



MEASURING SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION USING SERVQUAL MODEL: EVIDENCE FROM AN ALBANIAN PUBLIC FACULTY

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Abstract

Nowadays in Albania there is an increase in the number of public and private educational institutions and an increase in the number of students. There is a fierce competition between them. The objective of this study is to evaluate the quality of the services offered by a public faculty. The quality in this institution is assessed using the Servqual model, conducting a survey with the students. Evaluating the perceptions and expectations of them, the faculty will focus on the weak points, for better improvement in order to be more competitive in the market. The Servqual model remains one of the important tools in assessing the service quality of higher education institutions. The finding of this study is that all the dimensions of quality results with negative gaps which means that students aren't satisfied with provided services. The deepest gap corresponds to the dimension of reliability which is related to willing of the staff to help students dealing with their problems, respecting lecturers and exam schedules from academic staff, informing students about the schedule changes in advance and providing support for student.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution, Service Quality, Servqual Model, Survey

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important sector of the societies. Higher education contributes to the growth rate of economy. It also contributes to the evolution of nations. In our country, Albania, there is an expansion of higher education institutions, either public or private also. The number of students is increasing every year. As the competition arises, is important for these institutions to know how the students evaluate them. The greater the quality that the universities offer, the

greater the number of students they attract. So in these conditions it is necessary to measure the quality of the services that the universities offer. The service quality represents the comparison between customer's expectation and the customer's perception of the service that the businesses offer (Santos 2003).

Satisfying the students' needs is crucial for the universities to survive. There are different instruments that can assess the service quality in education sector. The purpose of this paper is to assess the service quality for higher public education institution using the Servqual model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1988). They represented it first on 1988, and different studies have shown the evolution of this model through time. The Servqual model is used to measure the service quality in different sectors like tourism, travel, hotel industry etc.

In this paper, the Servqual model is used to identify and analyze the differences in the perception of certain dimensions of the model by students of bachelor program in a public faculty in Albania. After the analyses, recommendations for improvement of service quality are given.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Higher Education Sector, following the manufacturing and service sector, is also faced with the concepts and methods of quality management. Investigating customer needs becomes indispensable given the fact that a customer-oriented approach is noted. This becomes even more important since the quality of service is considered subjective while the quality of the products is objectively measured, so customer perception estimation turns out to be appropriate to measure this characteristic. Service providers and researchers are paying particular attention to expectations and perceptions of the quality of the service in order to attract customers to best serve their needs. It has been noticed that the students being in a very competitive environment have become more discriminating in choosing the college or university they want to study. For this reason, it is important for universities to understand their expectations. Continuous research and analysis is very important for improvement of the quality of education services.

The key issue facing the academy nowadays is to identify the dimensions that signal the quality and achievement of excellence in higher education. Although some interesting studies exist (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003; Hill et al., 2003; Abdullah, 2006a, b;), the concept of quality in the field of higher education has not been fully addressed. The number and nature of service quality dimensions are directly related to the service being investigated (Chumpitaz and Swaen, 2002). Thus, to measure the quality of service, a specific sectoral scale is needed.

Many scholars have tried to define the dimensions of quality, especially in relation to services. Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Zeithaml et al. (1996) are the authors who have

provided the most familiar set of dimensions. They have later developed their framework and improved ten original dimensions to five general dimensions (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Gronroos (2000), in another context, presents a summary of the seven service quality criteria. The Gerhard et al. (1997) defined two dimensions of service quality, while Carman (1990) suggested seven dimensions of service quality. According to Cronin and Taylor (1992), service quality construction should be one-dimensional rather than multi-dimensional. Some scholars have classified service quality into two broad categories: technical and functional (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, 1991; Lewis, 1989). According to Gronroos, technical quality is related to outcomes or what is received from the service by the customer. Functional quality is related to the process of assessing the manner of delivering the service. Various definitions of quality in education have been provided such as, excellence in education (Peters and Waterman, 1982), adaptability for purpose, adaptability of educational outcomes, and experience of use (Juran and Gryna, 1988), compatibility of education output with goals and planned requirements.

