

THE STUDENT SATISFACTION AT THE CAMPUS: THE CASE OF SULEYMAN DEMIREL UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has been witnessing rapid changes in recent years and universities have been perceived as service providers beside their traditional roles. In this regard, concept of quality has also been transforming and becoming a multidimensional area that comprises state, society, employers, academicians and students. Student centered quality approach regards students as the main stakeholders in this process and emphasize that the students should be the primary participants and beneficiaries of quality improvement. In line with these developments, studies regarding student participation in quality management have been increasing and service quality of university facilities has begun to be measured. This study has also aimed at finding out assessments of students on quality of learning and student support services in a state university in Turkey, namely Suleyman Demirel University. To this end, findings of a survey held with students in 2016 are presented and discussed.

Keywords: higher education, student satisfaction, service quality

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades services have become the dominant form of economic activity and are now playing an important role in the economy of both developed and developing countries (Abdullah, 2006). Accordingly, in marketing literature, studies have begun to focus on quality of services which had discounted and treated like goods for a long time. This ambiguity still exists in some degree, because services and goods share much of the conceptual framework of quality (Palmer, 2011). Yet, services tend to pose much greater problems in the understanding of customers' needs and expectations due to the difficulty of defining and measuring its components (Giese and Cote, 2000). Unique characteristics of services such as intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, perishability and lack of ownership make the quality issue more complex (Palmer, 2011). When it comes to the higher education sector, difficulties further increase because of the special attributes which differentiates universities from other service enterprises. Thus, quality of services in higher education institution is a complex and disputed issue. Some scholars assert that the roles and facilities of the universities could not be likened to private sector, while the others argue for a new entrepreneur university paradigm. For example, according to Oldfield and Baron (2000), higher education can be seen as a "pure service," suggesting that it possesses all the unique characteristics of a service.

Yet, apart from these academic discussions, in practice there is a growing tendency that the universities are increasingly assuming a service provider mission. With significant changes taking place in higher education institutions over the last decade, it seems that higher education should be regarded as a business-like service industry, which focuses on meeting and exceeding the needs of students (Gruber et al., 2010). On the other hand, quality approach has also been changing towards a more student centered approach. Accordingly, institutions are placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of students. It is crucial for higher education providers to understand students' expectations and perceptions of what constitutes a quality service in order to attract students and serve their needs (Nadiri et al., 2009). Furthermore, this will lead to better allocation of resources, resulting in students being provided with an improved service (Abdullah, 2006). Therefore, evaluating the level of service quality through student feedbacks is an important task for universities to design their service in the best possible way.

Turkish higher education sector with 179 universities and nearly 7 million students has also witnessed important transformations in recent years. There are many newly established universities and this policy of expanding will continue due to the young population of the country. Indeed, massification of higher education has become an important topic on the agenda of many developing countries. Beside its advantages, this situation also has brought about quality concerns and thus importance of quality assurance increases. Universities have been developing mechanisms for quality assurance and including students in these processes. This study is also a product of this new understanding of quality and attempt to develop a student centered quality approach. The main objective of the study is to reflect the evaluations of students on the services of the university through a student feedback survey. Although the survey was dealt with the services in a specific university context, it is thought that this case has also many similar aspects with state universities in developing countries. Thus, the findings of the study were presented for grounding a base for further academic study.

METHODOLOGY

The student satisfaction survey was held in Suleyman Demirel University, Turkey which is a state university established in 1992. There are 65.000 students studying at associate, bachelors, and postgraduate levels as of the year 2016. Around 35.000 students are female. The survey was held in May and June, 2016 in the central campus of the university with the participation of 268 students from different faculties and gender distribution was also taken into consideration.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Survey questions were organized around five categories; academic dimension, administrative dimension, student support services, social services and external relations and general level of satisfaction. Main findings of the survey are presented below.

