisfaction formation (Oliver, 1980). By embedding SERVQUAL dimensions within the expectation–disconfirmation mechanism articulated in EDT, the framework provides a more comprehensive account of how postgraduate students evaluate educational experiences. Recent meta-analytic findings further affirm that expectation-disconfirmation processes remain foundational to satisfaction development across service industries, with particularly pronounced effects in higher education contexts characterised by multidimensional, interactive, and co-created service experiences (Ramamany et al., 2024).

From a practical standpoint, the framework offers business schools a structured diagnostic lens for evaluating and strategically enhancing ‘service quality’. Contemporary evidence suggests that institutions must move beyond traditional quality dimensions to incorporate emergent priorities, including digital capability, transparency in administrative processes, and institutional social commitments and responsibilities (Iqbal et al., 2024; Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024). By elucidating the precise mechanisms through which different dimensions of quality academic and administrative service will influence postgraduate students’ satisfaction and, ultimately, drive loyalty outcomes, this study highlights how each aspect of academic and administrative service provision, such as responsiveness, reliability, assurance, personalised empathy, and tangibility, contributes to students’ overall evaluative judgments. It demonstrates why these elements of service quality affect postgraduate student satisfaction, and elaborates how these elements of satisfaction experiences translate into concrete loyalty behaviours, including continued enrolment, positive recommendations, and sustained engagement with the institution. The self-explanatory, detailed mapping of relationships gives a clearer platform for understanding the sequential and interdependent processes that underpin the formation of student loyalty in postgraduate education. This framework supports more informed managerial decision-making in areas such as resource prioritisation, targeted service improvements, and service recovery initiatives (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In light of enrolment volatility in certain regions, intensifying global competition, and evolving post-pandemic student expectations, such evidence-based insights are critical for sustaining institutional competitiveness and long-term viability (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Stankovska et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Quality Academic and Administrative Service in the Higher Education Context

The positioning of higher education institutions as a quality service provider has long been the subject of scholarly and professional debate (Hill, 1995). While traditional perspectives have conceptualised higher education primarily as tertiary education and a means of crucial societal transformation in communities, contemporary viewpoints increasingly recognise education as a service that must meet the expectations and needs of its recipients. This shift reflects the growing emphasis on viewing students not merely as passive beneficiaries of knowledge but as active consumers of educational services, whose satisfaction and evaluative judgments are shaped by the quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of the institution’s offerings. Consequently, modern approaches highlight the service-delivery perspective of higher education, particularly teaching effectiveness, administrative support, and postgraduate student learning resources, to the overall student experience, alongside its broader social and developmental functions (Zhu & Sharp, 2022). This reconceptualisation mirrors broader structural shifts in higher education systems, including changes in funding models, governance arrangements, and student composition, alongside the growing prominence of the “student-as-consumer” discourse (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). While this metaphor has attracted criticism for its potential to oversimplify the educational experience, recent literature suggests that it remains analytically valuable for examining service quality expectations and satisfaction formation within higher education contexts, particularly when applied with conceptual caution (Magasi et al., 2022).

Academic and administrative services in business schools are broadly understood as multifaceted concepts that extend beyond a single aspect of the educational experience. It encompasses the effectiveness of instruction, including the clarity, relevance, and rigour of teaching; the responsiveness and efficiency of administrative processes; the availability and adequacy of learning facilities, resource learning libraries, state-of-the-art laboratories, and

modern digital resources; and the crucial practice of providing relevant and appropriate student support services, the most important academic advice, career guidance, and counselling. In addition, service quality is shaped by the nature and extensive quality of interpersonal interactions between postgraduate students and institutional actors, including academic members, administrative professionals, and support personnel. These interactions, whether in mentoring, consultation, or collaborative learning contexts, play a crucial role in influencing students' perceptions of the overall educational experience, making quality academic and administrative service a less complex and multidimensional construct in postgraduate higher education (Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Unlike conventional commercial services, however, educational services are characterised by high levels of student involvement, co-production, delayed and cumulative outcomes, asymmetries in professional expertise, and substantial personal and financial investment by students (Hill, 1995). These distinctive characteristics necessitate context-sensitive adaptations of generic service quality frameworks when applied to educational settings. More recent studies have further expanded these frameworks to incorporate digital service quality dimensions, reflecting the accelerated integration of technology into teaching and administrative processes, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic period (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2024).

The substantial body of empirical research has consistently demonstrated a causal positive relationship between the perceived quality of academic and administrative services and various postgraduate student-related outcomes, including satisfaction, persistence, academic performance, and institutional loyalty (Rahman et al., 2024; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Evidence from cross-national studies further supports these associations, while highlighting that the crucial elements of quality and the academic and administrative service dimensions can vary across contexts individually (Hoque et al., 2023; Khashab et al., 2022; Magasi et al., 2022). Notably, this weight assigned to specific dimensions differs across educational levels, programme types, and student profiles, indicating that perceptions of service quality are shaped by both institutional and learner characteristics. In the context of postgraduate education, students in exceptionally professional programmes such as MBAs, DBAs, and specialised master's degrees tend to place greater emphasis on applied learning, professional networking opportunities, career development support, and faculty expertise than their undergraduate counterparts (Aboubakr & Bayoumy, 2022).

