

## Education, Educational Services and their Quality

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### Abstract

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At the global level, education is seen as the main factor of sustainable economic, social and human development. In this regard, education is the fundamental element structuring the capacity and development skills through obtaining qualification, technological progress, and the ability to harness human resources of a country. University education represents a clear investment in human resources and high quality educational processes and services are of great importance to the development of cultural, social and economic status of any country. Therefore, anywhere in the world, university education is regarded as one of the most important factors that influence the development of a highly skilled workforce, which will constitute the engine of economic, social and cultural development of any nation. The paper addresses the issues of educational services and their specific quality, providing an overview on the literature dedicated to the matters.

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**Key Words:** Education, Higher Education, Educational Services, Quality

### Introduction

In 2006, participants at the Conference "Education for all" have highlighted and underlined the fact that education is also a fundamental right for all the people, being the engine of a world more secure and prosperous that contributes to the personal and social development. However, it was stressed that educational process and participation in it are deficient in many areas of the globe and that they must become more and more relevant, improving from the qualitative point of view and being universally provided (UNESCO, 1990).

In this context, higher education is regarded as one of the most important factors of a nation's development, both from the global perspective, as well as individual one, representing the main source of investment in people that contributes to the development of a state. In 2005, Kazemi said that the development of a community often depends on the degree of high education, but also on the qualitative and quantitative development of an educational system.

Currently, higher education institutions are subject to a growing pressure with regard to their involvement in the development of the communities to which they belong and they serve, and the responsibility with respect to the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of set targets has become a necessity, as a result of the process of adjustment and structural change, initiated in the last few decades. Nowadays, universities are increasingly under pressure to prove their ability to participate in the development of the communities so that the responsibility of carrying out or not the educational goals has turned into a necessity. Also, this pressure is accompanied by the process of structural change in higher education, initiated in the last few decades.

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Numerous factors such as population growth, expansion of educational levels and the development of the middle class have led, all, to the increasing demand for places in universities. Also, the continuous development of communication and information technologies has experienced individuals with new requirements, creating and developing potential areas of research in universities. Thus, the technological and informational development has increased the competition on educational market, leading to universities attempt to attract an increasing number of students interested in these fields.

This state of affairs has made the subject of processes and provided educational services quality an element that universities and faculties management has faced more and more often. Therefore, it must be pointed out that the quality of educational processes and services is the determining factor for the growth, success and sustainability of an institution of higher education, representing the strategic, effective and comprehensive factor of any university management.

In recent decades, the interest in improving the quality of education and institutions of higher education has increased considerably.

In Pazagadi's understanding (2005), the quality of any system of higher education is determined by the way it meets its objectives, and how it uses the means and resources necessary for the fulfilment and validation of those objectives. In these circumstances, the quality of higher education has a great influence in maximizing the potential of human resources in the existence and provision of material and financial resources, in the coordination and development of a correlation between educational system and its effectiveness (Naveh Ebrahim and Karami, 2006).

## **2. Educational Services and their Quality - an overview of the literature**

In recent decades, it has been noted the need for creating and developing the structures used in regulating the quality of educational services and of other specific types, provided by universities.

Educational services refer to services that universities and research institutes shall make available to professors with a view to improving quality and promoting their effectiveness within the structure of university education. Educational services are those services that support and are constituted as the foundation for the implementation of educational policies, achieving universities' objectives and promoting the effectiveness of the education system as a whole.

The objectives of the educational services are represented by:

- the creation, evaluation and improvement of educational programs,
- improving teaching process and faculty members' skills,
- transforming the learning experience into one as significant for students,
- transformation of educational process into one as cost-effective and efficient as possible,
- promoting continuous education,
- Orientation towards the creation and promotion of innovation in all activities and educational processes.

In order to achieve these objectives, higher education institutions must apply certain measures and to provide some services to develop and improve the quality of teaching staff:

1. The existence, within universities, of library services geared towards improving the quality of teaching staff;
2. Providing technology and infrastructure to facilitate informational flux and use of communications technology in order to improve the teaching and research activities of teaching staff;
3. Providing classes and other forms of continuing training for teaching staff.
4. Providing the necessary resources to facilitate teaching staff participation in workshops, conferences, working groups or forums.

The fact that education and educational processes can be viewed as a service can facilitate generalization of specific factors and elements of this sector.

