

CHAPTER 8

Using the Experience of Students in Improving the Quality of Services at Universities

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Abstract: The article fits into the subject of quality management systems in Polish universities. The aim was to identify opportunities to use student experience to improve quality in these organizations. A critical review of the literature on the main trends and research methods and tools that are used to identify experiences in university practice was conducted. The analysis showed that it is possible to identify students' experiences in relation to various aspects of their functioning at the university, which may translate into a better understanding of their needs and expectations. The choice of methods and tools depends on what areas of the organization will be evaluated and what purposes the study is to serve.

Keywords: student experience, quality management systems, quality measurement, universities

8.1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, higher education institutions in Poland have been participating in the process of constant changes resulting from the need to improve the quality of education. Initiated in 1999 by Poland's signing of the Bologna Declaration, the professionalization of activities in the area of quality management at universities was to ensure that they meet educational standards, both within the European Higher Education Area and national legal requirements. As indicated by Brdulak (2016), activities of universities related to quality management often focus mainly on meeting the requirements of the legislator, i.e., only on ensuring the quality of education. From the point of view of management theory, the quality system at a university in dynamic terms should be open to make it possible to easily introduce improvement changes and to respond to the challenges of the external environment, including: requirements of employers, expectations and capabilities of students, and the

impact of competition from other higher education institutions (Barnett, 2010, as cited in Bugaj, 2016). To effectively implement these goals, quality systems in universities must be equipped with appropriate mechanisms that will ensure quick and accurate identification of problems, which will be the basis for developing improvement solutions. For this reason, one of the key areas of functioning of the discussed system is monitoring, measuring and improving the quality of services provided.

Universities, when building internal quality management systems, can use many solutions that have been successfully implemented in enterprises before. The quality management systems compliant with ISO 9001, TQM and *kaizen* (Tutko, 2022, p. 120) are among the most frequently used in practice by Polish universities, in which customers are the focus. It is therefore essential that organizations measure, analyse and improve processes to fully meet their needs and expectations. Today, this idea is still being developed. According to the concept of service dominance logic, the customer should not only be the entity evaluating the service but also co-create its value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Such an approach may be particularly important in the case of educational services provided to students. They are the key “customers” of universities for which they provide teaching and administrative services. On the other hand, students are participants in academic life who specially contribute to the value at the university, and their satisfaction largely depends on their experiences related to their interactions with the university. Therefore, designing or improving services at the university, without knowing how they are perceived by students and in which places in the process there are significant problems affecting their overall satisfaction with the service, may reduce the value created in the process. It is therefore necessary to search for methods and tools supporting this aspect of process identification and analysis.

The most common form of student satisfaction research in the practice of Polish universities is a survey related to the evaluation of didactic classes carried out in an electronic form. Only some Polish universities conduct wider satisfaction surveys (Hall, 2022, p. 137). In the literature, in addition to the above-mentioned ones, there are many other methods and techniques for examining the quality of services that are used in universities. Among the most popular are: the SERVQUAL method, the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) technique, the A-E technique with the student satisfaction survey tool used within it, and less frequently: the SERVPERF method, and Expectation-Perception Analysis (EPA) techniques (Hall, 2011). This type of research, such as the above-mentioned SERVQUAL method, usually focuses on the overall assessment of the service assessed by the customer in the context of various categories. This allows for an overall assessment of the quality of the services provided, often without the possibility of identifying specific moments or real causes of problems. In addition, they do not provide the possibility of obtaining complete information to understand the customer in the context of his individual experiences acquired during the interaction with the service provider.

In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in the topic of student experiences. Matus, Rusu and Cano (2021) indicate that this issue has received a lot of attention from

universities, especially in the last decade (2010s), but very little research has focused on holistic student experiences. The concept was often used in universities for promotional purposes to increase interest in the university. In addition, the authors point to the trend of using the term “student experience” as an indicator of quality and/or satisfaction. The literature on the subject in the field of experience marketing indicates a relationship between satisfaction with the service and the customer’s experience related to his interactions with the service provider. Therefore, to provide students with services that meet their needs and expectations, it is necessary to improve them in such a way as to shape positive student experiences. Therefore, the question arises whether there are methods and tools for measuring student experience that can be used in the process of improving services at universities. The article aims to analyse the possibilities of using methods and tools measuring students’ experience in improving quality in universities. To achieve this goal, a critical review of the literature related to the subject of student experiences in the context of methods and tools for their measurement was carried out. To identify methods and tools for measuring student experiences, a literature review was carried out, covering the bases: WoS and Google Scholar. The review was limited to scientific articles that in the title, abstract or keywords refer directly to the terms: Identifying or measuring student experiences at universities. The analysis focused on finding research confirming the use of methods and tools for identifying student experiences at universities.

