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**"ARE YOU BEING SERVED?" DESIGNING AN INTERVENTION
PROGRAM TOWARDS STUDENTS' SATISFACTION**

Ayelet DvirMalca (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) Babeş-Bolyai University, 7 Sindicatelor Str., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ayelet.malca@smkb.ac.il

Abstract

Students studying in higher education institutions today have a considerable awareness of their needs and their rights, and accordingly, an escalating volume of expectations and requirements. While the academic staff is responsible for equipping the students with the theoretical and practical knowledge required for their chosen discipline, the administrative staff is the address for students, throughout their entire degree, in every aspect relating to the inspection of academic and ethical requirements, and checking up the compulsory obligations for the degree. Given this, it is for the administrative staff to be capable of providing quality service and to effectively relate to and assist students with their application. In an attempt to improve service quality provided by administrative staff, and there by increase students' satisfaction, a thorough examination of service dimensions will be conducted among college students. Following, an intervention via simulation program will be designed and activated during the following studying year. The program will engage academic secretaries from three faculties who will take part in four workshops, presenting student-secretary scenarios, which will involve the various service dimensions, played within a simulation center. The effect of the intervention program will be checked by means of distributing SERVQUAL questionnaires to sampled students pre and post intervention.

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1. Introduction

In an era of intense commercial competition and a growing alertness of consumers, the ability of an organization to deliver a high quality of service to increase customers' satisfaction is of utmost importance. Customers' satisfaction, the key concept of this process, is the outcome of two prominent components: service quality and customer value.

Customer value refers to the trade-off between the benefits and the sacrifices for a customer in a purchasing context (Parasuraman 1997; Woodruff 1997).

Service quality was conceptually defined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) as the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority. This definition preceded Bitner and Hubbert (as cited in Shahsavari & Sudzina, 2017), who defined service quality as the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services.

Both definitions recognize service quality as an abstract and elusive concept, and therefore difficult to define. In the absence of an independent definition, researchers were required to define, and then to assess, service quality by way of referring to consumers' perceptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

Educational institutions have long considered themselves independent of this equation, due to the unique nature of higher education as merchandise. However, alterations in national policies concerning higher education, have forced stakeholders to seriously consider and proactively think about how to deliver the goods.

The current paper will examine the present status of service quality in higher education, and will propose an intervention program to enhance service quality particularly designed towards students' satisfaction.

2. Main Body

2.1. Theoretical Grounds: Perceptions, Expectations, and Satisfaction

The adaptation-level theory (Helson, 1964) set the theoretical framework of consumers' satisfaction studies. Helson extended the notion of frames of reference from psychophysics to social behaviour. According to the theory, judgments of sensory phenomena were affected by the individual's most recent experience. This creates an adaptation level, or anchor, for subsequent judgments.

The theoretical model of customers' perceptions, known as the expectancy disconfirmation model of satisfaction, was originated in 1980 by Richard L. Oliver. In the theory, Oliver proposed that customers compare product performance to their expectations or normative standards when making satisfaction judgments. A state of positive disconfirmation is experienced when performance exceeds one's expectations for the brand or product category. Oliver's theory was drawing on the adaptation level theory, suggesting expectations as an adapted standard, which provides a frame of reference for consumers' judgments, and accordingly, for satisfaction judgments.

When attempting to attain high degrees of satisfaction, in line with the theoretical basis, a special emphasis should be placed on minimizing the gap between customers' expectations and the actual service delivered, a gap that can potentially cause customer dissatisfaction. Further, careful attention should be

paid to the different perspectives from which service is being observed, analyzed, and handled (Rowley, 1997).

In the field of education, identifying the actual quality of service delivered to students, as well as categorizing and measuring the existing gaps, is essential when designing research in the field, while planning an intervention program, and while promoting managerial implications.

