



Gaps Between Expectations and Perceptions of Students About Teaching Support Services in A Technological Institute in Ecuador

Gómez-Rodríguez¹, Flores Laaz², Delgado-Álvarez³, Reigosa-Lara⁴, Tolozano Benites⁵

¹Postgraduate Department, Universidad Bolivariana del Ecuador, Durán; Faculty of Commercial Education and Sciences, Instituto Superior Tecnológico Bolivariano de Tecnología, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

²Marketing and Communications Department, Instituto Superior Tecnológico Bolivariano de Tecnología, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

³Directorate of Evaluation and Quality Assurance, Universidad Bolivariana del Ecuador, Durán, Ecuador; Faculty of Commercial Education and Sciences, Instituto Superior Tecnológico Bolivariano de Tecnología, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

⁴Postgraduate Department, Universidad Bolivariana del Ecuador, Durán, Ecuador;

⁵Postgraduate Department, Universidad Bolivariana del Ecuador, Durán, Ecuador; Faculty of Commercial Education and Sciences, Instituto Superior Tecnológico Bolivariano de Tecnología, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Email: vgomez@bolivariano.edu.ec¹, aflores@bolivariano.edu.ec², ndelgado@ube.edu.ec³, areigosal@ube.edu.ec⁴, rtolozano@ube.edu.ec⁵

*Corresponding author's E-mail: vgomez@ube.edu.ec

Article History	Abstract
Received: 06 June 2023 Revised: 05 Sept 2023 Accepted: 11 Sept 2023	<p>The result of the determination of dissatisfactions is presented, based on the gaps detected, in relation to the expectations that students have about the service offered by the different departments of the Instituto Superior Tecnológico Bolivariano (ITB) and what each one of them perceives in relation to these services to later delve into the root causes that provoke them. With this point of reference, it is intended in the future to focus the management towards the continuous improvement of the processes involved, guaranteeing the satisfaction and fulfilment of the institutional strategic objectives. The results of the measurement are presented using the SERVQUAL model that allows to measure the quality of the service and determine the existing gaps between expectations and perceptions in each of the dimensions under study, namely: tangibility, reliability, response capacity, security and empathy. The comparison resulted in a decrease in the quality of the service perceived against expectations in the time period evaluated. The result that is presented is partial, and constitutes the continuity of the application of the approach within the institutional scheme started in 2017.</p>
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	Keywords: Service quality, SERVQUAL, institutional management, student-centered approach

1. Introduction

Educational quality and the student at the center of attention. The debate on whether or not to consider him as a client within educational institutions

The problem of the quality of the offer and the access of students to educational institutions

Improving quality standards in higher education has become a worldwide requirement. Those who are dedicated to quality assessment for accreditation purposes constantly refine their models and focus them on measuring management and results indicators that make it possible to make value judgments on the effectiveness and efficiency of professional training. This new reality has boosted competitiveness among educational institutions.

The challenges faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly growing and demanding as they are not only subjected to external and structured evaluation processes, but also to those internal and not so structured, but as demanding as the previous ones in which the students themselves play a very important role as clients of the educational service offered. And a third element and not least the competition.

Regardless of the fact that self-financed HEIs are, by law, non-profit institutions, performance in environments under pressure places them in the constant search for methods, approaches or philosophies that guarantee the continuous entry and retention of students to maintain stability in the income and, with this, strengthen learning environments, train professionals capable of responding to the demands imposed by society and be competitive in the market. An educational management that identifies and applies models and strategies focused on processes and continuous improvement is therefore essential, aligned with the fulfilment of the strategic objectives and goals that the institution projects.

Institutional management focused on quality teaching processes breaks the traditional paradigms and places the student at the highest level of attention, right at the center, placing institutional strategies, established procedures and systems at the extremes and, finally, the students. teachers and staff of the support processes, converging towards the center of attention: the student.

