

The Impact of Service Quality on Students' Satisfaction in Higher Education: An Empirical Investigation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to investigate students' satisfaction with higher education service quality and examine its relationship with overall student satisfaction. Ensuring high-quality education enhances the sustainability and growth of the institution. The sustainability of higher education institutions largely depends on their ability to meet or exceed students' expectations of the service provided by the institution. The findings of the study are based on primary data collected from 300 students via a standardized questionnaire. The study found that overall service quality has a statistically significant impact on student satisfaction. Among the service quality factors evaluated, reliability and empathy have the strongest positive impact on student satisfaction. Further indicate that high levels of satisfaction with assignments and exams, evaluation methods, and lecturers' knowledge and expertise. However, satisfaction levels are quite low in areas such as comprehending students' particular issues, the availability of career guidance services, and administrative assistance. Therefore, the study suggests that student support systems should be strengthened by enhancing career advising and counseling services, increasing administrative responsiveness, and cultivating a more student-centered institutional culture. Furthermore, increased investment in physical and technological infrastructure would improve the tangible aspect of service quality. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of using a comprehensive and integrated approach to service quality management in higher education institutions to improve student satisfaction while also encouraging long-term institutional sustainability and growth.

Keywords: Education, Higher education, Service quality, Student satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered one of the most vital tools in a person's life because it shapes personal development through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes, and values. Higher education serves as a platform for advanced learning, skill development, research, and innovation, thereby helping to create a skilled workforce. One of the main goals of higher education is to develop human capital by providing individuals with specialized knowledge and professional skills. Among different levels of education, higher education significantly enhances individuals' financial stability, career advancement chances, creativity, innovation, and overall quality of life, while also promoting employability and professional mobility. Higher education enhances individuals' career prospects and marketability, contributes to personal fulfillment, and plays a vital role in individual economic development. Besides economic benefits, higher education fosters critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility, which help develop a nation. Barnett (1992) identified the key purposes of higher education as producing qualified human resources, preparing individuals for research careers, creating effective teaching and learning environments, and expanding life opportunities. Similarly, the LIS Education Network Report (2022) emphasized that higher education serves as the backbone of any society, as it determines the quality of a country's human capital. In recent years, higher education has undergone a significant transformation due to globalization, technological advancement, increasing student enrolment, international student mobility, research dynamism, and diversification of academic programs. In Sri Lanka, this transformation has been further intensified by increasing of government, private, and foreign degree-offering higher educational institutions. As a result, higher education institutions are increasingly required to focus on service quality, student satisfaction, and stakeholder engagement to ensure long-term survival. Consequently, ensuring high-quality educational services has become a critical concern for higher education institutions.

Student satisfaction has emerged as a vital indicator of institutional performance, quality assurance, and long-term sustainability. The sustainability of higher education institutions largely depends on their ability to meet or exceed students' expectations regarding academic and non-academic services. Pheunpha (2020) argued that identifying and understanding the factors influencing student satisfaction can significantly enhance an institution's competitive advantage within the education market. Service quality, encompassing teaching quality, academic support, facilities, administrative services, and learning resources, plays a pivotal role in student satisfaction. De Silva (2023) stated that service quality in education can be evaluated by comparing the actual service performance delivered by institutions with students' expectations. Further, the scholar mentioned that in order to ensure institutional progress and long-term sustainability, it is essential to give priority to the quality of educational services, as high service quality contributes significantly to the development of a strong and positive institutional brand image. SERVQUAL is one of the most widely adopted and well-established models used to measure service quality across various service sectors, including higher education. Consequently, students have become increasingly conscious of the quality of educational services when selecting higher education institutions, as these services have a substantial influence on their future personal and professional development.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of service quality on students' satisfaction in higher education. In line with this purpose, the specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine students' satisfaction level with the service quality of higher education
- To analyse the relationship between service quality dimensions and students' satisfaction
- To recommend suitable strategies for enhancing educational service quality based on the study findings.