2.2 Student Satisfaction: Conceptualisation and Measurement

Student satisfaction constitutes a multifaceted psychological evaluation arising from a detailed comparison between 'anticipated' and 'actual' educational experiences (Oliver, 1980). Within higher education scholarship, satisfaction has been conceptualised as both a transaction-specific attitudinal response and a cumulative assessment over the course of the educational journey. More recent perspectives frame satisfaction as a dynamic, evolving construct shaped by the interaction of cognitive judgments, such as perceived quality and value, and affective responses arising from students' lived experiences (Nguyen et al., 2024; Stankovska et al., 2024). This contemporary view recognises that satisfaction is not static but develops progressively as students engage with multiple academic and administrative touchpoints.

Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), introduced by Oliver (1980) in the consumer behaviour domain, provides a robust framework for understanding how student satisfaction is formed. The theory suggests that satisfaction results from a cognitive comparison between pre-consumption expectations, the experience itself, and the post-experience perceptions of performance. When individuals evaluate a service or experience, they compare its actual

performance with their prior expectations. If the perceived performance exceeds expectations, this results in positive disconfirmation, meaning the experience is better than expected. Such favourable discrepancies reinforce positive evaluations and generate a stronger sense of satisfaction. Conversely, when the actual performance fails to meet initial expectations, negative disconfirmation occurs. This unfavourable gap between expectations and experience typically leads to dissatisfaction, as individuals perceive that the service has fallen short of their expectations (Oliver, 1980). A growing body of empirical and meta-analytic research supports EDT's predictive power across service industries, including higher education, showing consistent relationships among respective individual expectations, perceived performance, disconfirmation, and satisfaction across diverse institutions, programmes, and student cohorts (Ramasamy et al., 2024; Schiebler et al., 2025). Applying EDT in postgraduate education highlights how students actively evaluate service quality and form satisfaction judgments, offering a theoretically grounded approach to understanding and enhancing student experiences (Ramasamy et al., 2024; Schiebler et al., 2025).

2.3 The SERVQUAL Model

The 'SERVQUAL' instrument, originally formulated by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1988), is extensively acknowledged as a seminal and highly influential framework for assessing service quality across diverse service industries, including universities. It conceptualises service quality as a multidimensional construct, proposing that postgraduate students evaluate service performance through a structured set of interrelated dimensions rather than as a single, undifferentiated perception. The model delineates five core dimensions that collectively capture the complexity of service encounters. The first dimension, tangibles, pertains to the observable and physical elements associated with service provision, such as institutional facilities, technological equipment, learning resources, and the professional appearance of academic and administrative staff. These tangible cues serve as visible indicators of institutional quality and often shape students' initial impressions. The second dimension, reliability, refers to the institution's capacity to deliver its promised services dependably, accurately, and consistently over time. In a business school context, this includes fulfilling academic commitments, adhering to schedules, maintaining accurate records, and ensuring the dependable administration of programmes and assessments. Responsiveness, the third dimension, captures academic and administrative staff's willingness, attentiveness, and promptness in assisting students and addressing their inquiries, concerns, or academic needs. It reflects how quickly and effectively academic members and administrative personnel provide support, guidance, and problem resolution. The fourth dimension, assurance, encompasses employees' knowledge, competence, courtesy, and ability to inspire trust and confidence among students. This dimension is particularly significant in business school, where perceptions of academic credibility, expertise, and institutional integrity strongly influence students' overall evaluations. Finally, empathy represents the degree to which service providers offer caring, individualised attention and demonstrate genuine concern for postgraduate students' unique circumstances and aspirations. It highlights the importance of personalised engagement, approachability, and supportive relationships in shaping positive learning experiences. Thus, these five dimensions provide a comprehensive, systematic framework for evaluating and enhancing the quality of academic and administrative services in universities. By integrating tangible infrastructure and intangible interpersonal interactions, 'SERVQUAL' provides a holistic lens through which postgraduate student perceptions, expectations, and experiences can be critically examined and strategically improved.

In the context of universities, the 'SERVQUAL' key dimension has been extensively applied and empirically validated to reflect the unique features of educational service delivery (Alemu,

2023). Research consistently shows that postgraduate students' perceptions of quality academic and administrative services, as measured by the 'SERVQUAL' dimensions, are strong predictors of overall student satisfaction across different types of institutions and cultural settings (Aboubakr & Bayoumy, 2022; Shekarchizadeh et al., 2011). Building on the traditional 'SERVQUAL' model, more recent studies have expanded its scope to include business school-specific considerations, such as academic quality, curriculum relevance, and employability outcomes. These refinements strengthen the framework's suitability and contextual alignment within the university setting, enabling it to more accurately reflect the distinctive characteristics of higher education institutions. By incorporating dimensions that capture both academic and administrative service dynamics, the enhanced framework moves beyond a generic service perspective and becomes more attuned to the complexities of postgraduate education.

