SERVQUAL: STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND SATISFACTION WITH REGARDS TO QUALITY OF SERVICE PROVIDED BY STUDENT ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENTS WITHIN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

To deliver quality service can be regarded as a key success factor for any tertiary institution that wants to be successful and profitable. It is evident that many tertiary institutions are ignorant towards the level of service they provide to their students. This can have either a positive or a negative effect on their students' attitudes towards the institution. As a result of this a study was conducted among South African students that were registered at a tertiary institution. It is believed that the issues identified in a South African context will be applicable to students on an international scale, as there are huge similarities of this nature between universities in different countries. The aim of this study was to determine students' perceptions and their satisfaction with the quality of services provided by Student Administration departments within the tertiary institution. Their perception and satisfaction was measured based on the SERVQUAL elements - empathy and assurance. The results obtained from this study can be used by the Student Administration departments of all universities to improve their level of service to students by gaining a better understanding of their needs. Quantitative survey research was implemented and 200 structured questionnaires were distributed among students. The results indicated that students' perception about the quality of the service, as well as the overall level of satisfaction of the service in terms of assurance and empathy, are slightly above average, but that considerable improvements can be made on this.

Keywords: Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Assurance, Empathy, Tertiary Institutions, Student Administration, Students' Perception

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1. Introduction

As in any type of organisation, customers are seen as the lifeblood of the existence of an organisation (Lauer, 2012:1). The same applies to tertiary institutions where the students are the customers which are also regarded as the lifeblood of its existence. All types of customers have certain expectations about any type of service they receive or buy and so do students. Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Young, Haunold and Drew, (2003:1-19) indicated that the majority of students today knows exactly what to expect from the Student Administration department and they are also aware of whether they are receiving good services or not. Due to this, students are regarded as a vital and valuable asset to any tertiary institution (Wright & O'Neill, 2002:23-39).

Within tertiary institutions there are various schools, colleges and departments which are all in competition with one another, each aiming to gain more students registered. The moment that students realise that the service quality provided by one school, college or department is higher than another, the likelihood that they will register at that school, college or department is quite high and that might lead to a competitive advantage for the specific school, college or department. Darlaston-Jones *et al.,* (2003:1-19), indicated that students arrive at tertiary institutions with pre-formed perceptions about the school, college or department as well as the service they would like to receive (Tan & Kek, 2004:17-25).

According to Tan and Kek (2004:17-25), the SERVQUAL module is used in order to measure the students' satisfaction towards the quality of the service received in terms of empathy and assurance. The SERVQUAL module is used in order to determine the relationship among the expected service

and the actual service that is received in a particular situation (Tan & Kek, 2004:17-25).

It was found that previous research done on the service quality delivered by tertiary institutions has only focused on higher education in general. Various concepts such as service delivery, student needs, wants and expectations in the administrative departments as well as the possible benefits a faculty could receive when delivering outstanding services, were not covered.

This study has therefore placed the emphasis on the perception of the services delivered by Student Administration departments at a tertiary institution. Consequently, this research study attempts to investigate whether the student's perception about the service quality delivered by Student Administration departments is exceptional in terms of assurance and empathy.

This study aims to assist all tertiary institutions in providing a better type of service through the creation of new and better strategies which will most probably increase student satisfaction. The following research objectives are therefore established:

Objective 1: To identify the students' perceptions in terms of the **assurance** of the service quality provided.

Objective 2: To identify the students' perceptions in terms of the **empathy** of the service quality provided.

The following section gives an overview of service quality, the SERVQUAL elements and students' perception regarding the quality of service experienced at Student Administration departments. The empirical findings and the discussion of the findings appear in the latter part of the paper.

2. Service quality

Brochado (2009:174-190) indicated that services can be described as one's actions and performances, as it is a more behavioural activity and less physical. Furthermore, services are also intangible and not always the same in terms of their quality and type (Brochado, 2009:174-190). A service can also be described as being perishable, as it cannot be put away, therefore it is crucial that tertiary institutions ensure that they provide excellent services at all times in order to achieve satisfied students, which will result in spreading positive word of mouth about the administrations department at the institution.

