



**A Diagnostic analysis of the factors influencing student satisfaction and dissatisfaction
in tertiary education as perceived by H.E Experts**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the perception of Higher Education experts on student satisfaction through the use of the Higher Education Service Quality Scale (HESQUAL). The paper demonstrates that in addition to the academic and pedagogic quality of the teaching culture, infrastructure and quality of services, based on long-term relationships with university personnel, should not be underestimated when trying to understand and improve student satisfaction.

The overall objective of this thesis is a comparative analysis of the HESQUAL model to the perception of H.E. Experts and in the future develop a coherent student satisfaction model, describing the components (influencing factors, potential outcomes, dependent and independent variables) of student satisfaction.

The primary data collection method used was in depth interviews and more specifically with eight Higher Education Experts at the position of "Director of Recruitment and/or Admissions" in eight private European Universities. The first stage was the analysis of the actual customer satisfaction model Higher Education Service Quality Scale [HESQUAL]. During the second stage, the eight Higher Education experts and university personnel were at the core of the research to further validate and adapt the model through in depth interviews.

This student satisfaction model could serve two purposes in the future: first, a more comprehensive tool for improving the marketing for Higher Education providers by enhancing the student learning experience, and second, informing university management for adjusting and adapting Higher Education institutions to a changing and tougher economic reality.

KEY WORDS: Higher Education, Marketing, Student Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

It is known, that marketing is essential for any organization in order to promote its products or services and achieve its objectives. However, what is often less well known is that marketing can also be applied for educational purposes. This is because marketing can be used to raise awareness of educational opportunities and to encourage people to take up those opportunities. There are a number of ways in which marketing can be used for educational purposes (Shpolianskaya, and Prokhorova, 2019).

The playing field of Higher Education has become more and more crowded and muddy. While potentials for this development are obvious, so are many problems and issues.
(Chen cited in Raab, Ellis and Abdon, 2002, p. 218)

Research identifying satisfaction factors is not education-specific, as numerous generic measurements assist organizations in their policy planning. However, the complexities of the higher education sector hinder the utilization of instruments designed for other industries because engagement, needs, and expectations differ among the students' educational life cycle. Student satisfaction consists of many variables that only connect marginally to the provider itself. Higher education measurements were developed to rectify discrepancies in instrumentation applicability (e.g., Higher Education Performance [HEdPERF]; Higher Education Service Quality Scale [HESQUAL]) to varying degrees of acceptance.

Global competition in Higher Education implies an international repositioning of the universities. Additional resources are needed to meet this long-term challenge to maintain and continuously improve high standards, widen student access as well as strengthening links with business. The changing demographics will lead to increased competition with rival institutions. Through this empirical research, we can confirm that student satisfaction has a high significance for any private or public university

Literature Review

Marketing of Higher Education

There are a number of reasons why marketing of higher education has become increasingly important in recent years. Firstly, the number of students seeking to enter tertiary education has increased significantly, meaning that there is more competition for places. Secondly, the cost of higher education has also increased, meaning that students and their families are increasingly looking for ways to get value for money (Hübscher et.al, 2021). Finally, the nature of the higher education market has changed, with an increasing number of students from overseas and a greater focus on online and distance learning.

All of these factors suggest that universities and other higher education providers need to be more strategic in their marketing efforts. They need to be able to identify their target markets, and then craft messages and materials that will appeal to those groups. One of the most important elements to understand marketing of higher education is the role of accreditation (Kasian and Kolisnyk, 2019). In many countries, students will only be able to get government loans or funding if they attend an accredited institution.

As a result, accreditation bodies have become powerful in shaping the higher education landscape. They can influence which institutions are able to offer which courses, and they can dictate the quality standards that those institutions must meet. This can become a barrier for new institutions to enter the market, as they may not be able to meet the accreditation requirements (Shpolianskaya, and Prokhorova, 2019). It can also make it difficult for existing

institutions to change their offerings, as they may not be able to meet the new standards. This can limit innovation in the higher education sector.