The reality of the offer of places to access third level careers in Ecuador shows that the number of applicants increases year by year caused by the addition of young people who have just finished high school plus those who reapply to obtain a place in the institutions having not obtained it in previous years.

According to the Ministry of Education of Ecuador [1] in the province of Guayas in the 2020-2021 academic year, 207,857 students were enrolled in public, fiscal and private institutions, of which 32.5% were in their 3rd year getting ready to sit the entrance exam to public higher education. If we take into account the data published in the national press where it is stated that, according to data from the Senescyt, "a total of 94,349 places are available in 218 higher education institutions during this first academic period 2021" [2] it can be seen with ease, that, considering only high school graduates who graduate from this course, the province of Guayas demands more than 72% of the places offered in this period by Senescyt for the coastal region.

This problem has become an opportunity for private institutions that have expanded their academic offer, made their schedules more flexible and have adopted tuition values that are somewhat more accessible in relation to private universities in the area.

However, this does not ensure the permanence of the student throughout the career since the levels of satisfaction and the ever-increasing demands of the students mean that, in the face of strong competition, they can make decisions to change their career or institution anytime. It is in this sense that the quality of the service is of great importance to exceed the expectations of the students and that in turn it is possible to reduce the level of abandonment or desertion that exists. Customer service is one of the key success factors of business organizations, establishing a difference with the competition in the effort to conquer a larger market [3]. It is also the case for self-financed educational institutions.

The ITB is a higher education institution of technological level that has four campuses located in the city of Guayaquil; currently has about 15 thousand students distributed among the 20 careers offered by the institution in various modalities. It was the leader in the implementation of online education in the country and its enrolment in this modality amounts to about 4 thousand students to date. The ITB, concerned about the satisfaction regarding the quality of the service towards the students, carried out a

study using the SERVQUAL model, which is a tool elaborated by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry in [4] with the intention of measuring the perceptions and expectations of the students.

Conditioning aspects for the adoption of business concepts and approaches in self-financed educational institutions in Ecuador

Educational systems, for a long time, remained outside the principles and characteristics applicable to business management. The incorrect interpretation of the term that identifies them as “non-profit institutions” makes the way of approaching aspects inherent to quality, to identification and customer-centered management, to the implementation of approaches and indicators to determine effectiveness and management efficiency, were considered by many authors as concepts that did not have a direct application to this environment.

Authors such as Kells [5], for example, refer that educational institutions lack the characteristics of business organizations in basic elements such as: control of the supply of inputs, development and the interrelation between processes, the possibility of quantifying the results, among others, prevailing evaluations of a qualitative or quasi-quantitative nature that, although their variables are of a nominal type, allow establishing an order between them (bad, regular, good, very good, excellent).

The Integrated Management of Technical and Technological Institutes (GINTECNO) model proposed by Tolozano [6] rejects Kells' position and considers that educational institutions demand the implementation of a coordinated and integrated system of permanent supply of inputs that guarantees the academic process and the other processes necessary for its operation. For this, indicators must be introduced as part of the management to evaluate and control the quality of the graduate, the satisfaction of the student-client and of society itself, the intellectual production of the faculty through the publication of articles, books, monographs, lectures, in events, the number of research, innovation and social outreach programs and projects and the social impact generated by these, the quality of institutional spending, the performance levels of human resources, the work environment, efficiency, effectiveness, the effectiveness, sustainability and sustainability of the actions they develop, among others.

García and Casanueva [7] consider that a company is an entity made up of “people, aspirations, achievements, material goods and technical and financial capacities; all of which allows them to dedicate themselves to the production and transformation of products and / or the presentation of services to satisfy needs”, insisting that they do so with the intention of obtaining a profit or benefit.

Educational institutions are service entities that have, like any other business organization dedicated to offering services, a series of characteristics such as: they need inputs, they deliver intangible actions through transformative processes that involve outputs, the service is performed for a client or receiver and depend on a provider or sender of the service, demand for material and financial resources, manage functional areas and have an organizational structure at different levels of management.

