

Student Satisfaction, an overview of educational services quality - The Case of Bucharest University of Economic Studies

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Abstract

The main goal of this manuscript is to provide an assessment of the educational services quality by measuring the BUES student satisfaction.

Though the starting point is represented by the classical models of quality evaluation that have been applied in various sectors (e.g. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF) or were designed especially for the education field (e.g. HETQMEX, HEdPERF), this study offers a new perspective of the main dimensions of the higher-education service quality.

Therefore, the paper brings in the concept of quality of services measured by an aggregated index which includes three main components: the quality of basic services (teaching), the quality of auxiliary services (secretary, library, administrative operations) and the quality of supplementary services (eatery, dorms, online services).

The index aggregates the previously mentioned three components using a 50%, 30%, 20% weighting framework, constructed taking in consideration their general importance.

The proposed index is computed for a (non-probabilistic) sample of 139 students which answered an online questionnaire indicating their satisfaction regarding several aspects included in the three groups of services.

The main results of the paper indicate that the students enrolled in BUES have an average satisfaction level of 3.4 (on a scale from 1 to 5) and that the lowest 25% have a satisfaction level under 2.9 and the top 25% have a satisfaction over 4.0. Taking in consideration the three aggregated components we found that the highest satisfaction (average score of 3.6) is assigned to the auxiliary services and the lowest is assigned to the supplementary services, with an average score of 2.9.

Keywords: service quality; educational services; customer satisfaction; online survey; aggregate index.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Service quality is a broad concept and a current challenge for the marketers within the private or the public sector, considered to be a useful criterion in company's evaluation, a competitive advantage and a component of the customer satisfaction at the same time. Therefore, it is necessary to define its features and determinants. Each element that contributes to the final outcome, even if its presence is noticed or not in the encounter stage, is of high importance.

Thus, each university should pay attention not only to the core service, which consists mainly of the amount of information transmitted through lectures and seminars, but also to auxiliary and enhancing services, such as secretarial services – e.g. enrollment of students in the academic year, management of groups and study program, release of diplomas and certificates –, respectively accommodation and catering.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on the quantitative performance indicators and the limited financial resources may be obstacles in achieving the objective of improving services' quality in educational field. At the same time, the process of designing new services and developing the existing ones is more rigid in comparison with the tangible goods domain. Moreover, the educational services' characteristics – such as: intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability – influence the quality level.

So, first of all, in order to keep constant the quality of their services, the universities should implement measures of reducing intangibility. Therefore, they are willing to maintain long-term relationships with their current and former customers, fact which is leading to a win-win situation. On one hand, the graduates

– if they are satisfied with the educational services – may be tempted to associate their name with an educational service provider, as long as this connection is supporting their professional image and career success. On the other hand, a high quality of teaching-learning experience provides the university both an increased awareness, and a good reputation.

Second of all, by imposing several quality standards regarding the professionalism, dedication and empathy of educational services staff (including both teachers and administrative personnel) the services inseparability can be outrun. In addition, the unfavorable effects of this characteristic can be diminished by clear and detailed explanations on each educational process's requirements and by collecting learners' feedback.

Third of all, it is known that educational services cannot be rendered identically from a class of students to another. But in this case there can be no standardization of services, since variability is seen as a positive aspect of teacher performance that adapts to the audience in the classroom or seminar, thus personalizing the offer. There are also other activities that are behind an educational service and sometimes require equipment for the execution of repetitive operations. For example there are procedures for pre-enrollment, assessment tests carried out on an electronic platform or requesting additional services (such as accommodation on campus), which currently runs using computers and internet access. Once again, quality is marking the service performance, as it brings in the employees' responsiveness and the utility of tangibles.

Fourth of all, the perishability of educational services may be reduced either by a system of registration of students in various elective courses (for higher education) or part-time staff (or collaborators) employment which is meant to address customers' needs in the best conditions.

As one can see, in all the above contexts, the students are involved in the educational service delivery process to a great extent. This emphasizes the necessity of knowing their opinions about the core service and the supplementary ones, their attitudes towards various components of the educational offer (such as personnel or physical evidences) and, most important, their satisfaction in consumption, by collecting their feedback within marketing research while basing on proper quality evaluation tools.

2. Literature Review

The concept of service quality has been intensively debated and analysed in specialty papers, due to its importance in achieving a competitive advantage and ensuring the customers' satisfaction. Moreover, the quality is considered as defining an organisation and establishing the expected performance (Dew, 1997). As a consequence, these companies are interested in delivering qualitative services, being at the same time preoccupied to find out what are the most important components of quality in consumers' perspective.