Research Problem

Over the last few decades, education has undergone major changes in terms of teaching and learning methods, delivery modes, integration of digital tools, quality standards, and educational outcomes, while the core purpose of education remains unchanged. Advances in technology, globalization, and labor market demands have reshaped higher education, requiring institutions to focus not only on knowledge transmission but also on skill development, employability, and lifelong learning. Considering the Sri Lankan context, the government has allocated Rs. 619 billion for education in 2025, with general education receiving the most at Rs. 456.6 billion, followed by university education by Rs. 135.3 billion and vocational education by Rs. 15.4 billion (Feminist economists report, 2025). At the same time, the higher education sector has evolved into an increasingly competitive market due to the rapid growth of higher education institutions. Currently, there are approximately 65 registered higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka. As the number of institutions increases, students have become more informed and selective in their choices, and institutions are compelled to continuously enhance the overall educational service quality in order to remain competitive and sustainable in the education market. Therefore, it has been observed that increase in competition among higher educational institutions, driven by the growing number of institutions, changing student expectations, and the expanding demand for quality, employability-focused education. Despite the rapid expansion and increased competition within the higher education sector, many institutions continue to face challenges in delivering service quality that meets students' expectations. Academic service-related aspects, such as academic support, learning facilities, staff responsiveness, administrative services, and institutional reliability, play a crucial role in shaping students' educational satisfaction. With increasing competition among higher education institutions in Sri Lanka and rising student expectations, ensuring high service quality has become a strategic necessity. However, many institutions lack a clear understanding of which aspects of service quality most significantly influence students' satisfaction. The absence of empirical evidence on students' perceptions of service quality and its impact on satisfaction may hinder institutions from designing effective strategies to improve educational services, retain students, and remain competitive.

The Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE) is a prominent public higher education institution, operating 11 Advanced Technological Institutes (ATIs) across all provinces, along with seven ATI sections. The institution regularly revises its curricula to emphasize Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and Student-Centered Learning (SCL) approaches, aiming to enhance graduate employability and align academic

programs with industry requirements. Despite these initiatives, there has been a noticeable increase in student dropouts during the first and second years of study, particularly in management-related courses at ATI-Dehiwala. This could be due to several aspects, such as inappropriate program selection method, selection in state universities, unsatisfactory teaching and learning experiences, inadequate facilities, and limited engagement in professional career development activities. Supporting this view, Liyanage (2014) identified poor service quality, curriculum and labor market mismatches, insufficiently trained instructors, and ineffective administrative systems as major challenges facing the Sri Lankan education system. These issues raise critical concerns regarding the overall service quality delivered by higher education institutions. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence that clearly explains how different dimensions of service quality influence students' overall satisfaction in higher education, particularly within SLIATE - ATI Dehiwala contexts. The lack of sufficient empirical evidence limits institutions' ability to accurately identify and prioritize areas requiring service quality improvements. Therefore, this study seeks to empirically investigate the impact of service quality on students' satisfaction in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction is the positive feeling of pleasure that a person experiences when he or she receives what he or she expected from a product or service. Oliver (1999) defined satisfaction as the perception of the pleasurable fulfillment of service. According to Zeithaml (1988), satisfaction is the subsequent outcome of an institution's administrative as well as the educational system's coherent performance. Extending this view, Butt and Rehman (2010) highlight that providing quality education and a constructive learning environment are key factors of students' satisfaction. Further, studies confirm that student satisfaction is influenced by teaching quality, institutional support services, learning resources, and campus environment (Ali et al., 2021; Chandra et al., 2020). Grounded in Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), higher education institutions are expected to create value for a wide range of stakeholders, including students, academic staff, administrative personnel, management, parents, funding agencies, government non-government organizations, society, and the country. Institutions that effectively adopt stakeholder-oriented principles tend to perform better in terms of financial sustainability, social responsibility, and long-term institutional stability (Harrison et al., 2020). In general, students are more satisfied with their learning if the institution provides a healthy learning environment, such as proper infrastructure, updated facilities, a proper administrative system, qualified instructors, engagement in activities, and active involvement in research. Danish et al. (2010) identified that the most important components of student satisfaction are skilled and experienced faculty, teaching methodology, course content, and instructors' friendly attitudes. Moreover, the integration of digital in learning emphasized the importance of technological readiness and service quality in shaping student satisfaction in contemporary higher education institutions (Al-Samarraie et al., 2021). Therefore, one of the most important elements of both student satisfaction and the efficient running of higher education institutions is the quality of education. Nguyen et al. (2022) stated that students demand well-qualified and experienced instructors to guide their academic and professional development. Furthermore, authors mentioned that facilities like classroom setups, digital labs, libraries, parking facilities, playgrounds, clubs, and gymnasiums contribute to the institution's image of quality. Butt & Rehman (2010) suggest that students' satisfaction is considerably sensitive to instructors' expertise, bringing a 39% change in satisfaction. These results highlight the critical role of academic quality in shaping students' satisfaction in higher education. Additionally, their findings reveal that course offerings contribute about 21% to students' satisfaction, while the learning environment accounts for nearly 25% of the overall impact. Haseena and Mohammed (2015) argue that service quality in education is a concept that can be experienced by stakeholders but is difficult to define precisely. Further, scholars revealed that examination results, students' employment after graduation, facilities available, extra-curricular activities, and the reputation of the institution based on external reports are some of the quality parameters to measure the performance of institutions. Pathmini et al. (2014) found that service reliability, curriculum content, and empathy are the most influential and statistically significant determinants of students' satisfaction in higher education. Their study further concluded that the overall level of perceived service quality and students' satisfaction was moderate. Based on these findings, the authors emphasized the need to strengthen curriculum design by incorporating enhanced information technology competencies, analytical skills, and teamwork abilities in order to better support students' career development and employability. SERVQUAL model is the most widely used and acceptable model to measure the service quality. The purpose of the SERVQUAL model of service quality

developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988) is to measure the quality of service experienced by customers. Originally, the model was developed using 10 dimensions, which were reduced to 5 dimensions as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy in their subsequent paper (1988). The model has been applied in many sectors such as hotel, retail, banking and the education sector etc. Allam (2018) mentioned that teaching and learning experience, institutional factors, curriculum content, outcome and assessment, and resources are the main components of the quality of education. The researcher added that students’ outcomes and grades depend on the teaching style of the faculty and the materials. De Silva (2022) identified instructor effectiveness as the most critical determinant of student satisfaction in higher education. The study further highlighted that the development of students’ knowledge and skills significantly enhances their overall satisfaction, emphasizing the central role of effective teaching in achieving positive educational outcomes. Bucarey et al. (2021) also found that instructor quality has a positive effect on students’ satisfaction. A similar finding by Danish et al. (2010) mentioned that the quality of teaching and learning environment of the institution greatly influences the students’ satisfaction. Razinkina et al. (2018) revealed that the systemic development of facilities and equipment are significant components of the educational process, which enhance the service quality of education. Authors also indicate that extracurricular activity is a significant indicator of students’ satisfaction. Ongo (2019) found that reliability, empathy, and tangibility are the most influential service quality dimensions affecting students’ overall satisfaction in higher education institutions. The study further revealed that students who are satisfied with the services provided by their institutions are more likely to continue their studies at the same institution and to recommend the institution to others.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a positivist research philosophy, emphasizing objective measurements, observable facts, and statistical analysis to provide reliable and generalizable results. Positivism emphasizes the use of scientific methodology, quantification, and statistical analysis to evaluate correlations among variables and to develop generalizable results. This philosophy is appropriate for this study because it examines relationships between variables using empirical data. The study adopts a deductive approach, which aligns with the positivist paradigm. The deductive method starts with already established theories and literature, from which specific hypotheses are formed. According to Crowther and Lancaster (2008), deduction is often used in positivist studies because it allows researchers to analyze causal relationships and test theoretical assumptions using statistical evidence. Accordingly, based on the literature, this study develops hypotheses and tests them using quantitative data analysis techniques. The study used a quantitative design, which involves quantitatively measuring variables and statistically assessing their relationships. The main data gathering instrument for the study was a structured questionnaire to ensure reliability, objectivity, and consistency. Furthermore, the study employs a cross-sectional time horizon, with data gathered at a single point in time from a selected sample of the target population. This method is appropriate since the study investigates the current state, perceptions, and relationships among variables.

Conceptual framework of the study

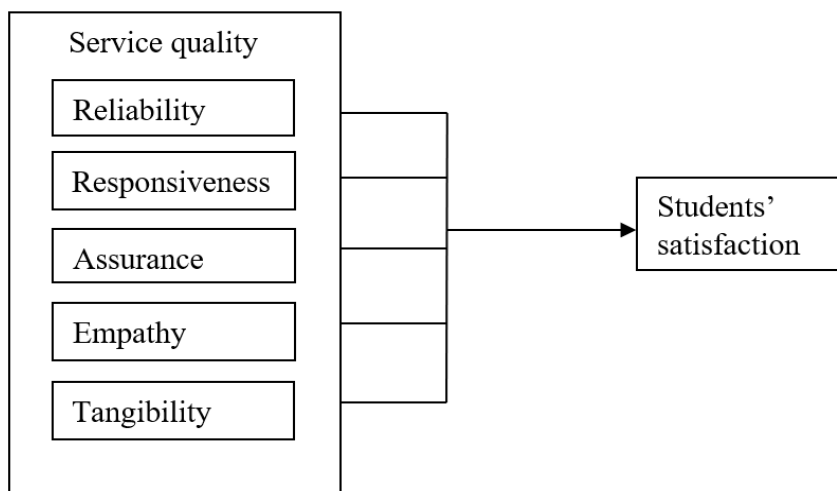


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Hypothesis

- H₁: Reliability positively influences students' satisfaction in higher education.
- H₂: Responsiveness has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.
- H₃: Assurance has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.
- H₄: Empathy has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.
- H₅: Tangibility has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.