Different number of studies is done to identify the student's attitude toward the universities that they attend. They have attempted to establish models for assessing the service quality in higher education institutions. The most widely model that is used is SERVQUAL model. This model is used by Parasuraman on 1988. According to this model, the quality is measured by the gap between expectation and perception of students for services in higher education. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) identified ten dimensions of service quality like competence, courtesy, reliability, accessibility, etc. Parasuraman et.al came to the conclusion that the service quality derives from comparing customer perceptions and actual performance of the service. Parasuraman et al (1988) reduces the number of dimensions of service quality into five dimensions as below:

1. Tangibles-equipment, appearance of personnel, physical facilities
2. Reliability-ability to perform the promised service accurately
3. Responsiveness- willingness to help customers and provide them prompt service
4. Assurance- courtesy and knowledge of personnel and and ability to inspire trust
5. Empathy- special attention provided to individual customers

Parasuraman et al (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, which consists in a multiple item scale. Service quality is assessed by two sections; the section of expectations that contains 22 statements to measure clients' expectations of service quality and the section of perceptions that contains the same statements to measure how is perceived service quality from clients. Consumers are asked to give their opinions on expectations and perceptions of service quality

on a seven point Likert scale, varying from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”. The gaps between expectations and perceptions evaluations defines the service quality.

Quality of services in higher education

The term quality has been the subject of much debate. Quality can be regarded as “the beauty that lies in the eyes of the beholder” (Mishra, 2007). The word quality comes from the Latin word “quails” which means “what kind”. Studying the concepts of quality and satisfaction as well as the relationship between them is difficult in a complex field such as higher education (Raboca and Solomon, 2010). This can be attributed to the fact that education as a service can only be provided by organizations that provide many services, which in addition to providing the optimal training framework, must also cover other customer requirements and needs. According to Green and Harvey, quality is considered perfection, which is a stage of performance exclusivity that stands out from the others and implies zero flaws. Reaching the standard and moving to excellence is the objective in higher education. Service quality in higher education is important for several reasons; a) *Competition*- The HE market is becoming part of a new regime, where competition between educational institutions for students and funding will be significant. Competition in the sector will increase so educational institutions must pay close attention to quality. b) *Customer Satisfaction* - Clients of educational institutions such as students, parents or sponsoring agencies are aware of their rights. They are looking for good quality teaching. c) *Maintaining standards* - Universities should always be concerned about setting and maintaining their standard continuously. To do this they need to improve the quality of educational transactions as well as educational provisions. d) *Responsibility* - Each institution is accountable to its stakeholders regarding the funds (public or private) used in it. Quality can serve as a monitoring mechanism, since, given its importance, funds will be used responsibly and stakeholders will be informed to make the right decisions. e) *Improving employee morale and motivation*- Paying close attention to quality will motivate staff to perform their duties. The presence of a quality system makes internal processes systematic, bringing each department to complement each service sector of others and helping to develop internal customer satisfaction. f) *Reliability, prestige and status* - If universities are concerned about quality, consistently and not every once in a while, it will bring credibility to individuals because of consistency leading to practice, status and brand value. g) *Image and visibility* - High-quality institutions have the ability to attract better stakeholder support, such as attracting deserving students from afar and close, increasing donations, and employers' greater interest in establishing easy of graduates.

Service quality in higher education has been the focus of several studies. Rigotti and Pitt (1992) used the Servqual model to evaluate management’s perception of customer

expectations and confirmed the reliability and validity of the instrument for use with education services. Assessing service quality from the point of view of students is important to make improvements at higher education institutions as students are primary stakeholders for these institutions (Dan Beaumont, 2012). Servqual model is used by De Oliveira and Fereira (2009) for the gap evaluation between expectations and perceptions of students for higher education sector in Brazil. Tan and Kek (2004) used this instrument to measure student satisfaction at the University in Singapore and concluded that cultural factors plays a crucial role and should be taken into consideration when developing the SERVQUAL questionnaire.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this study are:

1. The development of a tool based on the SERVQUAL model which can be used to assess the quality services in higher education.
2. The exploration if this tool can be useful for gap identification between expectations and perceptions of the higher education service in order to make necessary improvements.

