Using the Critical Incident Technique to Identify Factors of Service Quality in Online Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Information technologies are changing the way in which higher education is delivered. In this regard, there is a necessity for developing information systems that help university managers measure the quality of online services offered to their students. This paper discusses the importance of considering students’ perception of service quality. The authors then identify key factors of service quality, as perceived by students, in online higher education. To this end, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is proposed as an effective qualitative methodology. Some benefits of this methodology are highlighted and an exploratory research is carried out in a real environment to illustrate this approach. Results from this research explain which quality dimensions are considered the most valuable to online students. Information provided by this methodology can significantly improve strategic decision-making processes in online universities worldwide.

Keywords: Critical Incident Technique, Decision-Support Systems, Online Higher Education, Perceived Service Quality, Qualitative Data Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Higher education today is undergoing a period of fundamental transformation, triggered particularly by the consequences of the globalization process and by developments in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT). The emergence of an increasingly differentiated demand for education, the need to carry out more commercial activities in order to tap new sources of funding, the new entrants to the high education market—e.g., new online universities that exploit the possibilities offered by ICTs—and the increasing bargaining power of suppliers and customers are only some of the factors that are forcing universities to rethink their traditional roles, to develop new organizational structures and to reposition themselves...
through strategic direction setting (Moratis & van Baalen, 2002).

These trends and the widespread recognition that the university’s invisible product, knowledge, is the most important factor in economic and social growth are the reasons for the increasing competitiveness inside the higher education market all over the world. To survive in this environment, universities should focus on customers’ perceptions of service quality —understanding ‘service’ in the broad sense, including both academic and non-academic services— since those perceptions are a key influence on students’ decisions when they are choosing or recommending a particular institution.

While there is little disagreement on the importance of service quality issues in higher education, the challenge is to identify and implement the most appropriate measurement tools in order to gain a better understanding of the quality issues that impact on students’ service experiences (O’Neill & Palmer, 2004). The problem is that much of the research on this topic has been too highly focused from an academic insider’s perspective, presupposing that the inherent knowledge base of those involved in the business of higher education is sufficient for developing student-oriented programs. Nevertheless, research on service-related business suggests that this ‘inside out’ decision making is hardly ever successful, because if firms do not know what their own customers’ desire is, it is difficult to design programs that match customer expectations of what constitutes a good service. Stated simply, knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly one of the most critical steps in delivering quality (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). One of the most important customers of any higher-education offer is the student herself. Even so, her perceptions about the quality of the service being offered are usually omitted in the existing literature about online higher-education.

The purpose of the current article is to investigate how students perceive and evaluate online higher education services. In order to find out the aspects or characteristics that students take into account in their evaluation of the perceived service quality (PSQ) in online higher education environments we have carried out a qualitative analysis using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). CIT is a procedure in which it is the consumers themselves—in this case the students—who give descriptions of their experience of the service, whether satisfactory or unsatisfactory. After appropriate analysis, these are then grouped to form specific customer requirements or quality dimensions. The results obtained are not only aimed at clarifying the determinants of perceived service quality in online higher education, but also show the advantages of the Critical Incident Technique over other exploratory inductive methods, particularly when research is conducted in online environments, as is the case here.

**SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Following the general pattern set by service industries, the issue of service quality within the higher education sector has received increasing attention in recent years. In particular, there is a clear interest in developing information systems for monitoring students’ and groups’ activity in online environments, since it can contribute to improve learning processes and, therefore, the quality of the service being offered (Daradoumis et al., 2010; Juan et al., 2009b). Although debate has ranged over various issues, the most dominant theme is the development of valid, reliable and replicable measures of perceived service quality (O’Neill & Palmer, 2004). In the early stages, most models designed to evaluate PSQ focused exclusively on teaching and learning. In the last decade, though, several studies have approached the evaluation of university services from a broad perspective, considering not only the core service (the teaching) but the peripheral or auxiliary administrative and backup services as well (O’Neill & Palmer, 2004; Abdullah, 2005).

This study continues this line of research by applying a holistic conception of service qual-
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