An institution of education focused on the client, in analogy with what Bell [8] expresses, will focus its proposals for improvement based on the study of the opinions, criteria, experiences, claims and even thoughts of the students to make a memory of what has been said, it analyzes and provides a service based on the expectations formulated by the student himself or by society.

What, then, is an HEIs that manages its processes centered on the student? The answer is simple and complex at the same time, and in essence it means: identifying the student's needs and making them the institution's most important factor, designing differentiating factors for the service with the student in mind, personalizing the interaction to create unique experiences, adapting the organization, ensuring maximum performance, integrate the infrastructure through the organization and partners to provide the service. When referring to the client in their relationship with the service, one starts from what is suggested by authors such as Ishikagua, Juran and Crosby who considered that the emphasis on the client is one of the basic principles of quality, which constitutes one of the goals of the education today.

In the business context, clients are classified as external and internal. Similarly, in higher education institutions, many authors report that these types of clients are also present. For example, Saravia [9] states that education has as external clients' employers, governments and society as a whole, among its internal clients are students, parents and employees in general. On the other hand, Ojeda [10] states that among the external clients are governmental and private institutions, employers and society as a whole, which are also indirect clients. Another external client is the student, who is a direct client who "buys" or seeks to obtain services related to the training process. In this same classification, but at a second level, are the parents. The aforementioned author places teachers, managers, administrative and support service employees among her internal clients.

The client-centered philosophy requires placing the client at the center of attention, promoting that the elements and convergent factors in the institution's management model are also focused and integrated according to the client.

The evaluation models and processes for accreditation, self-evaluation and management control purposes in an HEI should, in general, start from the client's demands (expectations) in relation to the rest of the processes that are involved in some way with their professional training and taking as a point of comparison the perception that they have during the course and execution of the same.

Education as a service: a debate between offer, demand, competition and the quality offered

Kotler and Levy [11] argue that marketing goes beyond sales of mass consumer products, since activities such as product improvement, pricing, distribution and communication should not only be used in commercial companies, but also in commercial companies. of a non-commercial nature, such as: foundations, churches, public and educational entities, among others. These institutions also need to communicate the services and benefits they offer to their clients.

For this reason, educational marketing plays a fundamental role in the service of education; Institutions of this type should not only focus on implementing strategies to increase the flow of student income, they should also be concerned with creating and implementing strategies for student permanence.

Educational institutions meet the four characteristics of a service and evolve according to customer needs [12]. In education, the service begins from the moment the person requests information through any of the service channels. Therefore, the important thing is to make a good impression from the first time and make the customer live a unique experience that allows them to find the difference with other existing offers.

Quintanilla, Berenguer and Gómez [13] allege that companies no longer only focus on achieving sales figures but on developing marketing strategies focused on attitudes and perceptions that consumers have for decision-making.

In the educational sector, with an emphasis on higher education, the institutions are aware of the demand that exists annually by people who wish to access universities or institutes; This need is identified, and for the recruitment of new students, different marketing activities are developed that allow attracting those who are analyzing and comparing between the different options to decide on the one that offers the greatest benefits.

To get applicants for the higher education service to choose a certain institution, it requires a lot of resources and human effort, but the most complicated thing is to manage to keep that student so that he / she fulfils all his academic process in a satisfied way; It is here where the competitive advantage must go beyond the benefits that are offered, the quality of the service must be added, both academic and non-academic, which allows to generate confidence in the students.

SERVQUAL Model

Two models are known that can be used to measure the quality of service. The first is the SERVPERF model, which only works under the results of perceptions, and the second, the SERVQUAL model, which allows expectations to be compared with perceptions.

