

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS – DIFFERENCES OF MEASURING QUALITY AMONG THE OPERATION LEVELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The growing number of students enrolled in higher education and of the offered courses increasingly emphasizes the need for student-focused activities. Therefore, if sufficient attention is not paid to the evaluation of educational services and to the analyses of the results obtained, the guality of higher education services provided to students as key customers becomes unmanageable. In order to gain competitive advantage in the higher education sector where increasing marketization takes place, institutions have to identify their primary stakeholders as well as their needs and expectations. However, they should not only focus on students, since there are many other stakeholder groups involved in the key processes including e.g. academic staff with whom students have direct interactions and perceive educational service quality primarily through their lecturers' activity. When examining the guality of institutional services, different levels of measurement can be distinguished to each of which primary stakeholders, customers and quality dimensions could be identified. At all three levels (including institutional, program / faculty, course level), the state of the art focuses primarily on the voice of students and lecturers. In this research, the differences and similarities between the three aforementioned levels are demonstrated from the viewpoints of students and lecturers. As a result, three groups of quality attributes are identified on which quality measurement issues should be focused at each level.

1 Introduction

The role of higher education (HE) has been growingly recognized when developing a competitive socio-economic system (Kováts, 2016). Therefore, in the last two decades a renewed attention has been paid to the higher education sector, the various quality issues of institutional operation and of its different levels have come to the forefront (e.g. Mizikaci, 2006; Gupta & Kaushik, 2018). Diverse quality evaluation methods have arisen due to the increasing stakeholder requirements associated with institutional quality (Kováts & Takács, 2016).

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Despite the increasing attention paid to quality issues, the difficulty of defining quality in higher educational context may act as a barrier when it comes to the enhancement of institutional performance towards total quality management (TQM) philosophy (Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al., 2016). Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al. (2016) compared different studies (such as CESPUALE and ECUALE) when providing a viable quality definition. Based on the comparison of the voice of deans and academic staff, quality definitions such as 'Quality consists of meeting the expectations of all stakeholders (students, lecturers, institutions, society)' and 'Quality consists of developing the capabilities of students to help them transform themselves' have been pointed out. The first definition highlights that besides the students' viewpoint other stakeholders' expectations should also be taken into account, while the second definition expresses that the approach of evaluating quality has shifted institutions away from considering students as passive recipients towards handling them as co-creators of knowledge while widening the platform of stakeholders whose 'voice' counts. The higher educational service is considered as a unique service due to the interaction between different stakeholder groups the attending participants of which are changing from semester to semester. The variability of the service provision is caused by the ever increasing needs and expectations of the different stakeholders and by their unique and unstandardized experience gained during the 'consumption' of HE services. Higher education is also unique in the sense that its primary customers, namely students, do not have a clear idea of what they are about to 'purchase' calling attention to the fact that they cannot be the sole judge of HE quality (Gilroy et al., 1999).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of HE stakeholders. Section 3 introduces the applied methodology to differentiate the three operation levels associated with viewing quality at different levels of institutional operation. Section 4 interprets the first results of a student survey and some focus group interviews. Section 5 summarizes the main managerial conclusions and outlines possible future research directions.

2 Stakeholders of higher education institutions

Defining service quality is not an easy task without having a bright picture of the different groups of stakeholders. According to the state of the art, stakeholders of HE include undergraduate students, graduates, university employees, labor market participants, funding bodies and foundations, scientific societies, government, society, etc. (Guolla, 1999; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Bennett & AliChoudhury, 2009; Mark, 2013; Nell & Cant, 2014; Fosu & Owusu, 2015; Guilbault, 2016; Bhuian, 2016; Nasim et al., 2019; Ruben et al., 2018; Mattah et al., 2018). What is more, the groups of stakeholders who should be considered and their weighting may vary according to the level of operation examined in a particular HE situation. Fassin (2009) and Mainardes et al. (2012) introduced analytical models defining different stakeholders (internal constituents), stakewatchers (pressure group) and stakekeepers (regulators). True stakeholders can be characterized by having a real, direct claim on the institution, while a pressure group only has an indirect one. Regulators have no real claims at all. Mainardes et al. (2012) identified six groups of stakeholders, but highlighted the complexity of defining the borders among the groups:

- Regulatory stakeholder: this stakeholder group has influence over the organization, but the organization has none or very little influence.
- Controller stakeholder: the organization and the stakeholder are influenced by each other, however, the stakeholder's influence is higher on the organization.
- Partner stakeholder: the organization and the stakeholder are similarly influenced by each other.
- Passive stakeholder: the organization and the stakeholder have an impact on each other, the influence of the organization is higher on the stakeholder.
- Dependent stakeholder: the organization has an influence over the stakeholder, but the stakeholder has none or very little influence.
- Non-stakeholder: the organization and the stakeholder do not influence each other.

