

DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY FOR STUDY PROGRAMME 'THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE'

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Abstract. Higher education institutions try to provide best quality study and services in order to satisfied student. The purpose of this paper is to develop recommendations to improve service quality for study programme 'Therapeutic massage' (EQF study level 5). The standard questionnaire SERVQUAL (five dimensions - reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness), emphasizing on measuring the gap between level of current and expected service quality was used. In total 122 students (94% of study programme`s students) have participated in research. The study examines the validity of SERVQUAL in assessing students` satisfaction with study programme. Reliability Coefficient Cronbach's Alpha 0.884. The research found that in the study programme there is a gap of current and expected service quality in dimensions empathy (gap mean score -0.28), tangibles (gap mean score -0.38), responsiveness (gap mean score -0.30) indicating that development need to be implemented to enhance the service quality. Based on the research results obtained, recommendations for improvement of service quality were developed.

Keywords: service quality, SERVQUAL, student satisfaction, study programme.

Introduction

Students nowadays are self-rigorous, demanding and acknowledges the value of their time and resources for high service quality. Study programme and higher education institution might be easily changed if expectations will not be achieved. Yet in every country and in every higher education institution national licensing, accreditation have to be succeed as a mark of quality, nevertheless student's opinion and evaluation is the immediate signal of quality daily. The management of education institution have to observe, speak and listen to students regularly as equal members.

In the world in academic field current challenges related with student changing characteristics (like involvement, technology use, life skills etc.) (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to develop recommendations to improve service quality for study programme 'Therapeutic massage' (The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) study level 5). Length of study programme is 2 academic years, full-time studies, amount 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Total 28 educators are involved in education process. The research question - what actions have to be implemented to develop service quality for study programme 'Therapeutic massage'.

As instrument was used SERVQUAL questionnaire which was designed on the basis of Lickert's five scale and distributed among students in class. Results of SERVQUAL survey was analyzed and to develop recommendations or service quality improvements and incorporated into the strategy of the study programme 'Therapeutic massage', indicating performance indicators.

Importance of quality in education institutions

Educational institutions are being required to develop their own approaches to quality, to improve quality and raise universities' responsibility and responsiveness. Institutional diversification, individualization of universities' and adoption of specific missions operationalized have to be part of development strategies (Pavel, 2012). Educational institutions are pursuing quality improvement for a number of important reasons. Some are linked with professional responsibility, while others result from the competition inherent in educational marketplaces or from the need to demonstrate accountability.

Authors (Willemse & Lunenberg, 2005; Arawi, 2002; Lovat & Toomey, 2009) like to discuss the complexity of education and the importance of values in education what makes the motives for taking a quality stance more complicated and diverse.

Student behaviour and teacher-student relationships are transforming improving the environment of learning, strengthening teacher and student resilience, and hence staff and student satisfaction (Lovat & Toomey, 2009).

E. Sallis (2002) have set four quality imperatives: the moral imperative (students, parents and the community deserve the best possible quality of education), the professional imperative (educators have a professional duty to improve the quality of education), the competitive imperative (competition requires strategies that clearly differentiate institutions from their competitors), the accountability imperative (schools and colleges are part of their communities and as such they must meet the political demands for education to be more accountable and publicly demonstrate the high standards (Sallis, 2002).

Service specific in education field

No doubts service is specific in different fields so as in education field. In services, quality consists not only of the result, but also of the process. Even if the result is favorable (an academic degree), if the process is flawed, the quality is considered low since quality is meeting customer expectations in service characteristics. In services, the focus is on external customers, and their satisfaction with both the result and the process (Sharabi, 2013).

The traditional marketing tools historically grouped into 4Ps (product, price, place and promotion), 5Ps (adding people) and 7Ps (adding physical facilities and processes). Within the education context, it is proposed that marketing mix in category 5Ps people include academics, administrators, support staff and the students themselves. The physical evidence would of course be the materials, teaching facilities, accommodation, recreational facilities. the processes are those to facilitate applications, registration, exceptions, learning activities as well as social activities (Ivy, 2008). Service quality necessity in Higher education has been discussed from the specific viewpoint of students as consumers or customers (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017). From education quality point of view other scholars argue that students are not customers (Wood, 2016).