In particular, the modifications enable a deeper, more sophisticated interpretation of how the quality of teaching, supervision, curriculum delivery, student support services, and administrative efficiency collectively influence postgraduate students' academic journeys. They acknowledge that postgraduate learners often have heightened expectations regarding intellectual engagement, professional relevance, and personalised support. Consequently, the improved framework provides a more comprehensive lens through which institutions can examine how service quality dimensions interact to shape students' overall learning experiences, perceptions of institutional value, and levels of individual satisfaction (Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022). In parallel, contemporary empirical studies have further adapted 'SERVQUAL' to assess digital 'service quality' in online and hybrid learning environments, reflecting the rapid transformation of teaching and administrative delivery modes in the post-pandemic era (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Zaidi et al., 2023).

Despite its extensive use, 'SERVQUAL' has faced ongoing scholarly criticism. One key concern is its gap-based measurement approach, which assesses service quality by comparing students' expectations with their perceptions of service delivery. Critics argue that this method may have psychometric shortcomings, including issues with reliability, dimensional stability, and cross-contextual applicability. Additionally, some scholars contend that performance-only approaches, which focus solely on students' evaluations of how services are delivered, may provide stronger predictive validity in specific educational settings, particularly where expectations are difficult to quantify or vary widely across student cohorts. These critiques highlight the need for careful adaptation and contextualisation of 'SERVQUAL' when applying it to higher education research. Others contend that the universality of the five dimensions is questionable, advocating instead for context-specific adaptations that better capture sectoral nuances. Nevertheless, 'SERVQUAL' remains a highly influential framework, with recent empirical evidence continuing to support its utility in higher education, particularly when the model is contextually adapted and integrated with performance-based measures to reflect contemporary institutional realities (Magasi et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2024; Subekhan et al., 2025).

2.4 Student Loyalty and Retention

Student loyalty represents a strategically significant outcome for higher education institutions, reflected in behaviours such as programme completion, positive word of mouth, sustained alumni engagement, and advocacy through institutional recommendations (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007). Contemporary studies conceptualise student loyalty as a multidimensional construct comprising both attitudinal elements, such as emotional attachment, identification, and institutional commitment, and behavioural intentions, including continued enrolment, active

participation in institutional initiatives, and recommendation to prospective students (Chandra et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2024). However, this multidimensional perspective could magnify the importance of examining loyalty beyond simple retention metrics.

The satisfaction–loyalty linkage has been consistently supported in higher education research (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Oliver, 1999). Empirical evidence indicates that satisfied students demonstrate higher persistence rates, greater engagement in co-curricular activities, stronger alum participation, and an increased likelihood of acting as institutional ambassadors. Nevertheless, recent studies indicate that the connections between postgraduate student satisfaction and loyalty are more complex than previously assumed; they are neither consistent across contexts nor strictly linear. Evidence suggests that high satisfaction levels do not automatically lead to proportional increases in loyalty, as various mediating or moderating factors, such as programme type, institutional reputation, student expectations, and individual characteristics, can influence the strength and direction of this relationship. This emerging perspective highlights the need to move beyond simplistic assumptions and to consider the nuanced mechanisms through which satisfaction shapes loyalty behaviours, including retention, advocacy, and continued engagement with the institution. Contextual and relational variables, including institutional reputation, perceived social responsibility, and organisational trust, may mediate or moderate this relationship (Khashab et al., 2022; Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024). Furthermore, in digitally mediated educational environments, loyalty formation is increasingly shaped by perceptions of institutional transparency, responsiveness to student feedback, and congruence with students’ social and environmental values (Iqbal et al., 2024).

Within the specific context of business schools, ‘student loyalty’ assumes heightened strategic importance due to the competitive intensity of the postgraduate education market and the central role of alum networks in sustaining institutional reputation and future recruitment (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997). Recent sectoral analyses indicate that business schools are facing challenges maintaining enrolment and retention levels, particularly in full-time MBA and part-time DBA programmes, even as demand for specialised master’s degrees continues to expand (Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024). Therefore, exploring the crucial predictors that help postgraduate student satisfaction and individual loyalty is important not only from a theoretical standpoint but also with significant strategic implications for business schools. A detailed and nuanced understanding of these determinants enables institutions to make informed decisions that enhance student experiences, foster long-term engagement, and strengthen institutional image, enhancing university reputation. In an era marked by heightened competition and rapid change, universities operate within a dynamic environment shaped by technological advancement, globalisation, and evolving stakeholder expectations. To remain relevant and sustainable, they must move beyond traditional approaches and adopt adaptive, innovative, and quality-driven strategies that respond effectively to continuous transformation and increasing performance demands. Such insights are essential for building organisational resilience, sustaining student retention, and securing enduring success. By aligning service quality initiatives with the specific expectations and needs of postgraduate students, business schools can ensure they remain responsive, adaptive, and strategically positioned for long-term growth and stability.

2.5 Integration of EDT and SERVQUAL: A Conceptual Framework

Although EDT and the SERVQUAL framework have frequently been employed independently in higher education research, their integration provides a precise, holistic explanation of why and how ‘service quality’ can shape ‘student satisfaction’. EDT elucidates the underlying psychological mechanism by which students assess their educational experiences through

expectation–performance comparisons, whereas SERVQUAL delineates the specific service quality attributes that underlie these evaluations. Viewed clearly, the framework provides complementary insights into the cognitive processes and structural dimensions that underpin satisfaction formation.