Kattara, Weheba and El-Said (2008:309-323) further indicated that the quality of the service provided is based on the customers' perception of how well a service is being met or whether it exceeds their expectations, which will further contribute to the students' satisfaction level (Fisk, Grove & John, 2004:153). Service quality can also be regarded as the perceived quality by students, due to the fact that it indicates how well a service has been delivered and if it had met the students' expectations (Abdullah,

2006:31-47). Therefore, in order for tertiary institutions to achieve high levels of service quality, it is critical that they need to know their students' perceptions (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008:34-56).

Therefore, for any organisation, especially tertiary institution, to be successful it is critical that they need to provide outstanding quality of services on a continuous basis, in order to assure that their students are satisfied (Abdullah, 2006:31-47).

3. SERVQUAL defined

The SERVQUAL model is used to serve as an analytic methodology for disclosing broad areas of a company's weaknesses and strengths in terms of their service quality. According to Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991:420-450), the SERVQUAL dimensions and items represents the core evaluation criteria for organisations when measuring the quality of their services, as it is an instrument that is used to measure the perceptions of customers on service quality. These instruments are: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1991:420-450).

Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:65) stated that the SERVQUAL measurement instrument place emphasis on quality as it indicates the difference among customers' expectations about a particular service and their perceptions of the service received. According to Brochado (2009:174-190) the SERVQUAL measurement instrument is the most commonly used scale to measure the quality of services provided. For this research study there will only be focussed on the students' perception of service quality and not on their expectations. The reason for this is the fact that students form their own perceptions of the experienced service and it might be important for tertiary institutions to know exactly what these perceptions of the students are, because this might lead to potential students in the future. Every individual student have specific expectations about a service, however, this is before the actual service takes place. Therefore, the perceptions they have formed after the actual service delivery, is very important.

It is critical for organisations that want to deliver exceptional quality services to place emphasis on the measurement of their services. This can be accomplished by focusing on the SERVQUAL measurement instrument, which includes five dimensions, namely: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, tangibility and assurance (Machado & Diggines, 2012:124). These dimensions are defined as follows:

Reliability: Refers to the ability of an organisation to provide the promised service quality reliably and consistently.

Responsiveness: Refers to the organisation and its staff's ability to show willingness to assist the customers.

Empathy: Refers to the perceived attention and care given by the organisation to the customers to ensure that their needs are met.

Tangibility: Refers to the tangible component of a business that has an important impact on the customer and serves as physical indicators of the intended service quality.

Assurance: Refers to the customers' perceptions on the ability of the organisation's employees to provide the service with the needed skills, knowledge and communication techniques.

For this research study, the focus will only be on the assurance and empathy dimension. The reason for this is that assurance and empathy are important in the development of the service, and that the assurance dimension is extremely important and the empathy dimension is less important (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991:420-450). Even though assurance is a very important dimension to take into account in services, the overall satisfaction of the service quality delivered can only be established if all five the dimensions were taken into consideration (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2004:64).

Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:65) stated that the main purpose for using SERVQUAL to test the quality of the service offered is to firstly determine the level of service the customer will expect from the service provider, and secondly to assess the actual service the customer receive from the specific organisation.

Due to the above, Tan and Kek (2004:17-25) indicated that service quality equals perception minus expectation. Therefore, it can be inferred that service quality can be defined as "… a customer's evaluative judgement about the degree of superiority of service performance", this meaning that service quality is the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' service perceptions and expectations (Boshoff, 2014:40).

The SERVQUAL measuring instrument is based on the five dimensions of service quality- tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. In effect, customers are generally presented with a questionnaire that contains 22 questions that measures expectations and perceptions on the five quality dimensions. However, for the purpose of this study only nine out of the 22 questions will be asked to the students, in order to determine their perceptions in terms of assurance and empathy. The students were asked to answer the questions twice, the first time the students had to answer in terms of the tangible service received from the service provider, and the second time in terms of the level of service the customer expects from the specific service provider. The nine questions associated to assurance and empathy is presented below in Table 1 (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2004:66).

