The relationship between student satisfaction and service quality in private higher education institutions

PhD. (C.) Suela Hajdari
University of Elbasan, Albania

Abstract

One of the most important determinants of student satisfaction is the quality of service, which is a competitive advantage for service delivery organizations as well as for the education sector. This study aims to reveal the link between the quality of service and student satisfaction in private universities in Albania, as well as to highlight the key factors in the quality of service that most affect student satisfaction. For the realization of this paper, 250 Bachelor's students were selected randomly in three private higher education institutions that completed the questionnaire drafted in relation to the quality dimensions. The empirical results of this study can be considered as support for the Parasuraman SERVQUAL (1985), which refers to factors contributing to student satisfaction. The positive relationship between service quality and student satisfaction is one of the key findings of this study.

Keywords: Servqual model, education quality, student satisfaction, private higher education institution.

Introduction

The academic environment is undergoing rapid changes and is characterized by an ever-increasing competition, where potential students are offered numerous opportunities. In this respect, private higher education institutions should be careful in choosing attractive methods to attract and retain students. Student satisfaction should be seen as a primary source of competitive advantage (Poturak, 2014). If the institutions satisfy their students, this will ensure their sustainability and create a positive image for attracting new students as well. Fulfilling student expectations is at the center of the attention of many institutions, but the lack of student awareness among staff is the main obstacle faced by most educational institutions.

If education programs and services meet the student's expectations for services, then this makes students continue to enroll in higher education institutions. According to Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, (1996) satisfaction with services is the difference in this competitive market. Service quality is the focus of most popular marketing issues (Velnamby, Sivesan, 2013). Consequently, improving the quality of services should be the objective of private higher education institutions, which is closely linked to the ability of these institutions to create an atmosphere conducive to change through the decision-making process and human resource practices (Mosadeghard, 2006).

Determining the quality of higher education is a difficult task, as the quality of education is viewed as a vague and contradictory concept (Pounder, 1997). Since there is no standard definition for quality, its measurement has always been questionable. Many scholars have tried to develop a quality model for higher education based on

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industry models, such as Gronroos, Garvin and Parasuraman's quality dimensions (Ojlia and Aspinina, 1996), SERVQUAL (Oldfield and Baron, 1998) (Cullen et al., 2003).

The quality of higher education service has consistently been the focus of research conducted by many scholars such as: Ali & Mohamed, 2014, Alves & Raposo, 2010, Arambeela & Hall, 2009, Mulalic, 2012, Oldfield & Baron, 2000, Palli & Mamilla; 2012; Poturak, 2014; Usman, 2010). However, insufficient studies have been conducted that analyze the conceptual basis of the quality of service of higher education and student satisfaction. This paper aims to highlight the aspects of service quality and the level of student satisfaction in private higher education institutions in Albania.

Research questions

The research questions of this paper can be summarized as follows:
1.   What is the relationship between the dimensions of service quality and student satisfaction in two private higher education institutions?

2.   What are the key factors in service quality that more affect student satisfaction?

The objectives of research

The purpose of this paper is to determine the link between service quality and student satisfaction, where the five dimensions of quality will be analyzed: vulnerability, security, reliability, responsibility and sensitivity.
The objectives can be listed as follows:
1.   Determining the linkage of quality dimensions of service with student satisfaction.
2.   Determining key factors in service quality that more affect student satisfaction.

The significance of the study

The quality of service that can be applied to private education institutions makes them different from public institutions. These private institutions need to offer additional advantages to guarantee the protection of quality services during competition with public institutions. According to Zammuto et al. (1996), a service-oriented organization, to be successful should pay attention to aspects of service quality to provide competitive advantages to its competitors. In the case of private institutions, the bulk of income is directly related to registrations, so the quality of service is important. The importance of this paper lies in the fact that it will measure the degree of service quality and the degree of student satisfaction. Conclusions of this paper can be used to provide valuable information about quality dimensions that are considered essential by students when assessing the quality of services and satisfaction. Conclusions and recommendations of this paper may constitute valuable information for private higher education institutions.