8.2. The Concept and Essence of the Student’s Experience in the Context of Value Creation

The student experience is related to the term “customer experience” which is widely described in the literature. The first mention of this issue appeared in the 1950s when Abbot (in 1955) and Alderson (in 1957) argued that consumers do not really want products, but experiences that will satisfy them. In the following years, these views were developed by experimental theorists. According to their opinion, a broad view of consumer behaviour is necessary, which will include the emotional aspects of experience and decision-making (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 70). In addition, with the development of the concept, emphasis began to be placed on the aspects of creating company and customer value (Kamaladevi, 2010).

The literature on the subject does not provide a clear definition of how to understand the customer experience. Some authors indicate that this is a reaction to the company’s offer, others say that customer experience is related to the assessment of the quality of the offer. This means that in some studies customer experience overlaps with outcome variables, such as satisfaction or value, while in others it is an independent variable leading to satisfaction, for example. In addition, some studies see experience as a feature of the product, which is contrary to the interpretative tradition that always sees experience as a subjective

perception of the customer, even as a synonym of value in use (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Nevertheless, customer experience can be considered as an internal and subjective reaction of the customer to direct or indirect contact with the organization (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, p. 117). Direct contact is usually initiated by the customer and takes place when purchasing a product or using a service. Indirect contact refers to unplanned contact with a brand, product or service (e.g., through advertising in the media, or recommendations of friends) (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). As indicated by De Keyser et al. (2015, p. 117), customer experience can be considered as the fourth form of offer in the economy. They are inherently multidimensional and include both cognitive and emotional aspects. The student experience can be thought of as a special case of customer experience. Students, as key customers of universities, constantly interact with the products and teaching and administrative services offered to them by universities. As noted by Matus, Rusu and Cano (2021), by understanding the dynamics of these interactions and their impact on students, it is possible to improve the quality of experiences, satisfaction and well-being. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the elements/dimensions/factors that make up the student experience and to conduct a systematic analysis and evaluation of experiences in the context of improving universities.

Understanding what customer experience is and how it affects buyers' perception of service quality is not easy. In the literature, this issue is widely described both in general terms (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Hwang & Seo, 2016; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Palmer, 2010) and in relation to universities (Ciobanu, 2013; Sabri, 2011; Yap et al., 2022). Cano et al. (2021) note that research on this issue shows an increasing trend. In turn, Matus, Rusu and Cano (2021) argue that knowledge on how to research student experiences and use them in the process of improving services in universities is still dispersed. This is partly because different approaches and methods of measuring experience are used in university practice, depending on the needs. Their choice often depends on the purpose of the analysis, the subject of research and the organizational capabilities of the institution.

8.3. Methods and Tools for Studying Students' Experiences in the Practice of Universities

Universities in Poland, striving to improve the quality of functioning, mostly focus on the functional and utilitarian aspects of services. As a result, it is common practice in these organizations to measure and analyse student satisfaction after the service has been completed (e.g., after completing a course). As a result, the identification and analysis of student experiences in an inclusive approach is omitted, i.e., those that cover all life experiences of students, including, for example, affective aspects (i.e., feelings and emotions) or student involvement. Table 8.1 presents the results of the analysis of research trends relating to the study of student experiences, which dominate in the literature on the subject.

Table 8.1. Trends in the area of student experience research

The subject of research	Characteristics of the conducted research
Inclusive view of the student experience	Research focused on conceptualizing what constitutes a high-quality student experience. An attempt at a comprehensive study of the experiences of students who use the services of the university.
Experience in the field of education	Teaching experience related to basic services in the area of education, which is provided at the university and the impact of the student experience on learning results are identified. Discussions within this group of studies concerned, among others: teaching methods, learning support and establishing academic relationships.
Equal opportunities	Group of studies on differences in the assessment of student experience depending on gender. This category refers to the important problem of ensuring an equal learning environment for everyone.
Improving the quality of experiences	Identify how higher education institutions can improve the quality of the student experience. Within this category, three approaches to improvement are proposed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="481 752 1383 846">■ focus on students – higher education institutions engage with students continuously to understand their expectations and aspirations and align them with institutional expectations, <li data-bbox="481 846 1383 907">■ focus on managing the learning environment – improving pedagogical approaches, <li data-bbox="481 907 1383 1001">■ focus on ensuring synergy between physical infrastructure and educational and operational strategies of the institution – a holistic approach to shaping the student experience.
Satisfaction in the field of education	Identifying and measuring determinants of higher education experience that affect student satisfaction.