Population and Sampling of the Study

The population of a study refers to the complete set of individuals, events, or elements that are the focus of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It serves as the source from which data are drawn and about which the researcher wishes to generalize the findings. In this study, the population comprises all 1st year, 2nd year and 3rd year students pursuing the Higher National Diploma (HND) programs in Management, Business Administration, and Business Finance at ATI-Dehiwala. The population of the study is 661, which includes 278 from management, 147 from business finance, and 136 from business administration. Sampling design refers to the plan that guides the selection of a sample from a target population for a research study. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2020), sampling design is a specific plan established before the collection of data for obtaining a sample from a specified population. The study sampling frame is the students who are currently following HND in these 3 courses. A proportionate stratified random sampling method was applied for this study. To determine an appropriate and statistically acceptable sample size, the Morgan table was used. Accordingly, Morgan's table indicates that a sample size of 248 is appropriate for a population of 661. However, in order to improve the study's reliability and accuracy, the researcher considered 300 as the sample size.

Data collection

The accuracy and credibility of any research highly depend on the quality of the data obtained and the suitability of the method employed to acquire data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection methods differ depending on the field of study, the type of research, and the amount of data required. Data can be obtained as both primary and secondary data. In this study, findings are generalized based on the primary data. Primary data were gathered from students by distributing questionnaires from the chosen courses. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: the first measures the respondents' demographic factors, the second measures the service quality of higher education, the third measures students' satisfaction with the quality of education, and the fourth section is an open-ended question in which students share their suggestions and thoughts on how to improve the quality of education. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess student satisfaction as well as the quality of higher education services. Each dimension of service quality in education was measured using at least three items each.

Data analysis tools

In quantitative research, statistical techniques such as descriptive and inferential analysis are used to test hypotheses and investigate correlations between variables (Bryman, 2016). The data acquired for this study were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Data are presented in the form of text and tables. The demographic factors of respondents and basic characteristics of the independent and dependent variables are presented using descriptive statistics. The mean score was used to confirm the satisfaction of students with the quality of education by indicating a higher mean score as satisfaction and a lower mean score as dissatisfaction. In inferential statistics, correlation analysis is applied to measure the strength of the linear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. Multiple regression was applied to test the developed hypotheses and determine the impact of the independent variable's dimensions on the dependent variable.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Factors

In this study, the sample represents 32 percent males and 68 percent females. The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents (67%) are between the ages of 21 and 23. The finding also shows that most of the respondents (52%) are from the 2nd year batch, 35 % from the 1st year batch, and only 13 % from the 3rd year batch.

Table 1: Levels of student satisfaction with the service quality

Factors	Level of satisfaction
Knowledge and expertise of lecturers	3.65
Delivering services on time	2.84
Prompt responses and willingness to help students	3.56
Understanding student challenges and problems	2.43
Assignment and examination	4.85
Evaluation methods	4.73
Knowledge and skills development	3.86
Career guidance	2.67
Administrative support	2.53
Available resources and provided facilities	3.28
Trustworthiness of the institution	3.63

Table 1 presents the mean scores of students' satisfaction with different factors of service quality. Overall, the results revealed that students demonstrate varying levels of satisfaction across different service quality factors, with some areas performing well and other factors needing improvement. Students reported the highest level of satisfaction with assignment and examination procedures (4.85) and evaluation methods (4.73). This suggests that students strongly agree that the assessment system is fair, well-structured, and effectively measures their knowledge. A moderate level of satisfaction was observed regarding knowledge and skills development (3.86), knowledge and expertise of lecturers (3.65), trustworthiness of the institution (3.63), prompt responses and willingness of staff to help students (3.56), and available resources and facilities (3.28). This indicates that while students are generally satisfied with these factors, there is still room for improvement. In addition, students expressed a lower level of satisfaction with several support-related services. These include understanding student challenges and problems (2.43), administrative support (2.53), career guidance services (2.67), and delivering services on time (2.84). This suggests that students' satisfaction is low in institutional support systems and responsiveness.

