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The Impact of Service Quality on Student Behavioral Intentions in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the measurement of service quality in higher education, emphasizing the need for psychometrically robust and contextually relevant assessment instruments. Building on the widely validated SERVQUAL scale, the study identifies a six-dimensional structure for assessing service quality in higher education, deviating from the original five dimensions of SERVQUAL. This finding suggests that while the general framework of SERVQUAL applies, additional dimensions are necessary to capture the unique characteristics of service quality in higher education. The study, conducted with Engineering Management students, reveals a consistent shortfall between students' perceptions and expectations across all service quality determinants. The most significant gap was observed in the dimension related to potential for future career development, indicating a misalignment between institutional service delivery and student expectations. This dimension, despite exhibiting the largest negative discrepancy, emerges as the most influential predictor of students' future behavioral intentions. Addressing this critical aspect is essential for enhancing service quality and ensuring better student satisfaction. The findings highlight the importance of aligning service offerings with students' academic and professional aspirations. Additionally, the study provides managerial implications, offering recommendations for improving service quality in higher education institutions. Future research directions are suggested to refine service quality models further, ensuring their adaptability to the evolving landscape of higher education. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on quality assurance in higher education and underscore the necessity for institutions to continuously enhance their service quality frameworks to meet student expectations effectively.

Keywords: Service Quality, Higher Education
JEL Codes: I23, M31, L84

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, Western economies have experienced a significant expansion in the service sector. Services now contribute more than 70% to the GDP in some OECD countries, highlighting their critical role as a major driver of economic growth and development (OECD, 2000). This expansion is reflected in the employment statistics as well; while service-related jobs made up about 55% of the workforce in the 1980s, by the early 2000s, over 70% of employees in certain OECD countries were engaged in service-related activities (OECD, 2000). This shift underscores the increasing prominence of the service sector in contemporary economies. Due to the numerous positive outcomes associated with high-quality physical goods manufacturing and the growing significance of service industries, both academics and practitioners have shown substantial interest in the field of service quality measurement and enhancement. Service quality is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool that can significantly differentiate service leaders from their merely competent competitors. This growing emphasis on service quality underscores its crucial role in establishing a competitive edge and driving overall success in the service sector. According to Heskett et al. (1994), internal service quality is a critical factor in fostering employee satisfaction, which has a cascading effect on overall organizational performance. High levels of internal service quality lead to greater employee satisfaction by addressing their needs and creating a supportive work environment. Satisfied

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employees are more engaged, motivated, and committed to their roles, which enhances their productivity and reduces turnover rates. This positive work environment empowers employees to deliver exceptional services to customers. When employees are content and well-supported, their improved performance translates into higher quality customer service. This, in turn, leads to increased customer satisfaction, as employees are better equipped to meet and exceed customer expectations. The resulting positive experiences for customers contribute to their loyalty and retention. Loyal customers are not only more likely to return but also to recommend the service to others, which can drive growth and enhance the company's reputation. Thus, the interplay between internal service quality and employee satisfaction is essential. By investing in internal service quality, organizations create a foundation for excellent customer service. This strategic approach helps in distinguishing service leaders from their competitors, as organizations that prioritize and improve internal service quality often outperform those that do not. In essence, a focus on internal service quality is not only a way to enhance employee morale but also a powerful driver of customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately leading to a stronger competitive position in the market.

The study by Imran et al. (2021) examines global regulatory perspectives on artificial intelligence in autonomous vehicles, stressing challenges in harmonizing standards, ensuring safety, and addressing ethical concerns. It highlights that coherent frameworks not only enhance safety and public health but also indirectly support remittances by improving migrant workers' mobility and transport reliability.

According to Reichheld (1996; 2003), experience-curve effects significantly impact service efficiency and company profitability. Customers who remain loyal to a company benefit from these effects, as their ongoing engagement allows the company to streamline operations and improve service delivery over time. Loyal customers are often more familiar with the company's products and services, which leads to more efficient and personalized service. Satisfied and loyal customers are not only more likely to make repeat purchases but are also inclined to buy additional products and services. Their positive experiences translate into a willingness to engage more deeply with the company, thereby increasing their overall value to the business. Furthermore, these customers act as advocates for the company, spreading positive word-of-mouth recommendations that attract new customers.