Source: own study based on (Tan et al., 2016).

Different methods and tools are used to study students' experiences in higher education. Based on an analysis of the literature, Zeng, Freyer and Zhayo (2021) identified three main approaches to measuring student experience: the student engagement survey, the course experience survey, and the SET student survey. In addition, the literature increasingly points to the benefits of studying the student journey in the context of improving the services offered by learning (Rains, 2017). Table 8.2 presents and characterizes the main tools used in higher education institutions to study student experience.

One of the most widespread in academic practice is the study of students' experiences in the context of their involvement in studies. It is carried out at the institutional level and implemented using a questionnaire. Student engagement research began in 1979 when the C. R. Pace College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) was introduced in the USA (Zeng et al., 2021). The aim of the CSEQ is to identify how students perceive the general learning environment that should be provided by the academic and administrative staff at the university. The study focuses on assessing the amount of time and effort that students put into the educational process. It also verifies how universities use their resources and organize their curriculum and other learning opportunities to encourage student participation

Table 8.2. Selected methods of identifying student experiences

Type of conducted research	Tools	Example places of implementation	Dimensions of the research
Study of students' experiences in the context of involvement in studies	College Student Experiences Questionnaire – CSEQ	USA, Australia & New Zealand, South Africa, UK, China, South Korea, Ireland	The questionnaire measures institutional commitment across five dimensions: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching learning experience, and supportive campus environment.
Study of students' experience related to participation in the course	Course Experience Questionnaire – CEQ	UK, Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Netherlands	The original version of the questionnaire contained 30 items on five scales reflecting the different dimensions of effective teaching: good teaching, clear goals and standards, adequate workload, adequate assessment, emphasis on autonomy.
Opinion survey on the course	Student Evaluation of Teaching – SET	USA, Canada, UK and others	In its original version, the questionnaire included six main dimensions: course planning, communication skills, teacher-student interaction, course difficulty, student assessment and self-assessment of learning. Subsequent versions covered: subject knowledge, course organization, usefulness, enthusiasm, feedback and interaction with students.
Customer experience research by identifying the journey	Student Journey Mapping – SJM	USA, UK, Germany	It consists in identifying in the course of in-depth qualitative research (e.g., in the form of an interview) all emotions, opportunities and problems that the student experiences before, during and after the service.

Source: own study based on (Andrews & Eade, 2013; Chakrabarty et al., 2016; Fargo & Mastrangelo, 2021; Mandernach, 2015; Schuhbauer et al., 2020; Talukdar et al., 2013; Zeng et al., 2021).

(Mandernach, 2015). The student engagement survey allows for systematic observation of the university's institutional progress in supporting student engagement in learning. It can be the basis for formulating quality objectives at both the strategic and tactical levels. The results of research using the questionnaire can also be used in the process of benchmarking universities.

Another, commonly used in the university environment, is the study of students' experiences related to their participation in a course in which the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is used. The CEQ, based on the course perception questionnaire, was developed at Lancaster University in the 1980s and is used as a measure of perceived teaching quality in national and annual study programs in Australia. In 2005, the UK launched the National Student Survey (NSS) based on the CEQ as part of its quality assurance framework (Zeng et al., 2021). The use of the questionnaire makes it possible to identify the educational

experiences of students, which allows for generating information on the effectiveness of teaching, provides information for making decisions regarding teaching and allows for obtaining data for research on teaching processes. It is therefore a useful tool that can be used in the process of ensuring and improving the quality of education.

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) methods are widely used practically all over the world. The sets usually consist of a standard questionnaire that is provided to students at the end of the course. They are asked to give their opinion on topics such as the quality of the course, the quality of teaching and many aspects of it. The results of these assessments are typically used to evaluate faculty performance and often serve as the primary basis for promotion and hiring decisions (Royal, 2017). The literature on the subject often emphasizes their usefulness in striving to ensure the quality of education and activities in the area of teaching and learning quality in higher education (Galbraith et al., 2012; Spooren et al., 2013). As pointed out by Zeng et al. (2021), SET provides a cost-effective and standardized tool that allows universities to collect comparable information within colleges for different courses. Nevertheless, this tool is criticized due to the lack of consensus on the definition of effective teaching, the lack of theoretical basis for the construction of the tool and the bias of the assessment.

