

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA AND IRAQ FROM PROFESSORS' PERSPECTIVE

Zaid Yaseen Saud AL-DULAIMI¹

ABSTRACT

This study aims to draw attention to the issue of service quality in the context of higher education and to contribute to the building of criteria and indicators with a view to the development of a mechanism which could increase the quality of higher education institutions. The paper aims to analyze the collected data through the questionnaire. Subjects were asked to answer the questionnaire based on their own experience. The targeted population consisted of Romanian and Iraqi professors in the universities of the two countries, restricted to teaching staff in the universities from the capitals of the two countries. The sample size was of 50 professors (29 Romanians and 21 Iraqis out of the total 50 professors). The study concluded that there is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of all the variables on higher education services quality from the professors' perspective. The researcher recommended that the Romanian universities should continue the process of developing their educational plans and strengthen the programs adopted by the universities to increase the quality of educational services provided in institutions of higher education. For the Iraqi universities, the researcher recommended that the Iraqi universities should develop their programs to increase the quality of educational services provided in their higher educational institutions to meet the needs and expectations of their students.

KEYWORDS: *service quality, higher education, developing educational services*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *I20, I21.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The attention to the quality of university education has increased in the latter half of the twentieth century, because of scientific and technological progress, the attendant economic changes and the expansion of educational and social pressures on institutions of higher education. This increase motivated academic education, until the pursuit of quality in educational institutions became an essential requirement. As a consequence, indicators and benchmarks have been developed in order to assess the level of quality in this type of education for the implementation of improvements. It has also contributed to the increased global competition between higher education institutions. Students are attracted to attend the universities' courses, which in turn helps them in improving their position (Elliot & Healy, 2001). This is valid especially after the increase in the number of drop-outs from universities before the completion of their special academic programs (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004).

The institutions of higher education have faced pressures to enhance the value of their activities (Heck et al., 2000). Because the strengthening of the educational costs, which creates a constant effort for the student, it also generates a continuous pressure on the universities to improve their services, focus on the interests of the organization and increase the satisfaction of the students. These values are often used to assess the satisfaction level of the students about the quality of the

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, zaidyaseen610@yahoo.com

teaching services, in order to meet the needs and expectations of the students. Therefore, a number of concepts and models are available to establish the basis from which to measure the level of students' satisfaction regarding educational services provided to them.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The expansion of the number of universities was associated with low levels of services provided to students. Numerous aspects of student life, including the academic aspects of social support and financial simple care, were experiencing difficulties in how to understand and manage the significant growth in the numbers of students. Thus, the present study focuses on the relationship between the service quality of higher educational services and students' satisfaction in the context of the Iraqi higher education compared to the context of the Romanian higher education.

3. MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aim of present study is to establish several directions to follow in order to improve and modify educational services to increase the level of students' satisfaction in the Romanian and Iraqi universities. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- (a) Create, evaluate and improve educational programs;
- (b) Improve teaching process and faculty members' skills;
- (c) Transform the learning experience into a significant one for students;
- (d) Transform the educational process into one as cost-effective and efficient as possible;
- (e) Promote continuous education;
- (f) Orientation towards the creation and promotion of innovation in all activities and educational processes;
- (g) Study the level of educational services in the current Romanian and Iraqi universities and the level of students' satisfaction.

4. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of the study stands in the methods of improvement of educational services quality in order to increase the level of students' satisfaction in Romanian and Iraqi universities, through developing educational programs, the process of teaching and encouraging continuous education, which promotes innovation in all activities and learning processes.

5. SERVICE QUALITY

The quality of services has much in common with production quality, particularly in terms of implementation. However, the emphasis on the human element is much more important and requires an integrated thinking process used to deliver maximum value to the customer. Quality of service concept is linked with the perception and expectations of individuals. The services quality perceived by a customer is the result of comparing the expectations regarding the service provided to the clients and their perceptions regarding the activities of the supplier (Grönroos, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

In 1999, Kasper et al. have defined quality of service as the degree to which the service, the process of service provision and the way in which the service provision is organized can meet the expectations of a client or user. The seven features of the service, that define it clearly, have been listed and highlighted by Sasser and Arbeit in 1978 and by Kitchroen in 2004, being represented by:

- (a) Security - trust as well as physical/material safety;
- (b) Consistency - maintaining and applying the same treatment for every transaction;
- (c) Attitude – civility;

- (d) Completeness - availability of additional services;
- (e) State – infrastructure;
- (f) Availability - access in space and time of customer to services;
- (g) Training - of service suppliers.

In these circumstances, in 1983, Lewis and Booms were among the first researchers who defined quality of service as a measure of how well the level of delivered service corresponds to the requirements and expectations of the customer. Parasuraman et al. (1988) defined the quality of service perceived as "overall thinking, organizational attitude that refers to the superiority of a service".