The combined effect of retaining customers and gaining new ones contributes to the company's growth and profitability. Loyal customers, by bringing in additional revenue and reducing acquisition costs through their referrals, create a strong foundation for sustained business success. As a result, focusing on customer satisfaction and loyalty not only enhances immediate service outcomes but also supports long-term strategic goals, making it a crucial element in driving overall company performance and profitability. Services have increasingly become the cornerstone of contemporary economies, with this trend projected to persist as information-intensive services proliferate. The shift towards a knowledge-based society underscores the critical importance of quality human capital, as knowledge itself becomes the primary strategic resource driving prosperity. This transition has elevated the importance of higher education service quality, making it a central concern for academic communities globally. In recent decades, the field of higher education service quality has garnered significant attention due to evolving trends in the sector. Historically, universities primarily addressed regional needs, providing localized educational services. However, advancements in technology have dismantled geographical barriers, enabling institutions to operate on a global scale. As a result, what were once potential entrants—such as virtual and foreign for-profit educational service providers—have become a reality in today's higher education landscape.

This transformation emphasizes the need for universities to adapt and improve their service quality to remain competitive in an increasingly globalized and digitalized educational environment. The focus on higher education service quality reflects the growing recognition that excellence in this area is essential for meeting the demands of students and stakeholders, and for maintaining institutional relevance in a rapidly evolving academic and economic context. In this context, an institution's reputation as a high-quality service provider can serve as a strategic asset, creating a competitive edge that is challenging for new entrants to surpass. This established image can be a significant advantage, making it difficult for newer or less established institutions to attract students and gain market share. Moreover, higher education is increasingly influenced by trends such as massification and rising participation rates (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Massification refers to the expansion of higher education

to accommodate a larger segment of the population, often resulting in increased competition among institutions. As more individuals seek higher education, institutions face greater pressure to differentiate themselves through superior service quality and effective strategies to meet the diverse needs of a growing student body.

These dynamics underscore the importance of maintaining high service quality to sustain competitive advantage and respond effectively to the evolving landscape of global and domestic higher education. The massification of higher education, coupled with the inability of public funding to keep pace with growing demand, has led to significant changes in funding models. As students and their families are increasingly expected to cover a larger portion of educational costs, they have become more discerning consumers, demanding higher standards of service and quality. Universities are now more reliant on tuition fees from students, particularly those who are mature and have prior work experience. These students, constrained by time and financial resources, are less willing to tolerate subpar educational services. Consequently, universities must identify and address the factors that influence students' perceptions and attitudes toward their services. This understanding is crucial for institutions aiming to maintain their competitive edge and effectively respond to the evolving expectations of their student body (Ford et al., 1999). By focusing on these critical factors, universities can better align their offerings with student expectations, enhance satisfaction, and ultimately strengthen their market position in a competitive educational landscape. In response to growing demands for quality assurance and accountability, Australia has implemented the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which has been distributed to every university graduate since 1993. This initiative is designed to gather student feedback, which is intended to help higher education institutions enhance and refine their processes and improve the overall student experience. The data collected through these surveys not only aids in institutional improvement but also contributes to the public ranking of academic institutions. These rankings are made accessible through various commercial resources, such as the Good Universities Guide. This approach ensures that prospective students and other stakeholders have access to comparative information about the quality of educational services provided by different institutions (Griffin et al., 2003).

Concerns about quality in higher education have also been voiced within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which has undergone substantial reforms aimed at harmonizing educational systems to boost the international competitiveness of European higher education. Unlike the more standardized approach seen in Australia, the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance are not designed to be prescriptive or rigidly enforced (ENQA, 2009). Instead, these guidelines offer a flexible framework that accommodates the diverse socio-cultural and educational traditions of its member countries. The European approach emphasizes that responsibility for quality assurance rests primarily with the higher education providers themselves, while ensuring that the interests of all stakeholders, including students, are protected. Institutions are expected to be committed to continuous improvement and enhancement of educational quality. However, to preserve academic autonomy, specific strategies and measures for achieving these goals are left to the discretion of individual institutions. This model supports a more adaptable and context-sensitive approach to quality assurance, acknowledging the varying needs and expectations across different educational environments. Therefore, this study aims to gain deeper insights into the construct of higher education service quality by examining the attributes and dimensions that constitute this construct and evaluating the institution's performance on these determinants. Understanding these factors is crucial for effectively directing quality improvement efforts. Building upon the SERVQUAL scale, the study emphasizes the students' perspectives, recognizing that while students' viewpoints are central to this analysis, other stakeholders' perspectives are also valuable for a comprehensive quality management approach in higher education.

