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Perception of Undergraduates on Service Quality of Higher Education in Sri Lanka

D.M.M. Sandeepani*, P.N.M.M. Wijerathna, M.G.T. Lakmali and G.C. Samaraweera

Department of Agricultural Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Mapalana, Kamburupitiya

Corresponding author: madusha0906@gmail.com

Abstract

A significant restructuring in higher education services has been processed in both European and Asian contexts recently. As a developing country, Sri Lanka needs much more to move towards an economic development within the nation thus ensuring service quality of higher education is required to enhance the competitiveness within the educational sector. Hence, the study focuses on identifying the students' perception towards the service quality in higher education as they are the primary customers who utilize the higher education service. An online survey was conducted for the randomly selected 311 undergraduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka.The study covers six dimensions of HEdPERF scale; academic, non-academic, reputation, access, understanding, and program issues that measure the service quality of higher education. All the statements given to the respondents' perception regarding the quality of higher education are proven as valid and significant by the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (p=0.000). Accordingly, students believe that quality service can be obtained from the academic and non-academic staff of the faculty, and they consider that the hostel facilities, academic facilities, ability of producing employable graduates, and academic programs of the faculty are reputable. Moreover, the faculty has good access and interestingly, it possesses well-organized academic programs with a flexible syllabus, proper structure, sound orientation program and variety of specialization programs. The faculty maintains a good understanding of the counselling service, health service, ideal campus layout/location, and quick response to students' requests for assistance. The results reveal that the undergraduates' overall satisfaction level of the service quality provided by the faculty is valid and significant (p=0.000). Interestingly, the majority (46.9%) of the undergraduates are satisfied with the overall service quality while 32.8% have a strong satisfaction.14.1% of the sample shows a neutral approach while 4.5% and 1.6% have dissatisfaction and a strong dissatisfaction respectively. Hence, the research findings will be beneficial for the respective higher education providers to offer satisfactory services for the Sri Lankan students.

Keywords: Faculty of Agriculture, Higher Education, Perception, Service Quality, Undergraduates

Introduction

Quality higher education plays a vital role in re-sharpening the minds of citizens so as to encourage them to make a significant commitment towards national development. By fortifying the quality of higher education services, the students can secure applicable knowledge and skills required for the sound economic process and acquire global competitiveness. Accordingly, quality service in higher education can have a positive impact on a nations' economic development (Asiyai, 2020).Thus, it has become an emerging requirement for any nation to make a great concern about the quality of higher education. Providers (financial providers),employees, users of products (students), and the users of outputs (employers) are the four main stakeholders who are involved in the higher educational services (Schindler et al., 2015). Hence the perception towards the quality of service is likely to differ from each standpoint.

Even though identifying students' expectations and perception of quality is crucial for higher education development, a relatively low priority has been given to their concerns (Senthikumar and Arulraj, 2009). Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the undergraduates' perception towards the service quality of higher education in Sri Lanka as they are the primary customers who utilize the higher education service. Service quality of higher education is one of the variables that increase the number of satisfied students and thus enhance the students' loyalty and it is defined as the difference between the students' expectation and their perceptions regarding actual delivery (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). According to the HEdPERF scale described by Abdullah (2006), the undergraduates' perception of service quality in higher education is measured in terms of academic, non-academic, reputation, access, understanding, and program issues. Hence, the study focuses to identify the undergraduate perception towards these parameters and to examine the satisfaction level of undergraduates towards the service quality of higher education. The research findings provide a significant insight for the Sri Lankan higher education providers to identify the gaps and provide satisfactory service as it is a new and emerging requirement in the Sri Lankan education sector.

Methodology

The primary data were collected by the administration of a structured questionnaire which was developed in the English language. The initial questionnaire was prepared with the help of a literature survey. Students' service experiences are complex and distinct from those of consumers in other service industries. As a result, it is widely agreed that industry-specific service measures should be used to assess the quality of each industry's services. Accordingly, the HEdPERF scale proposed by Abdullah (2006), six dimensions (academic, non-academic, reputation, access, understanding, and program issues) were considered in this study to measure the service quality of higher education. The

questionnaire consisted of three sections to assess the demographic features of the undergraduates, perception of undergraduates towards the service quality of higher education and the overall rating of the satisfaction level of the service. Service quality items were presented as statements and measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha and it has given 0.7 Cronbach's alpha value for each questionnaire item.

The undergraduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna were selected as the population of the study and they were from three different degree programs; namely BSc Agriculture Resource Management and Technology, BSc Agribusiness Management and BSc Green Technology, and from four different academic years. It comprises 260 first year students, 216 second year students, 243 third year students, and 143 fourth year students. An online survey was designed for the data collection and the link was sent to 311 students of the faculty who were selected by the simple random sampling method. The sample was selected proportionate to the students in each batch. The link of the questionnaire survey was sent via their academic emails, and it was disabled after 14 days of circulation. Secondary data were collected from research paper articles, journals, newspaper articles, and other websites etc. The data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software and descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics were used while the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was mainly utilized as the analytical tool in this study.

