STUDENTS' PERCEPTION AND SATISFACTION TOWARDS CUSTOMER SERVICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Y. Hefer*, M. C. Cant**

Abstract

It is common knowledge that students experience various types of problems with universities and other higher education institutions. These problems are not limited to any specific country and it can be said that problems experienced in one country will most likely also occur in other countries. This study was done in order to determine students' perceptions and their satisfaction of the Student Administration departments in higher education institutions. The target population consisted 200 of undergraduate students in their 1st and 3rd year in a higher education institution. Quantitative research was conducted and a non-probability sample was chosen. Quota sampling was used in order to improve the representativeness of the sample The results from the study indicated that students' perceptions about the quality of the service received, in terms of reliability and responsiveness, from universities are slightly above average.

Keywords: Service Quality, Higher Education Institutions, Students' Perceptions, SERVQUAL, Student Administration

* Department of Marketing and Retail Management, University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria
Tel: +27-124292822
Email: hefery@unisa.ac.za
** Department of Marketing and Retail Management, University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria
Tel: +27-124294456
Email: cantmc@unisa.ac.za

1 Introduction

As students are the primary consumers in higher education institutions, they arrive at their chosen institution with predetermined perceptions about the level of service they wish to receive (Tan & Kek, 2004:17-25). There are various colleges and departments in any higher education institution and they are all incidentally in opposition with one another. Therefore, the different departments compete among each other for these "consumers" and could gain a competitive advantage over other the departments by means of good service.

For this research study, student satisfaction towards the quality of the service received is measured in terms of reliability and responsiveness by using the SERVQUAL model. SERVQUAL is a concept of assessing service quality as perceived by consumers. The SERVQUAL questionnaire consists out of 22 questions and is used to assist organisations that provide a service to understand the service perceptions and expectations of their customers better (Tan & Kek, 2004:17-25). The model assesses service quality in terms of the following five dimensions: reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness and empathy.

SERVQUAL tests both the service expectations and perceptions of consumers. This research study however only focused on consumer perceptions. Where previous research on service quality in higher education institutions only focused on higher education, this research study engrossed the perceptions of the service delivered specifically by the Student Administration of a higher education institution. Therefore, this research study investigated whether the student's perception about the service quality, delivered by a higher education institution, is exceptional in terms of the reliability and responsiveness.

Students as higher education customers, expect superior service from higher education institutions. As the competition in the education industry is increasing, it nurtures service quality innovation and therefore encourages better utilisation of the above-mentioned dimensions of service quality.

Consequently, this research study aims to achieve the following research objectives:

Objective 1: To identify the students' perceptions regarding the reliability of the quality of the service provided.

Objective 2: To identify the students' perceptions regarding the responsiveness of the quality of the service provided.

2 Literature review

2.1 Service quality defined

Service quality was first defined by Christian Grönroos. His definition suggested that service quality depended on three variables named: technical quality, functional quality and the image of the organisation (Boshoff, 2014:40). Technical quality labels the type of service the organisation provides, where functional quality describes how the service is delivered. By placing these two together you will determine the image of the organisation (Boshoff, 2014:40). However, due to the fact that services are intangible, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991:420-450) defined service quality as "… a customer's evaluative judgement about the degree of superiority of service performance". Kotler (2003:444) argued that a service is a performance or action that one person gives to another that is in essence intangible.

As service quality can only be established on perceptions as opposed to objective measures, service quality suggests that a good quality service is when the service organisation meets or exceeds the customer's preconceived perception (Boshoff, 2014:40). Therefore, to achieve great levels of service quality, a service organisation needs to recognise their consumers' perceptions (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008:34-56).

2.2 Servqual defined

The old saying that states 'what gets measured gets done' are also true for service organisations. The SERVQUAL model measures both customers' expectations and customers' perceptions of the service organisation's performance (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2004:65). 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 higher education institutions to know exactly what these perceptions of the students are, because this might lead to potential students in the future. Individual students have specific expectations about a service, however this is before the actual service took place. Therefore, the perceptions they have formed after the actual service delivery, is very important.