The research hypotheses are formulated as below:

H₁: Modified SERVQUAL model can be used in higher education sector to identify the areas that need improvements that should be made to increase the perceived education service quality by the students.

H₂: There is a negative gap between expectations and perceptions of service quality by students at the university taken in analyze.

The study was conducted at a public university in Albania. The sample of the study consists of 85 students of the Bachelor program that were selected randomly. Also, to accomplish this work, the total number of students enrolled for the first time divided by three years of study in 2018 was also identified.

Table 1. Population and sample structure according to the year of study

Year of study	Number of students in the population	Number of students taken in the sample
1	280	30
2	250	20
3	285	35
Total	815	85

To perform this work, the modified SERVQUAL model was used, consisting of a questionnaire with 25 questions for each scale: one needed to measure student expectations and the other to

measure their perceptions of the services provided. The survey questions were formulated to represent the 5 dimensions of quality identified by Parasuraman; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

The tangibles dimension analyzes the tangible assets needed to provide the service such as leaflets, infrastructure, laboratories, equipment etc. The reliability dimension analyzes precisely the ability to deliver the promised service such as efficiently resolving student complaints and problems. The responsiveness dimension analyzes the care provided to students in order to provide services quickly. The assurance dimension analyzes the behavior and knowledge of academic staff and their ability to transmit confidence. The empathy dimension refers exactly to the individual care shown towards the special needs of the students. The students were asked to give their opinion about each statement related to expectations and perceptions, in a 7-point Likert scale. The range of scale was designed so that “strongly agree” corresponds to 1 and “strongly disagree” corresponds to 7. Descriptive statistics is used to analyze the data collected from the questioners and then is used the SERVQUAL model for identification of the gap between expectations and perceptions of the students.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The table below presents the means scores on expectations and perceptions scales for each statement that defines the quality dimensions followed by the mean gap score.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Dimensions	Statement	Expect. mean (Stand. Dev.)	Perce. mean (Stand. Dev.)	Gap
<i>Tangibles</i>	1. The faculty has modern and latest equipment.	6.57(0.67)	6.18(1.66)	-0.39
	2. The faculty building appears attractive.	5.15(1.56)	4.99(1.89)	-0.16
	3. The staff of faculty appears professional and neat.	5.98(1.78)	5.26(1.12)	-0.72
	4. Availability of up-to-date literature in the library.	6.22(1.29)	5.10(1.5)	-1.12
<i>Reliability</i>	5. Classes are held respecting the schedule of lecturers.	6.01(1.15)	5.46(1.42)	-0.55
	6. Willing of the staff to help students dealing with their problems.	6.22(1.10)	4.71(1.4)	-1.51
	7. Staff of the Faculty provides support for students.	6.49(2.3)	5.6(1.54)	-0.89
	8. Academic staff respects lecturers and exam schedules.	6.15(1.25)	3.88(1.64)	-2.27

	9. Consistent grading criteria is applied by staff.	6.33(1.37)	5.5(1.35)	-0.83
	10. Informing students about the schedule changes in advance.	6.58(1.47)	4.98(1.1)	-1.6
<i>Responsiveness</i>	11. Handling and resolving the students claims promptly.	6.35(1.35)	5.4(1.1)	-0.95
	12. Students' best interest is in the focus of academic staff.	6.27(1.8)	5.1(1.55)	-1.17
	13. Willingness of faculty staff to help students.	6.12(1.9)	5.65(1.2)	-0.47
<i>Assurance</i>	14. Faculty staff has the necessary knowledge and adequate communication skills.	6.45(1.69)	5.55(1.18)	-0.9
	15. Study and educational programs are implemented for specialization of the students.	6.48(1.68)	5.14(1.22)	-1.34
	16. High level quality of education processes.	6.50(1.38)	5.4(1.56)	-1.1
	17. The behaviour of academic staff instilling confidence in students.	6.54(1.71)	5.67(1.62)	-0.87
	18. The adequate reputation and position of the faculty in the environment.	6.18(2.25)	5.94(1.4)	-0.24
	19. Professional answers are given to students' questions.	6.20(1.75)	5.10(1.61)	-1.1
<i>Empathy</i>	20. Students needs are well understood by academic staff.	4.68(1.83)	3.42(1.08)	-1.26
	21. Positive attitudes towards students is shown by academic staff.	6.76(1.76)	3.94(1.51)	-2.82
	22. Students best interest is the main objective.	4.33(1.19)	3.99(1.05)	-0.34
	23. Consultations hours are available for students.	6.39(1.27)	4.87(1.71)	-1.52
	24. Faculty values feedback from students to improve processes.	6.48(1.94)	5.59(0.99)	-0.89
	25. Polite and professional staff in communication with students.	6.30(1.65)	5.88(1.64)	-0.42