Recent conceptual and empirical studies lend strong support to this integrative approach. Evidence suggests that students develop expectations regarding distinct service quality dimensions prior to enrolment and continuously reassess institutional performance against these benchmarks throughout their academic trajectories (Stankovska et al., 2024; Zhu & Sharp, 2022). When higher education institutions meet or exceed expectations across key dimensions, such as instructional quality, learning facilities, student support, and administrative effectiveness, positive disconfirmation occurs, thereby enhancing student satisfaction (Schiebler et al., 2025). In contrast, perceived underperformance on these dimensions results in negative disconfirmation and subsequent dissatisfaction (Ramasamy et al., 2024).

Building on this integrative logic, the conceptual framework advanced in this review moves beyond a simple juxtaposition of EDT and SERVQUAL by identifying five service quality considerations particularly salient in the context of postgraduate business education: price value, learning environment, employee commitment, empathy, and assurance. Grounded in both foundational SERVQUAL studies and recent empirical evidence, these dimensions capture the distinctive expectations, evaluative criteria, and priorities of postgraduate business students operating in a progressively competitive, service-oriented higher education context.

3. Conceptual Model and Propositions for Postgraduate Student Satisfaction

3.1 Overview of Integrated Model

The conceptual framework proposed in this study integrates Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) with the SERVQUAL model to provide a comprehensive, theoretically grounded explanation of how the quality of academic and administrative services influences postgraduate students' experiences in business schools. Expectation Disconfirmation Theory asserts that satisfaction emerges from the comparison between individuals' prior expectations and their perceived performance outcomes (Oliver, 1980, 1993), while the SERVQUAL framework conceptualises service quality as a multidimensional construct comprising tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). By synthesising these two established perspectives, the model clarifies both the substantive dimensions of service quality and the underlying evaluative processes that shape student perceptions. Thus, tangible facilities and resources, consistent and dependable service delivery, prompt and supportive responsiveness, staff competence and credibility, and personalised care function as critical performance cues that are assessed against prior expectations, leading to positive or negative disconfirmation and ultimately determining students' levels of satisfaction within postgraduate business education contexts. In turn, the model demonstrates how this satisfaction shapes subsequent loyalty behaviours, including continued enrolment, positive recommendations, and ongoing engagement with the institution. By explicitly linking service quality attributes to satisfaction and loyalty outcomes, the framework offers both a theoretically grounded and practically relevant explanation of how business schools can manage and enhance the overall student experience to foster long-term commitment and institutional success. The framework proposes that five salient 'service quality' considerations, perceived price value, learning environment, employee commitment, empathy, and assurance, function as primary antecedents of student satisfaction. Students

assess these dimensions through expectation–disconfirmation mechanisms, whereby perceived institutional performance is systematically evaluated against pre-enrolment expectations (Oliver, 1980).

Student satisfaction subsequently serves as a pivotal driver of loyalty-related outcomes, reflected in behaviours such as programme completion, favourable ‘word of mouth’ communication, and sustained engagement with the business school during and beyond the period of study (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). By positioning postgraduate ‘student satisfaction’ as an intervening construct, the framework aligns with established satisfaction–loyalty paradigms in higher education and services marketing research (Oliver, 1999).

Furthermore, the framework recognises that the strength and direction of these relationships may be contingent upon contextual and institutional factors, including organisational reputation, student demographic characteristics, and programme-specific attributes (Khashab et al., 2022). In line with recent empirical insights, the model also acknowledges the growing influence of contemporary considerations, such as digital service quality, institutional transparency, and perceived social responsibility, in shaping satisfaction and loyalty outcomes within increasingly market-oriented and digitally mediated higher education environments (Iqbal et al., 2024; Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024). Figure 1 below denotes the ‘research’ model.