To provide a structured analysis, the study will begin with an overview of the SERVQUAL scale, outlining its application across various service industries to establish a benchmark for higher education service quality. Following this, the research methodology will be detailed, including the methods used to gather and analyze data. The results will be presented, highlighting the findings related to students' perceptions and expectations of service quality. Finally, the paper will discuss the managerial implications of these findings, address the study's limitations, and propose directions for

future research. This comprehensive approach aims to enhance the understanding of higher education service quality and guide institutions in improving their service delivery to meet the evolving needs of their students.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the reliability coefficients and factor loadings associated with the six identified service quality dimensions: Career, Care, Tangibles, Understanding, Assurance, and Timeliness. These dimensions are crucial in assessing how students perceive service quality in higher education settings and how it may shape their behavioral intentions.

The highest reliability coefficient is reported for the "Career" dimension (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.898), indicating strong internal consistency among its indicators (G50-24, G51-25, G49-23, and G52-26), which suggests that career-related services such as guidance, employability support, and future opportunities are perceived as coherent and reliably delivered. This finding aligns with previous research, where career services are consistently found to have a positive influence on student satisfaction and post-enrollment intentions (Yusof et al., 2015).

The "Care" dimension follows with a moderately high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.782$), demonstrating that interpersonal support, empathy, and staff responsiveness (G27-1 to G43-17) are moderately cohesive. This is consistent with literature suggesting that emotional and psychological care is a fundamental service element that strengthens student-institutional loyalty (Hasan et al., 2008).

"Tangibles" ($\alpha = 0.761$), referring to the physical environment and facilities such as classrooms, resources, and infrastructure (G39-13 to G35-9), also show acceptable reliability. This is in line with the SERVQUAL model's emphasis on tangible elements in forming perceptions of quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

"Understanding" has a reliability coefficient of 0.756, reflecting the degree to which students feel understood by the institution, a factor shown to influence trust and positive behavioral intentions (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). The moderately loaded items (G40-14 to G46-20) indicate sufficient cohesion in this latent construct.

"Assurance" and "Timeliness" show lower but still acceptable reliability values, 0.598 and 0.648 respectively. The "Assurance" factor (G45-19 to G32-6) reflects student confidence in staff competence and institutional credibility. Although below the ideal 0.70 threshold, it remains usable for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2010). Meanwhile, "Timeliness" (G30-4 and G29-3) is important in administrative efficiency, echoing studies where timely responses and processes correlate with favorable behavioral outcomes (Douglas et al., 2008).

The cumulative variance explained by the six dimensions is 59.845%, which is acceptable for social sciences, indicating that these factors collectively capture a significant portion of student perceptions related to service quality in higher education. These results provide empirical backing for the multidimensional nature of service quality and underscore its relevance to understanding student loyalty and retention behaviors.

Table 1: Reliability coefficients of quality dimensions

Components	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Career (0.898)						
G50-24	0.837					
G51-25	0.826					
G49-23	0.822					
G52-26	0.743					
Care (0.782)						
G27-1		0.661				
G36-10		0.667				
G28-2		0.604				

Components	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	
G31-5		0.571					
G37-11		0.507					
G43-17	0.481	0.442		0.426			
Tangibles (0.761)							
G39-13			0.745				
G33-7			0.728				
G38-12			0.721				
G34-8			0.536				
G35-9			0.464				
Understanding (0.756)							
G40-14				0.703			
G42-16				0.624			
G41-15				0.613			
G47-21	0.429			0.531			
G48-22	0.435			0.514			
G46-20				0.514			
Assurance (0.598)							
G45-19					0.752		
G44-18					0.635		
G32-6					0.488		
Timeliness (0.648)							
G30-4						0.785	
G29-3						0.739	
	Eigenv.	3.562	2.874	2.862	2.803	1.801	1.648
% of Variance		13.651	11.087	11.003	10.832	6.921	6.351
Cumulative %		13.651	24.738	35.741	46.573	53.494	59.845

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix among the service quality dimensions (Career, Care, Tangibles, Understanding, Assurance, Timeliness), Overall Service Quality (OSQ), and Behavioral Intentions (BI) in the context of higher education. The correlations indicate varying levels of association among these variables, reflecting the multidimensional nature of perceived service quality and its influence on students' behavioral intentions.

