

STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF ACADEMIC QUALITY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract: This paper examines student perception of academic quality in institutions of higher education. The study investigates the importance of delivering quality service in higher education institutions measured by student satisfaction. The research also explores if students have a positive view of non-academic facilities provided by higher education institutions and how it affects student satisfaction. The paper also examines the issue of whether students have a positive opinion concerning their accessibility to campus facilities and how this influences their degree of satisfaction. The study findings established that the level of undergraduate student satisfaction is associated with the student's ability to access sufficient resources which helps them to attain social and academic objectives. The literature review involved an online search of relevant articles dating from 2012 to 2017 using ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink.

Key words: quality education, student perception, academic quality, student assessment, higher education,

INTRODUCTION

This literature review explores student perception of academic quality within universities. The results indicate how the quality of service impacts on student satisfaction, as well as the way student satisfaction influence institutional reputation. Understanding these results can assist the institutions of higher education to enhance their service quality. Additionally, it can help to improve student satisfaction levels which would then strengthen institutional reputation.

The assessment of student's perception concerning the provision of quality service by the universities in a business point of view may help in the discovery of the basic requirements which students commonly consider during the selection of their preferred universities (McMahon, 2012). Having to make high-risk decisions and being indeterminate of selecting an institution of higher education, students particularly search for proof of premium service quality provision in the facilities provided by the academic institutions (Oldfield & Baron, 2012). Given that student satisfaction acts as a primary indicator of quality, institutions of higher education must consider student demands and preferences when providing services.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is insufficient research concerning student perception of the academic quality of universities, and even less research concerning exactly which components of university education determine perceived quality. Additionally, further research is necessary to resolve the discrepancies uncovered in previous studies. This paper offers suggestions regarding the assessment approaches necessary to measure student opinion and substantiates the need for further research.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To attain the objective of this research, the following study question will be explored:

- What is the student perception of academic quality within the institutions of higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Quality of Service

In the business world, quality of service is the key measure of organizational competitiveness. Over time, the delivery of quality service by academic institutions has become a fundamental topic because of its profound impact on these organizations as it also influences their customers who mainly are the students (Buela-Casal et al., 2013). Research concerning the quality of services is abundant, however, these studies have resulted in little agreement concerning the universally accepted definition of service quality (Coles, 2012). For instance, the American Society of Quality (ASQ) refers to service quality terminology, as the ability of characteristics and features in totality to fulfill certain needs (Briggs & Wilson, 2014). On the other hand, Coles, 2012, conceptualization of the quality of service describes that it is being able to satisfy the expectations of the user or it may also get defined as the excellence and superiority in service delivery. According to Galloway, 2015, argues that the quality of service encompasses the conformance with the requirements and needs of the customer. Based on the above definitions customer satisfaction is the indicator of quality of service. Consequently, this makes it challenging for the service deliverers to recognize or relate the quality of service and give it a standardized definition (Ivy, 2017).

The difficulty in the description of the terminology service quality also gets experienced in the process of measuring its impact on the consumer satisfaction level as no framework has been universally accepted and hence can be put under consideration to make a precise assessment to service quality (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). However, scholars in this field of research attempted to create instruments of measurement to capture and clarify the dimensions of service quality. The most commonly utilized instrument is the SERVQUAL, as it connects the aspect of quality of service to the consumer's concepts of expectations and their perception. Hill & MacGregor, 2013, however, criticizes this concept extensively, he specifically regards SERVQUAL instrument to be an unreliable tool due to its generalizability as well as its insufficient applicability in this field of study.

The Provision of Higher Education's Service Quality

The quality of service delivered by the institutions of higher education is essential since the satisfaction of students relates with positive perceptions for the given service quality (Krampf & Heinlein, 2014). However, the discussion is still on, on the best description of the quality of service in line with higher education. According to McMahon, 2012, the quality of education is a controversial and vague idea, and it relies on the stakeholders that interact with the services that get delivered by the institutions of higher education. The experiences that the stakeholders have had in the various provided services during the years of a student in the institution, encompass the quality of service (Mazzarol, 2017).