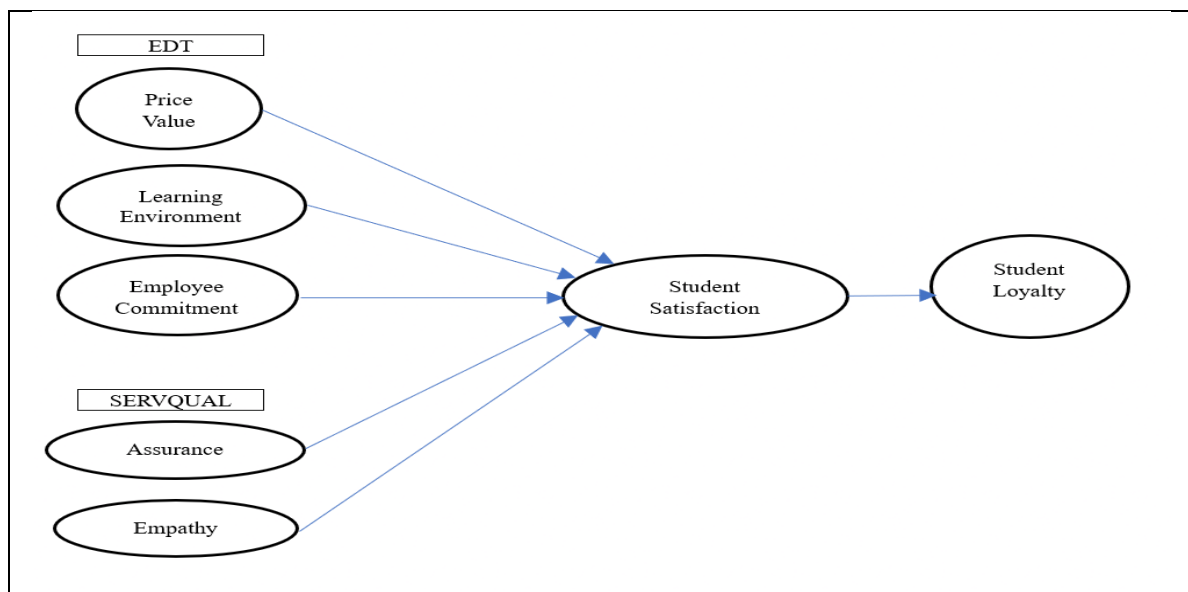


Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

3.2 Student Satisfaction as a Dependent Variable (SSA)

Student satisfaction occupies a pivotal position as the dependent variable in the proposed framework, serving as the mechanism through which perceived ‘service quality’ is translated into loyalty-related outcomes. It reflects students’ cumulative appraisal of their educational experiences across diverse academic and administrative touchpoints throughout their study journey. Grounded in EDT, satisfaction emerges from ongoing comparison processes whereby students evaluate actual experiences against prior expectations, leading to positive or negative disconfirmation effects (Oliver, 1980; Schiebler et al., 2025).

Contemporary studies further conceptualise satisfaction in higher education as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by ‘cognitive’ evaluations, from rational judgments of teaching quality, institutional support mechanisms, to the service performance, and affective responses,

incorporating emotions arising from interactions and learning experiences (Nguyen et al., 2024; Ramasamy et al., 2024). Importantly, meta-analytic findings substantiate the supporting role of satisfaction, demonstrating that it serves as a crucial explanatory platform, linking to ‘service quality’ dimensions to key behavioural outcomes, including student loyalty, retention intentions, and highly commended feedback positively (Schiebler et al., 2025).

3.3 Price Value (PVA)

Price value refers to students’ evaluative judgment of the trade-off between the benefits derived from an educational experience and the monetary and non-monetary costs incurred (Zeithaml, 1996). In the context of postgraduate business education, where students typically incur substantial financial commitments, perceptions of price value are a central determinant of satisfaction. Beyond tuition fees alone, price value encompasses broader considerations, including perceived return on investment, anticipated career progression, professional networking opportunities, and the overall comparative worth of the programme relative to competing alternatives (DeShields et al., 2005).

Accumulating empirical evidence indicates that perceived price value positively influences student satisfaction across diverse institutional and cultural contexts (Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). Postgraduate students engage in multifaceted cost–benefit assessments, weighing tuition levels, programme duration, and opportunity costs against expected outcomes such as salary enhancement, career mobility, skill acquisition, and personal growth. In an era marked by escalating tuition fees and heightened scrutiny of the economic returns of higher education, the salience of price-value has intensified, particularly among professionally oriented postgraduate cohorts (Stankovska et al., 2024). Consequently, price value emerges as a pivotal dimension in understanding satisfaction formation within contemporary business school environments.

Proposition 1: *Higher perceived price value positively influences postgraduate student satisfaction*

3.4 Learning Environment (LEN)

The learning environment encompasses not only physical infrastructure, such as classrooms, library resources, and general campus facilities, but also technological capabilities, teaching amenities, and the overall atmosphere that supports effective learning (Douglas et al., 2008). With the context of postgraduate business schools, this dimension also includes access to contemporary business tools, collaborative workspaces, networking venues, and the integration of technology into pedagogical practices (Sohail & Shaikh, 2004).

Recent scholarship indicates that the learning environment has undergone substantial transformation in the post-pandemic era, extending to digital and blended learning platforms, the quality of online resources, and the functionality of virtual learning spaces (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2024). Students increasingly evaluate the coherence and integration of physical and virtual learning environments, expecting seamless transitions between hybrid delivery modes that include both physical and online lessons (Wider et al., 2024). Empirical evidence demonstrates that well-structured learning environments, both tangible and digital, enhance student satisfaction by promoting engagement, facilitating collaboration, and supporting effective learning processes (Subekhan et al., 2025; Zaidi et al., 2023).

Proposition 2: *A high-quality learning environment (physical and digital) positively influences postgraduate student satisfaction*