Results of the European Performance Satisfaction Index (EPSI) service model, which was applied by Shahsavari and Sudzina in Denmark (2017), and by Alves and Raposo (2007), showed the negative impact of expectation on students' satisfaction. In other words, high expectations reduce the level of student satisfaction. Another important concern is the fluctuation of students' experiences and service quality perceptions over time, which emphasizes the relevance of context and of consumer's performance when measuring perceived service quality (Shahsavari & Sudzina, 2017). According to a study conducted by Galeeva (2016) in a Russian university, the positioning of an educational institution and its strategy depends upon the management's levels of awareness of areas of strength and weakness, based upon students' perceptions. The results of a study led by Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) indicated that service quality acts as a key antecedent to students' satisfaction, loyalty, and motivation.

2.2. Student-as-Customer

Service quality in the educational sector is considered an important, yet a complex and multi-faceted concept, and therefore lacks a single, correct definition of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). O'Neill and Palmer (2004) defined service quality in higher education as the difference between what a student expects to receive and his perceptions of actual delivery. Alternatively, Elliott and Shin (2002) defined service quality as the favourability of a student's personal evaluation of the different outcomes and experiences associated with education.

The complex and multi-faceted nature of service quality in educational institutions is the result of the unique characterizations of the student as a customer. Specifically, the exclusivity of belonging to an academic institute and of becoming its customer; the period of time and the intensity of service connection and at the same time the difficulty of withdrawing from this connection; the role of students in the service environment; and, the importance of student-to-student interaction in affecting satisfaction (Rowley, 1997).

Recognizing the importance of customer satisfaction to future loyalty to the educational institution (word-of-mouth communication with potential students, returning to study other courses), higher education leaders should pay maximal attention to distinctive service quality dimensions and to service quality offered by its employees (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007).

2.3. Service Quality Dimensions in Higher Education

A definition of service quality dimensions was offered by Gordon and Partington (1993), who characterized educational quality as the success of an institution to provide an educational environment which enables students effectively to achieve valuable learning goals including appropriate academic standards. While the focus in this definition is exclusively on the learning experience, student experience is commonly the sum of two dominant categories: teaching and learning, and total student experience.

Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) have shown that service quality revolves around six key factors: teaching, administrative services, support services, hostel facilities, library and lab facilities, and internationalization. Administrative services, hence, is a noticeable element in the student's overall experience of their studies and of the educational institution.

An examination of service quality in Business Education University in Canada, identified seven factors that influence student evaluations of service quality. In descending order of importance these factors are: reputation, administrative personnel, faculty, curriculum, responsiveness, physical evidence, and access to facilities (Leblanc & Nguyen, 1997).

A number of studies adopted the dimensions of the SERVQUAL model: responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and reliability (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Other studies have picked the HESQUAL model, which was developed by Leblanc and Nguyen (1997) through an exploratory phase for higher educational institutions, including seven dimensions: contact personnel, reputation, physical evidence, administration, curriculum, responsiveness and access to facilities. Administrative dimensions are clearly of heavy weight within the whole academic experience, and need to be recognized and distinctively measured and handled.

2.4. The Role of Administrative Service Providers in Higher Education

The administrative staff is the immediate address for students in every aspect relating to their studies, whether it is an academic requirement, an application of any kind, or any lack of clarity. Interactions with the administrative staff occur quite frequently and are usually more unmediated, diverse, and open to interpretation than those with academic staff. Therefore, the administrative staff moves beyond the processes of mere service-providers and incorporates a mentor role into their processes. Moreover, administrative staff tends to relate closely to students, perceiving them as internal customers (Pitman, 2010). Given this state of affairs, an important role is designated to the professionalism and efficiency of the administrative staff, as well as to their ability to listen, raise empathy, willingness to help, and finally, to be able to assist students in their applications.

In light of this observation, and based on an examination of the different service dimensions, and of students' and administrative staff's service perceptions, an intervention via simulation program will be initiated, in an attempt to enhance administrative service quality towards students' satisfaction.