Based on the above mentioned studies, stakeholders of HE institutions could be grouped by following the previous classification. Table 1 implies that the borders are blurred among the stakeholder groups. Depending on the operational level, the situation and the investigated process,

the participants of the higher education institution (HEI) processes can have different roles, provide different input and receive different output. Table 1 shows that students can be partner, passive or dependent stakeholder depending on the force of their influence on the university. University staff could be present in almost every role depending on the position of the staff member and the process. The society is present in various roles (controller, partner or passive stakeholder) as well as the parents of students (partner, passive, dependent stakeholder). Except the evaluation and assessment bodies, all defined participants could be part of more than one stakeholder group of Mainardes et al. (2012) which could be realized on the process shown in Figure 2.

Participants of HEI processes	Stakeholder	Stakewatcher	Stakekeeper	Regulatory stakeholder	Controller stakeholder	Partner stakeholder	Passive stakeholder	Dependent stakeholder
Students	х					х	х	х
Graduates	х				х	х		
Parents (through students)	х					х	х	х
University employees (lecturers, management, administrative staff)	х				х	х	х	х
Society		х			х	х	х	
Media		х			х	х		
Competitors		х			х	х		
Labor market		х			х	х		
Evaluation/assessment bodies			х	х				
Domestic and offshore partners			х	х	х	х		
Government			х	х				

Table 1. Groups of stakeholders in higher education

There are several studies that map the process of higher education service provision to define quality and the relevant stakeholders (e.g. Pereira & Da Silva, 2003; Labanauskis & Ginevicius, 2017). Jain et al. (2011) differentiate the students, the faculty and staff and the infrastructure as the suppliers of input, pointing out only the first two as having any kind of control. According to them, the output's 'customers' are the society and the industry since they view graduates as outputs of HE.



Figure 1. Processes of higher education Source: Jain et al., 2011

Based on Jain et al.'s (2011) model and on the stakeholder groups demonstrated in Table 1, Figure 3 differentiates roles including suppliers and partners, the work group and customers.





Figure 2 demonstrates the HE process in the context of the TQM philosophy emphasizing the position of students as input resources (Nasim et al., 2019) and outputs at the same time. The figure is also to summarize the conclusions of the above mentioned models by distinguishing input resources as national and offshore partners, parents, auditors, validating, accrediting and evaluating bodies, financing bodies and government, carrier advisors, graduates and current students. They provide primarily informational and financial resources to the institutional operation where the institution itself acts as a work group. The output of the process may be viewed either as knowledge (embodying finally in a degree) where students viewed as customers (output users). On the other hand, educated students could also be considered as outputs in case of which the labor market acts as a customer (outcome users).

The quality of institutional operation may be viewed at different levels (Harvey, 2003): institutional (e.g. Teeroovengadum et al., 2016), faculty /program (e.g. Mizikaci, 2006), and module/course level (e.g. Kincsesné et al., 2015; Surman & Tóth, 2019). The process demonstrated by Figure 2 reflects the macro level of institutional operation. Viewing quality on the other two levels, only a part of the above shown partners and suppliers are relevant and the role of labor market as outcome user is getting out of the pure, direct focus as shifting towards course level. However, an institution could fulfil labor market requirements efficiently and effectively by following a bottom-up approach. This means if lecturers are conscious of labor market trends, then this approach could diffuse up to higher level of institutional operation.

Quality could be measured in different ways (Nasim et al., 2019) by utilizing different approaches at each of the three operational levels since these interpret quality through different dimensions viewed from the aspects of different stakeholders. To investigate this issue including both the voice of students and academics, as primary stakeholders (having considerable influence in each level), questionnaires and focus group discussions were conducted which are to be discussed in the next section.

3 Methodology

The primary aim of the conducted student survey was to point out the differences between the three operational levels through quality attributes by focusing on the students' point of view. The survey conducted with student participation consisted of two parts: a first free thinking session and a ranking session. In the free thinking stage, students were invited to define individually the 3 most important quality characteristics associated with the different operational levels. The second phase included the most frequently referenced quality attributes according to the state of the art differentiated by the operational levels by listing 19 features on institutional, 14 characteristics on program and 17 attributes on course level (see Table 2) (e.g. Stewart & Walsh, 1989; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Navarro et al., 2005; Douglas et al., 2008; Butt & Rehman, 2010; Jain et al., 2011; Ibrahim et al., 2012; Seesy et al., 2018; etc.). In this part, respondents were required to rank the 3 most important attributes from the lists related to the separate level.

