

Quality of university services and students' satisfaction

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Purpose – This study aims at investigating whether and how the perceived quality of the educational services affects students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. For this purpose, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) has been carried out by taking into account the following main dimensions, as possible determinants of the overall satisfaction: teaching and course organization, library services, refectories, classroom study, students' service office, educational infrastructure. More specifically, the perceived quality is evaluated by measuring the students' level of satisfaction with respect to a number of items characterizing each dimension, as well as for their overall university experience.

Our interest in this topic is justified mostly by the importance that students' satisfaction assumes as indicator of the quality of educational services but also for its relationship with overall life satisfaction and subjective well-being, as shown in some research. From a more general point of view, many stakeholders may be interested in the assessment of quality in higher education, such as potential and enrolled students, together with their families, academic and administrative personnel, but also employers, firms, institutions (government and public sector) and wider community. In particular, among others, students are the direct recipients of the provided educational services and can be considered as the "primary customers" of a university, even though they are required to pay tuition fees. Hence, the analysis of customers' satisfaction is a possible way to assess how a university institution is being efficient and satisfy its mission. Following this perspective, the quality of educational services can be tested by assessing student satisfaction, since students can be considered as the most important stakeholder of a university. Evaluating perception and expectation of students is then particularly important in a competitive context, as universities are becoming more student oriented and are expected to be accountable for the public funds received. Research studies in higher education dealt with expectations and perceptions of quality/satisfaction using the SERVQUAL approach or alternatively the SERVPERF approach.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A web questionnaire was handed out to 12857 students enrolled at the University of Pisa in 2012. The level of satisfaction was evaluated for each item characterizing the services used by the students on the basis of a four points ordinal scale.

Findings – Preliminary results give a valuable insight into how students perceive the quality of the services offered at the University of Pisa and how this may affect students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. The main dimensions positively affecting students' satisfaction are teaching and course organization (+0.888; $p=0.000$), and educational infrastructure (+0.303; $p=0.001$). This confirms our expectations since the several aspects considered to measure such dimensions are crucial for the university experience: organisation of lessons, learning materials, exams booking, receiving hours and information about courses, adequacy and degree of cleaning of classrooms, laboratories and other common areas, as well as presence of parking. Among the other dimensions, the quality of refectories, as measured by characteristics and variety of food, waiting time, opening hours, tariff of catering, also has a positive but weaker effect (+0.110; $p=0.000$). Instead, students' service office shows a more complex relationship with students' satisfaction: in fact, on one hand it has a weak negative direct effect (-0.095; $p=0.000$), whereas, on the other hand, it has a higher positive indirect effect ($0.217 \times 0.888 = 0.193$), mediated by teaching and course organization. As a result, the total effect is slightly positive ($-0.095 + 0.193 = 0.098$). Finally, classrooms study are negatively related with student satisfaction (-0.200; $p=0.010$) whereas library services has no significant effect (-0.009; $p=0.805$); instead, as regard control variables, no differences were found by type of degree (first cycle vs second cycle) and gender while freshmen show a higher level of satisfaction.

Keywords Higher education, Service quality, Structural Equation Models, Student satisfaction