Table 1. Findings of the Student Satisfaction Survey

	Totally Satisfied %	Satisfied %	Not sure %	Dissatisfied %	Totally Dissatisfied %	No Opinion %
Academic Dimension						
The quality of education in general	9	52,2	14,4	19,4	4,5	3
Course materials and teaching methods	11,9	28,4	19,4	29,9	10,4	
Foreign language courses	7,5	14,9	26,9	19,4	26,9	4,5
Knowledge and capability of lecturers	13,4	53,7	14,9	9,0	7,5	1,5
Interaction in the class	13,4	34,3	23,9	22,4	6,0	
Advisory role of lecturers	14,9	16,4	23,9	29,9	9,0	6,0
Physical conditions of learning environments	16,4	29,9	25,4	22,4	6,0	
Administrative Dimension						
Attitudes of Top management	14,9	40,3	25,4	14,9	4,5	
Faculty Management	16,4	49,3	11,9	11,9	10,4	
Administrative staff	7,5	37,3	20,9	23,9	9,0	1,5
Registrar's Office	11,9	32,8	13,4	20,9	16,4	4,5
Student Support Services						
Physical Conditions of Campus	22,4	37,3	17,9	13,4	6	3
Scholarships	7,5	22,4	19,4	28,4	16,4	6,0
Dormitories	16,4	19,4	17,9	23,9	17,9	4,5
Library services	49,3	31,3	11,9	3	3	1,5
IT and internet services	17,9	25,4	28,4	19,4	6	3
Bookstore	11,9	40,3	23,9	10,4	10,4	3
Medical services	20,9	35,8	22,4	13,4	3	4,5
Security services	14,3	31,3	14,9	17,9	16,4	4,5
Cafeterias	19,4	34,3	17,9	19,4	7,5	1,5
Cleaning services	10,4	43,3	19,4	17,9	17,9	7,5
Shopping	9,0	23,9	14,2	19,4	20,9	11,9
Transportation	16,4	43,3	17,9	16,4	6	
Social Services						
Guidance and counseling	9	22,4	22,4	23,9	19,9	7,5
Cultural facilities	19,4	35,8	16,4	20,9	10,4	1,5
Sports facilities	20,9	37,3	13,4	16,4	7,5	4,5
Religious places	23,9	40,3	10,4	13,4	7,5	4,5
Student clubs	19,4	28,4	22,4	20,9	1,5	7,5
Relations with NGO's	13,4	23,9	26,5	22,8	10,4	3
International Office	10,4	32,8	14,9	23,9	11,9	6
General Level of Satisfaction					MEAN (10 Scale)	
Satisfaction with the Faculty						5,52
Satisfaction with the University						6,43
Satisfaction with Life						6,86

The findings revealed that the satisfaction level of the students regarding university services was generally at the medium level. The most problematic areas were appeared as the scholarships and dormitory facilities. Only 30% of the students were satisfied with the scholarships, meaning that the majority of students did not find scholarships sufficient. Similarly, only 36% of students found dormitory facilities as satisfactory. This dissatisfaction stems from inadequate capacity of state dormitories, low level of quality and expensiveness of private student hostels. Indeed these issues are major problems which affects living standards and thus academic performance of the students directly. On the other hand part-time job opportunities are very limited in many cities in the Anatolia, In Turkey, scholarships and dormitories are beyond the control of state universities and regulated by the government at a large extent. Yet, universities should take a leading role in combining efforts for producing more opportunities in these areas through the cooperation of state, local governments, NGO's, private sector and the university. Particularly universities should initiate projects in their region for improving living standards of the students.

When the general level of student satisfaction is taken into account, it was found that the students were pleased with their life in general terms. Yet, level of satisfaction decreases when the university and the department were regarded. Students were less satisfied with their departments and the university. Thus, quality development mechanisms should be built on the basis of a down-top understanding and started at the department level. This level is also more convenient for student participation. Evaluations of students on the departmental issues should be measured through more detailed surveys and other tools. Student feedbacks at both course level and departmental level should be used for developing further strategies for quality development.

In academic terms, it could be inferred that the institution generally meets the expectations of students. Yet, there are some problematic issues regarding teaching and learning. The most problematic area was founded as the foreign language proficiency. Only 22% of students were satisfied with the foreign language courses at the university. Indeed, foreign language and particularly English proficiency is one of the most important barriers for academic quality and mobility in Turkey as is the case for most of developing countries. Most part of the academic literature is produced in English and academic studies as well as academic career heavily depend on English proficiency. Yet, English preparatory courses at the university are not sufficient for developing academic language skills. Indeed language education should be started at earlier ages and insufficiency of language education in primary schools and colleges leads to problems in university education.

Another finding of the survey is that students thought that their lecturers had necessary knowledge and capabilities in their subject matters. Yet, they were more dissatisfied with teaching methods and course materials. It means that although lecturers are competent in their areas, there are some problems in transmitting this knowledge to the students. This might be resulted from differences between lecturers and students regarding forms of communication and interaction. In the internet age, there is a new generation which uses information technologies intensively and learns through visual tools, rather than books and other written sources. Thus, course materials and teaching methods should be overviewed in line with the technological developments and with the needs of "Z generation".