Table 1. Questions in the SERVQUAL measurement instrument

Assurance	
14	You can trust the employees.
15	You feel safe in your transactions with the employees.
16	The employees are friendly and polite.
17	The employees have the needed knowledge to answer customer queries.
Empathy	
18	The employees give individual attention to each customer.
19	The employees give personal attention to each customer.
20	The employees do understand the specific needs of customer.
21	The employees have the customer's best interests at heart.
22	The organisation has operating hours that is convenient to all their customers.

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988:38)

By taking the above elements of SERVQUAL into consideration, the following hypotheses were formulated:

$H_{1(alt)}$: There is a positive correlation between the perceived assurance of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

$H_{2(alt)}$: There is a positive correlation between the perceived empathy of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

4. Student perception of service quality

According to Brochado (2009:174-190), the awareness of service quality in tertiary institutions has increased over the past ten years. Tan and Kek (2004:17-25) indicated that the degree in which students' perceptions and expectations are met is described as quality in education and therefore the quality of service are viewed as a gaging factor which describes the satisfaction of the students' perceptions (Abdullah, 2006:31-47). Kara and DeShields (2004:1-24) point out that tertiary institutions that understand the perceptions of their students, will most probably contribute to the overall students' satisfaction.

5. Perception defined

According to Oxford Dictionaries (2014), perception can be defined as the "…ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses, as well as the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted." According to Brochado (2009:174-190), perceptions are described as

influential verdicts of the specific services experienced through contact with the administrative personnel in tertiary institutions.

Voss, Gruber and Szmigin (2007:949-959) furthermore stated that the quality of services in tertiary institutions can be pronounced as the variance among a students' expectation of a specific service and their perception of the received service. In tertiary institutions, the students are being regarded as the primary customer, and according to Darlaston-Jones *et al*. (2003:1-19) they are nowadays more aware of their "student rights" which enable them to determine whether their perceptions of a service provided and the reality of that service are in-line.

Voss *et al*. (2007:949-959) therefore stated that it is critical for tertiary institutions to know and understand students' perceptions, as this will enable them to be in an enhanced position in order to handle their perceptions. Students having a positive experience with these administrative departments may result in being more satisfied, which can further result in spreading positive word of mouth, creating loyalty among the current students and attracting potential students, which may ultimately lead to students enrolling for more additional courses.

The next section deals with the research methodology and the findings of the research.

6. Methodology

In determining the student's perceptions and their satisfaction with the quality of services provided by Student Administration departments within a tertiary institution, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire incorporated questions that are of quantitative nature. The questionnaire was issued to first and third year undergraduate students and a total of 200 usable responses were received.

The demographic profile of the respondent groups is presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below. There were a number of ways to select the respondents, however, the researchers decided to group the respondents into gender and year of study, because students can be grouped according to a variety of sub-groups. Therefore, gender and year of study were the two groups that could easily divide the students. Out of the 200 respondents, 100 respondents were male and 100 were female, as shown in Table 2 below. This was done in order to interpret both genders' opinions. To get a representative sample out of the two years of study, 100 respondents were chosen out of the first year group and 100 respondents were chosen out of the third year group, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 2. Gender

		Frequency	Valid Percent
	Male	100	50.0
Valid	Female	100	50.0
	Total	200	100.0

Table 3. Year of study

		Frequency	Valid Percent
	1st year	100	50.0
Valid	3rd year	100	50.0
	Total	200	100.0

a. Reliability

In order to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is the most

applicable method due to the fact that the questionnaire consists out of 5-point Likert scales.

As indicated in Table 4 below, the Cronbach's Alpha values for both the assurance and the empathy dimension used in the SERVQUAL model are both of acceptable nature.

