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Research Paper

Assessment of the Quality of Academic Services at Yasouj University: Application of SERVQUAL Model

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Abstract

The qualitative expansion of the higher education system, regardless of quality development, will have inappropriate outcomes. Therefore, the present study was conducted to assess the quality of academic services at Yasouj University using the SERVQUAL model. The statistical population consisted of 508 senior undergraduates at Yasouj University in 2018-2019. According to the Krejcie and Morgan formula, 220 individuals were selected as the sample through stratified random sampling in terms of their field of study. Data were collected through a two-part questionnaire including students' perceptions and expectations about the quality of educational, research, and welfare services. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by using the opinions of the relevant field experts after revising, and its reliability was estimated by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. The results showed that students had the lowest and highest satisfaction with the current status in terms of welfare services and educational services, respectively. Also, the greatest service gap was in welfare, research, and educational services, respectively. The results of the means comparison test revealed that the students' expectations of educational, research, and welfare services were significantly higher than their perceptions. Therefore, better provision of educational, research, and welfare services should be taken into consideration by the relevant authorities.

Keywords:
Student, Yasouj University, quality of services, SERVQUAL model

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INTRODUCTION

Various governments and communities recognize education as a necessity to alleviate global poverty and increase equality, peace, and sustainability for all, and therefore the task of educating and training of efficient and effective human force is allocated to universities. Since students are considered an invaluable human capital in all countries due to their creativity, innovation, and construction, it is of utmost importance to pay attention to their education and training (Nazari & Sharifnia, 2010).

Education is the most important asset available to the general public and is the basis for all developments in society (Jalalvandi et al., 2016). A positive educational environment provides the conditions to prepare students for future life in order to be in a suitable job position (Heidari-Gorji et al., 2016).

Higher education is defined as a type of investment in human resources that can enhance the knowledge, skills, and requirements of organizational staff in both vocational and managerial aspects. Therefore, the more the higher education in its public and private forms could penetrate at the broader and deeper levels of society, the more striking the range of its impact would be (Hemmati Nezhad & Hemmati Nezhad, 2014).

In other words, the higher education system has critical responsibilities in the economic, social, political, cultural, and educational development of societies. Considering the role and status of universities and people's sensitivity to the performance of this institution, they must grow in both quantitative and qualitative dimensions in a balanced manner (Khajeh, 2015). On the other hand, the higher education system as a dynamic and purposeful system confronts new challenges. Sustainable development of this system requires balanced and quantitative and qualitative growth in parallel with each other. Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept that largely depends on the educational status, academic system, mission, conditions, and standards of the academic field. Students, staff, faculty, community, and industry are the customers of higher education, and students as the main customers can play an important role in improving the quality of services (Ghasemzadeh-Alishahi et al., 2016) since customers' satisfaction is one of the fundamental principles of quality management (Soltani Nasab & Abasi, 2018).

In general, quality is the most significant criterion for the development of educational systems and has become one of the key concepts in macro educational policymaking, so qualification has emerged as an important stage in the history of educational system developments. Considering quality is now one of the main focuses of all educational disciplines and its promotion is the most important task of educators, there are some internal weaknesses in the higher education sector that is implicated for the undesirable quality of education services. The quality of services is, thus, an important factor for the growth, success, and sustainability of any organization and is considered a strategic, effective, and inclusive subject on the management agenda. Interests in promoting and improving quality in higher education and universities have recently been increased dramatically and have attracted international attention in educational research. Academic education has been associated with important changes and reforms in the evolution of higher education systems, the growing role of information and communication, and the demand for knowledge. Therefore, quality is often at the forefront, and improving services is one of the most critical tasks of any institution or university (Abdoli Yazdi et al., 2017). On the other hand, research shows that the quality of education is strongly correlated with income and economic growth as well as individuals' outputs, and there is a direct relationship between educational institution quality and its achievements (Boccanfuso et al., 2015).