The SERVQUAL model is one of the main tools for measuring service quality. According to López, De la Torre, Herreros and Cabo [14], this model attempts to answer three essential questions: When is a service perceived as being of quality? What dimensions make up quality? And, What questions should make up the quality questionnaire? Fernández and Bajac [15] mention that the model was illustrated so that consumers' perceptions of quality are influenced by five gaps that occur in organizations as described below.

The first gap is related to the expectations of the clients and the perceptions of the company is based on the fact that the managers or administrators of the organizations do not always recognize which of the clients' needs they want to satisfy. This prevents the generation of actions that make it possible to meet expectations about the service offered.

The second is defined from the managers' perceptions and the quality specifications of the service offered. Even if the administration is clear about the expectations of the clients, it would be of no use, since it does not know the quality standards or norms that allow it to increase the level of quality.

For its part, the third of the gaps that includes quality specifications and service delivery emphasizes ensuring that the service provided complies with all quality specifications and standards.

The penultimate gap is identified with the delivery of the service and what is communicated about it to customers. In this sense, advertising allows to create expectations among consumers, but it will depend on the organization if it can really deliver what it is communicating.

The fifth gap marks the difference between the expectation of the service and the quality perceived by the customer. This gap is considered for the measurement of quality, because consumer perceptions will depend on the causes that generate the four previous gaps.

The quality assessment questionnaire is made up of five dimensions, which are: reliability, responsiveness, security, empathy and tangibility [16]. "Reliability" refers to providing the service carefully and reliably. For its part, "response capacity" is the willingness of staff to help or quickly solve customer requirements. The "security" consists of the trust generated by the service received. "Empathy" focuses on identifying alternatives to provide personalized attention. Lastly, "tangibility" relates to the appearance and functionality of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and materials and communication channels.

The SERVQUAL model is made up of two questionnaires with 22 items each, and they are assessed using the Likert scale. The first questionnaire is focused on knowing what the clients' expectations are about the service and the second questionnaire focuses on the perceptions of the quality of the service received [17].

2. Materials And Methods

The present work was carried out with a quantitative, descriptive approach. The results obtained in the research will allow defining the existing gaps in relation to the expectations and perception of the service (Malhotra, 2008) that students receive during the second academic period that began in September 2019 and that lasted until February 2020, just before the beginning of the scourge of the pandemic caused by the COVID 19 virus.

The SERVQUAL model was used, specifically in the analysis of gap 5 (expectations versus perception) where statistical indicators were obtained for each question and dimension, in turn comparisons were made between the measurements.

The scope of the research is descriptive, since this type of analysis is based on the description of the characteristics of the population under analysis with respect to the variables under study [18]. Its design is non-experimental of a transectional type, since it analyzes the phenomenon in its natural context and the information is collected in a single moment [18]

The unit of analysis is made up of the ITB, the target population is integrated of active students from the careers of Nursing, Administration, Accounting, Software Development, Land Transport, Trichology and Cosmiatrics, Older Adults and Podiatry.

Sample

The type of sampling used is the probabilistic stratified by type of career and to obtain the sample size the following parameters were considered:

Chart 1. Sample parameters

Sep. 2019 – feb. 2020	
N	9792
Z:	95%
E:	5%
P:	50%
Q:	50%
n:	370

N: active ITB students in the established period

Z: % of confidence, which is equal to 1.96 of the quantiles of a normal distribution

E: % of the sampling error

P: % of probability of the event occurring

Q: % of probability that the event will NOT occur (1-P)

n: Sample size

It is necessary to emphasize that, for the calculation of the sample size, a finite population was considered based on proportional sampling [19].

$$n = \frac{Z^2 P Q N}{E^2 (N - 1) Z^2 P Q}$$

For the distribution of the samples, the stratified sample by type of career was used, in function of the representativeness of the number of students for each career within the total enrolled in the study period as shown in chart 2.

Chart 2. Distribution of the sample by type of career and year.