3.5 Employee Commitment (ECO)

Employee commitment in business school refers to the responsibilities and accountabilities by which academic and non-academic staff demonstrate dedication, professional accountability, and proactive involvement in fulfilling their institutional roles. It reflects not only a sense of responsibility toward teaching, research, and administrative duties but also the willingness to go beyond formal obligations to support student learning, contribute to institutional goals, and foster a positive educational environment. In higher education research, employee commitment is recognised as a critical driver of organisational performance, influencing practices such as quality of teaching and learning, enhancing postgraduate student satisfaction, sustaining institutional effectiveness, and the overall learning outcome experience (Temizer & Turkyilmaz, 2012). In a university setting, this construct is reflected in lecturers' passion for teaching, readiness to provide academic guidance, prompt responsiveness to student inquiries, and sustained efforts to foster student achievement, attributes closely linked to 'service quality' dimensions of 'responsiveness' and 'assurance' (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Accumulating empirical evidence indicates that employee commitment is the most crucial causal factor of 'student satisfaction'. Cross-national studies on various institutional contexts consistently report that faculty and administrative personnel who demonstrate authentic concern for student progress, offer timely and constructive feedback, remain accessible, and exhibit enthusiasm in their roles positively influence students' overall satisfaction evaluations (Hoque et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). Furthermore, lessons from the post-COVID-19 period reveal that institutions characterised by highly committed staff, particularly those who effectively transitioned to online teaching and maintained consistent academic and emotional support, were better able to sustain higher levels of student satisfaction despite unprecedented disruptions (Wider et al., 2024).

Proposition 3: *Higher levels of employee commitment positively influence postgraduate student satisfaction*

3.6 Assurance (ASS)

Assurance works to the extent to which business schools, together with institutional personnel, demonstrate expertise, professional competence, courtesy, and credibility, thereby fostering trust and confidence among students (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Within the environment of business education, assurance extends beyond interpersonal interactions to encompass faculty academic qualifications and industry experience, recognised accreditation status, institutional prestige, programme rigour, and the perceived market value of the awarded degree (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997).

Recent empirical studies reaffirm that assurance constitutes a pivotal determinant of student satisfaction, particularly within highly competitive business school environments (Alemu, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2024). Students typically assess assurance through multiple performance signals, including faculty research output and professional credentials; institutional rankings and international accreditations; alumni career trajectories; employer collaborations; and the institution's reputation within the business ecosystem (Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024). Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that transparency in governance, robust internal quality assurance systems, and visible commitments to ethical and social responsibility practices increasingly shape students' assurance perceptions and, consequently, their overall satisfaction evaluations (Khashab et al., 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024).

Proposition 4: *Higher institutional assurance positively influences postgraduate student satisfaction*

3.7 Empathy (EMP)

Empathy refers to the extent to which higher education institutions provide caring, individualised attention and demonstrate genuine understanding of students' unique needs (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Within postgraduate education, where students frequently balance professional commitments, family responsibilities, and academic demands, empathy becomes a particularly salient dimension of service quality. It is reflected in flexible academic policies, tailored academic advising, sensitivity to personal circumstances, and timely, supportive communication practices (Oldfield & Baron, 2000).

Recent empirical studies further conceptualise empathy as institutional responsiveness to heterogeneous student populations, including international students, working adults, students with disabilities, and those from underrepresented groups (Aboubakr & Bayoumy, 2022; Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022). Institutions that operationalise empathy through adaptive scheduling, reasonable accommodation of exceptional circumstances, personalised support mechanisms, and authentic concern for students' psychological and academic well-being foster stronger relational bonds and emotional attachment. Such practices have been consistently associated with higher student satisfaction and more positive evaluations of the overall educational experience (Magasi et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Proposition 5: *Higher institutional empathy positively influences postgraduate student satisfaction*

3.8 Student Loyalty as an Outcome Variable (SLO)

Student loyalty constitutes the outcome variable in the proposed framework, capturing the extent of students' enduring commitment to their institution and their intention to sustain relational ties beyond graduation. It has been expressed through a wide range of behavioural, attitudinal manifestations, including programme completion, continued participation in institutional events, favourable word of mouth, alum contributions, engagement with career services, and active recommendations to prospective students (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Chandra et al., 2019).

Recent studies further suggest that, in the digital era, student loyalty extends beyond traditional post-graduation involvement to encompass online engagement behaviours such as social media advocacy, participation in virtual alum networks, and the sharing of digital testimonials (Khashab et al., 2022). Loyal graduates often function as institutional ambassadors, reinforcing organisational reputation, supporting student recruitment efforts, and enhancing long-term sustainability (Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024). In the context of business schools, alum loyalty is particularly strategic, as strong alum networks contribute to student placements, philanthropic support, and the institution's overall prestige (Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024).

Proposition 6: *'Student satisfaction' positively influences 'student loyalty' in postgraduate business schools*

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1 Theoretical Contribution

This conceptual framework makes several significant theoretical contributions to higher education research. Most notably, it integrates Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and the SERVQUAL framework into a coherent and unified model, thereby extending the explanatory power of existing satisfaction research. Expectation Disconfirmation Theory explains satisfaction as a cognitive evaluation process in which perceived performance is compared with prior expectations, leading to confirmation or disconfirmation outcomes (Oliver, 1980, 1993). In contrast, the SERVQUAL model conceptualises service quality as a multidimensional construct encompassing tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). By synthesising these two influential theoretical perspectives, the proposed framework offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which specific service quality dimensions are cognitively processed and translated into student satisfaction. Rather than relying on either a purely evaluative (EDT-based) or purely dimensional (SERVQUAL-based) explanation, the integrated model captures both the structural attributes of service delivery and the psychological comparison processes that collectively shape postgraduate students' satisfaction in higher education settings. By integrating the cognitive evaluation process emphasised in EDT, which compares expectations with perceived performance, with the multidimensional service quality perspective of SERVQUAL, the framework captures both the perceptual and service-delivery aspects of the student experience. This synthesis not only deepens theoretical understanding of satisfaction formation in postgraduate education but also provides a structured foundation for exploring the complex interplay between service quality dimensions, expectation management, and subsequent student outcomes such as loyalty, engagement, and institutional commitment. While SERVQUAL specifies multidimensional service quality attributes and EDT explains the cognitive comparison process underlying satisfaction, their integration enables a more comprehensive understanding of expectation–performance evaluations within educational settings. Recent meta-analytic evidence substantiates this combined approach, demonstrating that expectation–performance comparisons occur across discrete ‘service quality’ considerations in business school contexts (Schiebler et al., 2025).