There are a number of options to market higher education, and the most effective approach will vary depending on the target audience. For example, things like campus facilities and student life may attract students who are looking for a traditional university experience, while students who are looking for a more flexible learning experience may be more interested in things like online and distance learning options (Hübscher et.al, 2021). It is important to remember that the marketing of higher education is a competitive process, and that universities and other providers need to be constantly innovating and evolving their strategies in order to stay ahead of the curve.

Student Satisfaction Models

Most student satisfaction models are multidimensional, and generally consist of a maximum of six factors that contribute to student satisfaction: academic factors, social factors, institutional factors, personal factors, environmental factors, and programmatic factors (Haverila et.al, 2021). Academic factors include the quality of the academic program, the quality of the faculty, and the level of challenge in the coursework.

Social factors include the level of social support from family and friends, the level of involvement in extracurricular activities, and the level of satisfaction with the campus community. Institutional factors include the level of institutional support, the level of financial aid, and the level of satisfaction with campus facilities and services. Personal factors include the student's level of preparedness for university, the student's level of motivation, and the student's level of self-confidence (Osman and Saputra, 2019). Environmental factors include the level of safety on campus, the level of cleanliness on campus, and the level of noise on campus. Programmatic factors include the level of satisfaction with the career services office, the level of satisfaction with the counseling center, and the level of satisfaction with the health center. The student satisfaction model can be used to guide research on student satisfaction and to inform policies and practices that improve the college experience for students (Hwang and Choi, 2019). By understanding the factors that contribute to satisfaction, universities can create a more positive and enriching experience for all students.

The new task for university providers is the targeting of the right students who can become advocates and increase their positive word-of-mouth. As a result, a proactive management is required to get a detailed understanding of student needs, preferences and choices (Leeflang and Wittink, 2000). The so-called customer approach treats the students as the customers in contrast to the product approach that treats the students as the products (Emery, Kramer and Tian, 2001). Additionally, Higher Education providers are adopting a total-service concept. This concept "implies a comprehensive approach to student's services ranging from the point of initial contact to admission, from instructional-related services to non-instructional-related services, and from experience on the campus to after-graduation contacts" (Michael, 1997, p. 123). To gain deeper insight into the student needs and perceptions it is useful to develop close relationships with them and to conduct student surveys (Slater, 2001).