2.5. Intervention Program via Simulation: Rationale

The trend of using simulations for professional training purposes has been increasing in recent decades. Simulations offer a safe environment within which learners can repeatedly practice a range of skills in the context of everyday professional life (Kneebone, Scott, Darzi, & Horrocks, 2004). The practice of simulation aims to enhance interpersonal and communication skills and to promote professionalism (Pascucci, Weinstock, O'Connor, Fancy, & Meyer, 2013), as well as to improve critical thinking processes and decision making (Feinstein et al., 2002). The purpose of using simulation is to develop tools for effective conflict management, and to develop interpersonal communication skills such as listening, building trust, generating empathy, dealing with conflicts, bridging skills, and giving feedback. Using simulations allows professional and personal advancement and development, and equips

employees with innovative coping methods. Graetz (2002) has outlined an approach to strategic thinking, which integrates scenario planning, as it reinforces the need for finding unique solutions to unique problems.

The theoretical grounds of simulation as a learning device rest on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and on loop learning (Argyris, 1977). Kolb's experiential learning model leans on the learning theories of Piaget, Dewey, and Levin, and is defined as a process of learning based on experience and reflection. Hence, learning is described as an activate process by which knowledge is created via transformation of experience as follows: concrete experience (emotional connection) – reflective observation (constructing concepts) – abstract conceptualization (application and practice) – active experimentation (integration of application and experience).

According to loop learning (Argyris, 1977), learning takes place when the organization achieves its goals, or when there is a gap between the organizational goals and the actual performance. Single loop learning occurs when discrepancy is exposed. It refers only to the correctness of the means and the process in order to achieve the goal. Double loopis inclusive and integrates discrepancy within its broad perspective. It further doubts organizational norms and its fundamental assumptions. Double loop learning ensures long-term effectiveness and empowerment of the organization's destination.

2.6. Improving Service Quality through a Simulation Environment

The multidimensional nature of the service experience, as well as the fact that services are intangible, makes it difficult to assess customers' requirements and to fix a service standard accordingly. Moreover, employees and customers bring their psychological aspects, perceptions, and expectations to the service transaction.

The service quality management (SQM) simulation captures the main operational characteristics of service delivery process, and the behavioural components of customers, managers, and employees. Additionally, unlike in the real world, the simulation provides prompt and realistic feedback about the state of the service delivery system (Oliva & Bean, 2008).

As such, the implementation of an intervention via simulation, towards service quality improvement, can be beneficial to the educational institution, and may bring a relative advantage in the present academic competitive world.

3. Methodology

The intervention program will involve 20 academic secretaries from three faculties (education, sciences, and humanities). The secretaries will take part in a preview session, which will expose them to the research aims and rationale, and will illuminate the research design and methodology. Secretaries will then participate in four workshops played within a simulation center. Each meeting will present two student-secretary scenarios illustrating situations of conflict taken from the faculty's everyday life. The scenarios will be written beforehand by the researcher and the administrative secretaries, and professionally supported by the head of the simulation center in the college. At the end of each scenario, secretaries will fill in a structured feedback form and will hold a discussion regarding crucial points that were raised throughout the scenario.

The effect of the intervention program will be examined by means of distributing questionnaires to sampled students pre- and post-intervention. Students will be cluster sampled from three faculties (education, sciences, and humanities) and then sampled within faculties according to degree program: Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and teaching certificate, and according to their year of study. Additional information regarding students' perceptions of service quality of the academic secretaries will be gathered using of semi-structured interviews.

4. Conclusion

The complex nature of academic institutions makes measurement of service dimensions within this context a compound, yet obligatory task, particularly due to the present trends in the field of higher education, and the implicit necessity to improve service considerations. Current research will attempt to shed light on the diverse dimensions of administrative service, and on the weight and influence it has on students' overall satisfaction from their studies. The implementation of an intervention program towards service quality improvement will theoretically enhance students' satisfaction. The results of current research are expected to assist and direct decision makers in higher education institutions in promoting awareness to service quality significance, and to the inherent advantages which are embodied in a simulation program.

A review of the literature has not raised comparable intervention program in higher education institutions. Consequently, the contribution of current research should be of great interest to academic institutions.

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