SERVQUAL AS A TOOL FOR MEASURING AND ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICE QUALITY

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Abstract. *This study assesses the quality of services in Uzbekistan's higher education sector using the SERVQUAL framework, which evaluates five key dimensions: Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness. Data were gathered through a cross-sectional survey of university students using a structured questionnaire. The results indicate that factors such as class punctuality (Reliability), staff professionalism (Tangibles), and efficient financial transactions (Assurance) significantly influence perceived service quality. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed the validity of the SERVQUAL dimensions, with high internal consistency scores across all variables. The findings underscore the need for educational institutions to address gaps in service delivery, such as accessibility to teaching materials and prompt non-academic services, to improve student satisfaction and align with modern educational expectations.*

Introduction

Service quality is crucial for the success of both businesses and institutions, offering benefits like increased loyalty, user attraction, growth, cost reduction, and improved reputation (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In higher education, it plays a key role in enhancing student satisfaction by focusing on factors such as responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). Elements like instructional quality, faculty interaction, administrative support, and campus facilities are vital for improving the student experience, aligning services with their needs, and ensuring long-term institutional success (Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023; Utkirov, 2024b). Uzbekistan's government has been strategically aligning its national policies with international standards to enhance the quality of its higher education. In recent years, the **Presidential Decree "Concept of Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030," issued on October 8, 2019**, has emerged as a cornerstone of this initiative. The decree mandates that a minimum of ten Uzbek universities must achieve global rankings by 2030 (Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). This vision underscores the country's aspiration to elevate its higher education system to international levels by improving institutional infrastructure, academic standards, and research output.

The concept further emphasizes the integration of innovative practices and government-backed reforms to support universities in meeting these ambitious goals. This includes providing financial incentives, encouraging international collaborations, and developing faculty competencies. As a result, many universities in Uzbekistan are actively striving to gain international accreditation and establish themselves in the global educational ecosystem (Education, 2019; Eureporter, 2021; Uralov, 2020).

Recent investments in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), further support these efforts. Based on Fiscal Institute under the state tax office of the Republic of Uzbekistan as highlighted in **Figure 1**, significant resources are allocated

to education, healthcare, and infrastructure, reflecting Uzbekistan's commitment to human capital development. These priorities align with the strategic vision of the higher education reform, as a globally competitive education system is seen as a critical driver for national development (Kun, 2023).

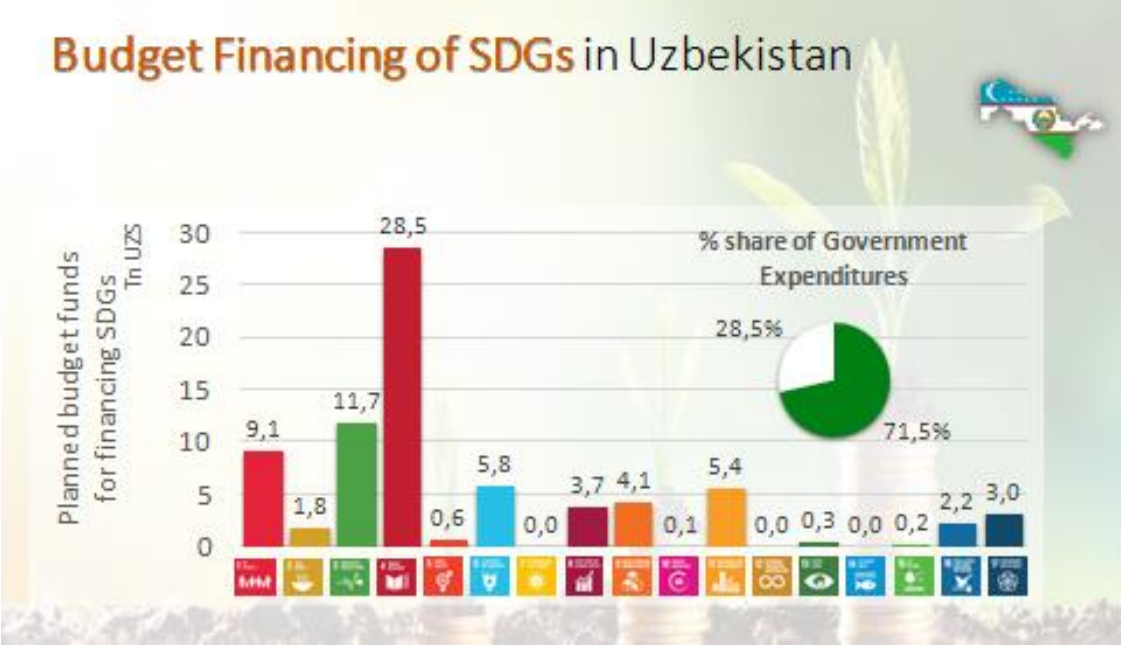

Figure 1: Institute for Fiscal Studies: Kun (2023)