Satisfaction level of the students with academic advising was lower and they thought that lectures could not allocate sufficient and convenient time for consultation. This inefficiency stems from the overload of lecturers in terms of both teaching and research responsibilities. Indeed, this is a part of a wider problem stemming from high student/lecturer ratios in Turkish higher education. While increased massification of higher education and establishment of new universities proved beneficial in many aspects, it has also led inevitable quality problems in the face of insufficient lecturer numbers. As the case in many countries Turkey suffers from inadequacy of academicians in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Thus, doctoral education should be widened and conditions of academicians should also be improved for creating a greater pool of academicians. It should not be forgotten that university education is something more from teaching in the classroom and it comprises leadership of academicians in many aspects which necessitates strong advising.

Physical conditions and equipment of learning environments are also problematic areas since the number of universities have rapidly grown without sufficient resources for infrastructure investment. The university where the survey was held was founded in 1992 and had relatively more opportunity for developing infrastructure compared to many newer universities. Yet, nearly half of the students were dissatisfied with physical conditions which might be regarded as an important portion. This also another result of the dilemma between enhancing higher education opportunities for more students and providing quality education.

Regarding administrative dimension of the institution, it was found that the students were more satisfied with the attention and treatment of top university management and faculty directors, and less satisfied with the

administrative personnel at lower levels. Nearly half of the students did not feel satisfied with the attitudes of the administrative staff. Top managers (rectors and deans) are also academicians in Turkish state universities and this finding implies that the interaction between academics and students is better and more fruitful. It is a matter of concern that in many universities in Anatolian cities, administrative staff have been hired on the basis of local relations rather than merit. Thus, they do not have necessary competences for performing in the university which has unique relations and rules different from other kind of institutions. On the other hand, most of the administrative staff have permanent job contracts and gain their wages directly from the government which also decreases their performance. Indeed, quality and performance of the administrative personnel is an important problem in most of the public institutions in Turkey and the universities are not immune from this situation. Taken into consideration that the administration is an indispensable part of the quality, this structure should be reorganized. Personnel must be employed on the basis of merit and their performance should be assessed for both payment and promotion.

Services of the Registrar's Office are the ones which students mostly face with in their academic life. According to the findings, nearly half of the students evaluated these services as sufficient. Yet, 20% of students dissatisfied with the Office. For improving student services the university tried to use technology more intensively at the admission and registration processes. These efforts have given their fruits, yet there are still problems stemming basically from insufficiency of personnel.

The findings regarding the main student support services in the campus are as followings: The highest satisfaction level was depicted for library services according to the survey. This finding is not surprising given the fact that university top management have pursued a strategy of supporting the library in both financial and logistic matters. The library has been directed by a professional manager, developed digital infrastructure and provides service 7/24 for the students. Thus, the high quality of library services could be regarded as a proof that support of leadership, professional management, effective use of resources and student centred service vision produce fruitful results in university facilities. Similarly, students were satisfied with the sports facilities of the universities which are also important for personal development. Again, places devoted for worship were found as satisfactory. Yet, it should be noted that these places are for Muslims which constitute majority of the university population and places for other people belonging other religions should also be taken into account. The lowest level of satisfaction were recorded for psychological counselling services, shopping facilities and security services. Psychological counselling is one of the most important and problematic matters for particularly state universities in small size cities. Universities have difficulty in hiring professionals for psychological counseling due to the personnel regulation of government which does not give flexibility in wages. Universities in small cities could not offer attractive positions for psychologists and suffer from this inadequacy. Yet, psychological counselling has a paramount importance particularly for young students who leave their families and start a different life in a strange environment. Thus, counselling issues both in academic and psychological terms must be reorganized. Again, security services throughout the campus must be handled seriously and related personnel should be continuously trained not only in terms of security matters but also in terms of relations with the students.

The above mentioned findings imply that contemporary universities are becoming service provider institutions in many aspects beside their traditional missions of teaching and research. This new role for universities is a complex one and could be afforded with the participation and contribution of the students. Thus, student feedback and representation should be a regular part of quality improvement efforts in any university. This cooperation becomes possible with the development of a quality culture within campus, rather than the implementation of formal rules of quality assurance. The student centered approach should gain prominence in the university environment, yet students should not be perceived as customers who are right in every situation. Universities have the capacity and should manage this transformation in quality understanding through finding a balance between tradition and change, quality and autonomy, freedom and responsibility.

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