A starting point belongs to Garvin (read in Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007, p. 419), who considers that quality – even if it is associated to tangible products or to services – may be defined by multiple items, such as:

- (1) performance (primary operating characteristics);
- (2) features (bells and whistles);
- (3) reliability (probability of malfunction or failure);
- (4) conformance (ability to meet specifications);
- (5) dureability (how long the product continues to provide value to the customer);
- (6) serviceability (speed, courtesy, competence, and ease of having problems fixed);
- (7) esthetics (how the product appeals to any or all of the user's five senses), and
- (8) perceived quality (associations such as the reputation of the company or brand name).

Though these components correspond to a complex and detailed approach, Grönroos' point of view (2007, p. 90) brings in a more structured and more precise version on quality dimensions. They are presented in a slightly modified form and are clearly focusing on the service industry. Thus, the quality of the service delivery process is assessed by using five criteria, such as: (1) attitudes and behaviour, (2) accessibility and flexibility, (3) reliability and trustworthiness, (4) service recovery, and (5) servicescape. While the first four criteria focus mostly on employees and their willingness to render the best service at the right time, by acting in a friendly and spontaneous way, keeping their promises, adjusting and remedying the offer to the

consumers' demands, the last one refers to the physical surroundings where the service is supposed to take place, by creating a positive experience for the implied parties.

However, Grönroos' approach (2007) emphasizes the concept of experienced quality, as a result of the two dimensions of quality: technical and functional. The technical dimension refers to the result's quality, whilst the functional dimension focuses on the quality of the process. This two-dimensional quality concept is the major difference between the two perspectives presented above.

Thereby, all these aspects contribute to the final perceived service quality. This is why in education services, as in any other industry, the total perceived quality depends both on the expected quality and the experienced quality. (Grönroos, 2007)

At the same time, in the educational domain, several factors were added, such as: academic and non-academic aspects, learning institution's reputation, access, programme issue and students' understanding. Whilst the first factor refers to those activities or tasks that are performed by non-academic staff in order to help students fulfil their study obligations, the second takes into consideration only the responsibilities of academics. The third one highlights the importance of building and maintaining a professional image in the field of learning institutions. The last three factors focus on the students' needs and wishes in terms of service's approachability, ease of contact, availability and convenience, academic programmes or specializations' diversity and flexibility, and counselling and health services. (Abdullah, 2006)

Another perspective belongs to Woodall (2001, p. 603), who believes that the focus is on service quality, without clarifying what the service means. Thus, the service may be seen as the entire manifestation of an organisation, the core result of the provider performance, an enhancing or an auxiliary activity (product augmentation or product support), and as a mode of behaviour (an act). That being the case, the quality may define each of these particular processes, tasks or outputs, which leads to various features or components. These approaches, besides other important points of view, which are considered anchors in the field of services or even in the education domain, are summarized in the following table.

Author	Dimensions	
Gronroos (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalism and skill • Attitudes and behavior • Access and flexibility • Reliability and trustworthiness • Recovery • Reputation and credibility 	
Parasuraman et. al. 1991 Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability • Responsiveness • Competence • Access • Courtesy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Credibility • Security • Understanding the customer • Tangibles
Parasuraman and Berry, 1991; Zeithaml et al, 1990 Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangibles • Reliability • Responsiveness • Assurance • Empathy 	
Cronin and Taylor, 1992 Performance Only; Service Quality Performance Model (SERVPERF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangibles • Reliability • Responsiveness • Assurance • Empathy 	
Ho and Wearn, 1996, Higher education TQM model of excellence; (HETQMEX)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Commitment • Total customer satisfaction • Total involvement • Training education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership of problem • Reward and recognition • Error prevention and • Teamwork
Firdaus Abdullah (2006); Higher education performance model; (HEdPERF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic aspect • Non-academic aspect • Reputation • Access 	

- | | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme issue • Understanding |
|--|--|

Table 1. Quality dimensions and models in services field

Source: Prasad and Jha, 2013, p. 25-28

However, the services quality assessment is a complex and difficult task, as the consumers usually have just a few visible items to observe and analyze that in most cases include physical settings, front-line staff and certain facilities offered by the provider. This is why in some authors' opinion the criteria underlying this on-going process cannot be fully known or understood. (Cetina et al, 2009)

Due to the lack of marketing communication, the customers are influenced by other factors in forming the expected quality, as: word of mouth, general image of the provider or their needs and values. (Grönroos, 2007)

Other authors (Cetina et al, 2009) point out the difficulty of designing a certain and objective level of quality in the field of services, as it is basing on consumers' subjective needs and wishes. Moreover, the quality is the result of comparing customers' expectations with their experience during the service performance. Hence, the quality is defined by consumers.