Recent data on Uzbekistan's **Budget Financing of SDGs** (Figure 1) further illustrates the country's commitment to addressing socio-economic challenges and advancing development priorities. The government has strategically allocated funds across several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with notable emphasis on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). These sectors receive the largest share of funding, reflecting their pivotal role in human capital development and economic transformation.

Reasons for Budget Prioritization:

1. **Focus on Human Capital Development**: The significant allocation for SDG 3 and SDG 4 underscores the government's recognition of education and healthcare as critical enablers of sustainable growth. These investments are aimed at improving productivity, reducing inequalities, and fostering societal well-being.
2. **Economic Transformation**: Uzbekistan's focus on infrastructure (SDG 9) signals its intent to modernize its economy, attract foreign investments, and boost industrialization.
3. **Global Commitments**: The resource allocation reflects Uzbekistan's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing its active role in global development initiatives.
4. **Addressing Social Inequities**: By prioritizing goals such as No Poverty (SDG 1) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), the government aims to address disparities across regions, ensuring inclusive growth.

This alignment of national priorities with SDG goals provides a contextual framework for understanding the broader developmental reforms in Uzbekistan, including those in higher

education. Just as the government strategically invests in SDG-focused initiatives, higher education institutions must also adapt to meet the evolving needs of students and society.

Thomas & Galambos (2004) highlight that student satisfaction with educational institutions can significantly influence their beliefs and future intentions. This satisfaction serves as a crucial indicator of how well universities meet the diverse needs of their students, reflecting the overall quality, success, and sustainability of these institutions (Alnawas, 2015). As the nature of education has shifted from a non-commercial activity to a service-oriented model, it has become essential to consider service quality dimensions—such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles—in shaping student experiences.

The integration of national priorities, as highlighted in the chart on SDG financing, with institutional reforms in higher education underscores Uzbekistan's holistic approach to sustainable development. This study therefore aims to assess the effectiveness of service quality measures within universities in Uzbekistan and their alignment with broader socio-economic objectives, using the SERVQUAL model as a foundational framework.

Methodology

The study employed a structured SERVQUAL-based questionnaire to collect data from university students. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and EFA were used to analyze the data and validate the dimensions of service quality. The questionnaire covered 23 items across the five SERVQUAL dimensions, evaluating aspects such as punctuality, staff professionalism, and responsiveness to student inquiries.

Findings

Analysis revealed significant insights into service quality perceptions:

1. **Reliability**: Students rated class punctuality and consistent grading criteria highly, though administrative hours and extracurricular activity updates needed improvement.
2. **Tangibles**: Staff professionalism and modern facilities were well-rated, but access to teaching materials remained a concern.
3. **Assurance**: Financial transaction efficiency was strong, while staff sufficiency required attention.
4. **Empathy**: Staff politeness and professionalism were appreciated, but understanding student needs showed variability.
5. **Responsiveness**: Registration communication was effective, but non-academic services lacked promptness.

Reliability analysis confirmed high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha values exceeding 0.84 across all dimensions. EFA validated the constructs, with all factor loadings above 0.5, supporting the robustness of the SERVQUAL model in the educational context.

Discussion

The findings highlight critical areas for improvement. Universities must address gaps in resource accessibility and responsiveness to enhance overall service quality. Aligning services with student expectations is essential for fostering satisfaction and loyalty. The SERVQUAL model provides a structured approach to identifying and addressing service delivery issues.

The study also underscores the evolving role of educational institutions in a competitive market. As students increasingly view education as a service, universities must prioritize quality improvement initiatives to remain relevant. Recommendations include investing in modern

teaching resources, training staff for better student interaction, and streamlining administrative processes.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the applicability of the SERVQUAL framework in assessing service quality in Uzbekistan's higher education sector. By focusing on the five dimensions, institutions can identify and address critical gaps, enhancing student satisfaction and institutional performance. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and administrators aiming to align educational services with modern expectations.

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