Numerous research studies have attempted to examine and establish models for service quality in line with higher education. For instance, Browne et al., 2008, considers SERVQUAL, as a scale to quantify the service quality that has been perceived in United States universities utilizing three aspects: global satisfaction; willingness to recommend the College and satisfaction with value received from the educational experience. Validation and development of the scale were initiated by 736 students from American colleges in the year 2004. Results indicated that the perceived quality of the educational offering and service quality explained different amounts of the variance in satisfaction (Browne et al., 2008).

Other authors (Firdaus, 2006) considers HEdPERF (Higher Education PERFORMANCE-only), as a scale to quantify the service quality that has been perceived by students utilizing five aspects, that is, program issues, academic features, reputation, non-academic concerns as well as access. This paper describes the methodological development of HEdPERF, that captures the authentic determinants of service quality within the higher education sector (Firdaus, 2006). The HEdPERF was proposed by the researchers as a scale that is comprehensive as it encompasses a range of attributes of the service in the universities context (Devinder & Datta, 2013).

Student Satisfaction Regarding Higher Education Service Quality

The literature on the satisfaction of the customer is established on definitions around ideas such as perceived value, quality of service, experience, expectations and subsequent service evaluation. (Joseph et al., 2015). For instance, satisfaction is the state that some individual feels through experiencing excellence or a result that meets their expectation (Lagrosen et al., 2014). In the University education context, undergraduates are the prime customers (María Cubillo et al., 2016). The idea of considering undergraduates as customers is not unusual because students are the prime partners and customers in the university education segment as they deliberately select and purchase services (Oosterbeek et al., 2012). Moreover, Mazzarol, 2017, argues that satisfaction of the student is an attitude that only lasts for a short period of time. Furthermore, Owlia & Aspinwall, 2016, contend that the satisfaction of academicians has a major duty in shaping the authenticity and accuracy of provided services. Parameswaran & Glowacka 2015, indicate that student satisfaction is the only sign of the performance of quality of service for providers of higher education.

Numerous explanations for the dimensions of student satisfaction exist. For example, Parameswaran & Glowacka 2015, looked at elements such as events that are outside of the curriculum and course quality. It was also pointed out by Peng et al., 2012, that students are clients or customers and the providers of education are required to give them priority and meet their expectations. However, Price

et al., 2013, put the factors affecting the satisfaction of students into personal and institutional factors. Personal factors were gender, age, temperament, grade point average (GPA), preferred style of learning and employment status (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2012). Institutional factors found included; instruction quality, promptness, and quality of feedback from the instructor as well as their expectations' clarity, instructor's style of teaching, the class size and the institution's emphasis on research (SadiqSohail & Shaikh, 2014). University education service providers need to put into consideration both personal and institutional factors (Soutar & Turner, 2012).

Institutional Reputation

The research indicates the confusion that exists surrounding the definition and conceptualization of the term 'reputation'. For example, Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2012, stated that reputation has habitually been interchangeably utilized with the image. On the other hand, Tam, 2013, indicated institution's reputation to be, merely being associated with the name of the organization. Equally, Buella-Casal et al., 2013, referred to reputation as an organization's personality profile that is psychological and is created by an individual. However, some researchers, notwithstanding existing variations have come to an agreement on reputation's definition. For instance, Lagrosen et al., 2014, stated that it is a representation of an object that is mental and that acts in that object's place. Correspondingly, according to Krampf & Heinlein, 2014, scholars of the reputation of universities and colleges highlight that the university reputation is an opinion of provided services that is comparatively cognitive and relatively communicative. The university reputation gets affected by intangible and tangible elements, communication and values (Price et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY FOR THE REVIEW

The ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink online databases were consulted from 2012 to 2017. The primary words comprised of quality education, student perception, academic quality, and student assessment, which got combined from these two sources. The searches resulted in 195 hits on the ScienceDirect and 507 hits in the SpringerLink. However, only 108 hits remained, when the search was limited to additional essential words "higher education". Only matching documents were searched for selected topics, and 31 papers met the set standards.