It is worth noting that governments devote

a significant portion of their resources to higher education every year, Therefore, ensuring that academic programs, practices, and goals are on the right track towards a comprehensive policy is a national necessity. In other words, higher education must not only pay attention to the crisis of increasing quantities and financial bottlenecks, but it must also maintain, improve, and promote the quality of its system and fulfill its tasks and objectives when it is in desirable status in terms of educational quality. In this regard, service quality assessment is one of the essential steps in developing quality improvement plans (Jafarinejad et al., 2016). In fact, the qualitative expansion of a higher education system, regardless of quality development, will have consequences such as academic failure, academic dependency, brain drain, lack of entrepreneurship, and production weakness. Therefore, it seems necessary to constantly improve the quality of educational services (Shahamiri et al., 2016). Hence, it is, on the one hand, essential to establish a coherent quality improvement system to respond to higher education in a chaotic environment. It is, on the other hand, important to note that quality in higher education encompasses all functions and activities, including education, research, staff, students, facilities, possibilities, and services to the community and the university. In other words, according to the model of organizational elements, all elements, including input, process, product, output, and impacts, should be taken into consideration in order to improve the quality of an education system, (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2015).

In summary, national and international experience indicates that evaluating the status and quality of the higher education system is essential to achieve appropriate goals. On the other hand, more than 37 years have passed since the founding of Yasouj University and in the academic year of 2018-2019, approximately 6000 students were studying at this university. However, the status and quality of services have not been evaluated so far and authorities at the university have not received feedback in this area. Therefore, considering the impact of this assessment on continuous improvement and quality promotion in this organization, it seems necessary to carry out this assessment. Various studies have been conducted on the quality of service assessment from the students' perspective, the most important of which are reviewed below.

The results of a study conducted by Movahedi et al. (2017) showed that the quality of education in the Faculty of Agriculture at Bu-Ali Sina University was almost average. The findings of Aghamirzaee et al. (2017), Abbaspour and Tahmak (2017), AbdoliYazdi et al. (2017), Galavandi et al. (2017), Faraji et al. (2016), Heidari Sureshjani et al. (2016), Jafarinejad et al. (2016), Khadem-Rezaiyan and Mousavi Bazaz (2016), Heydari and Mohammadi (2015), Zaker Jafari et al. (2015), Seyedaskari et al. (2015), Mehr Ali Zade et al. (2015), Yarmohammadian et al. (2015), Mohebi et al. (2015), Khani Jazani et al. (2014), Shams et al. (2014) and Feyzi et al. (2014) showed that there was a negative gap in all five dimensions of service quality. In other words, there was a statistically significant difference between the current status and desirable status in all five dimensions. The results of Kheirgou et al. (2016) showed that tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy had greater importance for the quality of service of the three faculties including Faculty of Management and Military Sciences, Faculty of Engineering and Flight, and Faculty of Basic Sciences at Imam Ali Military University, respectively. Shahamiri et al. (2016) indicated that there was a significant difference between the students' perceptions and expectations in terms of service quality dimensions. However, there was no significant difference between the students' demographic variables. The findings of Zarei et al. (2016), Khandan et al. (2015), Hemmati Nezhad and Hemmati Nezhad (2014) revealed that there was a negative gap in all dimensions of quality.

Nonetheless, there was no statistically significant difference between the quality of educational services (five dimensions) in terms of gender. Khajeh (2015) indicated that there was a significant difference between the students' perceptions and expectations in all dimensions of educational service quality. There was also a significant difference between the quality of educational services in terms of gender, faculty, and field of study. The results of Sattari et al. (2014) showed that there was a significant difference between the existing and desirable status of educational services, but there was not a significant relationship between some variables including students' gender, place of residence, field of study, and employment status with their view on educational services quality. Ozdemir et al. (2020) revealed that the performance of the university located in the socio-economically more developed region was better considering the total satisfaction score and four of the five dimensions. Vasconcelos et al. (2020) researched the multidisciplinary criteria for the quality of e-learning services design. They presented a strategy for decision making based on multidisciplinary criteria, which was developed to assist providers to configure services that offer quality in user experience. Ogunnaike et al. (2018) investigated data on the interactive quality of the educational services rendered in the southwest of Nigeria. The data would be an encouragement for empirical studies to assess the current trends in quality of education in Nigeria and how the educational service could be improved upon and marketed to both internal and external stakeholders. Sin et al. (2018) illustrated that the expectation score was greater than the perception score in terms of five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model among international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Zafiropoulos (2014), Yousapronpaiboon (2014) and Barnes (2007) showed gaps between the students' perceived and expected quality. The results of research by Richard and Adams (2013) also showed that students were not provided with qualified services in the United States. Arambewela and Hall (2006) conducted a research at a university in Australia, illustrating that there was a significant difference among SERVQUAL dimensions.