Statement nr. 21 (*Positive attitudes towards students is shown by academic staff*), which is related to the dimension of empathy, has got the highest score of 6.76 on the expectations scale. Meanwhile, statements nr. 20 (*Students needs are well understood by academic staff*) and nr. 22 (*Students best interest is the main objective*) which are related to the same dimension has got the lowest score of 4.68 and 4.33 respectively on the same scale. Statement nr. 1 (*The faculty has modern and latest equipment*) which is related to the dimension of tangibles, has got

the highest score of 6.18 on the perceptions scale. Statement nr. 8 (*Academic staff respects lecturers and exam schedules*) which is related to the dimension of reliability and statement nr. 20 (*Students needs are well understood by academic staff*), which is related to the dimension of empathy have got the lowest score of 3.88 and 3.42 respectively on the same scale. Looking at the results of the table, it is evident that all the perceptions mean scores were lower than respective expectation score, which means negative service quality for all the statements that define dimensions of quality service. The highest and the lowest students' expectations are related to empathy dimension. The highest students' perceptions are related to tangibles dimension and the lowest to empathy.

The SERVQUAL model is used to calculate the gap between expectations and perceptions related to the services offered to the students. The gaps for all the dimensions are negative which means that students haven't got the expected service and the faculty should make improvements. The table below presents the dimension level analysis of service quality on the basis of gap scores.

Table 3. Dimension level analysis of service quality on the basis of gap scores

Dimensions	Average Expectations	Average Perceptions	Gap
Tangibles	5.98	5.382	-0.598
Reliability	6.297	5.022	-1.275
Responsiveness	6.25	5.38	-0.87
Assurance	6.39	5.47	-0.92
Empathy	5.82	4.615	-1.205
Total Gap	6.147	5.174	-0.974

The magnitude of gap varies from – 0.87(the least negative gap) which corresponds to the dimension of responsiveness to -1.275(the most negative gap) which corresponds to the dimension of reliability.

All the dimensions of quality results with negative gaps which means that students aren't satisfied with provided services. The deepest gap corresponds to the dimension of reliability which is related to willing of the staff to help students dealing with their problems, respecting lecturers and exam schedules from academic staff, informing students about the schedule changes in advance and providing support for students. The dimension of empathy comes next and it is related to understanding well the students' needs by academic staff, positive attitudes towards students shown by academic staff and polite and professional staff in communication with students. The faculty should invest more on training the staff as both of these dimension

are linked closed to academic and non academic staff. The dimensions of responsiveness and assurance are with the lowest negative gap. As these dimensions are related to high level quality of education process, to adequate communication skills and willingness of academic staff to help students, the quality of human resources is good.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes on the measurement of quality of higher education services. It is very important to measure service quality before trying to improve it. Assessing quality services in higher education results to have benefits like identification of service aspects that are doing good or bad, of areas which need improvements, monitoring the performance of academic staff and establishing clear objectives. To assess service quality in higher education is used the modified SERVQUAL model and is determined a negative gap between students' expectations and perceptions on services provided by higher education institution. The research hypotheses are positively confirmed.

One of the limitations of this study is that only one faculty is taken in analyze, meanwhile a university consists on different faculties with different characteristics, so that the conclusions of this study cannot represent the university as a whole. This study can be considered as an input for other researchers to state the validity of the adapted SERVQUAL model used in higher education services.

Higher education institutions should be interested on students' expectations when they are enrolled in a study program. Their expectations and perceptions might change by the time, so that is recommended the measurement of service quality for every generation of students to find out the impact of study time on their expectations and perceptions.

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