The quality and quality standards of higher level must represent the main factor in the development of any university, regardless of its profile (Sallis, 1997). Because, according to Mohammadian (2004), the perception of quality is often complex, with many facets, the more the context of university education is one which is likely to give rise to difficulties in defining specific quality, unless there have been established and are used on agreements regarding the term and its coverage (Cheng, 2003).

Often, it has been argued that the quality of university education depends on the state of the environment and the conditions under which a university carries out specific tasks, as well as on the specific standards of a particular field of study. Numerous researches have established that the quality of university education and its components cannot be generalized or organized according to a preset pattern (Bazargan, 1999) and therefore, the quality of the educational act depends on the capabilities and skills of teaching staff and students, as well as the resources within a specific department-faculty-university.

Numerous researches have revealed that teaching, both at the levels of educational development and learning, is one of the most important factors in the framework of quality assessments (Bardes and Falcone, 1998; Artiles, 1994). Teaching represents a process constantly evolving and developing, and a well-structured and complex teaching process will facilitate students' success and the development of their skills (Fuller and Brown, 1975; Steffy et al., 2000).

Other research emphasizes that development of students' capacity and abilities in the studied area is influenced by the quality of faculty members (Healey, 2000). Students to whom it has been provided a high quality teaching have demonstrated a capacity for learning and understanding of a much deeper level. To this end, teachers should foster instilling a sense of curiosity and stimulate learning, while a process of high-quality teaching will encourage students to organize their knowledge and will motivate them in the independent learning process (Trigwell and Prosser, 2004; Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi, 2003).

In 1994, Hoover and Arrington have pointed out that the quality of faculty members is determined by two variables, individual features and the characteristics of education system. Other research have identified the fact that effective teaching as part of the educational process in higher education was best facilitated by a style of teaching that has three characteristics: mental, emotional and physical (Croom, 2003).

Other research and studies have pointed out that the provision of good quality education is dependent on many factors such as: high-quality organizational culture of a university, particular focus on education, competent teaching body involved in continual professional development of students, specific experience of teachers in the area, and the focus university management has on its fast improvement (Lomas, 2004). In 1998, Simmons noted that the interaction among the variables represented by teacher's genre, student's genre, a course structure, student's age, the difference between average grades and those expected to be obtained by a student at an examination, as well as the procedure for conducting a course, all affect the quality of teaching. In 2003, Oliver pointed out that the standards and qualitative indexes at the level of teaching and learning constitute the very teaching and learning programme, the process which accompanies the development track of a program, the environment in which teaching takes places, the methodologies and guidelines made available to universities, students' satisfaction and important quantitative developments.

In 2006, Vorki noticed that the structure of a course, teaching method, assessment method and interpersonal relations are the most important indicators that determine the quality of teaching in universities. In addition, there is a fundamental difference between the quality of teaching within a certain time and the quality of teaching in an optimal situation. The priorities of an effective teaching process are teaching method and teacher's ability to convey and communicate knowledge (Asgari and Moadab, 2010). Teaching method, communication capability, research process a teacher is involved in and the individual features have been identified as the most important factors that influence an effective teaching process and activity (Zohur and Eslami, 2002).

The quality of educational services in higher education began to gain more and more ground in recent decades. In 1993, Stern and Tseng said that few universities had adopted a philosophy of educational services quality. Previous research had underlined that students were reluctant to criticize the low quality of educational services (Gronhaug and Arndt, 1980). Currently, students and teaching bodies have become increasingly conscious by the value and the quality of educational services provided by the universities. A continuous global, social, cultural and economic change was employed by higher education institutions through a steady stream of complex reforms based on quality.

Thus, demonstrating the adapting need of higher education institutions, in order to serve the interests of all stakeholders, from the perspective of a higher capacity of receptivity, accountability and satisfying superior requirements, universities and educational systems were pressured to transfer their focus from quantitative growth to an emphasis on quality.

Quality assurance systems within higher education emphasized student experience as one of the most important criteria for evaluating (Allen and Davis, 1991; Ramsden, 1991).

In response to the increasingly important concerns of stakeholders with respect to a low or inconsistent quality of educational services, universities increasingly realized the significance of student-centered philosophies seeking, thus, new ways of improving the existing educational services and of creating and developing new services.