Another, slightly less frequently used in the practice of university, experience research tool is Customer Journey Mapping (CJM). It differs significantly from the previously discussed ones because it is based on qualitative research and identifies students' experiences in a process approach. According to Rains (2017), student journey mapping enables university administrators to draw unique insights from the perspective of their key audiences. This method consists of a visual presentation of the sequence of events during which students interact with the organization (for example, during the recruitment process for studies). In general terms, the journey map is therefore a visual illustration of the process, which illustrates the needs and perception of students' relations with the university (Temkin, 2010). According to Rosenbaum, Otalora and Ramírez (2017), the main objective of mapping is to improve interactions with service providers, which is expected to lead to an improved customer experience related to contact points. Usually, these points are presented horizontally on visual maps according to the process schedule.

In the literature on the subject, the effectiveness of CJM in the context of improving student service in academic libraries is indicated by Andrews and Eade (2013), and Samson, Granath and Alger (2017). The possibilities of using CJM to increase student engagement in the context of library services are described by Fargo and Mastrangelo (2021). In turn, the method of journey mapping in the context of the analysis of the entire life cycle of a student was used by Schuhbauer, Brockmann and Mustafayev (2020).

It is worth noting that the first of the tools mentioned above focuses on a relatively wide range of students' academic experiences. It contains an extensive set of questions relating to student characteristics and a description of students' experiences under three main categories: university activities, university environment and estimated benefits (Gonyea et al., 2003, p. 3). In turn, the other two tools, i.e., CEQ and SET, are aimed at evaluating

courses and teaching. Student journey mapping identifies experiences related to student-university interactions and can be the basis for improving student administration processes.

8.4. Conclusions

In the era of dynamic changes taking place in the socio-economic environment of universities, focusing solely on meeting the mandatory requirements limits their development opportunities. Universities, wishing to develop and improve their competitive position, should strive to maximize the value provided to eternal stakeholders, including primarily students, by providing them with services that meet their needs and expectations. This is connected with the need to constantly strive to expand systemic mechanisms focused on the idea of continuous improvement and development of a quality culture.

The conducted analysis of methods and tools for analysing student experience indicates the possibility and benefits of their use in the practice of Polish universities, as part of university quality management systems. Analysing students' experiences in the context of involvement in studies using the CSEQ student experience questionnaire allows for looking at experiences holistically, which can be a good basis for verifying and formulating quality goals in the medium and long term. Researching students' experiences related to participation in a course with the use of CEQ and surveying opinions on the course with the use of SET may extend the forms of measuring the quality of education already existing at universities. It is worth highlighting the first of the above-mentioned methods in particular due to its strong foundation in theory and the benefits of its application in practice indicated in the literature. In turn, the study of student experiences using travel mapping (SJM) can effectively support the improvement of administrative processes at a university and complement the previously described methods and tools for identifying experiences.

To summarize, it can be said that measuring students' experiences can provide valuable information about their satisfaction with the services provided by universities. Therefore, it can support the decision-making process related to designing solutions that improve the functioning of universities. The review was limited to the analysis of documents that use the term "research or measurement of student experiences" in their titles, abstracts, and keywords. Therefore, articles in which measurement of student experiences is not the main subject of research may have been omitted. Despite these limitations, the results were sufficient to identify the main methods and tools for measuring student experiences. In the context of directions for further research, it is worth focusing on the problem of integrating the discussed methods and tools for measuring student experience with other tools used within quality management systems at universities.

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Wykorzystanie doświadczeń studentów w doskonaleniu jakości usług w szkołach wyższych

Streszczenie: Artykuł wpisuje się w tematykę systemowego zarządzania jakością w polskich szkołach wyższych. Jego celem jest identyfikacja możliwości wykorzystania doświadczeń studentów w doskonaleniu jakości w tych organizacjach. Dokonano krytycznego przeglądu literatury w obszarze głównych trendów oraz metod i narzędzi badawczych, które wykorzystuje się do identyfikacji doświadczeń w praktyce szkół wyższych. Analiza wykazała, że możliwa jest identyfikacja doświadczeń studentów w odniesieniu do różnych aspektów ich funkcjonowania na uczelni, co może się przełożyć na lepsze zrozumienie ich potrzeb i oczekiwań. Wybór metod i narzędzi jest uzależniony od tego, jakie obszary organizacji będą poddane ewaluacji i jakim celom ma służyć badanie.

Słowa kluczowe: doświadczenia studenta, systemy zarządzania jakością, pomiar jakości, szkoły wyższe