Since a few decades, the way of defining service quality has been followed with interest, and the literature dedicated represented the area for numerous debates (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Asubonteng et al., 1996; Dotchin & Oakland, 1994; Guster, 1995; Galloway & Wearn, 1998; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Although in the provided definitions, services quality has various meanings, the concept is correlated with the individual. According to the research of the previously mentioned, most of the services quality definitions have been targeted on the client, and the client satisfaction has been regarded as one of the most important attributes of the perceived quality or, in other senses, perceived quality was based on customers' satisfaction.

Thus, ever since then, a generally accepted prospect defined service quality as the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations (Asubonteng et al., 1996; Dotchin & Oakland, 1994; Lewis & Mitchell, 1990).

The quality of services, taking into account the manner in which is perceived by customers, generates a comparison between what they think the service should be, or the expectation, and the clear and concrete evaluation of the services they were provided with, or the perception (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Sasser & Arbeit, 1978; Zeithaml et al., 1985). In another last vision, the quality of services is defined as the difference between customer's expectations with respect to the service and the service clearly perceived. When the expectations are greater than the performance of the service provided, then the perceived quality is not satisfactory and can generate almost certainly customer dissatisfaction (Lewis & Mitchell, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985). The reason for the high interest that quality of services raises is due to the fact that low-quality services disadvantage any company in relation to competitors and removes it from the list of unsatisfied customers (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Currently, companies are operating in tough competitive environments, and managers involved in activities devoted to services have understood that improvement of services quality is one of the most important factors in gaining competitive advantage (Baro et al., 2009; Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the case of markets with tough competition, experience regarding quality of service represents a particularly important factor in the buying decision made by the customer (Cuthbert, 1996). Thus, the quality of services turns out to be one of the most important factors in the evolution of any organization and in the differentiation of the perceived experience of one service by another (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Therefore, it is no wonder that the quality of services is an area intensively researched in terms of correlation with the costs (Crosby, 1979), profitability (Rust & Zahorik, 1993), customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), customer loyalty (Bolton & Drew, 1991). In addition, many researchers have looked at the quality of services as a "quest" and "unclear" concept, difficult to define and evaluate (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasurman et al., 1988). Baron et al. (2009) points out that quality of service is an abstract concept in relation to the quality of products, in which case the technical characteristics of quality are concrete and tangible. At the same time, Clewes (2003) points out that, in the field of quality of services, still remain unresolved the identification of an appropriate definition for this concept and a model for evaluating the quality of services.

In fact, the concept of quality, as seen in the literature devoted to services, is regarded in terms of perceived quality. Perceived quality is defined as the way in which the consumer regards the excellence or superiority of an item. Perceived quality is different from tangible, objective quality,

which implies the existence of an objective, tangible characteristic of an entity. The quality perceived is a form of attitude, correlated with satisfaction, although not similar to this, which results from comparing "clients' expectations with their perceptions regarding performance" (Berry et al., 1988). Due to the subjective character of service quality (Oliver & Rust, 1994), often the literature devoted to this concept focused on quality in terms of perceived quality of services (Nadiri et al., 2009). In 1997, Athiyaman said the perceived quality of services represents, in fact, an overall assessment of the good or bad character of a product or service.

In 1995, Hill included consumer in the context of quality of service. Thus, the already complex character of quality perceived by customer is dependent not only on the service provider, but also on the performance of the consumer. Service delivery is becoming more important for a company, especially when consumers are involved in the process of development and provision (Palmer, 2011).

This situation is very important, especially in the context of education and, mostly, of higher education, where the participation of professors and students is vital, due to the role played in determining the success of the service developed and provided. From these perspectives, management and monitoring of service quality is difficult for all service providers (Palmer, 2011).

6. DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY

There are several approaches in the delivery of high quality services, but all start from understanding what the key elements of service quality are.

The five elements: tangibility, helpfulness, reliability, trust and empathy create a holistic vision of any services environments; firstly, the tangible aspects of this environment should be accurate. In this case, accurate does not necessarily mean that the service should be luxurious but, for example, a fast-food restaurant must first look clean and efficient, not to involve financial resources spent excessively on a luxury infrastructure. On the other hand, a management consultant can wear designer clothes and drive a luxury car, for often the customers want to know that they employ someone who does a good job.

Secondly, the organization must provide, in the form of services, the promises made and the customer requirements. If the fast food does not deliver a fast service or will provide an objectionable one in terms of quality, then all the rest will not matter.

Thirdly, a reactive organization in terms of seriousness, will try to personalize the service provided to customers and to respond effectively and quickly to any special requirement. A dental service that can respond quickly to patients' emergencies or an insurance company that can provide fast assessments of risks or unusual conditions, without the imposition of a penalty, are viewed as responsive.