The strongest correlations are observed between some of the core service quality dimensions themselves. For example, Understanding and Care ($r = 0.526$) and Understanding and Tangibles ($r = 0.561$) exhibit relatively high positive correlations, suggesting that students who perceive empathy and support from the institution also tend to rate the physical aspects of service delivery and faculty attentiveness favorably. This supports earlier findings from Parasuraman et al. (1988) on the interdependence of SERVQUAL dimensions.

The correlation between Career and Overall Service Quality ($r = 0.459$) is among the highest in the table, implying that career-oriented services significantly shape students' overall perception of quality. This aligns with Yusof et al. (2015), who emphasized the impact of career services on students' satisfaction and loyalty.

Behavioral Intentions (BI), which represent students' future intentions such as continued enrollment or recommendations, show the highest correlation with Overall Service Quality ($r = 0.394$). This supports the theory that higher perceived quality is positively associated with favorable behavioral outcomes (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

However, the direct correlations between individual service quality dimensions and Behavioral Intentions are relatively weak. The highest among them is Career (r = 0.244), while Timeliness shows the weakest correlation (r = 0.055), suggesting that while promptness is appreciated, it may not directly influence students' decision to remain committed or recommend their institution. These modest values suggest that the influence of service quality on behavioral intentions is likely mediated through overall service quality perception.

These findings reinforce the conceptual framework where specific service dimensions shape the overall perception of service quality, which in turn drives behavioral outcomes, echoing the model proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1992).

Table 2: Correlation matrix

	Career	Care	Tang	Unders	Assur	Time	OSQ	BI
Career	1							
Care	0.441	1						
Tang	0.459	0.414	1					
Unders	0.403	0.526	0.561	1				
Assur	0.408	0.478	0.401	0.514	1			
Time	0.205	0.295	0.329	0.421	0.233	1		
OSQ	0.459	0.312	0.313	0.329	0.361	0.219	1	
BI	0.244	0.120	0.171	0.161	0.170	0.055	0.394	1

Table 3 reveals a significant gap between students' expectations and their actual perceptions of service quality across all six dimensions, indicating a consistent dissatisfaction with the services received in higher education institutions. The difference between the mean expectations and mean perceptions (P-I) is negative for each dimension, and the t-values are all statistically significant at the 0.001 level ($p < 0.000$), suggesting that these differences are not due to chance but reflect a real disparity in perceived service delivery.

Among the dimensions, the greatest gap is observed in Career Services (P-I = -1.47, t = 14.532), followed closely by Tangibles (P-I = -1.44, t = 16.123). These results imply that students have high expectations regarding career development opportunities and the physical facilities or infrastructure, yet perceive that these expectations are not adequately met. This aligns with previous research by Abdullah (2006) and Sultan & Wong (2010), who emphasized the critical role of career support and tangible resources in shaping students' satisfaction and perceptions of institutional quality.

Timeliness also demonstrates a significant gap (P-I = -0.97), even though it had the highest expectation mean score (6.15), indicating that prompt and efficient service delivery is highly valued by students, but often perceived as lacking. This finding is supported by Clemes, Gan, & Kao (2008), who found that delays and slow responsiveness in academic services negatively influence students' perceptions and satisfaction.

Care and Understanding, with P-I gaps of -0.88 and -0.94 respectively, suggest that students expect more empathetic engagement and personalized attention than they currently receive. Similarly, Assurance (P-I = -0.83) highlights a shortfall in the confidence and trust students place in the institution's ability to deliver dependable and supportive educational services.

These perception gaps collectively suggest a misalignment between institutional service offerings and student expectations, which could impact overall satisfaction, loyalty, and future behavioral intentions (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Institutions must therefore prioritize aligning their service delivery mechanisms more closely with student expectations, particularly in areas with the widest gaps, such as career services, physical resources, and responsiveness.