Second, this framework delineates five service quality considerations particularly salient to postgraduate business education, drawing on foundational service quality theory and contemporary empirical research published within the past five years. These dimensions capture the transformation of higher education environments, including digitalisation of learning platforms, heightened sensitivity to price–value considerations, and increasing emphasis on institutional accountability, transparency, and social responsibility (Iqbal et al., 2024; Wider et al., 2024).

Third, by positioning student satisfaction as an intermediary construct between quality academic and administrative services and postgraduate student loyalty, the framework elucidates overall psychological processes through which institutional performance translates into observable behavioural outcomes. Thus, it demonstrates that postgraduate students' evaluations of quality academic and administrative services, across dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, shape their overall postgraduate satisfaction, ultimately influencing loyalty-related behaviours, including continued enrolment, programme advocacy, and long-term engagement with the institution. By explicitly mapping this supporting role, the framework provides a clearer understanding of the cognitive and affective mechanisms that connect institutional service delivery to tangible student responses,

thereby offering both ‘theoretical’ insight and practical guidance for enriching strategic management and the unique student experience in postgraduate learning outcomes. Consistent with recent high-impact empirical studies, satisfaction is not merely a correlational variable but an evaluative and affective state through which perceived service quality translates into retention intentions, advocacy behaviours, and long-term institutional commitment (Nguyen et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2024).

4.2 Practical Implications

The research framework has practical implications for business school leaders, administrators, and higher education policymakers. First, it underscores the need to adopt a holistic service quality management approach that simultaneously addresses all five identified dimensions, rather than focusing on isolated aspects of the student experience. Contemporary empirical evidence indicates that students form overall satisfaction judgments through multidimensional evaluations, and strengths in one dimension do not easily offset weaknesses in another (Magasi et al., 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024).

Second, this framework highlights the strategic importance of expectation management throughout the student lifecycle, from initial recruitment to programme completion. Institutions should align promotional messaging, branding, and recruitment communications with actual service capabilities to minimise adverse disconfirmation effects. Recent studies demonstrate that positive disconfirmation, where institutional performance exceeds prior expectations, exerts a more substantial influence on satisfaction formation than merely fulfilling expectations (Schiebler et al., 2025; Zhu & Sharp, 2022).

Third, the model emphasises the pivotal role of employee commitment and empathy as fundamental drivers of student satisfaction in business school. Within the ‘SERVQUAL’ framework, empathy is defined as the provision of personalised care and genuine attention to students’ individual needs (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), while employee commitment reflects the dedication, professionalism, and proactive engagement demonstrated by academic and administrative staff. When academic and administrative staff exhibit strong commitment and empathetic behaviour, students are more likely to perceive service delivery as supportive, trustworthy, and student-centred. From the perspective of Expectation Disconfirmation Theory, these positive interpersonal experiences enhance perceived performance and increase the likelihood of favourable expectation–performance comparisons, thereby generating positive disconfirmation and higher satisfaction levels (Oliver, 1980, 1993). By foregrounding these relational dimensions, the model reinforces that, beyond structural and procedural factors, human interaction and affective engagement are decisive in shaping postgraduate students’ satisfaction outcomes. Business schools are encouraged to invest in professional development initiatives, foster supportive organisational climates that strengthen staff engagement, and implement responsive systems that enable personalised and empathetic student support. Evidence from high-impact studies, including research conducted during the COVID-19 period, shows that institutions characterised by committed and empathetic administrative and academic staff were better able to sustain student satisfaction despite operational disruptions (Hoque et al., 2023; Subekhan et al., 2025; Wider et al., 2024).

Fourth, given the framework's utmost salience of price–value perceptions, institutions must clearly articulate and substantiate their value proposition. Transparent disclosure of tuition structures, employability outcomes, alum achievements, and programme distinctiveness enhances students’ value assessments and satisfaction judgments (Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024).

Finally, the framework positions student satisfaction as a strategic pathway rather than an ultimate objective. Enhancing satisfaction should be pursued as a mechanism for cultivating student loyalty, which contributes to institutional sustainability through improved retention, favourable word of mouth, and sustained alum engagement (Chandra et al., 2019; Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024).