The review of the literature shows that there has been a gap between students' perceptions (current status) and expectations (desired status) in terms of the five dimensions of service quality. Nevertheless, these studies have only focused on measuring the quality of educational services at university, while students are receiving other services such as research, welfare, etc. from the university too. Therefore, this study aimed at assessing the quality of all received services from the students' point of view. Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework of the research is illustrated in Figure 1.

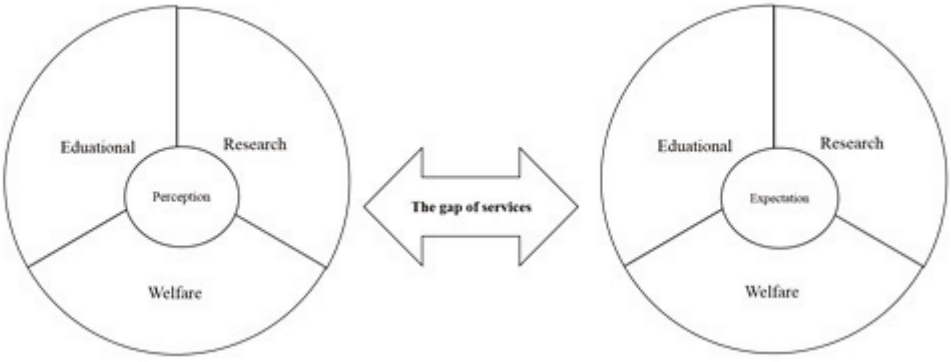

Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the research

Research hypotheses

A. There is a difference between students' perceptions and expectations of the quality of educational services.

B. There is a difference between students' perceptions and expectations of the quality of research services.

C. There is a difference between students' perceptions and expectations of the quality of welfare services.

D. There is a difference between students' viewpoints about the quality of services (educational, research, welfare) in terms of demographic variables (gender, marital status, accommodation status, faculty, and parents' settlement).

METHODOLOGY

The research method was a descriptive-analytical approach. In this study, to find out the gap between students' perceptions and expectations of provided services, a two-part questionnaire was applied composed of students' perceptions and expectations of service quality (including educational, research and welfare services) in which measurements were based on Likert scale. Educational services were assessed by 37 items for the availability of modern and appropriate educational equipment including computers, networks, etc., presenting lessons to students comprehensibly, presenting the content of each class session in a systematic and interconnected manner to students, opposing professors of sufficient specialized knowledge, holding class at appropriate time, etc. Research services were assessed by 18 items, including accessing students to research equipment and facilities (credits, laboratory materials, etc.), collaborating students with professors conducting research, status, and quality of scientific conferences held at universities, etc. Finally, welfare services were assessed by 29 items for diversity, quality and volume of food offered in the restaurant and buffet at university, students' access to health services, financing facilities (loans, etc.) to support students' educational and life costs, sports facilities at university, etc. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by the relevant field experts after making some modifications and its reliability was confirmed by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient whose results for different sections are shown in Table 1. The statistical population consisted of 508 undergraduate students studying at Yasouj University during 2018-2019. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula, 220 students were selected by stratified random sampling method in terms of the field of study. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (independent t-test, paired t-test, etc.) and SPSS software.

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for Different Parts of the Questionnaire

Items	Number	Alpha coefficient (perceptions)	Alpha coefficient (expectations)
Educational services	37	0.934	0.848
Research services	18	0.916	0.977
Welfare services	29	0.892	0.983

RESULTS

The results of the respondents' individual characteristics are shown in Table 2. Accordingly, 60 percent of the respondents were female and 40 percent were male. Most of the students (83.6%) were single and only 16.4 percent were married. Also, 68.2 percent were living in dormitory, 31.8 percent were not. Most of them (92.6%) were unemployed and 7.4 percent were employed. In addition, 22.0 percent of parents' settlement was in a village, 76.2 percent were living in a city, and only 1.8 percent was nomad. Also, only 15.8 percent, 14.6 percent and 8.8 percent were members of cultural, scientific and political associations or organizations, respectively. The average age of the respondents was 22.25 with a standard deviation of 1.07. The students' average GPA was 15.44 out of 20 with a standard deviation of 1.32. The average distance of parents' settlement to the university was 267.61 km with a standard deviation of 296.29.

The mean score of the students' perceptions and expectations and the gap of educational, research and welfare service are shown in Table 3. According to this table, among the three dimensions of services (educational, research, and welfare), the students had the lowest perceptions of welfare services and the highest perceptions of educational services. The students' expectations of research services were also slightly lower than their expectations of educational and welfare services. Consequently, the highest service gap was related to welfare services (-1.22) followed by research services (-0.90).