Literature review
The concept of student satisfaction

Satisfaction is a condition experienced by an individual when he accomplishes

a performance or result that meets his or her expectations (Kotler and Clarke, 1987). Satisfaction constitutes a relative function of expectations and perception performance. The concept of satisfaction is defined in many ways both in terms of service quality and student satisfaction. If the institution has the appropriate infrastructure to provide educational services against the parameters of professional development, then students will certainly feel more satisfied and more motivated to complete their studies. From this point of view, Elliott & Shin (2002) defined the student's satisfaction as: "The likelihood of subjective assessment of students for the various learning outcomes and experiences." While the customer's perspective is the focus of most of student satisfaction, researchers are facing the problem of providing a standard definition for student satisfaction, highlighting the need to choose a client satisfaction theory that explains what the student's satisfaction means. Students as consumers may be dangerous, but referring to the characteristics of the higher education market, the student may be considered a "client" and, as he / she pays tuition fees, may require that his views be taken into account and enforced (William, 2002).

The concept of service quality

The concept of quality of service has at the same time exhibited interest and debate in research literature (Ananth et al., 2010). According to Lewis and Booms, the quality of service can be considered as a measure of the degree of compatibility between the level of services provided and customer expectations. The nature of the service quality assessment is explained mainly by relying on two fundamental concepts: the European perspective drawn up by Grönroos (1984) "the lack of quality service concept" and the American perspective compiled by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) the "SERVQUAL" scale to measure the quality of service (Chanaka, Wijeratne and Achchuthan, 2014). The concept of quality of service offered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry relies on three issues related to the quality of service as a definition, service quality problems and the steps to be followed to improve the quality of services. Parasuraman (1985) created a service quality model pointing out that organizational shortcomings affect customer perceptions of quality.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) identified ten dimensions of service quality that can be applied to any kind of service that includes: vulnerability, reliability, accountability, competence, access, courtesy, communication, reliability, security, and understanding. Later, they were simplified into five dimensions in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1990) which are: security, sensitivity, reliability, vulnerability, and responsibility. Their explanation is as follows:

Reliability-refers to the ability to deliver the promised service with certainty and accuracy

Responsibility - refers to readiness to help customers and to provide prompt services

Tangibility- refers to equipment, physical objects and personnel appearance

Assurance - refers to employee behavior and ability to convey confidence

Empathy - refers to the individualized attention and attention that the firm offers to its clients.

Quality of service in the context of higher education

The SERVQUAL model turns out to be suitable for applying in the higher education sector as well, and this is shown by studies conducted by (Rigotti and Pitt, 1992), (Cuthbert, 1996, Soutar a In the study conducted by Cuthbert (1996), among the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, the dimension of vulnerability appears to be the most important, followed by dimensions of security, reliability, accountability and sensitivity. However, according to him, it is not the vulnerability that most affects student satisfaction, but the key factor is the meeting of the service. At the same conclusion, O'Neill and Palmer (2004) have also reached, arguing that although the dimension of vulnerability is best ranked from the point of view of the overall performance result, it is considered less important by the students when it comes to the process and sensitivity. Security and reliability are identified as the most important dimensions in studies by Perisau and McDaniel (1997), suggesting that students pay more attention to knowledge, friendship and the ability to inspire confidence. It has been concluded that there is a difficult aspect in choosing the perception of customer satisfaction between the emotions of technical functionality (Smith and Enne, 2001). In this respect, a given service that is provided by the student can be judged depending on how reliable (technical functionality) or age, friendliness and emotionality are related to the emotions. It also showed that a significant impact on the university's assessment has the support elements known as peripheral aspects and such objects of unversity as the cafeterias and apartments from which the students benefit. The size or number of faculties from which a university department is composed influences the student's satisfaction. Other specific studies have been conducted regarding the quality of educational service, comparing the importance of service quality by students in New Zealand and the USA (Ford and Joseph, 1999). Academic reputation proved to be the most important in New Zealand and was followed by career opportunities, program issues, cost / time, physical aspects, and others, and the US academic reputation was also in the first place followed by the cost / time, program issues, physical aspects and effects of choice.

