QUALITY PERCEPTION GAP INSIDE THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Institutions in the higher education try to provide best quality services because they need to compete for their students. Measuring quality of their services is therefore an important task of those institutions that give feedback on the dimensions of quality that need to be taken care of and offers institutions the possibility to gain significant competitive advantage in knowledge market. In theory we found five most used dimensions of service quality. We developed a questionnaire including 18 items describing these dimensions with the help of focus groups of students. Analysis was carried out on students and professors of Slovenian business school. SERVPERF theory was challenged with the help statistic tools to establish the most important determinants of quality for students and professors.

Key words: perception, higher education, service quality, SERVPERF

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) is an extremely fast growing service industry and it is exposed to the globalization processes every day more and more. Service quality, emphasizing student satisfaction, is a newly-emerging field of concern. In order to attract students, serve their needs and retain them, HE providers are actively involved in the process of understanding students’ expectations and their perceptions of service quality. They have often to adopt techniques of measuring quality of their services just like in the business sector.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Managerial or excellence approach to quality stresses the importance of customer satisfaction. However, quality improvement for external customers i.e. students, must not undermine the care about the internal customers too. An expansion of the reception/assistance function for students would be the first choice in a quality improvement programme for external customers. Improvement in the perceived quality for staff requires a sustained improvement in the clarity, accuracy and reliability of the service offered, with no particular aspect standing out. The changes required for external customers would be seen as directing effort from improvements in task based services and possibly degrading quality. In other words, improvements to meet external customers’ perceptions, without equivalent improvements for internal customers would almost certainly generate a negative reaction among the internal customers. The two areas are not incompatible but, given limited resources, it may not be possible to improve appearance and responsiveness, and improve the task-based service given to staff, simultaneously (Galloway 1998, 24).

In the search for a reliable method of measuring service quality there has been little consensus on the methodology which is of general applicability in all service industries. In recent two decades SERVQUAL disconfirmation model became the most experimented and most challenged too. Disconfirmation models have sought to define quality in terms of the difference which appears between customers’ expectations and their perceptions of the actual service delivery. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry – PZB (1985, 41-50) defined five dimensions of service quality that other researchers often failed to replicate in many later studies. But their work in this field still stands out in terms of trying to conceptualise the way, how customers see the service quality. PZB (1988, 16) define perceived service quality as a »global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service«. They define expectations as »desires or wants of consumers' beliefs concerning the service received« (PZB 1988, 17). Cronin and Taylor (1992, 55-68) advanced the use of the model called SERVPERF, based on perceptions of performance only. It is resulting from examinations and assessments of PZB's gap theory, and it is relying on the construct that »service quality should be measured as an attitude« (Cronin and Taylor 1992, 64). Other service quality measurement model, proposed from Teas (1993, 18-34) is called EP (evaluated performance). Carrillat et al. (2007) in their meta-analysis discovered that in spite of the discussions and several arguments provided by researchers about the superiority of SERVPERF over SERVQUAL, their results suggest that both scales are adequate and equally valid predictors of overall service quality.
In the HE a number of studies have been made on the basis of SERVQUAL construct (O’Neil & Wright, 2002; Sahney et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2007; Lee & Tai, 2008; Yeo, 2008a; Brochado, 2009). Abdullah (2006) used a measuring instrument called HEdPERF, comprising 41 items, to assess service quality for the higher education sector. His study was made on three universities in Malaysia and findings confirmed that students’ perceptions of service quality can be considered as six-factor structure consisting of six identified dimensions: non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access, programme issues and understanding. He suggested widening and developing of the measuring instrument from a different perspective that is from other customer groups (internal customers, employers, government, parents and general public).

Quinn et al., (2009) studied techniques used to take on the challenges of quality improvement in higher education. They examined two elementary difficulties: first, definition of the customer; and second, measuring customer quality perceptions. An examination of representative historical applications of quality techniques was conducted as well as identification of the differences and similarities surrounding quality improvement efforts in each of three service areas typically found in higher education: academic, administrative, and auxiliary functions.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

To apply a SERVQUAL based survey in the HE sector, we had to adapt the wording of the questions to the context in a language, which the respondents can identify. FZB (1991, 445) recognized: »context-specific items can be used to supplement SERVQUAL«, despite their efforts to build a generic instrument. Consequently, the first stage of the research was to consult undergraduate students, via focus groups, to test out, and refine the wording and understanding of potential survey questions.