Table 2: Item-Total Statistics

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
SS	16.35	5.438	.315	.731
RL	16.20	4.709	.364	.634
RP	15.33	5.318	.338	.828
AS	16.37	5.771	.300	.699
EM	15.98	6.123	.416	.751
TG	16.68	6.306	.302	.742

Table 2 presents the Item-Total Statistics examining the contribution to overall reliability. Based on the table, the corrected item-total correlation values vary from 0.300 to 0.416, which suggests that all items have a satisfactory level of correlation with the overall scale. Values above 0.30 suggest that the items are sufficiently related to the construct being measured. Accordingly, empathy (EM) value 4.16 shows the strongest correlation with the total score, followed by reliability (RL) value .364, and responsiveness (RP) value .338. Assurance (AS) value 0.300 and tangibility (TG) value 0.302 demonstrate comparatively weaker but still acceptable relationships with the overall scale. Based on the table, Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted" values ranged from 0.634 to 0.828, indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.801 ^a	.642	.585	1.130	1.838

a. Predictors: (Constant), TG, RL, AS, RP, EM

b. Dependent Variable: SS

Table 3 represents the model summary. The model explains that there is a strong correlation between the dependent and independent variables, where the R value is .801. The finding of the table explains 64.2% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.642$), with an adjusted R^2 score of 0.585 indicating a strong model fit after adjusting for predictors. Furthermore, the Durbin-Watson value of 1.83 suggests that there is no autocorrelation, confirming the reliability of the regression model.

Table 4: ANOVA Table

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.424	5	.485	38.380	.006 ^b
	Residual	375.243	294	1.276		
	Total	377.667	299			

a. Dependent Variable: SS

b. Predictors: (Constant), TG, RL, AS, RP, EM

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is used to test the significance of the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable. The ANOVA table 4 shows that the independent variables collectively have a significant effect on the dependent variable, with a p-value of .006, which is less than the 0.05 significance level.

Table 5: Coefficients of Regression Analysis

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.849	.501		5.685	.000
	RL	.697	.055	.075	1.264	.007
	RP	.476	.062	.026	.446	.046
	AS	.239	.062	.116	.269	.025
	EM	.534	.095	.021	6.362	.032
	TG	.190	.088	.013	.215	.043

a. Dependent Variable: SS

To examine the significance and impact of the independent variables on students' satisfaction (SS), a multiple regression analysis was conducted. As shown in Coefficient Table 5, all independent variables, such as RL, RP, AS, EM, and TG, were statistically significant, with p-values less than 0.05. The unstandardized coefficients indicate the extent of change in students' satisfaction for a unit increase in each independent variable, while holding the other variables constant. Specifically, a unit increase in RL and EM corresponds to an increase of 0.697 and 0.534 in students' satisfaction, respectively. Similarly, a unit increase in RP, AS, and TG leads to increases of 0.476, 0.239, and 0.190 in students' satisfaction. These results demonstrate that each of the independent variables positively contributes to students' satisfaction, thereby supporting all the proposed hypotheses.

Table 6: Summary of Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis	Coefficient value	Relationship	Result
H ₁ : Reliability positively influences students' satisfaction in higher education.	.697	Strong effect	Supported
H ₂ : Responsiveness has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.	.476	Moderate effect	Supported
H ₃ : Assurance has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.	.239	Moderate effect	Supported
H ₄ : Empathy has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.	.534	Strong effect	Supported
H ₅ : Tangibility has a positive effect on students' satisfaction in higher education.	.190	Weak effect	Supported

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education is a lifelong journey of acquiring and sharing knowledge that shapes both individuals and societies. Individuals gain confidence and a sense of responsibility via education, allowing individuals to contribute valuable to their communities and countries. In this context, the main purpose of this study was to investigate students' satisfaction with the service quality provided in higher education. The findings of the study are based on primary data collected from 300 students who are currently following Higher National Diploma programmes in Management, Business Finance, and Business Administration at SLIATE, ATI - Dehiwala. ANOVA test shows that overall service quality has a statistically significant effect on student satisfaction. The study shows that service quality dimensions such as reliability and empathy have the greatest positive impact on student satisfaction, where a point increase leads to improved student satisfaction by 69% and 53% respectively. It also shows that responsiveness and assurance have a moderately strong effect on satisfaction, whereas tangibility has a relatively modest influence. Based on these findings, it is clear that greater emphasis should be placed on enhancing tangible elements and facilities, such as classroom equipment, a library, a laboratory, and internet access, and hygiene and sanitation standards within the institution. In addition, Descriptive analysis reveals that students are highly satisfied with assignments and exams, evaluation techniques, and instructors' knowledge and ability. However, students are less satisfied with their understanding of challenges and problems, the availability of career guidance, and administrative support. As a result, it is recommended that the institution strengthen student support systems by boosting career advising services, increasing administrative responsiveness, and encouraging staff to take a more student-centered approach. Furthermore, investing in physical and technological infrastructure will assist in improving the tangibility dimension of service quality, perhaps leading to improved overall student satisfaction.

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