Table 2
The Respondents' Individual Characteristics

Variable	Levels	Frequencies	Valid percent
Gender	Female	132	60.0
	Male	88	40.0
Marital status	Single	183	83.6
	Married	36	16.4
Accommodation status	Living in Dormitory	150	68.2
	Not Living in Dormitory	70	31.8
Status Employment	Employed	16	7.4
	Unemployed	199	92.6
Parents' settlement	Village	48	22.0
	City	166	76.2
	Nomad	4	1.8
Membership in cultural associations or communities	Yes	34	15.8
	No	181	84.2
Membership in scientific associations or communities	Yes	31	14.6
	No	182	85.4
Membership in political associations or communities	Yes	19	8.8
	No	198	91.2

Variable	Mean score	Standard deviation
Age	22.25	1.07
Grade point average (GPA)	15.44	1.32
The distance of parents' settlement to university (km)	267.61	296.29

Finally, the lowest service was allocated to educational services (-0.80). Among the educational services items, the lowest gap was related to "spending time by professors to respond to and explain issues to students out of class" with a gap of -0.38 and the highest gap was related to the item "the availability of modern and appropriate educational equipment (computers, networks, etc.)" with a gap of -1.44. Also in research services, the lowest gap belonged to "the ease of access to other libraries through Ghadir project membership" with a gap of -0.62 and the highest gap belonged to "introducing students as trainees to relevant sections" with a gap of 1.24. Finally, among the items of welfare services, the lowest gap was related to the item of "food distribution hours in the restaurant and buffet at university" with a gap of -0.67 and the highest gap was related to the item of "holding students' visits and camps" with a gap of -1.81.

Paired t-test was used to compare the mean score of the students' perceptions and expectations of educational, research and welfare services. According to Table 4, there was a significant difference between the students' mean score of perceptions and expectations of educational, research and welfare services so that the students' expectations of educational, research and welfare services were significantly higher than their perceptions.

Table 3

The Mean Score of Students' Perceptions and Expectations and the Gap of Educational, Research and Welfare Services

	Perceptions	Expectations	Gap
Educational services	3.07	3.87	-0.80
Research services	2.91	3.81	-0.90
Welfare services	2.65	3.87	-1.22

Ranges (1-5)

Table 4

The Results of Paired t-Test to Compare the Students' Mean Score of Perceptions and Expectations of Educational, Research and Welfare Services

	Perceptions	Expectations	Paired t-test	*p*-value
Educational services	3.07	3.87	11.249	0.001
Research services	2.91	3.81	10.796	0.001
Welfare services	2.65	3.87	13.942	0.001

Ranges (1-5)

Independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean score of the gap of the three dimensions of service quality (educational, research and welfare) in terms of gender, marital status, accommodation status, and parents' settlement. Based on Table 5, the results showed that there were no significant differences between the mean score of the gap of perceptions and expectations in the three dimensions of quality of service (educational, research and welfare) in terms of marital status (single and married), accommodation status (dormitory and non-dormitory), and parents' settlement (village and city). In addition, there was not a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the gap of research and welfare services in terms of gender (male and female). However, the mean score of the gap of educational services between male and female students was statistically significant at the 1 percent level. Female students felt greater gap in educational services than the male ones. Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the mean score of the gap of the three dimensions of service quality (educational, research and welfare) in terms of faculty (Table 5). The results indicated that the mean score of the gap of welfare services in terms of faculty was not statistically significant, while there was a significant difference in the gap of educational and research services in terms of faculty at the 5 and 1percent levels, respectively. The students of the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources showed the highest mean score of the gap of educational and research services, while the students of the Faculty of Humanities showed the lowest mean score of the gap in the two mentioned dimensions of services.