New business models mean universities are increasingly taking a more business-like approach while attempting to meet and exceed the needs of students as clients. The core service of the university experience is embodied in the learning experience of the student. Students play two key roles in creating a service outcome i.e. as a productive resource, and as a contributor to quality, satisfaction and value. As a productive resource, students bring with them their intellect, language and communication skills. As a contributor to quality, satisfaction and value, students can choose the level of effort they wish to expend. Supplementary services such as application processes, payment of fees, campus facilities, staff helpfulness and student accommodation all play a role to facilitate the core service experience (Ng & Forbes, 2009).

Several researchers have used SERVQUAL model to assess service quality in educational institutions. Majority of authors who had used SERQUAL model found that students' expectations significantly exceeded their perceptions (Legčević, 2009; Yousapronpaiboon, 2014; Serban & Stoian, 2019; Karwati, Sukardi, & Syafruddin, 2018; Tan & Kek, 2004; Akhlaghi, Amini, & Akhlaghi, 2012).

For some authors only some dimensions showed significant difference between students' expectations and current level of quality (Abari, Yarmohammadian, & Esteki, 2011; Leonnard, 2018).

Some authors found at least one positive gap between five proposed and evaluated dimensions (Soares, Novaski, & Novaski, 2017; Milojević & Radosavljević, 2019; Jess, 2019).

Literature review show that for different higher education institutions different improvements have to be done.

For higher education institution in Thailand to improve the service delivery it needs to upgrade facilities and equipment in order to decrease the gap. (Yousapronpaiboon, 2014).

The results of case study what was carried out at the Slovenian business school by A. Faganel showed the most important quality dimension for students is to inform students timely about time and place of services provided. 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. Students stress the appearance of faculty building and surroundings as the least important quality dimension which gives less importance with low perceived quality (Faganel, 2010).

According to the findings (Akhlaghi, Amini, & Akhlaghi, 2012) authors suggest to recruit staff who understand the importance of services and have the attitude to provide students with effective resolutions on the first contact whenever possible, to reinforcing the staff capabilities through ongoing opportunities for training and development, requesting feedback from the students regularly using surveys or through representatives who have close interaction with students, the measurement and monitoring of complaints is vital, encouraging students to share their ideas and using their opinions in educational planning (Akhlaghi, Amini, & Akhlaghi, 2012).

The methodology

The quantitative approach to the study was selected as appropriate research to investigate social phenomena using statistical techniques. First Descriptive statistics analysis was done in order to summarizing large databases and detecting patterns in the data in order to convey essence for further analysis using inferential statistics (Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2014). The study was conducted among students in higher education institution study programme 'Therapeutic massage' (EQF study level 5) in Latvia. Satisfaction measurement instrument SERVQUAL was used. Parasoraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985) initially identified 10 dimensions for the identification of service quality: facilities, reliability, responsibility, communication, credit, security, qualification, politeness, understanding of the client, and availability. Later, in a research in 1988 researchers summarized these into five dimensions:

Tangibles - The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. Reliability - The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness - The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Assurance - The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Empathy - The caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

A positive gap score implied that expectations have been met or exceeded, service quality is perceived to be satisfied. A negative gap score implied that expectations have not being met, quality is perceived to be unsatisfactory (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

Based on the abovementioned literature reviews from June to July 2019, a SERVQUAL scale for student satisfaction was developed. Questionnaire consisted with 28 items listed in 5 dimensions according SERVQUAL model. In 5 point Likert scale (for expactation "5" very important; "1" not at all important, for perception "5" excellent and for "1" very weak) students had to mark how important was their expectations and what are their current perception regarding services received.

The questionnaire was pre-tested in August-September with higher education institution`s staff and the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were analyzed. In October, the questionnaires were submitted to the research institution`s Ethics Committee for consideration and subsequently approved (10/10/2019., Nr.30).

Data were collected in class distributing questionnaires among students (November). During process of distributing questionnaires researcher participated so to provide full explanation about questionnaire and items so to ensure correct interpretation. The undergraduate students were assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

Quantitative data analysis software Ms Excel 2016 was applied for data processing. The reliability of the SERVQUAL scores was evaluated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. The Cronbach's Alpha helps to determine the reliability as it measures the internal consistency of a set of items comprising a scale. The closer the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is to 1.0, the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale will be (Olaniyi, 2019).

Based on the research results obtained, recommendations for improvement of service quality were developed.

