

Quality Concerns in Education

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Editors

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First Edition: 2017

ISBN: 978-1-926488-54-7

Published by

Canadian Academic Publishing
81, Woodlot Crescent, Etobicoke, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada.
Postal Code - M9W 6T3
www.canadapublish.com
Printed in India

Cover Design

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EVALUATION OF THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Universities have seen the provision of higher education to become a product and have been driven by competition to examine the quality of their services, to redefine their product and to measure customer satisfaction in ways that are familiar to service marketing specialists. Universities have realized that their long-term survival depends on how good their services are and that quality sets one university apart from the rest. Education services are often intangible and difficult to measure, since the outcome is reflected in the transformation of individuals in their knowledge, their characteristics, and their behaviour. Therefore, there is no commonly accepted definition of quality that applies specifically to the higher education sector. Further, when we assess quality of higher education institutions (HEIs), issues such as autonomy and independence complicate the whole process.

This study focuses on the determinants of service quality within the Higher Education sector and attempts to assess their individual weight in defining quality from a student perspective.

More specifically, this study's objective is to establish and test dimensions for measuring service quality in higher education, with specific reference to students following undergraduate taught programs and to measure student's preferences in the available educational services. It also aims to measure and analyse the factors that determine the quality, to what extent they meet the students' expectations and if there are any differences of the students' perceptions about the weighting of the importance based on demographic factors. In the following sections, we will review the related literature, present an overview of quality assurance in HEIs, and then discuss the research methodology. Subsequently, we will present the results of the study. Finally, we will present the recommendations – conclusions.

Quality and quality assurance in higher education

Even though, there is an enormous volume of published books and journal articles on the subject of quality, starting from early 1980s up to now, the concept of quality is still frequently misrepresented, misunderstood, or both, by many academics.

A number of different definitions has been given concerning quality in Higher Education, each one representing a different view, including: exceptional, perfection, as fitness for purpose, value for money the stakeholder perspective of quality degree to which the previously set objectives are met offers a very interesting discussion on the meaning of quality in education presenting his reflections on this topic for the last 30 years.

At the same time, there have been a lot of definitions in the literature describing the concept of service quality. It has been oriented as focusing on meeting customers' needs and requirements screening if the service delivered matches their expectations. In fact, a lot of the contemporary quality descriptions originate from the thesis that quality is the degree up to which customer expectations are met. Besides, considerations of quality are sternly linked to the subject of satisfaction leading prospect behaviour. Customer satisfaction can be defined as the attitude or feeling of a customer towards a product or service following the usage of it.

Research methodology

This study attempted to look at the determinants of quality in HEIs rather than quality as a whole, and its objective was to measure the weights of the quality determinants in order to discover those that influence students' satisfaction most. The starting point was the questionnaire developed by HQAA which defined explicitly the quality determinants.

The primary objective of AHP is to classify a number of alternatives (e.g. a set of quality determinants) by considering a given set of qualitative and/or quantitative criteria, according to pair wise

comparisons/judgments provided by the decision makers. AHP results in a hierarchical levelling of the quality determinants, where the upper hierarchy level is the goal of the decision process, the next level defines the selection criteria which can be further subdivided into sub criteria at lower hierarchy levels and, finally, the bottom level presents the alternative decisions to be evaluated. The main advantages of applying the AHP method are

- it is capable to provide a hierarchical decomposition of a decision problem that helps in better understanding of the overall decision making process;
- it handles both quantitative and qualitative criteria;
- it is based on relative, pair wise comparisons of all decision elements; instead of arbitrarily defining a percentage score and a weight for each decision element, AHP allows the decision maker to focus on the comparison of two criteria/alternatives, at a time, thus it decreases the possibility of defining ratings based only on personal perceptions of the evaluators or other external influences;
- AHP is applicable to both individual and group-based decision making (this is often achieved by considering the geometric mean of comparison values),
- it enables consistency checks upon pair wise decision judgments; and
- it supports sensitivity analysis to examine the effects of changing values of criteria weights on the final ranking of the decision alternatives.

Recommendations – conclusions

To begin with, teaching personnel could benefit from training to improve their communication skills as these criteria were seen of high importance between the students. Another suggestion could be to include evaluation of the communication and interaction skills in the classroom for teaching personnel as a main criterion for hiring personnel, in addition to the traditional evaluation methods that are based on professional and research experience. This measure could minimise the cases of indifferent teaching personnel. Secretariat should be run efficiently by a sufficient number of trained staff members that can provide accurate information on all aspects of students' studies. Where library services are concerned, the availability of textbooks and journals is the main factor influencing the quality according to students. Concerning the curriculum structure student value practical/hands on experience which is in direct connections with market demand. Further, students believe that elective modules are quite important since they provide the opportunity to customize their studies and get an insight into areas of specialisation as early as possible. The location of TEI/L seems to be of concern for students since the transportation cost and the frequency of the service are important factors for them. Except quality of infrastructure for teaching and laboratories, subsidised catering and accommodation services are important for the majority of students. Finally, concerning carrier prospects, students value specialization of studies. Also, to better equip students, it is necessary TEI/L to offer postgraduate degrees in new subjects, enhancing the competitiveness of its graduates. To this effect, the TEI should strengthen its links with businesses and society with a twofold purpose: to attract new students and to provide graduates with better career prospects.

With this study, the issue of quality of the TEI of Larissa has been addressed in order to define the determinants and their respective weight in the overall quality assessment of the institution from a student perspective. The study also provides recommendations on quality improvement of the institution based on its findings. Applying the AHP method that has proven to be the most appropriate when surveys need to account for a high degree of intuition and subjectivity, the authors attempted to fill in the gap noticed in the literature on the subject of quality in the higher education sector as most studies do not look at quality determinants separately.

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