Once the quality dimensions or components have been defined, another issue raised in the academic world. The quality – satisfaction relationship or the differences between these two concepts have been the central theme within multiple research conducted in the domain of services.

Although they have certain things in common, satisfaction is generally viewed as a broader concept, whereas service quality focuses specifically on dimensions of service. Based on this view, perceived service quality is a component of customer satisfaction. (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2006, p. 106)



Figure 1. Quality – Consumer's Satisfaction Relationship

Source: Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2006, p. 107

Other research reveals surprising results, according to which “the service quality dimension of reliability/assurance primarily drives satisfaction, whereas the other dimensions remain insignificant. ... Thus managers in the service sector may be required to focus on strategic choices in providing reliable and trustworthy services in order to gain a competitive advantage.” (Andronikidis and Bellou, 2010, p. 581)

The conclusions of another study show “that service quality is an antecedent of consumer satisfaction and that consumer satisfaction exerts a stronger influence on purchase intentions than does service quality. Thus, managers may need to emphasize total customer satisfaction programs over strategies centering solely on service quality. Perhaps consumers do not necessarily buy the highest quality service; convenience, price, or availability may enhance satisfaction while not actually affecting consumers' perceptions of service quality”. (Cronin, Taylor, 1992, p. 65)

Moreover, multiple authors consider that there is a fundamental distinction between service quality and consumer satisfaction. Service quality is a long-term attitude, whereas consumer satisfaction is a transitory judgment made on the basis of a specific service encounter (cf. Bitner 1990; Bolton and Drew 1991; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Oliver 1993; Patterson and Johnson 1993, read in Cronin and Taylor, 1994, p.126).

3. Research goal, methodology and data issues

3.1. Research goal

The main goal of this manuscript is to provide an assessment of the educational services' quality by measuring the BUES student satisfaction. Using an online survey in pursuing the previously mentioned goal, the study should be viewed as an exploratory, descriptive research paper covering several physical evidences, auxiliary and supplementary services and also other relevant aspects of the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to provide both: individual assessments of the most important parts of the educational services and an overall assessment of the quality of the educational services provided by BUES.

3.2. Methodology and data issues

In order to answer the main goal of the research data were collected for a sample of 140 students enrolled in BUES in undergraduate education and graduate education. The sample is a non-probabilistic online sample and therefore the statistical representativeness of the results needs to be regarded with caution. Thereby, the entire research needs to be viewed as an exploratory research and its results need to be further investigated.

Taking in consideration the characteristics of the studied population and the investigation method selected for collecting the data, the questionnaire consisted of only 12 questions. The first seven questions were complex questions investigating the opinion of the respondents regarding the quality of several aspects of the educational services they have received. The last five questions are mainly demographic questions which were included with the clear purpose of assessing potential differences in opinions between different groups. All initial seven questions are closed questions with either a five point scale (Likert scale, satisfaction scale) or a ten point scale (grades from 1 to 10) answer which were employed both for facilitating the answering process and the analysis process.

The analysis of all recorded answers was done with the help of SPSS software and also with the help of Microsoft Excel.

For the overall assessment of the educational services an aggregated index was constructed, which was computed for each respondent and also for the entire sample. The overall index (ESI) was computed using three partial indices (BSI, ASI and SSI) which were computed using the methodology displayed in Figure 2. The initial items (sub-questions) were aggregate using equal weights for each partial index.

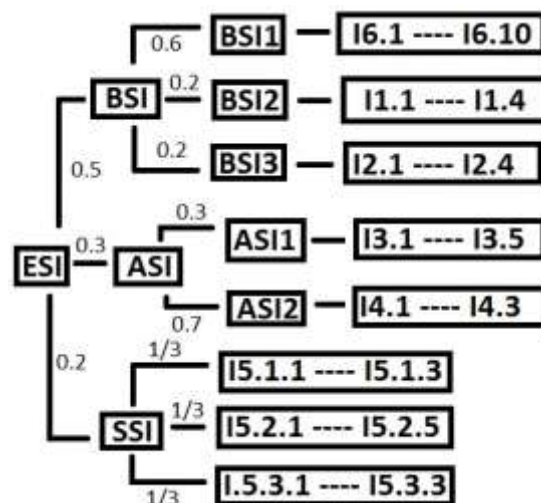


Figure 2. The methodological structure of the aggregated index

Source: Authors' work

4. Empirical results and main findings

This section will present and discuss the main results of the analysis using the same structure as the one employed for the aggregated index. Therefore the quality of the educational services will be discussed for the basic services, for the auxiliary services and finally for the supplementary services.