Development of research technique detailing protocol and procedures to be followed in reviewing literature includes; sources to be explored for literature; terms to be utilized to identify the literature review; the screens for each item to go through to be considered for inclusion in the review; processes for noting and storing references; and, processes for identifying and summarizing collected works.

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The study results revealed that foreign students in the United States public universities are a core customer group. The research also revealed data indicating that 35% of matriculating foreign students fail to earn a degree, and 45% of these students drop out by the time end of their second year. The reason is they are dissatisfied with academic quality. This reflects how vital it is for public university administrators, as well as researchers, to concentrate their responsiveness on academic service quality that leads to higher student satisfaction. The definition of student satisfaction is positive, pride or attractive sentiments which get developed by students towards a university's academic programs. It was discovered that the level of each undergraduate's satisfaction correlates with student's ability to access sufficient resources which helps them to attain social and academic interests. Students who reported positive social experience as well as academic positive sentiments within the institutions of higher education, also expressed better satisfaction with the general campus experience.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The concentration on quality (quality is the key ingredient for success to achieve students satisfaction) in academic services is a core focus of American public universities. The results of this research further identify that all United States universities must first deliver quality services and curricula foreign students since all undergraduates are concerned with each element (both from the academic perspective and the social point of view) concerning their campus experience. The quality in academic services not only encompass note taking, lectures and guidance, but also involves the undergraduate's capability as they interrelate with several non-academic individual constituents within the university (Browne et al., 2008). The foreign student's selection process of the higher education institutions in the United State is a process that involves student's putting much eminence in the university's reputation which acts as driving force for the acceptance and gratification with the chosen university (Veloutsou et al., 2014). Through the consideration of multiple perspectives in respect to the dimensions and description of the term quality, scholars in this research differ in their use of measurement principles as they determine the impacts of quality service on client (in this case students) satisfaction as a display for quality.

The study result further indicates that students become satisfied with the diverse features of quality academic service delivered by the United States public universities, specifically curricula, but also non-academic aspects such as, accessibility to campus amenities and even campus reputation. These findings confirm that the entire measurements of quality service has a huge impact on student satisfaction, which in turn affect organizational reputation. Also, academic quality profoundly impacts on the student's acceptance to every academic institution. The study results correlate with the findings from previous researchers which explored the perspective of the impact of quality of service on client satisfaction. Also indicated by this study, specifically the United States public universities, is a focus on the provision of quality service as a strategic move to attract more international students, or at least retain the existing ones who are already enrolled.

To achieve the study results mentioned above, scholars in this field of research utilized the HEdPERF scale whose components were comprised of features such as the reputation of the institutions of higher education, student's ability to obtain quality services delivered by the institutions, the quality of curricula offered by the university, and both non-academic and academic experiences of the student while on campus. Comparing this study to the previous researcher, it is noticeable that a limited number of researchers utilized this scale in previous studies to explore students' thoughts on quality of service offered by the universities. Despite this limitation, the previous researchers were still comparative in their study design which involved the comparison of SERVPERF with HEdPERF to examine comparative effectiveness. In the previous studies, the researchers determined that HEdPERF is a more dependable tool to evaluate the quality of service of higher education institutions associated with the alternative tools (Bourke, 2014). Besides these comparative studies, there are no empirical studies that examined HEdPERF together with its impact on the degree of student satisfaction, institutional reputation and how this aspect affects their acceptance of certain institutions within the United States.

Furthermore, even though higher education quality of service has been studied by many scholars, only a few of them concentrated on the non-academic student perception. Hence, this research seals the gap in the current literature since it explores the influence of American university quality of service measurements on the student's gratification level as well as its successive impacts on the organizational reputation and student's preferences of a certain acceptance on these institutions. Consequently, this literature review serves as an important guide for educators to improve their assessment methodology, which may result in attaining higher quality education and learning.

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