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha for the SERVQUAL model used (n = 200)

Dimensions	M	SD
Assurance (α = 0.83)	3.81	0.64
I can trust the staff	3.74	0.79
I am feeling safe when interacting with the staff	3.87	0.75
The staff is friendly and helpful	3.67	0.97
The staff is knowledgeable	3.94	0.79
The staff can answer my questions	3.83	0.86
Empathy (α = 0.68)	3.27	0.66
The staff gives individual attention/assistance to each student	3.42	0.90
The staff understands my specific needs	3.19	0.87
The staff has each student's best interests at heart	3.30	0.86
The Student Administration has convenient service hours	3.16	1.05

7. Results

The outcomes of the questions asked in the questionnaire are examined in terms of descriptive techniques and hypotheses testing.

a. Students' perception of the service quality provided by the Student Administration departments

The students' perception of the overall service quality is above average, with an average of 3.56 on the 5-point Likert scale. Therefore, it suggests that the students' perception of the service quality lies between "neither agree nor disagree" and "agree". One can imply that the average of 3.56 on the 5-point Likert scale falls more towards "agree" instead of "neither agree nor disagree". As a result, the students are on average, satisfied with the perceived service quality.

b. The five service quality features relating to the SERVQUAL model

Table 5 below indicates the importance of the two service quality features (knowledge and politeness, caring and individualised attention) relating to the SERVQUAL model- assurance and empathy. The results suggest that the knowledge and politeness of the staff of the Student Administration department and their ability to convey trust and confidence is the most important feature when it comes to service quality. The caring, individualised attention that the Student Administration department provide to its customers was found to be the least important. Therefore, the Student Administration of the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty should focus their attention to deliver their services by providing more caring and individualised attention to students.

**Table 5.** The perceived service quality features (n = 200)

Dimension	Features	Sum	Ranking
Assurance	The knowledge and politeness of the staff of the Student Administration and their ability to convey trust and confidence	539	1
Empathy	The caring, individualised attention that the Student Administration provides its customers	654	2

c. Student's overall satisfaction with the quality of the service received

The students' overall satisfaction with the service received from the Student Administration department was measured at a mean of 6.60. This suggests that the average leans towards the excellent label (between 6 and 7 on the 10 point semantic scale). Figure 1 below illustrates the percentages of each of the responses from one to ten. The majority of the respondents (75%) represent a scale of seven on the semantic scale from one to ten.

Figure 1. Overall student satisfaction
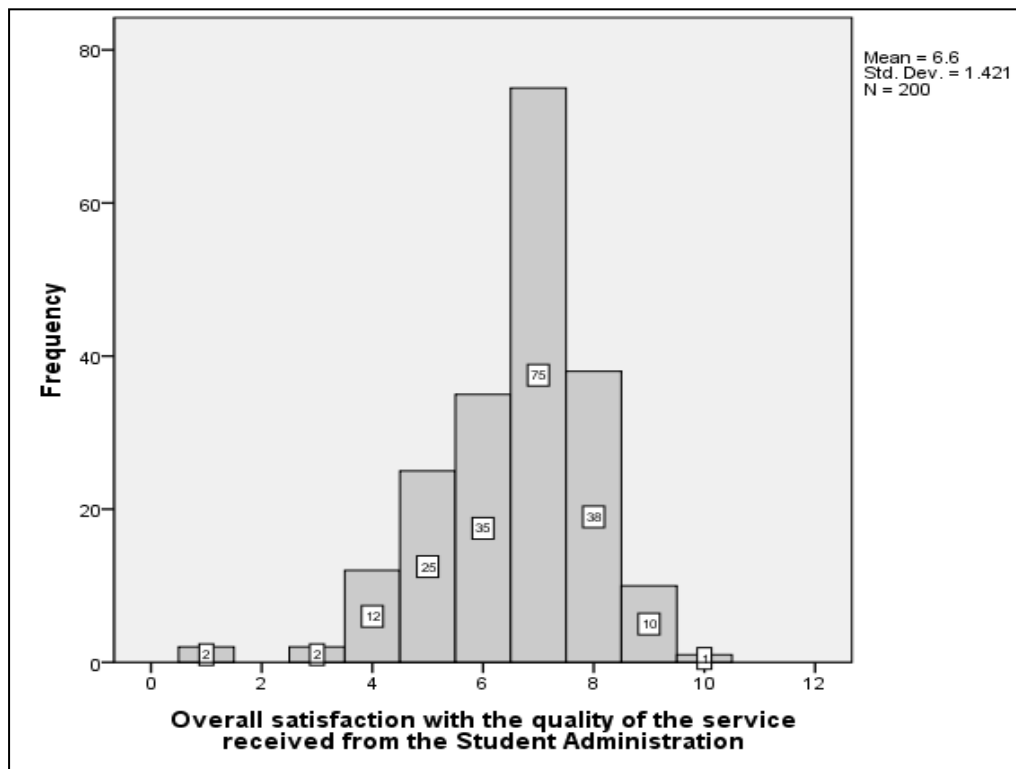
8. Hypothesis test