Methodology

This paper is based on the *SERVQUAL model* developed by Parasuraman and its five dimensions. Student satisfaction is the addictive variable and measured with its overall satisfaction from universities. While the quality of service in higher education that is measured precisely from the level of satisfaction resulting from the service obtained is the independent variable. The five dimensions of quality are the responsibility, the vulnerability, the sensitivity, the security and the reliability. *The sample* of this study is the students of the Bachelor system in two private higher education institutions (European University of Tirana and Luarasi University). In each of these, 200 questionnaires were randomly distributed and 180 questionnaires completed. *The instrument* of realization of this paper is the questionnaire which is divided into three sections. The first section is represented by demographic factors related to gender, age, and year of study. The second section is represented by measuring the quality of service in higher education through 46 statements. The third section is represented by

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measuring student satisfaction through 4 statements. The five-degree Likert scale has been used to evaluate statements strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Analysis of results

Profile of respondents
Demographic data of respondents, including gender, age and year of study, are presented in the following table:

Table 1

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	70	38.9
Female	110	61.1
Age		
18-21	90	50
22-25	70	39
26-29	15	8.3
Above 29	5	2.7
Year of study		
First Year	70	39
Second Year	55	30.5
Third Year	55	30.5

As we see from the table, 38.9 % of the respondents are male and 61.1 % are female. The most of the respondents are in the first year of their studies (39%) and belong to the age from 18 to 21 (50%).

Reliability of the study
It is necessary that the consistency of the research instrument be tested by the reliability analysis (Ndubisi, 2006) and for this purpose Alpha Cronbach is calculated, a measure widely used for the degree of reliability. Minimum reliability is achieved for Alpha Cronbach's 0.6 value. Table 2 gives the values of this test about five dimensions of service quality and student satisfaction. Since all values are above 0.8 then we can say that these dimensions are reliable for conducting this study.

Table 2

Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha value
Assurance	0.874
Reliability	0.820
Tangibility	0.901
Empathy	0.842
Responsiveness	0.810
Satisfaction	0.923

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"Lecturers' Appearance", which is part of the vulnerability dimension, has the highest average score (mean = 4.88; sd = 0.87), followed by "courteous and friendly lecturers (4.79; 1.00) and" academic lecture credentials "(4.78; 0.9); While the lowest score is "insufficient amount of computers in the labs (3.00; 1.2). Lower satisfaction versus services is related to the dimension of vulnerability and greater satisfaction with the security dimension.

Relationship: Student Satisfaction - Service Quality Determinants

There are important positive links between the five dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibility, responsibility and empathy) and the quality of service to student satisfaction. There is a strong link between satisfaction and empathy, whereby rank, assurance, tangibility, responsibility and reliability are listed. There is a moderate link between tangibility and satisfaction, which applies to dimensions of security, reliability and accountability. While there is a stronger connection between tangibility and satisfaction ($r = 0.610$). The five dimensions are strongly linked to one another. These conclusions are shown in the following table:

Table 3: Results of correlation

Variable	Y	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6
Satisfaction-Y	1.00						
Indipendent Variable							
X1-Tangibility	0.556	1.00					
X2 -Assurance	0.572	0.675	1.00				
X3-Reliability	0.545	0.718	0.787	1.00			
X4Responsiveness	0.547	0.657	0.775	0.745	1.00		
X5 -Empathy	0.610	0.689	0.621	0.672	0.734	1.00	
X6 –Total quality	0.664	0.889	0.876	0.904	0.875	0.835	1.00

48 % of the variance in student's satisfaction are explained by the five dimensions of quality. As the F statistics value of F= 28.202 is significant at 0.000 it means that there is not a significative relationship between tangibility, reliability, responsiveness and student satisfaction. The two key factors that have great impact on student satisfaction are assurance and empathy.

Conclusion, Recommendation and limitation of the study

Through this paper, it was concluded that there is a positive relationship between student satisfaction and quality of service. So as the literature asserts, the quality of service needs to be improved continuously because it can increase student satisfaction and this is a competitive advantage for the private higher education institution. Through regression analysis it was found that the two dimensions of quality are precisely the sensitivity and security that are more affecting student satisfaction.

It is widely acknowledged that the quality of service is closely related to satisfaction and if no due attention is paid, organizations may lose their competitive position as service quality could account for approximately 48% of satisfaction. Paying special attention, empathy and assurance, as critical factors in the quality of service,

institutions provide the way to a better appreciation of satisfaction. Restrictions and working recommendations can be summarized as follows:

a)   One of the limitations of this paper is the fact that student samples were taken only by two private higher education institutions.

b)   Other comparative studies are suggested to identify whether there is any difference between public and private institutions regarding the link between quality of service and student satisfaction.

c)   Also, in the conduct of future studies, consideration of ease of data collection should also be taken into account as it may constitute an obstacle for the researcher.

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