Results, Discussion, and Conclusions

Considering the gender, the majority were females (80.7%) whereas males accounted only for 19.3% of the sample. Taking the degree program into account, 59.5% comprised undergraduates who are following BSc Agricultural Resource Management and Technology degree program while 26.7% were from BSc Agribusiness Management degree program and the lowest number of respondents was from BSc Green Technology degree program (13.8%).

Table 1 shows the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test obtained from responses concerning each statement on the perception of the undergraduates towardsthe service quality of higher education within the faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka. Service quality is measured using six dimensions proposed by Abdullah (2006) in the HEdPERF scale. According to the results, undergraduates believe the service of academic and non-academic staff of the faculty are valid and significant (p=0.000). Students significantly consider that the hostel facilities, academic facilities, ability of producing employable graduates and academic programs of the faculty are reputable (p=0.000). Moreover, the results show that all the statements given to the respondents regarding the access, program issues and understanding are proven as valid and significant (p=0.000). Accordingly,

the faculty has good access and interestingly, it owns well-organized academic programs with a flexible syllabus, proper structure, sound orientation program and variety of specialization programs. Furthermore, the faculty has a good understanding of the counselling service, health service, ideal campus layout/location and quick response to students' requests for assistance.

The undergraduates' overall satisfaction level of the service quality provided by the faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna is valid and significant (p=0.000). The majority (46.9%) of the undergraduates are satisfied with the overall service quality of the faculty while 32.8% of the respondents have a strong satisfaction. A neutral approach to the overall service quality of the faculty was evident in 14%. Out of all the respondents, 4.5% are not satisfied with the overall quality of service provided by the faculty and 1.6% of respondents showed their strong dissatisfaction regarding this.

Table 1: Perception of undergraduates on the service quality of higher education

	Statements	**Test Value**	**P-Value**
Academic Aspects	Knowledge in the course content of the overall academic staff is satisfactory.	14.871	0.000
	The academic staff is caring and courteous towards students.	14.552	0.000
	Academics have a sincere interest in solving academic-related problems.	14.232	0.000
	The academic staff shows good communication skills.	14.802	0.000
Non-Academic Aspects	The non-academic staff shows a sincere interest in solving faculty problems.	14.104	0.000
	Non-academic staff is efficient/prompt in dealing with complaints.	13.711	0.000
	The non-academic staff has caring and individualized attention towards faculty circumstances.	13.123	0.000
	Non-academic staff show a positive attitude towards their service	13.978	0.000
Reputation	Hostel facilities and equipment given are satisfactory.	8.826	0.000
	Academic facilities are satisfactory.	11.691	0.000
	University provides easily employable graduates.	12.244	0.000

Table 1: Perception of undergraduates on the service quality of higher education

	Statements	Test Value	P-Value
	Academic programs provided by the faculty are reputable.	13.922	0.000
Access	The faculty administration can be easily contacted by telephone.	11.173	0.000
	The information provided by the faculty is confidential.	13.013	0.000
	Faculty provide equal treatment and respect for all.	12.946	0.000
	Use students' feedback for further faculty improvements.	12.540	0.000
Program Issues	Three academic programs are well organized.	14.353	0.000
	There is a flexible syllabus and proper structure within the degree programs.	14.101	0.000
	Provide a sound orientation program.	13.257	0.000
	Provide a variety of specialization programs.	14.626	0.000
Understanding	There is a sound counselling service	13.172	0.000
	There is a satisfactory health service.	9.232	0.000
	There is an ideal campus layout/location.	12.988	0.000
	There is a quick response to students' requests for assistance.	11.593	0.000

*Significance level = 0.05

Accordingly, the study reveals that the undergraduates of the faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna show a good perception regarding the service quality in terms of academic, non-academic, reputation, access, understanding, and program issues of higher education. Furthermore, they show a higher level of satisfaction regarding the overall quality of the services provided by higher education in Sri Lanka.

Higher education providers must understand students' expectations and perceptions of what constitutes service quality in order to provide high-quality services to entice them and provide for their needs. Accordingly, the research findings will be beneficial for the respective higher education providers to equip the higher education service in a well-coordinated manner regarding academic, non-academic,

reputation, access, understanding, and program issues to offer a satisfactory service for the Sri Lankan students. Nevertheless, a selected sample from the Faculty of Agriculture, University Ruhuna was used in this investigation. Thus, other samples in the Sri Lankan context may provide empirical evidence on service quality perceptions of higher education, affecting the generalizability of the results.

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