	Institution		Program		Course
•	career opportunities	•	lecturer skills and abilities	•	lecturer skills and abilities
•	scientific work and reputation of academic staff	•	career opportunities scientific work and	•	scientific work and reputation of academic staff
•	infrastructure, equipment		reputation of academic staff	٠	infrastructure, equipment
•	reliability	•	infrastructure, equipment	٠	reliability
•	trust	•	trust	٠	understandability
•	commitment to improvement	•	curriculum internationalism	٠	commitment to improvement
•	institutional reputation internationalism	•	program reputation	•	usefulness, utilizable knowledge
•	active student life word-of-mouth	•	word-of-mouth safety	•	ability to arise interest empathy theory-practice ratio
•	safety joint services e.g. dormitory	•	feedbacks given to students scholarship opportunities	•	responsiveness safety
•	location, e.g. public transportation		number of courses	•	accuracy novelty, modernity
•	enrolment process			٠	accessibility
•	social engagement			٠	personal attention
•	number of programs			٠	feedback and reclamation
•	library services				handling
•	administration process				

Table 2	Quality	v attributes a	at	different	levels	of	institutional	oneration
	Quality	allinduces	αι	unerent	10,0013	UI	institutional	operation

The questionnaire was filled in by 258 Hungarian and 78 foreign students who were invited to respond during the Quality Management and Management and Business Economics titled courses (average response rate is around 49 %). The demographic characteristics are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Respondents' demographic characteristics

Foreigner	Hungarian	Total	

Gender	Gender 35 52 87 43 206 249 Level of study 57 256 313 21 1 22 - 1 1 Field Mork experience Work experience ave 48 32 80 experience at all 30 226 256						
Female	35	52	87				
Male	43	206	249				
Level of stu	ıdy						
Bachelor	57	256	313				
Master	21	1	22				
Undivided	-	1	1				
Field							
Engineering	56	254	310				
Business and management	22	4	26				
Work experie	ence						
Already have	48	32	80				
No work experience at all	30	226	256				
Course							
Management and Business Economics	53	249	302				
Quality Management	25	9	34				
SUM	78	258	336				

In the meantime, focus group discussions were organized including PhD students and lecturers from the Department of Management and Business Economics at the investigated university. From the results of the focus group discussions, affinity diagrams were constructed the headings of which were compared to the state of the art dimension rankings.

4 Results

4.1 Student survey

The responses of the first free thinking session defined quality in various ways, the most popular categories are listed in Table 4. Each respondent had to give three ideas in connection with quality at every operational level. Hungarian students listed 774, while foreign students provided 234 ideas. When summarizing the answers, the first step was to look for the same ideas and to group the synonyms. Table 4 demonstrated those features and characteristics that appeared with the highest frequency. The way how Hungarian and foreign students articulate quality shows many similarities, however, it is worth mentioning that e.g. career opportunities were mentioned more times by foreign students.

Table 4. Most frequent quality attributes provided in the free thinking session	Table 4. Most freq	uent quality attribute	es provided in the fre	e thinking session
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		0			
Foreign students		Hungarian students			
	Institu	ition			
	lecturer s	kills and professional knowledge			
reputation					
infrastructure					
	up-to-date curriculum				
	 usefulness of the diploma and the curriculum 				
career opportunities		 easiness of completing programs 			
	•	 quality of education 			
Program					

	•	diversity			
	•	• up-to-da	ate curriculum and knowledge		
		 lecturer 	skills and professional knowledge		
	•	 interesti 	ng		
•	career opportunities		reputation		
•	reliability		 proper and suitable processes 		
			quality of education		
			 usefulness of the degree and the 		
			curriculum		
		Col	urse		
	•	lecturer skills			
	•	usefulness			
	•	 ability to 	arise interest		
	•	proper a	and suitable processes		
	•	• underst	andability		
	•	 practice 	-oriented		
•	career opportunities		diversity		
•	easiness of fulfilling the course		up-to-date syllabus and knowledge		
•	syllabus				

Based on the most frequent ideas given in the free thinking session, institutional reputation, and the infrastructure are the most perceived attributes of quality at institutional level, while the course level view of quality focused more on the skills and professionalism of the academic staff. Regarding the quality features of the curricula and the related syllabuses, it is easy to see that as we reach lower levels of operation, the most features refer to the quality lecturing style. What is more surprising that student responses in connection with quality have not referred to student performance assessments at all.

In the second part of surveying where students chose the 3 most important dimensions from the listed attributes, several similarities and differences could also be detected. The table in the Appendix is to demonstrate the diversity of features emerging from the literature research.