Educational services can be viewed as a management philosophy that interwoven universities structure and culture in order to satisfy students and teachers through provided quality. In recent decades, universities have increasingly perceived importance of this philosophy, status observed by an increasing concern of university management in relation to the criticisms and concerns expressed by both the students and faculty staff on the education quality and the universities management. Often, it was pointed out that, during the last decades the pressure from students, teachers and employers took place with the purpose of eliminating or reducing the gap between expectations regarding scheduled and actual performance.

In 1996, Cuthbert said that the quality of university education is joined by all the specific elements of services: intangibility, heterogeneity, entangled state with regard to the moment of production and supply, perish ability and inclusiveness, through the participation of students and teachers in the process of delivery.

Quality of service affecting students' psychology and their behaviour, presented in terms of a positive attitude towards university educational services, has proved to be the most important factor, and even the sole one, in achieving long term success and survival of universities. They have realized the importance of qualitative focus so that the last decades have been the witnesses of processes of providing high quality educational services.

The quality of services at higher education level is a relative concept in relation to university education stakeholders and specific circumstances. Because the quality is defined and viewed differently by each individual (Zafiroopoulos et al., 2005), it was pointed out that the definitions of high education quality is based on the generic definitions of quality (Sahney et al., 2004).

In recent decades, there have been launched a number of debates about the best way to define higher education service quality (Becket and Brookes, 2006), due to the existence of numerous ways to define it. Since 1997, Cheng and Tam argued that "the quality of education is a concept quite vague and controversial", depending on the engagement of stakeholders (students, their families, the local community and other institutions) in terms of quality and organizational culture of the institution of higher education. The quality of educational services depends exclusively on the experiences of students who benefit from these services as part of their personal development.

Because service quality perceptions differ between parties, discussions relating to stakeholders in higher education shows that a client's perceptions about the quality of the services differ from those of other clients, and hence the disparity in terms of evaluating the quality of services. It should also be noted that perceptions about the quality of service change over time, especially at the level of higher education, where students' experiences are varied and continuous throughout the years of study (Cuthbert, 1996).

Currently, the literature relating to the quality of service in the higher education sector is continuously developing, because most researchers have targeted their research on commercial services (Sultan and Wong, 2010). However, it is increasingly obvious that the universities, which in the past were not considered as profit-making organizations, try, currently to gain competitive advantage on the education market (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). Owing to the current economic realities, manifested by a reduction in funding and in the number of potential students, higher education institutions have begun to behave like business bodies, competing on national markets and, often, international ones, for students and other resources (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Thus, higher education institutions must continually look for the most appropriate ways of obtaining competitive advantage.

Accordingly, universities must focus on delivering high-quality services and meeting students' requirements (which can be regarded as "participant clients" to the provision of services), to achieve and maintain sustainability in a competitive environment of educational services (DeShields et al., 2005). It is clear that, in the present circumstances, universities can succeed only to the extent that students have at their disposal services they want to acquire and of high quality (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009). This state of facts underlines the importance of services quality in obtaining competitive advantage, also highlighting the need for a better understanding of the position which services quality occupies within the higher education.

Applicability of services quality within university education sector has proved interesting for various researchers (Edwell, 1993; Tribus, 1994; Brigham, 1994). The universities are seen as organizations that provide teaching, curriculum organization, organizational and educational management processes so as to assist students in reaching their career goals.

A particular interest in the quality of educational services has been manifested since the 1990s (Sallis, 1993) with a focus on universities (Coate, 1990; Cope & Sherr, 1991; Masters & Leiker, 1992; Saunders & Walker, 1991; Sutcliffe & Pollock, 1992; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1992; Winter, 1991). As in the case of other types of services, quality in relation to university education had an inclusive character (Williams, 1990; Staropli, 1992; Cheng and Tam, 1997), and quality of service in universities has been looked at, from several points of view, as excellence in education (Peters and Waterman, 1982), fit with the pursued purpose (Reynolds, 1986; Brennan et al., 1992; Tang and Zairi, 1998), fit with the learning result and the experience of use (Juran and Gryna, 1998), the compliance of educational process results with planned objectives, specifications and requirements (Gilmore, 1974; Crosby, 1979), defects removal from educational process (Crosby, 1979) and achieving or surpassing customer requirements for educational services (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Many universities have implemented quality policies in response to the decreasing funding per student, complaints of employers or families, but also as a result of these policies success in corporate activity (Kanji and Tambi, 1999). Thus, since the beginning until the mid-1990s, focused research identified and rated the aspects connected to the quality of services provided by universities as well as by the environmental attributes that affect higher education (Harrop and Douglas, 1996; Narasimhan, 1997; Shank et al. 1995), in some cases using the evaluations from students to assess quality (Rowley, 1997; Aldridge and Rowley, 1998).