The HESQUAL model

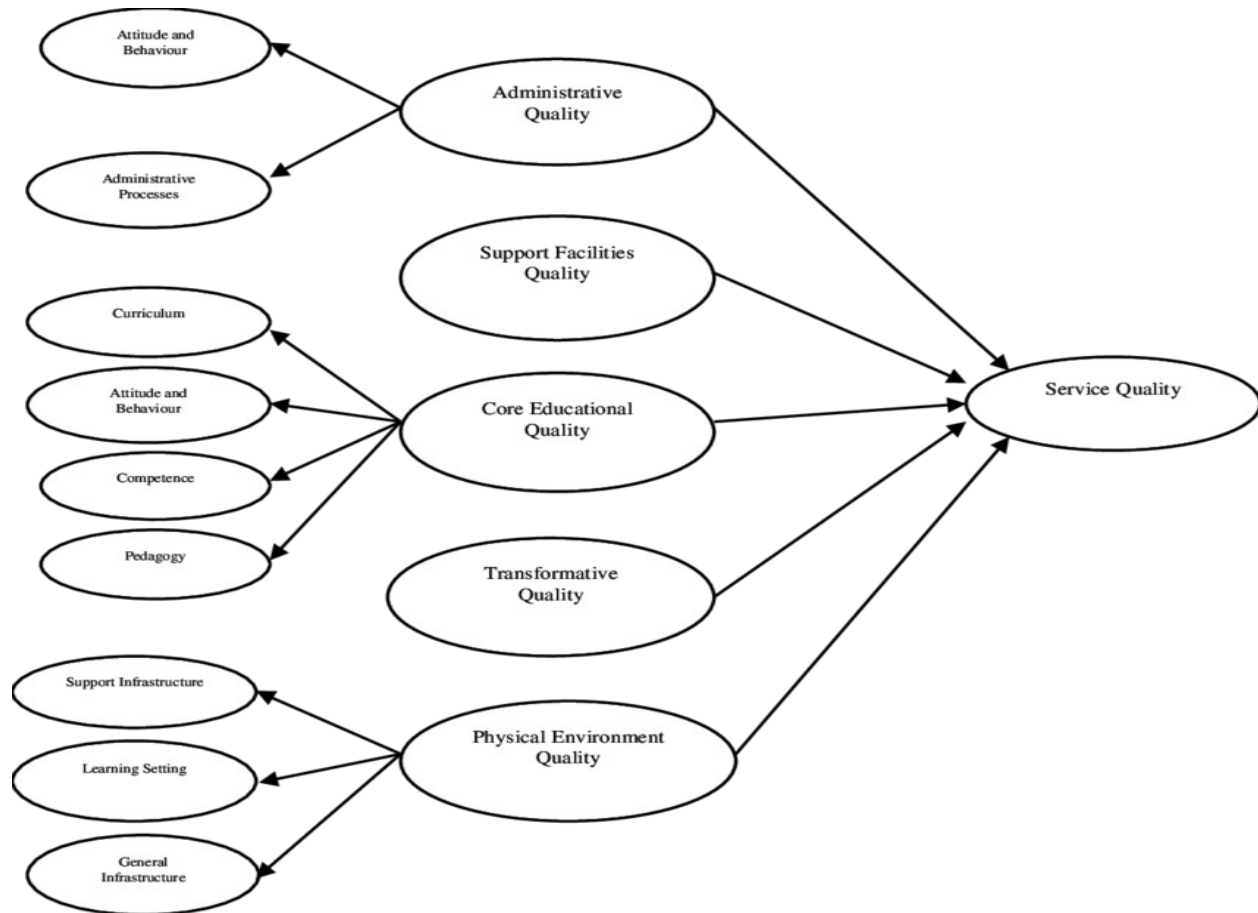


Figure 1: The HESQUAL model developed by Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, and Seebaluck (2016)

Researchers have developed and tested instruments with various successes and acceptance to formulate an industry-specific model. The HESQUAL model developed by Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, and Seebaluck (2016) as seen in Figure1, is a sizeable hierarchical instrument that consists of five constructs that contain nine variables and forty-eight items. The model was developed through a mixed-method approach, attempting to incorporate all potential factors into its design. Two hundred and seven students responded in the initial study. The statistical analysis was limited and did not explore model fit, and construct influence on the outcome variable (service quality) was not examined. The relatively large scale of variables makes the HESQUAL model enticing.

Student Satisfaction for Higher Education Providers

Student satisfaction is a major concern for higher education providers. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies investigating student satisfaction with their educational experience. The literature on student satisfaction can be divided into three main categories: The first category includes studies that focus on the overall satisfaction of students with their university experience. This research typically uses large-scale surveys to collect data from a wide range of students (Hwang and Choi, 2019). Studies in this category generally find that students are satisfied with their university experience, although there are some variations between different groups of students.

The second category of research focuses on specific aspects of the university experience that impact student satisfaction. This research often uses smaller-scale surveys or interviews to collect data from a more targeted group of students. Studies in this category have investigated a wide range of factors, including teaching quality, student support services, and the campus environment. The third category of research looks at the relationship between student satisfaction and outcomes such as retention and graduation rates. This research typically uses data from large-scale surveys or administrative data sources (Osman and Saputra, 2019). Studies in this category generally find that student satisfaction is positively related to these outcomes. Overall, the literature on student satisfaction provides a good understanding of the factors that impact students' satisfaction with their university experience (Hwang and Choi, 2019). However, there is definitely room for further research in this area, particularly studies that focus on specific groups of students or specific aspects of the university experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of this research paper is to identify the major factors influencing student satisfaction (influencing factors, potential outcomes, dependent and independent variables) of student satisfaction in Tertiary Education.