The five determinants of service quality in SERVQUAL model, measured through 22 items are (Grönroos, 2000): reliability (this means that the service firm provides the customers with accurate service the first time without making any mistakes and delivers what it has promised to do by the time that has been agreed upon); responsiveness (this means that the employees of a service firm are willing to help customers and respond to their requests as well as to inform customers when service will be provided, and then give prompt service); assurance (this means that employees’ behaviour will give customers confidence in the firm and that the firm makes customers feel safe. It also means that the employees are always courteous and have the necessary knowledge to respond to customers’ questions); empathy (this means that the firm understands customers’ problems and performs in their best interests as well as giving customers individual personal attention and having convenient operating hours); and tangibles (this determinant is related to the appeal of facilities, equipment and material used by a service firm as well as to the appearance of service employees).

We conducted three undergraduate student focus groups on three HE institutions. They consisted of six participants drawn from the first and third year students, and initial discussions were aimed at producing a series of recollections of their experiences at institution and the perceived quality of the HE services. Purpose of the discussion was to get an understanding of singular dimensions of the perceived quality, to choose the right wording for the survey questionnaire and to define the most important factors of HE process, as seen from the participants. It emerged that students perceived a clear distinction between administrative and academic roles.

On the basis of findings, we constructed our SERVPERF adapted questionnaire. Original SERVPERF questionnaire uses the word »employees« in a number of statements. In order to get appropriate answers to the statements, the wording has to be precise. So we had to use words »administrative staff«, or »academic staff«, as necessary in different questions. As a result of the focus group discussions, a set of 18 statements was prepared, adapted from generic SERVPERF questionnaire and used in the second stage of the survey. Statements were designed two-poled, for example: »Employees have never students’ best interests at heart« and »Employees have always students’ best interests at heart«. Respondents had to choose their agreement with one or the other pole of statement on the five dimensional scale. Then followed another set of 18 statements, connected to the first set, where the respondents expressed their view of the importance of single statements on a five-point Likert scale.

In the academic year 2003/04, 1762 students were enrolled in first three years of the study at the business school, and 50 professors were regularly employed. We obtained 390 responses in our survey, 361 from students, which represents 20.5% response rate and 29 from professors (58.0% response rate). Students were asked to answer the questionnaire between the class courses in the paper form. We had two separate samples: in one sample there were students of the business school and in another sample there were professors and assistants of the same faculty.

We analysed frequency tables by the use of Means procedure which calculates subgroup means and related univariate statistics for dependent variables within the categories for set of quality dimensions.

4. RESULTS

We first analysed frequency tables which show relatively high levels of perceived quality. On 5 point Likert scale 1 represented the least desired option and 5 the most desired option of quality dimension. Perceived quality is on the average always higher with academic staff than with students. Professors and assistants show the highest level of perceived quality with keeping students informed about time and place of services provided. According to the academic staff there is always will to help students. They also believe that students are informed in time/timely about the time and place of services provided. They are least satisfied with appearance of faculty building and surroundings. Students also show the highest level of perceived quality with keeping students informed about the time and place of services provided. They also feel that academic staff show respect to the students. They are satisfied with timely informing about time and place of services provided. The lowest level of perceived quality is the same as with academic staff - appearance of faculty building and surroundings. It is interesting to see the low level of students’ perceived quality also with time when services are carried out (often after time that was promised) and with individual attention of employees towards students.
The most important quality dimension for academic staff and for students is to inform students timely about time and place of services provided. Second most important item for academic staff is existence of will to help students and needed knowledge of employees to answer students' questions. Students' second most important item is the regularity of informing students about the time and place of services provided. Their third most important quality dimension is the knowledge of employees to answer students' questions. Both groups stress the appearance of faculty building and surroundings as the least important quality dimension which gives less importance with low perceived quality of both groups with this item.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Measuring service quality in HE is highly important to attract and retain students and government funding. Quality is a term often used in management, but the understanding of services quality can be quite different for different stakeholders. Our analysis confirms that fact. This also proves that there is no universal theory of quality that can be applied to different sectors. We found five quality dimensions, defined by PZB (1985) a good start of a research about quality but we have to develop different dimensions and models of quality in different sectors.

This case study was carried out at the Slovenian business school: students and faculty were interviewed about perceived quality of services at this school and about most important dimensions of quality. Our analysis was focused on the understanding of quality, so we closely analysed the second set of questions that concerned the most important quality dimensions for different stakeholders. Results unsurprisingly showed different understanding of quality between students and faculty. The assessment of students appears to be more critical, which is in accordance with other studies made in HE setting. Managers and lecturers have to bear in mind the reason of their success or failure – the satisfaction of their customers and among them students are not the least important.

REFERENCES