SERVQUAL is used to serve as a technique to measure service quality and to address the problems that arise. It was designed to provide service organisations with a better understanding of their customer's perceptions and expectations. It is an instrument used to measure consumers' perceptions of service quality by using the following measuring instruments: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1991:420-450). The measuring instruments can be defined as follows:

Reliability: Reliability refers to the capability of the service organisation to provide the promised service consistently.

Responsiveness: Responsiveness refers to the organisation showing enthusiasm to support the consumer.

Empathy: Empathy refers to the compassion and courtesy given to the consumer by the service organisation.

Tangibility: Tangibility refers to the physical indicators of service organisation.

Assurance: Assurance refers to the aptitude and skill of the service organisation's employees to provide the promised service.

For this study, the focus will only be on the reliability and responsiveness dimensions. These two dimensions were chosen because out of the five dimensions mentioned above, reliability and responsiveness are the dimensions that the consumers value the most (Parasuraman et al., 1991:420-450). The ranking of the remaining SERVQUAL model dimensions, in terms of strength, is assurance, with empathy and tangibility as the least important dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1991:420-450).

The SERVQUAL model makes use of 22 questions to measure the five above mentioned quality dimensions/instruments. For this research study, only 10 (Table 1) of the 22 question were used to determine the students' perceptions in terms of reliability and responsiveness.

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

H1(alt): There is a positive relationship between the perceived reliability of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

H2(alt): There is a positive relationship between the perceived responsiveness of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

Table 1. Questions in the SERVQUAL measurement instrument

Reliability	
The capability of the service organisation to provide the promised service consistently and dependably.	
1	Providing the promised service precisely.
2	Genuineness of employees in problem solving.
3	Carrying out the service appropriately the first time.
4	The service is provided at the agreed upon time.
5	Knowing at what time services will be executed.
Responsiveness	
The organisation showing enthusiasm to support the consumer.	
6	The staff delivers on the time they stated.
7	The staff delivers an outstanding service.
8	The staff delivers an immediate service.
9	The staff is capable.
10	The staff is enthusiastic to help students.

Source: Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:66)

2.3 Students' perceptions in terms of service quality

The expectations of today's students, together with the competitive higher education market are much higher than it was before. Students are much more aware of the service quality they want to receive at higher education institutions as they are their biggest asset (Brochado, 2009:174-190).

Quality in higher education is a complicated and intricate theory (Harvey and Green, 1993:9–34). The variance between a students' expectation of a service and their perception of the service received, can be defined as service quality in higher education (Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007:949-959). O'Neill and Palmer (2004:39–52) describe service quality in higher education as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery".

2.3.1 Perceptions defined

According to Cant and Van Heerden (2013:60), a perception is how an individual sees something, in other words, how they select, organise and interpret information. Higher education institutions that are willing to embrace student perceptions will gain more than institutions that does not. Knowing and understanding student perceptions can assist higher education institutions in their value creation and delivery to many consumers, especially their students, consequently delivering better services that could have a positive effect on the students perception of the service quality (Dursun, Oskaybas & Gokmen, 2013:1133-1151).

3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling

Undergraduate students in 1st and 3rd year were the chosen population for this research study. This study achieved a sample size of 200 respondents and the units of analysis were undergraduate students. Although the research was conducted in South Africa, it can be assumed that the perceptions of students all over the world will be very similar regarding this aspect.

Quantitative research was conducted and a non-probability sample was chosen. Quota sampling was used in order to improve the representativeness of the sample (Cooper & Schindler, 2008:398). The researchers used quota samples to attain a large amount of completed questionnaires speedily and thriftily. This method was also chosen for the reason that quota sampling is much faster and less costly when using questionnaires (Wiid & Diggines, 2013:191).

There were a number of ways to select respondents. 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 two groups that could easily divide 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
Valid	Male	100	50.0
	Female	100	50.0
	Total	200	100.0

Table 3. Year of study

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

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Data collection method

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the necessary data. Questionnaire are an inexpensive means of collecting data, the sample was very accessible and it was less time consuming than the other methods (Cooper & Schindler, 2008:226). It was an anonymous form of data collection.