It can be concluded that the quality of educational services provided by the universities is a complex concept, based on the different visions, which makes difficult to formulate a single definition. The difficulty is the result of taking into account, as part of the research, the quality of several elements represented by the students, teaching staff, support staff and infrastructure, the processes of teaching and learning, as well as the quality of the results obtained in the form of the number of students hired on the labour market, of the projects gained and implemented, etc., thus covering all aspects of university life.

Considering the important changes that have taken place at the level of universities over the past decade, higher education began to be increasingly seen as a branch of the services, whose activities are geared towards achieving and exceeding the requirements of students (Gruber et al., 2010). In these circumstances, many universities understood that they compete on a market on which students are clients (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009) and that must become increasingly responsible for the quality of the services they provide.

Therefore, achieving quality became one of the most important goals for many universities (Abdullah, 2006). Harvey and Green (1993) predicted that the quality of education at the higher education level is a complex concept, whose definition is very difficult. They identified the existence of several ways to define the quality of higher education, each definition emphasizing different criteria and perspectives, depending on the interests of stakeholders considered defining. Thus, from the perspective of the student as a stakeholder, DeShields et al. (2005) argues that universities must continuously provide quality services and meet the requirements of students for achieving success in a competitive environment.

In conclusion, the attempt to assess the level of service quality and the understanding of how various factors influence the quality of educational services are crucial in the approach that the universities make it when designing their services. Also, knowing the strengths and weaknesses of various factors as well as their potential influence, it can result in a more efficient allocation of resources, so that students will be provided with improved services (Abdullah, 2006).

DeShields et al. (2005) argued that universities management must implement and apply the same principles and market-oriented strategies used within corporations and companies. These principles and strategies are applied and implemented by universities in order to gain competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

That is the reason why universities realize more and more the importance that higher education has regarded from the perspective of services and put special emphasis on the fulfilment of students' requirements (DeShields et al., 2005). Nadiri et al. (2009) revealed that it is very important for universities, as providers of educational services, to understand students' requirements and to perceive what is constituted as a quality service in order to attract students.

According to Oldfield and Baron (2000), university education can be regarded as a "concrete service", concept that stresses the fact that it includes all the features of a specific service. Recently, Gruber et al. (2010) stated that university education is identified as a service, generally, intangible, perishable and heterogeneous.

These features are the result of the fact that a service varies from a conjuncture to another, which results in the difficulty of developing and applying common standards to higher education services. As service, higher education is perishable, being difficult to store. However, there are currently numerous technical instruments with which this character identified as a weakness can be removed (information technologies).

### 3. Conclusion

Concerning the characteristics of higher education from the perspective of services, it was identified that it is important that universities, like any other company, to be viewed as entities with various stakeholders who, in turn, have different interests and requirements relating to the university in different ways.

Universities stakeholders include students and their families, teaching staff, university faculties and departments management, the community and local authorities, national agencies and international organizations and, last but not least, current and prospective employers (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998). Due to this wide variety of stakeholders, it is self-evident that their prospects and interests vary according to the different groups they belong to (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006). Gruber et al. (2010) states that the stakeholders interested in the activity of universities have their own criteria for assessing the quality, depending on their specific requirements. In addition, quality means different things to different people, depending on the various circumstance (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011), and hence the need to highlight the importance of recognition different stakeholder groups.

Identification of the most important stakeholders of higher education is complex and generates numerous problems (Cuthbert, 1996).

This fact, correlated with the evidence that suppliers can deliver efficient services only if they know with certainty which are customer requirements (Gruber et al., 2010), makes the identification of the most important stakeholders an essential act and process. Hill (1995) said that students are the main stakeholders of higher education services, highlighting that they are key element in the process of implementing and delivering the educational service.

In recent years, Gruber et al. (2010) have pointed out that students are the specific and essential target group, highlighting the need for managers to focus on universities ability to understand their requirements. Also, if the universities will focus on identifying and perceiving how the students feel and react to the provided services, they can adjust their services so as to generate a positive impact on the quality of service perceived by the students. This circumstance could provide the institution with a competitive advantage, particularly in terms of initiating a positive communication between current and future students (Alves and Raposo, 2009).

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