Fourthly, the confidence inspired by staff will be assessed through proven knowledge, behavior and look, in terms of appearance, clothing, etc.

Last but most stimulating component is empathy. Empathy means the ability of the employee to be put in customer's shoes. An empathetic service provided to the client will make the client feel truly in the spotlight and cherished. For example, being empathetic, a salesperson can rather enhance the customers' experience (and long-term performance) by recognizing and fulfilling their preferences, rather than try to sell a product or service together with the most expensive options.

Empathy is often an unstable concept, but clients recognize it once they have experienced it and will seek it always.

It should be noted that these dimensions may bring criticism from the perspective of their integrative feature and the direct link with the decision-making processes of the client but, as a whole, they possess an intuitive grasp, representing the most complete attempt to conceptualize and measure the quality of services and to ensure the comparability of the various activities of the services industry.

7. TARGET POPULATION

The targeted population consisted of Romanian and Iraqi professors in the universities of the two countries. The targeted population will be restricted to teaching staff in the universities in the capitals of the two countries.

7.1. Sample and sampling procedures

As the population intended to participate was represented by specialists (academic staff or education managers), the sample size was of 50 people (29 Romanians and 21 Iraqis of total 50 people); all of them filled in the questionnaire. For collecting data related to the concepts of quality of educational services it was used the library method.

7.2. Reliability

Cronbach alpha was used to find the questionnaire reliability. Table (1) indicates the obtained results. It is clear from the table that all Cronbach alpha values are higher than 60% which means that the instrument is reliable.

Table 1. Reliability of the scale variables

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Non-academic	6	96.2
Academic	14	97.3
Educational services	13	97.7
Reputation	4	87.3
Access	3	98.1
Program issue	3	86.4
Design, delivery and assessment	5	96.4
Group size	3	70.7
Higher education quality	7	80.1
Research instrument	58	97.0

7.3. The analytical field of the study

The aim of this study is to analyze the collected data through the questionnaire; the questionnaire was addressed to university professors in Romania and Iraq. Subjects were asked to answer the questionnaire based on their own experience. The obtained results are described below.

7.3.1. The equations used for the case study presented in the article

Taking into account that the scope of the questionnaire was to identify and prioritize the factors affecting quality of educational services, the study has been conducted in two steps. The first one was represented by questionnaire building, which was developed to identify the factors affecting the quality of educational services. As the population intended to participate was represented by specialists (academic staff or education managers), the sample size was 50 persons (29 Romanians and 21 Iraqis of total 50 persons, all of them filled in the questionnaire. For collecting data related to the concepts of quality of educational services it was used the library method.

The coding of the data was done as follows: SEX - Male = 1, Female = 2

AGE - 25-30 [] = 1, 30-35 [] = 2, 35-40 [] = 3, 40-45 [] = 4, 45-50 [] = 5, Above 50 = 6
 TEACHING EXPERIENCE -10 years and above [] = 1, Less than 10 years [] = 2
 The Likert scale elements were coded as follows: CA = 4, AA = 3, AD = 2, CD = 1, while the variables were provided their corresponding numbers in the questionnaire.

The validity of the questionnaire was determined as formal and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used for measuring reliability of the questionnaire and the questions used. In order to understand

whether the questions in this questionnaire all reliably measure the same latent variable (quality of educational services) Cronbach's Alpha (SPSS Software) was observed through the obtained results, based on which, reliability of questionnaire stood more than 78% (0.914). Therefore, it was indicated a high level of internal consistency for the chosen scale with the specific sample.

Table 2. Case Processing Summary

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	50	100.0
	Excluded ³	0	.0
	Total	50	100.0
a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure			

7.3.2. Descriptive analysis

The data analysis for the self-administrated questionnaire revealed the results indicated in table 3 in terms of age, gender, education, working hours per week, semester hours and study hours.

Table 3. Sample distribution according to demographic information

Variable	Option	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	21	42
	Female	29	58
Age	25-30	9	18
	30-35	13	26
	35-40	14	28
	40-45	8	16
	50+	6	12
Experience	Less than 10 years	15	30
	10years+	35	70

Table 3 indicates that the study sample was distributed in terms of gender to 42% males and 58% females. As for age 18% had ages ranging between 25 to 30 years old, 26% with ages ranging between 30 to 35 years old, 28% with ages ranging between 35 to 40 years old, 16 % with ages ranging between 40 to 45 years old and finally 12% with ages over 50 years old. With regard to experience 30% have less than 10 years while 70% have 10 years and more.

Table 4 indicates the general means for all dimensions.