Research results

Descriptive statistics analysis is made to describe quantitative data regarding student demographic profile and gap analysis according to SERVQUAL model. Reliability Coefficient of SERVQUAL model Cronbach's Alpha 0.884. The study

was conducted among 122 students (94% of study programme's students). The results are statistically significant. 94 females and 28 males participated in the research. 20.1% were in age category from 21-30 years old, 14.8% were in age category 31-40 years old, 8.6 % were in age category 41+. 72 students were in 1st study year, 50 students were in 2nd study year. For 30 respondents from 122 this study programme is their 1st qualification. Almost the same amount of respondents (32) mentioned that they are studying 'Therapeutic massage' because they want to change their current profession. 48 respondents admit that studies are new challenges for them, self-growth. Perceptions and Expectations couples everywhere statistically different ($p < 0.05$). Descriptive statistics are given from table 1.

The results show that differences in perception and expectation across all 28 items and five dimensions are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). In addition, the difference between overall average perception and expectations is statistically significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a gap between the perception of the students of the study program and the quality of service.

Study programme 'Therapeutic massage' Students stress items *Opportunity to participate in the Students' Council, Erasmus + internship and to prove yourself in competitions, Olympics, etc. Extra-curriculum activities* related to the study

Table 1 Mean scores of dimensions of service quality

Dimensions and Items	Expectations		Perceptions (current level)		Mean Gap Score	Gap 1st study year	Gap 2nd study year
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	(P-E)*	(P-E)	(P-E)
Empathy	4.36	0.67	4.08	0.63	-0.30		
Individualized attention to every student	3.85	0.81	3.89	0.59	0.03	-0.17	0.32
Convenient education's place	4.32	0.67	4.18	0.59	-0.13	0.01	-0.36
The lecturers' interest in and readiness to satisfy students' justified wishes	4.41	0.65	4.07	0.52	-0.33	-0.32	-0.36
Convenient time for receiving education services	4.49	0.56	4.11	0.60	-0.38	-0.25	-0.58
Possibility to combine studies with paid work	4.72	0.66	4.17	0.83	-0.54	-0.69	-0.34
Assurance	4.28	0.74	4.20	0.57	-0.09		
Business like environment of lectures and practical classes	3.82	0.81	4.07	0.53	0.24	0.03	0.56
Faculty members with a long experience of working with students	4.22	0.86	4.24	0.56	0.01	-0.21	0.34
The attitude of faculty members - behavior, speech, appearance	4.17	0.86	4.16	0.55	-0.01	-0.25	0.32
In case of uncertainty - support from any employee	4.39	0.70	4.17	0.63	-0.22	-0.39	0.02
All level of staff attitude towards students	4.52	0.59	4.26	0.57	-0.26	-0.36	-0.12
Faculty members - industry practitioners	4.58	0.64	4.31	0.56	-0.27	-0.40	-0.08
Responsiveness	4.23	0.65	3.92	0.63	-0.30		
Opportunities to prove yourself in competitions, Olympics, etc. extra-curriculum activities related to the study process	3.09	0.93	3.80	0.61	0.71	0.60	0.88

Faculty members` flexibility regarding students' justified expectations	4.31	0.66	4.07	0.48	-0.24	-0.24	-0.26
Faculty members availability for individual consultations	4.37	0.61	4.07	0.70	-0.3	-0.31	-0.30
Topicality of the content of lectures and practical classes	4.70	0.51	3.88	0.55	-0.81	-0.92	-0.68
Prompt provision of information on changes to the course / program schedule	4.67	0.54	3.79	0.79	-0.88	-1.02	-0.68
Reliability	3.94	0.75	4.06	0.64	0.12		
Opportunity to participate in Erasmus + internship	3.16	0.95	3.96	0.73	0.8	0.70	0.94
Opportunity to participate in the Students' Council	2.48	0.91	4.01	0.62	1.52	1.34	1.78
Accreditation of the study program at the national level	4.48	0.68	4.26	0.64	-0.22	-0.10	-0.4
Provision of practice place during studies	4.53	0.68	4.14	0.70	-0.39	-0.29	-0.54
Provision of accurate document certifying the acquisition of the study programme	4.56	0.60	4.10	0.62	-0.45	-0.32	-0.66
Providing regular feedback to students on the results of the tests by the lecturer	4.45	0.66	3.91	0.55	-0.54	-0.53	-0.56
Tangibles	4.12	0.80	3.74	0.84	-0.38		
Individual study workstations with adequate lighting, internet access and electrical charging options	3.62	0.88	3.81	0.76	0.18	0.38	-0.08
Integration of modern teaching methods (audio-lectures, use of mobile/digital applications) into the study environment	4.42	0.76	4.32	0.71	-0.09	-0.18	0.02
Access to libraries and electronic databases	4.41	0.71	4.26	0.63	-0.14	-0.28	0.04
Ergonomics of lectures/ practical training rooms	4.27	0.72	3.56	0.87	-0.71	-0.55	-0.94
Availability of catering services	3.43	1.08	2.66	1.29	-0.76	-1.24	-0.08
Easy to understand content, volume, format of methodological / handout materials	4.58	0.67	3.81	0.80	-0.77	-0.72	-0.84

*(P-E) this means Perceptions – Expectations = Gap

process as the least important quality dimension which gives less importance with low perceived quality.