For the basic services, namely teaching, ten individual items were included in the analysis and the answer for each of them was measured on a five point Likert Scale. The best three results (the largest percentage for the combination strongly agree and agree) were obtained by the following items: I2 – the students are encouraged to discuss the received information, I8 – the seminar teachers have a friendly attitude towards students and I5 – the auxiliary materials used during classes are useful for the learning process. On the other hand, the lowest percentage of positive opinions were received by items I4 – the teaching methods are captivating, I9 – the professors careful with the students' needs and I3 – the theoretical and practical notions are combined during classes.

	16.1	16.2	16.3	16.4	16.5	16.6	16.7	16.8	16.9	16.10
Strongly disagree	6,3	4,2	5,6	10,5	4,9	4,2	4,9	2,1	7,7	3,5
Strongly agree	11,9	6,3	16,8	16,1	7,0	8,4	6,3	5,6	11,9	7,0
Neutral	17,5	9,1	19,6	24,5	15,4	21,7	16,1	16,8	25,2	20,3
Agree	39,9	46,9	33,6	30,8	38,5	38,5	38,5	43,4	30,8	49,0
Strongly agree	21,7	30,8	21,7	15,4	30,8	24,5	29,4	28,0	19,6	16,1
Missing	2,8	2,8	2,8	2,8	3,5	2,8	4,9	4,2	4,9	4,2
Positive answers	61,5	77,6	55,2	46,2	69,2	62,9	67,8	71,3	50,3	65,0

Table 2. The opinions regarding the quality of the basic educational services (% of total)

Source: Authors' work

For the auxiliary services, namely library related aspects and the administrative staff eight items were included (five for the library and three for the interaction with the administrative staff). Each item was measured on a five point scale ranging from totally satisfied to totally unsatisfied. The satisfaction level regarding these eight measured items is larger than the agreement declared for the items of the basic educational services. Therefore an important observation is the fact that when planning the overall improvement of the educational services the auxiliary services are among the strong points. Among these, the interaction with the auxiliary staff (except the library staff) brings forward the lowest levels of satisfaction. The secretary staff is the only one where satisfaction measured as percentage of positive answers is lower than 50% and is followed by the administrative staff where the satisfaction level is at 59.4%. The largest satisfaction levels are recorded for the endowment of the library with appropriate furniture (78.3% positive answers) and is followed by the satisfaction level measured for the appropriateness of the books and journals from the library (71.3%). The satisfaction level recorded for the online library is at only 63.6% being equal with the one recorded for the endowment of the library with appropriate IT&C infrastructure.

	13.1	13.2	13.3	13.4	13.5	14.1	14.2	14.3
Totally unsatisfied		2.8	1.4	1.4		12.6	2.1	4.9
Unsatisfied	.7	6.3	2.8	7.0	2.1	23.1	7.0	4.2
Nor satisfied nor unsatisfied	18.9	23.8	21.7	25.9	24.5	15.4	17.5	28.7
Satisfied	39.9	37.8	45.5	37.8	40.6	24.5	44.8	36.4
Totally satisfied	38.5	25.9	25.9	25.9	30.1	23.1	25.9	23.1
Missing System	2.1	3.5	2.8	2.1	2.8	1.4	2.8	2.8
Positive answers	78.3	63.6	71.3	63.6	70.6	47.6	70.6	59.4

Table 3. The satisfaction regarding the quality of the auxiliary educational services (% of total)

Source: Authors' work

For measuring the supplementary services eleven items were used. These eleven items were included in three main groups, investigating aspects related to the eatery, the dorms and other services offered by BUES. There are three aspects related to the cafeteria, five related to the dorms and three related to the Wi-Fi infrastructure, the blended-learning platform and recreation and socializing halls. The answers for all eleven items were scores ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 represents totally unsatisfied and 10 totally satisfied.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dorms' capacity	122	1	10	6,16	2,728
Rooms' comfort	121	1	10	6,21	2,732
Dorms' security	121	1	10	6,49	2,751
The capacity of the cafeteria	133	1	10	6,63	2,661
The food quality in the cafeteria	134	1	10	6,99	2,631
The schedule of the cafeteria	132	1	10	6,47	2,805
Food prices in the cafeteria	131	1	10	7,95	2,663
Hygiene of the cafeteria	132	1	10	7,36	2,566
Wi-Fi Internet in the BUES buildings	137	1	10	5,28	3,134
Recreation and socializing halls	137	1	10	5,66	2,971
Blended Learning online platform	139	1	10	6,12	2,932