The results for each hypothesis are indicated and discussed below.

a. Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis (H_1) focused on the relationship between the perceived assurance of the service provided and the students' overall level of satisfaction. The following null and alternative hypotheses (H_1) are stated below:

$H_{1(null)}$: There is no correlation between the perceived assurance of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

$H_{1(alt)}$: There is a positive correlation between the perceived assurance of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

This one-tailed hypothesis was tested at a 5% level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 6 below describes the descriptive statistics for the students' perception of the assurance of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the students' perception of the assurance of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction

	N	M	SD
Overall satisfaction	195	6.60 (10 point scale)	1.42
Total assurance	195	3.81 (5 point scale)	0.64

The expectation of H_1 suggests that there should be a positive correlation between the student's perception of the assurance of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction. The results above implies that there is in fact a positive correlation due to the fact that the students' overall satisfaction rating ($M = 6.60$) is above average, leaning towards the "excellent" label, although the ideal would be a higher rating. The total assurance ($M = 3.81$) suggests that the students' perception about the assurance of the service provided is above average leaning towards the "strongly agree" label, although the ideal would be an average rating of four or five.

The level of measurement used to measure the students' perception of the assurance of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction was measured at an interval level. The appropriate parametric significant test used is person's product moment correlation.

The histogram and the normal probability plots for both the variables (overall satisfaction and total assurance) showed that they do not have a normal correlation.

The data points in the scatter plots form a cloud and not a cigar shape around the regression line. This indicates that there is a very weak, but positive correlation among the two variables. A positive relationship exists, as the regression line has a definite positive slope, but the relationship is not very strong.

The correlation matrix in Table 7 below shows the correlation of the two variables with each other and with themselves. The table indicates that the p-value is smaller than 0.05 and that the null hypotheses can be rejected and the alternative hypothesis can be accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between these two variables.

The correlation coefficient indicates that the direction is positive and that the strength (0.47) of the correlation between the two variables is weak according to the "rules of thumb" proposed by Burns and Bush (2006:542).

Table 7. Non-parametric correlation for H_1

			Overall satisfaction	Total assurance
Spearman's rho	**Overall satisfaction**	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.47
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	0.00
		N	195	195
	Total assurance	Correlation Coefficient	0.47	1.00
		Sig. (1-tailed)	0.00	.
		N	195	195

A weak strength positive correlation was found between the two variables (total assurance and overall satisfaction), $r(193) = 0.47$, $p \leq 0.0005$.

b. Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis (H_2) focused on the relationship between the perceived empathy of the service provided and the students' overall level of satisfaction. The following null and alternative hypotheses (H_2) are stated below:

$H_{2(null)}$: There is no correlation between the perceived empathy of the service provided and the overall satisfaction level of service quality received.