4.3 Limitations and Future Research

This conceptual review develops an integrated framework linking quality academic and administrative services, postgraduate student satisfaction, and individual loyalty in postgraduate schools and business cohorts, by synthesising Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and the SERVQUAL model. It demonstrates how multidimensional service quality influences student satisfaction, which in turn drives loyalty outcomes such as programme continuation, positive recommendations, and ongoing engagement, offering both theoretical insight and practical guidance for enhancing postgraduate student experiences. Drawing upon extensive empirical studies, the framework identifies five salient service quality considerations, price value, learning environment, employee commitment, empathy, and assurance, that shape student satisfaction through expectation–disconfirmation mechanisms. In turn, student satisfaction is positioned as the key driver of loyalty outcomes, including retention, amplified sharing of favourable experiences with a university brand, and sustained institutional engagement.

A contemporary ‘higher education’ landscape presents significant structural and competitive pressures for business schools, including intensifying global competition, escalating operational costs, fluctuating enrolment patterns, rapid technological transformation, shifting student demographics, and evolving stakeholder expectations (Stankovska et al., 2024; Xuerong & Kanjanapathy, 2024). High-impact international research confirms that these challenges are systemic and global rather than region-specific, affecting institutions across both developed and emerging economies (Magasi et al., 2022; Subekhan et al., 2025). Within such a volatile environment, business schools that adopt a multidimensional approach to service quality management, addressing tangible resources, interpersonal interactions, and both cognitive and affective dimensions of the student experience, are more likely to enhance attraction, satisfaction, and long-term retention (Rahman et al., 2024).

Postgraduate student satisfaction should therefore be understood not solely as the evaluative endpoint, but also works as a ‘strategic lever’ that underpins institutional sustainability by influencing student persistence, institutional reputation, and alumni engagement (Chandra et al., 2019; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). Contemporary research further underscores that satisfaction formation has become increasingly multifaceted, shaped not only by traditional service quality dimensions but also by digital learning experiences, institutional transparency, ethical and social responsibility practices, and alignment with students’ personal and professional values (Iqbal et al., 2024; Suranta & Rahmawati, 2024).

The proposed framework establishes a robust platform for subsequent empirical inquiry. Future studies are encouraged to test the hypothesised relationships, examine moderating or mediating processes, investigate longitudinal dynamics, and incorporate emerging dimensions relevant to modern business education contexts (Dangaiso et al., 2022; Temizer & Turkyilmaz, 2012). Such endeavours will refine theoretical precision while offering actionable insights for continuous improvement in service quality (Alemu, 2023; Sureshchandar et al., 2002). Ultimately, the objective extends beyond achieving short-term satisfaction; it involves delivering transformative educational experiences that generate substantive intellectual,

professional, and personal value commensurate with the significant investments undertaken by postgraduate business students (Abu-Rumman & Qawasmeh, 2022; DeShields et al., 2005).

As business schools confront uncertain futures shaped by digital disruption, global competition, evolving labour market demands, and post-pandemic restructuring, the systematic management of service quality to strengthen student satisfaction will remain central to institutional resilience and competitive advantage (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997; Wider et al., 2024). Anchored in established theoretical foundations and reinforced by contemporary empirical evidence, this framework contributes both conceptual coherence and managerial relevance to ongoing scholarly discourse on service excellence in business education and, more broadly, in higher education (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Schiebler et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

This conceptual review effectively fulfils its stated objectives by systematically consolidating and critically assessing recent empirical studies on quality academic and administrative service and postgraduate student satisfaction within the business school environment. By bringing together diverse research findings, the review addresses the existing fragmentation in the literature, synthesising scattered insights into a coherent narrative. Furthermore, by emphasising contemporary studies, it ensures that the analysis remains contextually relevant, reflecting the latest developments, trends, and challenges in postgraduate education. Through this rigorous evaluation, the study not only clarifies conceptual relationships but also provides a robust foundation for advancing theory and guiding practical interventions to enhance student experiences and institutional performance in the current higher education landscape. By focusing particularly on contributions from recent years, the review captures the evolving dynamics of business school environments shaped by digital transformation, intensified competition, and increasingly discerning student expectations. The integration of ‘EDT’ with the ‘SERVQUAL’ model provides a theoretically coherent, context-sensitive framework that bridges cognitive evaluation processes with multidimensional service quality attributes. Through this integration, the study moves beyond descriptive synthesis and offers a structured explanatory model explicitly tailored to postgraduate business schools.

Furthermore, the objectives achieved due to the identification and theoretical substantiation of five salient service quality considerations: price value, learning environment, employee commitment, assurance, and empathy, demonstrating conceptual clarity and empirical grounding. Each dimension is carefully justified through recent evidence and aligned with emerging sectoral demands, thereby strengthening the robustness of the proposed framework. The development of theoretically informed propositions in this study further illuminates the critical relationships between quality academic and administrative services, postgraduate student satisfaction, and subsequent individual loyalty outcomes, thereby extending to refining established postgraduate student satisfaction–loyalty frameworks within higher education research. By articulating these connections in a structured, theory-driven manner, the study provides a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which specific service quality dimensions influence students’ evaluative judgments and behavioural intentions. Moreover, by translating these theoretical insights into practical implications, the review offers actionable guidance for business school administrators and policymakers. This includes strategies to improve service delivery, enhance the overall student experience, and foster long-term loyalty and engagement. In doing so, the study bridges the gap between conceptual understanding and managerial practice, supporting both academic advancement and the sustainable growth and competitiveness of postgraduate business schools.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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