At the macro level, career opportunities, reliability, the scientific work and the reputation of the academic staff, and the institutional commitment to improvement were highlighted most frequently. At the program / faculty level, the skills and abilities of the lecturers and the curriculum appeared besides the career opportunities and the scientific work and reputation of the academic staff (which appeared on institutional level as well). The fact that the skills and abilities of the academics were ranked the highest both by the Hungarian and the foreign respondents implies that at program level the 'style' of lecturing is more important than the lecturers' professional reputation which was pointed out at institutional level as one of the most important attributes. By following a top-down approach and reaching the course level, even more attention should be paid to the knowledge transferring ability of the lecturers, since understandability, the skills and abilities of the lecturers and usefulness were ranked as highest. At this level, 'reliability' and 'commitment to improvement' were ranked lower than at institutional level. It is worth pinpointing that in case of courses the academic work and publications of the lecturers as attributes were neglected, while it contributes to 'the degree to which education is correct, accurate and up to date' (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996) and is an important indicator in various HE institution rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), Center for World University Rankings (CWUR)). There was no significant difference between the rankings of foreign and Hungarian students. This is confirmed by the Spearman rank-order correlation results as well (large positive correlation (institutional level: r_s=0.8178, p=0.000, program level: r_s=0.848, p=0.000, course level: r_s=0.828, p=0.000)).

When comparing the results emerging from the first and second part of surveying, several highly ranked quality attributes of the second part appeared in the first, free thinking part. There are some attributes highlighted in the literature which have not appeared in any part when surveying our students (e.g. trust, joint services, social engagement). This phenomenon affects primarily the macro level, while at course level all state of the art attributes was mentioned in the free thinking part except for 'handling feedback and reclamations' and 'accessibility'. This implies that the evaluation of quality at institutional level should not be dominated by the students' view. Due to the existence of information asymmetry students do not have a full understandability of institutional operation. To further explore this issue, focus group discussions were held.

4.2 Focus group discussions

Three focus group discussions were held to investigate the differences between the perceptions of lecturers and students in terms of the three operational levels' primary quality attributes. The first group consisted of 2 PhD students and an assistant lecturer in order to track how opinions change while 'transforming' from student to lecturer. The other two focus groups included professors and researchers with higher levels of lecturing experience, one including academics from an elder and the other from a younger generation. During the free thinking session, focus group participants identified quality attributes related to the three distinct levels (min. 5 attributes per level). In the second part, participants discussed the emerged ideas and then grouped them together into an affinity diagram.

Considering course level, the three different focus groups listed similar ideas related mainly to the curriculum and to the knowledge transferring style of the lecturer mentioning the theory-practice ratio, diversity, self-improvement, interactivity, improvement, logic, actuality (modernity), depth and quality of the curriculum, number of students, infrastructure.



Figure 3. Affinity diagram headings on course level

At program level, the importance of labor market feedback has not been emphasized by PhD students. The PhD student group narrowed the quality features of programs primarily to courses and curricula. The role of lecturers (when examining quality at course level) has not been mentioned in the focus group of mid-experienced lecturers. The constructed affinity diagrams focused primarily on the following characteristics: recognition and reputation of the lecturers and programs, graduate career tracking and admission trends, course-specific flexibility, customization and popularity, and infrastructure.



Figure 4. Affinity diagram headings on program level

The affinity diagrams focusing on institutional level primarily reflected to the international and scientific relations of the institution, to the recognition, reputation and connected publications of the lecturers, the value of the various degrees, the modernity (actuality) of the knowledge provided by the various programs and the features of the admission process. It is worth highlighting that only the syllabus was mentioned by the highly experienced group of lecturers, while the curriculum did not appear at all.



Figure 5. Affinity diagram headings on institution level

The comparison of the attributes highlighted by the focus groups and the state of the art (included also in the second part of the student survey) delivers similar results as the comparison between the two stages of surveying.

Many state of the art quality attributes were highlighted both in the free thinking part of student surveying and in the focus group work as well (see Table in the Appendix). It can be concluded that the highly experienced group of lecturers was closest to the knowledge embedded in the literature and overlapped the best with students' free thinking results. Overall, student responses emerging in the free thinking session were closest to the features arising from the state of the art taking into consideration that far more students were involved in the survey than lecturers participating in the focus group sessions. From the 50 listed quality attributes (see Table 2), students specified 36 in the free thinking session, while PhD students and mid-experienced lecturers listed 25 and highly-experienced lecturers assigned 31 features.