Careers	september 2019 – february 2020
Nursing	157
Administration	102
Accounting	54
Software development	27
Land Transport	15
Trichology and Cosmiatrics	6
Elderly care	5
Podiatry	4
	370

Physical surveys were applied in the classrooms of the different campuses of the unit of analysis. The aforementioned data were tabulated and analyzed using the SPSS program, version 22.

Chart 3 shows the SERVQUAL model questions classified according to their dimension.

Chart 3. Questions of the SERVQUAL model classified according to the corresponding dimension

Dimension	Question
P1	Tangibility Premises and facilities in good condition
P2	Tangibility State-of-the-art classrooms and laboratories
P3	Tangibility Properly uniformed and impeccable staff
P4	Tangibility Enough attractive and explicit advertising
P5	Reliability The staff shows interest in solving requirements

P6	Reliability	The staff undertakes to comply in the shortest time and does so
P7	Reliability	The staff offers good service at all times
P8	Reliability	The staff complies with the service in the established time
P9	Reliability	There are documents and student files in order and without failures
P10	Response Capacity	The solution / response time of the request is reported
P11	Response Capacity	Service is provided promptly
P12	Response Capacity	The staff is always ready to help
P13	Response Capacity	Staff always available to help with requirements
P14	Security	The staff transmit confidence
P15	Security	One feels secure when carrying out a procedure
P16	Security	Staff is friendly
P17	Security	Trained personnel to give reliable answers to requirements
P18	Empathy	The staff gives you personalized attention.
P19	Empathy	Adequate staff to offer personalized attention.
P20	Empathy	Customer service hours are appropriate.
P21	Empathy	The staff cares about offering well-being.
P22	Empathy	The staff understands the requirements.

The items that make up the SERVQUAL model questionnaire were measured on a Likert scale where the respondent had to indicate his agreement or disagreement with the statement presented to him. For this, an orderly and one-dimensional scale from 1 to 7 is used. In the case of the expectations questionnaire, it is assumed that a score of 7 corresponds to "very important" and 1 to "not important". For the questionnaire on perceptions, the score of 7 represents "that the evaluation is always fulfilled" and 1 that "it is never fulfilled".

3. Results and Discussion

To measure the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient or internal consistency index was used, which is an indicator that assumes values between 0 and 1. Below 0.7 it is considered that the instrument is not reliable. Cronbach's Alpha values between 0.7 and 1 indicate that the construct is reliable. Chart 3 presents the results obtained in both measurements.

Chart 4. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both questionnaires.

Total sample (n= 370)		
Expectative	Cronbach's Alpha	0.939
Perceptions	Cronbach's Alpha	0.944

Cronbach's Alpha Perceptions 0.944, From Chart 4 it can be concluded that the instrument used is reliable since, for the total sample, in both questionnaires, the coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha is close to 1.

Chart 5 shows the mean of the responses to each question of the expectations questionnaire and the one that mediates the perceptions and a contrast is made between them to determine the gaps in relation to what is expected and what is perceived about the services by the users. Students enrolled in the period September 2019 to February 2020 at the ITB.

Dimension	Average of measurements sept. 2019 – feb. 2021			Gap	Average of	Change in expectation
	Expectative	Perception	Expectative			
P1	Tangibility	6,42	5,53	-0,90	5,81	0,61
P2	Tangibility	6,41	5,7	-0,71	5,96	0,45
P3	Tangibility	5,82	5,61	-0,21	5,81	0,01
P4	Tangibility	6,01	5,83	-0,18	5,57	0,44
P5	Reliability	6,32	5,76	-0,56	5,96	0,36
P6	Reliability	6,34	5,82	-0,52	5,81	0,53
P7	Reliability	6,56	6,06	-0,50	6,15	0,41
P8	Reliability	6,45	5,91	-0,53	6,13	0,32
P9	Reliability	6,45	6,16	-0,28	6,18	0,27