Eight Higher Education experts and personnel were at the core of this research. The research was conducted through in depth interviews. This method was perceived to provide useful information on the interrelation between strategic and operational decision makers within the system of Higher Education adding to more in-depth information for the initial student satisfaction model. The in-depth interviews questioned strategic and operative decision makers in Higher Education and were conducted in order to analyse their perceptions on the adopted model leading eventually to possible further adaptations. The sampling method used was snowballing.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The in-depth interviews with 8 Higher Education experts researched in individual definitions of the overall student satisfaction construct. The objectives were to extract the most mentioned parts in the definitions of the overall student satisfaction construct. The statements were (translated by the authors)

WB 2	<i>Student satisfaction is for me when the students are taken seriously, when their suggestions are realised and when they leave the university with a good feeling and promote the university.</i>
M 1	<i>Student satisfaction is on a realistic valuation based feeling of students. This feeling contains not only the university as a whole also the study content, the environment, the location, the community, the assistance – all possible dimensions which are partly inducing and partly not. Marketing starts where it is partly inducing.</i>
HLM 1	<i>Student satisfaction is when students will go to work and realise that they learned something which is adjusted to the actual situation.</i>
WB 1	<i>Overall, a student is satisfied when he/she can look back in a positive way because of the overall impression and what he/she learned during university time.</i>
REK 1	<i>Student satisfaction is focusing on actual students. Therefore, it is for me the curiosity in a subject, having various contact possibilities to very qualified people and so rise the probability to get a good job later.</i>
ST 1	<i>Student satisfaction is the measured qualification profile, which is a delta between the study start and the study end, i.e. the increase of knowledge, which can be partly transferred into practice.</i>
HLM 2	<i>Student satisfaction is the feeling I have during studying that I use the time meaningful, I learn a lot, transfer this to the practice and develop myself further.</i>
REK 2	<i>Student satisfaction is the acceptance of specified arrangements and specified results, which are, attune during studying.</i>

Figure 1: Participant statements - definition

In detail, they expressed that “*student satisfaction has to be seen in a long-term perspective*” (HLM 1; HLM 2). It is also “*retrospective and contains a continuous matter of giving and taking*” (WB 2). Additionally, overall student satisfaction “*is in the centre, it has to be seen in a holistic way, but not all factors of student satisfaction can be influenced*” (M 1; REK 1). So, “*a realistic realisation and implementation of student satisfaction*” (ST 2) is needed. On the other side some participants argued more critically: student satisfaction is “*only a means to an end*” (REK 1; REK 2), it is always “*depending on the time and the age-group*” (REK 1) and “*is only medium important*” (ST 1). Moreover, “*students should not be spoiled too much, instead they should act*

in a more self-organised way” (REK 2). Interestingly a participant mentioned that “alumni satisfaction is more important than student satisfaction” and therefore “alumni satisfaction and staff satisfaction have to be included” (REK 1) when developing a holistic student satisfaction model for Universities.

Positive and negative factors of student satisfaction

In addition to the most important factors of student satisfaction, a collection of the positive and negative factors of student satisfaction is presented here below. The collection of these factors is based on the reports mentioned during the interviews.