Table 4. Comparison of sample responses for all dimensions

No.	Dimension	Mean		Mean	
		Romania	Rank	Iraq	Rank
1	Non-academic	3.4940	8	3.3409	9
2	Academic	3.7781	5	4.0552	5
3	Educational Services	3.7637	6	4.0245	6
4	Reputation	3.4375	9	3.5000	8
5	Access	4.8095	1	4.5758	1
6	Program Issues	4.5833	2	4.2879	3
7	Design, Delivery and Assessment Variable	3.6571	7	3.7818	7
8	Group Size	4.5357	3	4.4394	2
9	Higher Education Quality	4.2755	4	4.2208	4

The table indicates that general means for the Romanian sample are to some extent higher than the means of the Iraqi sample. Professors in the Romanian universities have better and longer experience than professors in the Iraqi universities. Therefore, their perspective is based on experience in this regard.

7.3.3. Testing the most important hypotheses

(a) The first hypothesis

There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of non academic variables on quality of higher education.

Table 5. Results of the first hypothesis testing

Dep.V	R	R ²	F	Sig	Regression Coefficient			
					Ind.V	B	T	Sig.
Higher education quality	0.519	0.254	17.655	000	Non-academic	0.039	4.202	0.000

Source: prepared by authors

Table 5 indicates that the impact of independent variable (non-academic) on the dependent variable (higher education quality) is statistically significant. F calculated value is (F=17.655) at (sig F = 0.000) which is less than 0.05 while the correlation coefficient was (R=0.519) which indicates a positive relation between the independent variable and the dependent variable. In addition, R2 was 0.254, which indicates that 25.4% of variance in higher education quality variable may be interpreted through the variance in non-academic variable. The value of the regression coefficient (B=0.039) indicates that the total impact of non-academic variables on higher education quality is significant. T value is 4.202 at level (Sig = 0.000). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative one is accepted. This means that there is a statistically significant impact at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) level of non-academic variable on higher education quality from the perspective of professors.

(b) The second hypothesis

There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of academic variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.

Table 6. Results of the second hypothesis testing

Dep.V	R	R ²	F	Sig	Regression Coefficient			
					Ind.V	B	T	Sig.
Higher Education quality	0.500	0.168	9.723	0.003	Academic variable	0.234	3.118	0.003

Source: prepared by authors

Table 6 indicates that the impact of independent variable (academic variable) on the dependent variable (higher education quality) is statistically significant. The F calculated value is (F=9.723) at (sig F=0.000) which is less than 0.05, while the correlation coefficient is (R=0.500), which indicates a positive relation between the independent variable and the dependent variable. In addition, R2 is .168, which indicates that 16.8 % of variance in higher education quality may be interpreted through the variance in the academic variable. The value of regression coefficient (B = 0.234) indicates that the total impact of academic variable on higher education quality is significant. T value is (3.118) at level (Sig = 0.000). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative one is accepted. This means that there is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of academic variable on quality of higher education from professors' perspective.

(c) The third hypothesis

There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of educational service on quality of higher education.

Table 7. Results of the third hypothesis testing

Dep.V	R	R ²	F	Sig	Regression Coefficient			
					Ind.V	B	T	Sig.
Higher education quality	0.440	0.194	11.550	0.001	Educational service	0.251	3.397	0.001

Source: prepared by authors

Table 7 indicates the impact of independent variable (educational services) on the dependent variable (higher education quality) is statistically significant. F calculated value is (F=11.550) at (sig F = 0.001), which is less than 0.05, while correlation coefficient is (R=.194) which indicate a positive relation between the independent variable and the dependent variable. In addition, R2 is 0.194, which indicates that 19.4 % of variance in higher education quality may be interpreted through the variance in educational services. The value of the regression coefficient (B = 0.251) indicates that the total impact of educational services variable on higher education quality is significant. T value is (3.397) at level (Sig = 0.000). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative one is accepted. This means that there is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of educational services variable on quality of higher education from professors' perspective.

8. RESULTS

Based on the statistical analysis, the study concluded the following results:

- There is a statistically significant impact at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) level of non-academic variable on higher education quality from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of academic variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of educational services variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of reputation variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of access variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of programs issue variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of design, delivery and assessment variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.
- There is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of group size variable on the quality of higher education from professors' perspective.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The overall conclusion of the studied data is that the educational services are directly impacted in terms of service quality by three main variables (academic qualifications of teaching staff, non-academic qualifications of teaching staff, educational service of teaching staff), extracted from table (4) (Comparison of Sample's Responses for All Dimensions). The study also concluded that there is a statistically significant effect at the level of significant ($\alpha < 0.05$) of all the variables on higher education services quality from the professors' perspective. The researcher recommended that the Romanian universities should continue the process of developing their educational plans and strengthen the programs adopted by the universities to increase the quality of educational services provided in institutions of higher education.

For the Iraqi universities, the researcher recommended that the Iraqi universities should develop their programs to increase the quality of educational services provided in their higher educational institutions to meet the needs and expectations of their students.

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