$H_{2(alt)}$: There is a positive correlation between the perceived empathy of the service provided and the overall satisfaction level of service quality received

This one-tailed hypothesis was tested at a 5% level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 8 below describes the descriptive statistics for the students' perception of the empathy of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for the students' perception of the empathy of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction

	n	M	SD
Overall satisfaction	195	6.60 (10 point scale)	1.42
Total empathy	195	3.27 (5 point scale)	0.66

The expectation of H_2 suggests that there should be a positive correlation between the students' perception of the empathy of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction. The results above implies that there is in fact a positive correlation due to the fact that the students' overall satisfaction rating (M = 6.60) is above average, leaning towards the "excellent" label, although the ideal would be a higher rating. The total empathy (M = 3.27) suggests that the students' perception about the empathy of the service provided is above average leaning towards the "strongly agree" label, although the ideal would be an average rating of four or five.

The level of measurement that was used to measure the students' perception of the empathy of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction was measured with an interval. The appropriate parametric significant test used is person's product moment correlation.

The histogram and the normal probability plots for both the variables (overall satisfaction and total empathy) showed that they do not have a normal correlation.

The data points in the scatter plots form a cloud and not a cigar shape around the regression line. This indicates that a weak but positive correlation between the two variables exists. The fact that the regression line has a definite positive slope indicates that there is a positive relationship, however, a weak one.

Due to the above discussed results it would be appropriate to use the Spearman's rank order correlation.

The correlation matrix in Table 9 below shows the correlation of the two variables with each other and with themselves. The table indicates that the p-value is smaller than 0.05 and that the null hypotheses can be rejected and the alternative hypotheses can be accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between these two variables.

The correlation coefficient indicates that the direction is positive and that the strength (0.35) of the correlation between the two variables is very weak according to the "rules of thumb" proposed by Burns and Bush (2006:542).

Table 9. Non-parametric correlation for H_2

			Overall satisfaction	Total empathy
Spearman's rho	**Overall satisfaction**	Correlation Coefficient	1.00	0.35
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	0.00
		N	195	195
	Total empathy	Correlation Coefficient	0.35	1.00
		Sig. (1-tailed)	0.00	.
		N	195	195

A very weak strength, positive correlation was found between the two variables (total empathy and overall satisfaction), r (193) = 0.35, p ≤ 0.0005.

9. Discussion

Student satisfaction towards the quality of the service provided by the Student Administration departments of the higher education institutions was measured in terms of assurance and empathy by using the SERVQUAL model. This was done in order to determine how the students perceive the above mentioned dimensions and to determine the students' overall satisfaction with the service they receive.

10. Conclusion

The results indicated that students' perception about the quality of the service, as well as the overall level of satisfaction of the service received is slightly above average. Even though this suggests that the students are not unsatisfied, there is still a lot of room for improvement in order to completely satisfy the students.

According to the students' perceptions, the highest agreed upon dimension in the SERVQUAL model was assurance (M = 3.81). Therefore, one can suggest that the students are the most satisfied with the assurance dimension. In relation to the results

obtained, empathy was the lowest agreed upon (M = 3.26). The statements regarding the empathy dimension have suggested that the students did not agree that the staff understand their needs, gives them individual attention or that they have the students' best interests at heart. Therefore, the Student Administration departments should focus their efforts on improving their empathy towards the students in order to increase the students' overall satisfaction.

The results further indicated that the male students together with the first year students were more satisfied regarding their overall perceptions about the quality of the service received from the Student Administration departments.

It is clear from the study that it is important that students' perception, in terms of service quality, should be understood in order to assure a high level of satisfaction. Therefore, tertiary institutions in South Africa should use the results of the SERVQUAL model to improve on their service offering in the areas where the students are not completely satisfied.

The study further provides strong support for the potential development of an effective service quality model which will aim to assist Student Administration departments in tertiary institutions to increase their overall level of student satisfaction. To conclude, tertiary institutions can benefit from and obtain a competitive advantage above other institutions by having excellent Student Administration departments that focuses on exceptional service quality and high levels of overall student satisfaction.

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