Table 3: Expectation and Perception scores

	Mean Expectations	Mean Perceptions	P-I	t-value	Sign. (2-tailed)
Career	5.92	4.45	-1.47	14.532	0.000

	Mean Expectations	Mean Perceptions	P-I	t-value	Sign. (2-tailed)
Care	5.51	4.63	-0.88	11.871	0.000
Tangibles	5.30	3.86	-1.44	16.123	0.000
Understanding	5.49	4.55	-0.94	11.765	0.000
Assurance	5.81	4.98	-0.83	10.964	0.000
Timeliness	6.15	5.18	-0.97	10.998	0.000

3. CONCLUSIONS

Despite widespread academic agreement on the importance of higher education service quality, there is still no consensus on its conceptualization and measurement. The challenge remains in determining the most effective method to gauge service quality. One fundamental truth is that improvement cannot occur without measurement and subsequent corrective actions. Given the constrained budgets of higher education institutions, there is a pressing need for reliable, valid, and diagnostically sound measurement tools to guide resource allocation effectively. This study aimed to deepen understanding of the construct of higher education service quality. By adapting a generic scale to the higher education context, the research identified a six-dimensional structure for service quality. These dimensions provide a nuanced view of service quality in higher education, highlighting areas that require attention for enhancing institutional performance and student satisfaction. The study has highlighted the significance of the technical dimension of service quality, a finding supported by subsequent factor analysis. This research contributes to bridging perspectives on service quality by integrating both Nordic and American views, demonstrating that perceptions of undergraduate students are shaped by both technical and functional attributes. Nevertheless, the study does not aim to be prescriptive and acknowledges that it raises more questions than it answers. The measurement tool developed in this study should be seen as a starting point rather than a definitive solution. While the inclusion of both students' expectations and perceptions in the study introduces challenges, such as increased questionnaire length and respondent effort, it also provides valuable insights. This approach allows for early identification of problematic areas before they escalate, offering a practical basis for future research and improvements in higher education service quality management. Higher education differs from commercial businesses in that students cannot easily switch institutions if they are dissatisfied, making spurious loyalty impractical in today's educational environment. The study shows that students' perceptions of service quality consistently fall short of their expectations across all dimensions. Investigating the reasons behind this gap would benefit from additional qualitative research. One plausible explanation for the discrepancy may lie in the sample structure, particularly the higher proportion of first-year students. The transition from secondary education to university is significant, and students' expectations may be shaped by their previous educational experiences. Expecting the same level of service and treatment as in secondary education might be unrealistic and could contribute to dissatisfaction.

To address this, university administrators could implement introductory courses for new students to help them understand what to expect and the behaviors deemed appropriate within the higher education context. Such courses could also benefit students at all levels, as effective participation and realistic expectations are crucial for achieving positive outcomes in higher education. The study's reliance on a convenient sample from a single faculty limits the generalizability of its findings. Future research should aim to include more randomized samples from a variety of institutions and consider the perspectives of both full-time and part-time students. Additionally, exploring the dimensional stability of the service quality construct across different cultural contexts would be valuable. The study's main limitation is its focus on the students' perspective alone. While this approach made the study feasible, incorporating the viewpoints of other stakeholders, such as teaching staff, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of discrepancies between students' expectations and the perceptions of those delivering the service. Such inclusion would offer deeper insights into how service quality is perceived by all parties involved and contribute to a more balanced evaluation of higher education service quality. To enhance the study's findings, incorporating qualitative research could uncover obstacles and challenges faced by front-line employees in delivering high-quality

service. Augmenting the measurement instrument with additional items identified through qualitative research would improve its efficacy. Implementing this enhanced tool longitudinally could track shifts in students' expectations and perceptions over time, providing valuable insights into trends. Comparing expectations and perceptions across different years of study could offer further understanding of how service quality evolves as students progress through their education. Additionally, utilizing the instrument for segmenting students based on their perceived service quality or the importance they place on various attributes could aid in identifying specific areas needing improvement. By applying these strategies, university administrators can better address service quality issues and implement targeted actions to close gaps effectively.

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