P10	Response Capacity	6,51	5,86	-0,65	6,03	0,48
P11	Response Capacity	6,49	5,82	-0,67	6,14	0,35
P12	Response Capacity	6,53	6,04	-0,49	6,05	0,48
P13	Response Capacity	6,50	5,79	-0,70	5,96	0,54
P14	Security	6,48	5,99	-0,49	6,16	0,32
P15	Security	6,65	6,03	-0,62	6,26	0,39
P16	Security	6,51	5,82	-0,69	6,16	0,35
P17	Security	6,56	5,95	-0,61	6,15	0,41
P18	Empathy	6,34	5,91	-0,43	6,03	0,31
P19	Empathy	6,41	5,79	-0,62	6,03	0,38
P20	Empathy	6,6	5,96	-0,64	6,23	0,37
P21	Empathy	6,53	5,88	-0,65	6,15	0,38
P22	Empathy	6,63	5,86	-0,77	5,96	0,67

In the penultimate column of Chart 5, the values of the expectations that the students had in a similar study dedicated exclusively to identifying the expectation about the support service for the training processes carried out at the ITB in 2017 have been placed. The last column of this same table shows the way in which what was expected by students enrolled in the first period of 2017 and those enrolled two years later (late 2019 and early 2020) moved in two years.

The results show that the mean of the expectations is higher than the mean of the perception according to the response given to the questionnaires by the students enrolled in the second academic period of 2019. This indicates that there are dissatisfactions in each of the observed dimensions latent or what is the same, that the level of satisfaction with the different services does not reach the expectations of the clients (students). The items that present the greatest gap are: facilities (P1), the perception that the staff does not understand the requirements that are made (P22), classrooms and equipment with state-of-the-art technology (P2), and the availability of staff in quantity necessary to expedite the procedures (P13).

Chart 5 also shows that an analysis of the expectations declared by the students in 2017 and 2019 show that those related to the "tangibility" dimension relative to physical facilities in good condition grew more (P1), the one related to the dimension of "reliability" corresponding to the fact that the staff agrees to comply in the shortest time and does so (P6), the one related to the dimension of "response capacity" which refers to the availability of the staff to help with the requirements (P13) and the one corresponding to the dimension "empathy" in relation to the understanding of the personnel about the nature and type of requirements (P22). The foregoing leads to the need for a further analysis of the results obtained for each of the dimensions to be deepened, especially since the SERVQUAL model is based on these aspects.

From this it can be inferred that a probable cause that these items also coincide, for the most part, with those that present greater gaps between what is expected and what is perceived by students at the beginning of 2020 is the significant increase in the expectation of services declared by students in this period in relation to the study carried out by the ITB quality department at the beginning of 2017.

4. Conclusion

In the 2019 study, perceptions are lower than expectations, therefore, the ITB should focus on deepening the subject to implement improvements that can modify the perception of students in relation to the teaching support services they generally receive.

The general average of expectations in students enrolled in the first period of 2017 amounted to 6.03 and that of those enrolled in the second period of 2019 amounted to 6.43. This means that the expectations of students enrolled in the second semester of 2019 increased, on average, almost 7% compared to what students enrolled in early 2017 had on the same services, which is probably supported by the change in cohorts and in the influence of the different evaluation processes for accreditation purposes that have taken off in the country in recent years.

The general index of expectations for the year 2019 is 6.43 and the perception index is 5.86, which generates an average gap of -0.57 between the two, which together with the fact that for the 22 items the gaps Individuals are negative, this is an indicator of the existence of problems in the level of complementary service to the training that the ITB offers to students.

The Instituto Superior Universitario Bolivariano de Tecnología should focus on reducing the gaps and monitoring each of the items and dimensions analyzed in this study. It is recommended to accelerate the identification of the inputs and outputs to all the processes that occur in the institution to determine the control and management indicators and to be able to define the level of service that is given in each of them. The present study was carried out with a general approach and not related to the processes defined within the institutional management model, therefore it is recommended to carry out a broader study that includes all the processes.

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