Table 5

The Comparison of Means for the Gap in Educational, Research and Welfare Services in terms of Gender, Marital Status, Accommodation Status, Faculty, and Parents' Settlement

Variable		Educational services	Research services	Welfare services
Gender[+]	Female	-0.97	-1.00	-1.34
	male	-0.54	-0.74	-1.02
	p-value	0.003**	0.12	0.07
Marital status[+]	Single	-0.77	-0.89	-1.19
	Married	-0.96	-0.91	-1.33
	p-value	0.32	0.94	0.54
Accommodation status[+]	Living in Dormitory	-0.80	-0.93	-1.27
	Not Living in Dormitory	-0.79	-0.81	-1.09
	p-value	0.92	0.48	0.32
Faculty [++]	Technical and Engineering	-0.92	-0.98	-1.46
	Agricultural and Natural Resources	-1.19	-1.41	-1.37
	Basic Science	-0.86	-1.26	-1.34
	Human Science	-0.59	-0.58	-0.96
	p-value	0.042*	0.002**	0.06
Parents' settlement[+]	Village	-0.82	-0.91	-1.17
	City	-0.77	-0.86	-1.20
	p-value	0.75	0.81	0.85

**p<0.01, *p<0.05, [++]Kruskal Wallis, [+]Independent sample t test

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study aimed to assess the quality of academic services at Yasouj University using the SERVQUAL model. The results showed that welfare services and educational services had the lowest and the highest ranks of the students' perceptions, respectively. The students' expectations of research services were the lowest expectations compared with their expectations of educational and welfare services. Therefore, the highest gap was related to welfare services, whereas the lowest gap was related to educational services. Since welfare services included items such as food quality in the restaurant and buffet at university, holding students' visits and camps, students' access to medical and health services, extracurricular training for students (courses and workshops), university authorities should be more concerned about providing these services.

In addition, the results of paired t-test showed that the students' expectations of educational services were considerably higher than their perceptions, which is consistent with many previous research studies including Jafarinejad et al. (2016), Khadem-Rezaiyan and Mousavi Bazaz (2016), AbdoliYazdi et al. (2017), Heidari Sureshjani et al. (2016), Khajeh (2015), Zarei et al. (2016), Sattari et al. (2014), and Hemmati Nejad and Hemmati Nejad (2014). Thus, this finding indicates that the students' expectations of university educational services have not been met. It is, therefore, necessary to provide better educational services such as the availability of modern and appropriate educational equipment (computers, networks, etc.), the apparent attractiveness of the physical facilities (buildings, classrooms, chairs, and resting places) of the faculty, as well as the equipment provided by the professors using them in teaching (slides, books, pamphlets, etc.), applying students' comments and suggestions on educational issues in the curriculum, facilitating students' access to high-rank authorities of the Faculty and university if needed, and facilitating practical units (equipment) and the environment of the laboratory, greenhouse, workshop, farm, etc.

Furthermore, paired t-test to compare the students' mean score of perceptions and expectations of research and welfare services showed that the mean score of perceptions and expectations were meaningfully different in both services. In other words, the students' expectations of research and welfare services were not met. Therefore, providing better research services such as favorable supporting and encouraging students' initiatives, ideas, innovations, articles, and scientific activities by the relevant educational group, presenting research projects to the students, providing electronic citations to receive scientific papers, the status and number of scientific conferences held at the university and students' access to research equipment and facilities (credits, lab materials, etc.) as well as welfare services including diversity, quality and volume of food offered in the restaurant and buffet at university, students' access to health and medical services, providing appropriate educational facilities to students (consultant, grants, etc.), holding students' visits and camps and planning leisure programs for students should be on the agenda of the relevant authorities.

Also, the comparison of the mean scores of the gaps of the triple service quality dimensions (educational, research and welfare) in terms of individual characteristics showed that the difference between the mean score of gaps of educational, research and welfare services in terms of marital status, accommodation status, and parents' residence were not statistically significant, which is consistent with Shahamiri et al. (2016) and Sattari et al. (2014). Also, there was no significant difference between the mean score of gaps of research and welfare services in terms of gender, while this gap in the quality of educational services between male and female students was statistically significant at the 1 percent level. The gap of educational services felt by female students was more than that by

male ones. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Khajeh (2015) and contradicts with the results of Khandan et al. (2015), Zarei et al. (2016), Sattari et al. (2014), Hemmati Nezhad and Hemmati Nezhad (2014).

In addition, the result of Kruskal-Wallis test for comparing the mean scores of the gap in three dimensions of quality of service (educational, research and welfare) in terms of faculty indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the gap of quality of service in terms of faculty, whereas the gap of educational and research services were statistically significant in terms of faculty at the 5 percent and 1 percent levels, which is in accordance with the findings of Khandan et al. (2015) and Khajeh (2015). Since the students of the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources showed the highest mean score of gap in the two dimensions of educational and research services, it is necessary to provide educational and research services to the students of the mentioned faculty.

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