5 Conclusions

The demographic changes and the recent trends turning up in higher education have all been shifting this sector to break down the traditional assumptions and to become an integral part of both the society and the economy (Polónyi, 2006). HEIs must act as service providers: there is an extensive pressure on them to meet the needs and expectations of their stakeholders as much as possible. The increasing competition both on national and international levels, the growing number of institutions, the rising demand for domestic institutions to appear on the international scene, and the need to enhance their competitiveness require institutional management to pay more attention to the quality of educational service and to the service quality perceptions of students.

The primary purpose of this research was to highlight the existence of quality attribute differences among the different operational levels by listening to the voice of students and lecturers as well.

Based on the results of the applied survey and the three focus group discussions, it can be concluded that the focus of each level includes primarily the quality features listed in Table 5.

	Institution		Program		Course
•	career opportunities (during and after)	•	lecturer skills and abilities career opportunities (by the	•	lecturer skills and abilities infrastructure, equipment
•	reputation of academic staff infrastructure, equipment	•	program) scientific work and reputation of academic staff	•	reliability understandability (syllabus and lecture)
•	reliability institution's commitment to	•	infrastructure, equipment curriculum	•	lecturer's commitment to improvement
•	improvement institutional reputation	•	internationalism program reputation	•	usefulness and utilizable knowledge
•	internationalism industrial relationships			•	ability to arise interest theory-practice ratio
•	enrolment process			•	novelty and modernity (value-added received during the course)

Table 5. Concluded dimensions of the three operational levels

These features demonstrate those quality attributes to which institutions should pay attention at each level of operation when managing quality.

However, the identification of these attributes is not enough to establish an implementable framework. The various stakeholders align with the various HE services have to be associated with the different levels of operation. What is more, their needs and expectations should be weighted as well as the different quality attributes. The demographic features of the stakeholders are also important since that could bias the results. For a successful framework, validity and reliability have to be also evaluated (Ramlo, 2017).

Concerning future research directions, with defining the three groups of quality attributes, the next step has to be the determination of the weights by applying e.g. Likert scaling. What the voice of students is concerned, a new, more sophisticated questionnaire will be developed, while the interpretation of quality attributes needs further investigation. Personal interviews are also planned with labor market participants and with the heads of department of the university under investigation (based on the results of literature research, e.g. Reid, 2008).

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Institution - Dimensions	Foreigners	Hungarians	Highly- experienced	Moderately experienced	PhD
career opportunities	1	1	yes	yes	yes
reliability	2	2	yes	yes	yes
scientific work and reputation of academic staff	3	4	yes	yes	yes
commitment to improvement	9	3	yes	yes	yes
institutional reputation	5,5	7	yes	yes	yes
active student life	4	9	yes		
trust	8	5			
infrastructure, equipment	7	6	yes	yes	yes
internationalism	5,5	10,5	yes	yes	yes
industrial relationships	12,5	8	yes	yes	yes
joint services e.g. dormitory	12,5	10,5	yes		
word-of-mouth	10	13			
safety	16,5	12			
social engagement	12,5	16			
enrolment process	15	15		yes	yes
number of programs	12,5	18			
location, e.g. public transportation	16,5	14			
administration process	19	17			
library services	18	19			
Program - Dimensions	Foreigners	Hungarians	Highly- experienced	Moderately experienced	PhD
lecturer skills and abilities	1	1	yes	yes	yes
career opportunities	2	3	yes	yes	yes
curricula	5	2	yes	yes	yes

Appendix

scientific work and reputation of academic staff	3,5	4	yes	yes	yes
infrastructure, equipment	3,5	6	yes		yes
program reputation	6	7	yes	yes	yes
trust	9,5	5			
scholarship opportunities	8	10			
internationalism	7	11	yes	yes	yes
feedbacks given to students	9,5	9	yes		
further study opportunities	11	8			yes
word-of-mouth	12	12			
safety	14	13			
number of courses	13	14			
Course - Dimensions	Foreigners	Hungarians	Highly- experienced	Moderately experienced	PhD
understandability	1	1	yes	yes	yes
lecturer skills and abilities	2	3	yes	yes	yes
usefulness, utilizable knowledge	6,5	2	yes	yes	yes
reliability	4	6	yes	yes	yes
empathy	3	7			
ability to arise interest	8	4	yes	yes	yes
responsiveness	5	8			
theory-practice ratio	9,5	5	yes	yes	
commitment to improvement	6,5	10,5	yes	yes	yes
accuracy	9,5	10,5			
infrastructure, equipment	12	9	yes	yes	yes
novelty, modernity	13	12	yes	yes	yes
personal attention	11	15		yes	
accessibility	15	13			
feedback and reclamation handling	15	14	yes		
scientific work and reputation of academic staff	15	17	yes		
safety	17	16			