The respondent pre-testing option was used to pre-test the questionnaire (Cooper & Schindler, 2008:269). The questionnaire was field tested by respondents that had similar features and backgrounds. The questionnaires were distributed in the exact same manner as it was distributed in the actual study. Ten respondents were asked to participate in the pre-testing phase. The individuals that was used for the pre-test was undergraduate students in a higher education institution.

The questionnaires were handed out to the students, at the end of their classes. Permission to follow this procedure was obtained from the Dean of students and from the lecturers. There were no incentives given to the respondents in order to encourage them to participate in this study.

3.3 Methods

A multi-dimensional measure based on the scales reported by Wright and O'Neill (2002:27) was used to determine the extent to which the students were satisfied by the two elements of SERVQUAL. The constructs of this study (responsiveness and reliability) were measured through the use of 5-point Likert scales, a semantic differential scale and a constant sum scale. All were multiple-choice, single response questions. These scales were based on the scales used in previous research by Wright and O'Neill (2002:27). Table 4 shows the number of items used to measure each of the constructs mentioned above.

Table 4. Items to be measured

Dimension	Number of items in the scale
Reliability	5 items
Responsiveness	5 items

The points in the Likert scales were numbered 1 to 5, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree". The points in the semantic deferential scale were numbered from 1 to 10, where 1 is "poor" and 10 is "excellent".

3.3.1 Reliability assessment

In order to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used. Cronbrach's coefficient alpha is the most applicable method due to the fact that the questionnaire consists out of 5-point Likert scales.

Table 5 below indicates the Cronbach's coefficient alpha for each of the dimensions used in the SERVQUAL model.

Table 5. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the SERVQUAL model used (n = 200)

Dimensions	M	SD
Responsiveness (α =0. 82)	3.55	0.64
When the staff promises to do something by a certain time, they do it	3.37	0.82
The staff delivers an excellent service	3.57	0.80
The staff delivers a fast service	3.42	0.79
The staff is competent	3.75	0.86
The staff is willing to help me	3.66	0.96
Reliability (α = .78)	3.49	0.62
The staff is not too busy to respond to student requests	3.49	0.86
The staff provides services at the promised time	3.52	0.81
Complaints and problems are solved with great concern and sympathy	3.19	0.94
The service is delivered correctly the first time	3.54	0.81
The staff is dependable	3.69	0.82

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The results suggest that the ability of the Student Administration to perform the promised service consistently and dependably (responsiveness) is the most important feature when it comes to service quality.

4.2 Hypothesis tests

4.2.1 Hypotheses 1

The first hypotheses (H1) focus on the correlation between the perceived reliability of the service provided and the students' overall level of satisfaction. The null and the alternative hypotheses (H1) are detailed below:

H1(null): There is no relationship between the perceived reliability of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

H1(alt): There is a positive relationship between the perceived reliability of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

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

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

	n	M	SD
Overall satisfaction	200	6.60 (10 point scale)	1.42
Total reliability	200	3.49 (5 point scale)	0.62

The expectation of H1 suggests that there should be a positive correlation between the student's perception of the reliability 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 reliability (M = 3.49) suggests that the students' perception about the reliability 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 students' perception of the reliability of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction was measured at an interval level of measurement. Product moment correlation was deemed adequate for a parametric significant test.

The data points in the scatter plots form a cloud and not a cigar shape around the regression line. This shows that there is an affirmative but very frail relationship between the two variables. The fact that the regression line has a definite positive slope indicates that there is a positive correlation; however it is frail.

4.2.2 Hypotheses 2

The second hypotheses (H2) focus on the correlation between the perceived responsiveness of the service provided and the students' overall level of satisfaction. The null and the alternative hypotheses (H2) are stated below:

H2(null): There is no relationship between the perceived responsiveness of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

H2(alt): There is a positive relationship between the perceived responsiveness of the service provided and the overall level of student satisfaction.

Table 7 below describes the descriptive statistics for the students' perception of the responsiveness of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction.