Table 4. The satisfaction regarding the quality of the supplementary educational services (% of total)

Source: Authors' work

When discussing the dorms, the largest average grade is received by the security of the dorms, followed by the comfort of the rooms and finally by the capacity of the dorms. The fact that all average grades are under 6.5 shows clearly that this is a domain where the quality of the services can be improved. As long as the cafeteria is regarded, the food prices receive the largest average grade which is close to 8. Following with an average of 7.36 is the hygiene of the cafeteria and with an average grade of almost 7 is the quality of the food. The lowest average grade is received by the schedule of the cafeteria.

The lowest grades are received by the Wi-Fi infrastructure and by the recreation and socializing halls. The average grades under 6 show clearly that these aspects are extremely problematic and that they need immediate attention. The blended learning platform receives the best average grade when compared with the Wi-Fi infrastructure and with the recreation facilities.

	BSI	ASI	SSI	ESI
Q1	2,9	3,1	1,9	2,9
Q2	3,6	3,7	3,0	3,5
Q3	4,1	4,3	4,0	4,0
Average	3,5	3,6	2,9	3,4

Table 5. The average (and quartile) values of the three individual indices and of the aggregated index used for measuring the satisfaction regarding the quality of the educational services

Source: Authors' work

The average value of the overall index (computed for the entire database) is 3.4 showing a generally good satisfaction level. Also notable is the fact that the lowest 25% of the respondents have an overall satisfaction level under 2.9, while the top 25% of the respondents have a general satisfaction level over 4.0. As far as the three components are regarded, the highest average satisfaction level is recorded for the auxiliary services. On the other hand, the supplementary services record an average score of 3.6. Noteworthy is also the fact that the average satisfaction level recorded for the basic services is a little bit higher than the overall average satisfaction level. Therefore, we can conclude that the weakest point is represented by the supplementary services and quick action needs to be taken in this regard due to the fact that these services are perceived by students as an important differentiator between educational institutions.

5. Conclusions, implications and future directions

Identifying the real students' needs and wishes represents a major continuous challenge for the university management, whose main role is to adjust and improve the core, auxiliary and enhancing services so that educational institution could offer the best teaching - learning process in a proper manner and servicescape. The implementation of an aggregated index at the basis of quality assessment, which includes three components, such as: (1) the quality of teaching, (2) the quality of secretary, library, administrative operations and (3) the quality of canteen, dorms, and online services, offers the universities an enlarged and more precise perspective on students' satisfaction on the above core and supplementary facilities.

On this account, keeping the students' high interest in attending to certain specialized courses, involving them into the educational service delivery to a great extent, encouraging them to use additional services so that they could be fully trained for their future careers require a long-term marketing vision by running the necessary research for collecting their feedback and finding out how satisfied they are. This demarche should be a going-on one and should lead to an improvement in service quality. In addition, it is the duty of universities to discover what high quality means for each student or client segment, and then to act in order to meet their needs.

It is noteworthy that the organizations providing educational services should be aware of the consequences of an inefficient system of motivating and rewarding employees. Both unsatisfied academic and non-academic staffs, who are performing either core or supplementary tasks, may affect the quality of the output. Hence, knowing the importance of this factor in the whole sum of items underlying the quality is mandatory. This approach is important especially because in economic higher education, as in other services field, both technical and functional dimensions of quality are essential in improving the students' contentment. Whilst the first one is defined by the students' or graduates' abilities of applying their knowledge to the real business world and to make use of information learnt during the university programmes in a successful manner, the second one refers firstly to teaching – learning process and secondly to auxiliary and enhancing services (e.g. accomodation, canteen, other student facilities).

This research is a first step in the series of initiatives related to quality – consumers' satisfaction relationship in educational services. Future moves may focus on the teaching – learning system, including the students' perceptions on various items, such as: comprehension check, discussions encouragement, ability of capturing the students' attention and interest, utility of auxiliary materials, student-student interactivity, fairness in students' evaluation, or tangibles in the classroom and, in the end, their importance percentage in the whole educational process.

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