Positive factors	Negative factors
<u>Assistance & counselling</u>	<u>Teaching</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REK 2: high assistance rate • REK 2: good and real-time contact to the Professors • ST 2: open door concept • M 1: open doors / short ways • HLM 2: transparency of the valuations • HLM 2: reciprocal interactions • WB 1: getting involved into the lectures • M 1: intensive assistance • M 1: be there for the students any time • OE 1: positive co-operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WB 1: lectures do not meet the expectations • WB 2: partly the material which the students get • WB 2: partly the quality of the materials for the students • M 1: small offer on languages • M 1: lectures can not be visited by all students • OE 1: dissatisfaction with the teaching
<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Organisation</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REK 1: teaching niveau • ST 1: practice relevance of the topics • M1 : relevance for the practice • ST 1: transfer into the practice • WB 1: draw lessons of the lectures • WB 2: being really convinced with the lectures and the content • M 1: content is varying between courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ST 1: a too strong customer mentality – leads to a spoiling effect • HLM 1: no transparency • HLM 1: structure inside the house • WB 1: when things differ from the planning, e.g. in the timetable • WB 1: no service-friendly treatment in the service departments
<u>Professors & personnel</u>	<u>Didactic</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REK 1: profile of the personnel • REK 2: mixture of internal and external Professors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REK 2: too theoretical • REK 2: repeated content • REK 2: strict lecture style

Positive factors	Negative factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ST 1: close to academic personal</i> • <i>ST 1: willingness of the university to go new ways</i> • <i>ST 2: very personal relationship with the Professors</i> • <i>HLM 1: Professors should know who is working together and what students should do</i> • <i>WB 2: quality of the Professors</i> • <i>M 1: there is no anonymity</i> 	
<u>Didactic</u>	<u>Marketing</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ST 1: working in small teams</i> • <i>ST 2: small teams</i> • <i>ST 1: test new learning methods</i> • <i>M 1: didactic concept</i> • <i>ST 2: philosophy of self-organized learning and studying</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>OE 1: external picture of the university</i> • <i>HLM 1: image problem</i>
<u>Campus</u>	<u>Infrastructure</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>REK 2: having a campus, an academic place</i> • <i>WB 2: love to come to the university</i> • <i>M 1: size of the university</i> • <i>OE 1: climate in the university</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HLM 2: infrastructure offer</i> • <i>HLM 2: deficiencies in the infrastructure</i>
<u>Infrastructure</u>	<u>Location</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>REK 2: infrastructure offer</i> • <i>WB 1: functioning infrastructure</i> • <i>WB 1: services operate in a positive way</i> • <i>M 1: very good infrastructure</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>REK 2: location of the university</i> • <i>M 1: location of the university</i>
<u>Evaluation</u>	<u>Campus</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HLM 2: results of the evaluation</i> • <i>HLM 2: results of the regularly quality circle</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>M 1: size of the university</i>
<u>Others</u>	<u>Others</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>REK 2: general conditions of a</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ST 2: high efforts the students</i>

Positive factors	Negative factors
<p><i>University of Applied Sciences course</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HLM 2: student representation possibilities</i> • <i>HLM 2: right to say a word possibility for the students</i> • <i>M 1: social cohesion of the students</i> • <i>OE 1: positive contribution to the result</i> 	<p><i>have to manage</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HLM 1: unrealistic student expectations</i>

Table 1: Mentioned positive and negative factors of student satisfaction by the participants

Conclusions

This qualitative research demonstrated that the dominant interpretation of satisfaction by the research participants referred to a feeling and an evaluation process. Given the dominance of the various service situations in the empirical results “it is interesting to note that satisfaction as an evaluation between what was received and what was expected maintains a high profile” (Parker and Mathews, 2001, p. 43). The above-mentioned definition suggests that student satisfaction is a two-component construct of the teaching product and the factors of university experience. So, each component is utilized individually, even though a complete picture of student satisfaction can be presented when it integrates all the factors described in the HESQUAL model. Furthermore, students evaluate their satisfaction based on their actual and personal student experience.

Summarizing, the tendencies of students and recent trends in the satisfaction literature suggests that satisfaction is a global summary response of varying intensity. The results of this research paper demonstrated that student satisfaction is a changing phenomenon that reflects the response to a particular consumption-related aspect at a specific point in time (Giese and Cote, 2002).

Closing, all participants in this empirical research mainly mentioned the same general elements for student satisfaction, such as: teaching, the relationship with their professors, assistance from lecturers and administrative staff and the social intercourse in the university with all people. Individual student personality however is a major influencing factor.

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