The expectation of H2 suggests that there should be a positive correlation between the student's perception of the responsiveness 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 responsiveness (M = 3.55) suggests that the students'

perception about the responsiveness 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.

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

	N	M	SD
Overall satisfaction	200	6.60 (10 point scale)	1.42
Total responsiveness	200	3.55 (5 point scale)	0.64

The students' perception of the responsiveness of the service provided and their overall level of satisfaction was measured at an interval level of measurement. Pearson's product moment correlation was deemed fit as a suitable parametric significant test.

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 positive but very weak correlation between the two variables. The fact that the regression line has a definite positive slope indicates that there is a positive relationship; however it is a frail relationship.

5 Discussion

Student satisfaction towards the quality of the service provided by the Student Administration of the higher education institutions was measured in terms of reliability and responsiveness 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.

5.1 Summary of findings

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. The total reliability suggested that the students' perception about the reliability of the service provided is above average, leaving a lot of room for improvement in terms of the institution's ability to correctly deliver the service they had promised.

The total responsiveness suggested that the students' perception about the responsiveness of the service provided is above average, leaving a lot of room for improvement in terms of the readiness of the institution to assist students and provide them with timely service. The results 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.

Higher education institutions should welcome new ways to improve their service quality as they will gain a competitive advantage to other higher education institutions. Being innovative with service delivery can assist the institution in creating value for their customers – employees, staff and humanity. As the results indicated, by delivering better quality service it could have a positive effect on the perception of students and increase their satisfaction levels.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

Future researchers could focus on the benefits a faculty could receive when delivering an exceptional service to their students. They could also study the needs and expectations of students in higher education institutions in order to determine its importance to service quality.

This study's results have indicated that the first year students as well as the male students are on average more satisfied with the overall service quality. One can do a future study to determine if this is in fact the truth and the reason behind it.

References

1. Boshoff, C. (2014), Services marketing: A contemporary approach. 2nd ed, South Africa: Juta & Co.
2. Brochado, A. (2009), "Comparing alternative instruments to measure service quality in higher education", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 174-190.
3. Cant, M.C. & Van Heerden, C. H. (2013), Marketing management: A South African perspective, 2nd ed, South Africa: Juta & Co.
4. Cooper, D.R. & Schindler, P.S. (2008), Business research method, 10th ed, Singapore, McGraw Hill.
5. Dursun, T., Oskaybas, K. & Gokmen, C. (2013), "The quality of service of the distance education", Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 103, pp. 1133–1151.
6. Harvey, L. & Green, D. (1993), "Defining quality", Assess Eval High Educ, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 9–34.
7. Jordaan, Y. & Prinsloo, M. (2004), Grasping service marketing, 2nd ed, South Africa, ANT Production Management.
8. Kotler, P. (2003), Marketing Management. 11th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
9. Narangajavana, Y. & Hu, B. (2008), "The relationship between the hotel rating system, service quality improvement, and hotel performance changes: A canonical analysis of hotels in Thailand", Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 34-56.
10. O'Neill, M. & Palmer, A. (2004), "Importance–performance analysis: a useful tool for directing continuous quality improvement in higher education", Qual Assur Educ. Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 39–52.
11. Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L. & Zeithaml, V.A. (1991), "Refinement and reassessment of the SERVQUAL scale", Journal of Retailing, Vol. 67 No. 4, pp. 420-450.
12. Tan, K.C. & Kek, S.W. (2004), "Service quality in higher education using an enhanced SERVQUAL approach", Quality in Higher Education, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 17-25.
13. Voss, R., Gruber, T. & Szmigin, I. (2007), "Service quality in higher education: The role of student expectations", Journal of Business Research, Vol. 60 No. 9, pp. 949-959.
14. Wiid, J. & Diggines, C. (2013), Marketing Research, 2nd ed, South Africa, Juta & Co.

15. Wright, C. & O'Neill, M. (2002), "Service quality evaluation in the higher education sector: An empirical investigation of students' perceptions", Higher Education Research & Development, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 23-40.