The biggest difference in quality of service is in dimensions *Responsiveness* regarding *Prompt provision of information on changes to the course / program schedule* (average negative gap is (-0.88)) and *Topicality of the content of lectures and practical classes* (-0.81). Therefore, it is necessary to make the communication network more efficient. In order to prevent late transmission of lecture schedule changes to students, it is suggested to implement a mobile application *WhatsApp* group account. E-mail so far, as well as the elder of the course, were not always able to convey messages effectively to others.

Content of lectures and practical classes is possible to change every year in the content of the study program during the approved accreditation period of the study programme do not exceed 20% of total credit points in programme (Regulations of opening and accreditation of study directions, 2019). It is based on trends in the sector, suggestions from employers, changes in technology, and wishes expressed in student regular questionnaires. Opportunity-based changes are incorporated into next year's program as far as possible. Students' questionnaires will serve as a monitoring tool. Questions as - the speed of

information on changes in lecture schedules and satisfaction with the curriculum content.

In study programme's strategy are set performance indicators to minimize gap for item *Easy to understand content, volume, format of methodological / handout materials* (-0.77). Out of all study courses in 95% study courses methodological materials have to be uploaded and available in student e-learning site Moodle. Educators will be encouraged to upload methodological materials available before lectures, so that students can familiarize themselves with them before the lecture.

Regarding- *Providing regular feedback to students on the results of the tests by the lecturer* (-0.54) - educators constant have to be reminded the importance of feedbacks both for mid term grade and final tests grade. In study programme's strategy is set performance indicator: firstly, 19 out of 28 educators regularly prepare knowledge self-control tests in study system Moodle so students can immediately after filling the test see the correct and wrong answer (which is perfect tool to provide immediate feedback). Secondly 9 out of 28 educators regularly practice mobile application tool (like *mentimetr, kahoot.it direct poll* etc.) to provide for students short and quick self control tests. Thirdly student questionnaires will be added with *do educators provide regular feedback*.

Availability of *catering services* (-0.76) what is very important for 1st study course students and *Ergonomics of lectures/practical training rooms* (-0.71) what 2nd study course student require more are rather important, so possible solution will be discussed at a College development meeting.

Discussion

Based on the research results obtained it can be concluded that student profile is diverse because of age and previous experience, what might causes different student expectations about study programme. There is a gap between expectations and the quality of the services received in the study programme 'Therapeutic massage'. In addition, SERVQUAL is a reliable tool (Cronbach's Alphas is 0.884) for evaluating the quality of services in the study programme. The results are similar to a study conducted by author A. Faganel (2010) at the Slovenian Business School. A.Faganel states that most important aspect for students is the provision of information on changes to the course/programme plan on the part of employees - 0.88, which is the Responsiveness dimension.

Comparing the results with researcher K. Yousapronpaiboon (2014) results in Thailand, it can be concluded that students in Study programme 'Therapeutic massage' is more satisfied with the quality of the services, the lowest Gap - 0.88 vs. the lowest Gap of Thailand -2.88. This is because the quality of studies is constantly assessed, but according to Sharabi (2013) even if the result is

favorable (an academic degree), if the process is flawed, the quality is considered low since quality is meeting customer expectations in service characteristics.

Consequently, to improve service delivery and decrease the gap between undergraduate students' perceptions and expectations, for the institution in Latvia it need to be upgraded facilities and equipment, developed availability of catering services and ergonomics of lectures/practical training rooms.

It is imperative for higher education institutions to understand the various dimensions of service quality and the need of continuous improvement in service quality for achieving sustainable development. Satisfaction with higher education services will be annually monitored. The recommendations developed in this study have been incorporated into the strategy of the study programme 'Therapeutic massage', indicating performance indicators.

For further research promoting and coordinating quality of services could serve as a perspective for other study programmes within the same higher education institution.

Further studies could be carried out by means of a quantitative (SERVQUAL questionnaire) and qualitative research approach (focus group discussion), since mixed methods research is a pragmatic research approach. To the mixed methods researchers, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provides a better research approach than either in isolation (Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2013).

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