

A review of service quality from the last three decades: reflections from the UK and Italian Higher Education sectors

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Abstract

Purpose. This study was overseen with the intensions of analytical assessment of the various techniques applied in service quality over the past three decades, their footprint on customer satisfaction and also to point out concern for further investigation.

Methodology. The aims were carried out through a theoretical desk research on different research on service quality starting from 1985 to 2015. Conclusions were drawn based on the findings from literature and comparative reflections based on UK and Italian higher education perspectives.

Findings. The study divulges that the techniques employed in service quality have great impressions on customer satisfaction. The study also revealed that customer satisfaction is not dependent on service quality and all its dimensions only but that customer satisfaction depends on other factors such as the time of the service, personal factors, price, values etc. The study also shows that service quality assessment cannot be generalized for all type of services, but that service quality assessment depends on the type of service settings, situations, time, need etc.

Practical implications. The practical implications from this research is to give those involved in service quality within higher education, the reflections on changes over the last three decades with a view to determining trends for the future.

Originality/value. This research reflects on changes in service quality within the higher education sector over the past three decades.

Keywords

service quality; customer satisfaction; service delivery; higher education

1. Introduction

Service quality has become the chief ingredient in all service industries during the past 3 decades, due to its intense impact on customer satisfaction, loyalty, profitability and on overall performance (Leonard and Sassar, 1982; Bitner 1992; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Nadiri 2011). Service quality has been described as an end product of customers' comparisons between what they are expecting from the service and the perceptions of the organization's services rendered to them (Oliver 1997; 2014). Early research highlighted the link between customer satisfaction, good service quality and loyalty (Oliver 1980; Zeithaml et al.1988; Tornow and Wiley, 1991; Parasuraman et al 1993).

This paper looks at the changes in service quality within the last three decades as applied to the higher education (HE) sector. Reflections from those directly involved in service quality within the Italian and UK HE sectors.

2. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been defined as the actions of an individual concerning a fulfillment or discontent from a perceived performance in relation to the individual's expectations (Kotler 2000). Similarly Yi (1990) defined customer satisfaction as the joint result of the assessment between the perceived and experienced performance of a product or service. Browne et al. (1998) argue that one definition is the disconfirmation between the expected and the perceived service. While Caruana (2002 pp. 816) while agreeing with this disconfirmation, recognise the 'lack of consensus' in defining customer satisfaction. Regardless of the definition, however, the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction is critical and therefore the focus on service quality continues to be a crucial factor to both practitioners and researchers since the 1980s (Parasuraman et al. 1985). Practitioners are particularly interested in service quality, due to the importance of retaining and attracting new customers and can be said to be the most important element that stands as an instrument for assessing customer's satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Bowen and Chen 2001; Caruana 2002). Browne et al. (1998) while discussing the importance of service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction recognise that within higher education, the role of the student as the customer further adds to the complexity of service quality within higher education. Kumra (2008) further argues that the employee is critical to the perceived service quality by the customer. He also argues that service quality is not all about the end product but also depends greatly on the production procedure and the service process as well.

The idea of service quality and its importance in customer satisfaction first came to the forefront in the late 1980s and 1990s (Gronroos 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1991) when the gap model and SERVQUAL were used as tools for assessing quality within service environments.

These models apply the measurement of service quality based on predetermined dimensions. Gronroos (1984); he pointed out that the standard of service received by the customer is affected by what the customer was expecting from the service. These expectations are based on the previous experience, the word of mouth, traditions, and ideology. On further research, Gronroos (1984), uncovered three aspect of service quality, which includes; a technical dimension, that is what the customer obtains out of the service; functional dimension is the degree to which staff behaves; and the third which is the firm's reflection. According to Parasuraman et al., (1985) service quality dimensions are those components that are used in evaluating the quality of services. They proposed 10 dimensions of service quality, which include: responsiveness, reliability, competence, courtesy, credibility, communication,

tangibles, security, access, and understanding of the customer. These 10 dimensions were then trimmed to 5 as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Revised Dimensions of Service Quality

DIMENSIONS	DEFINITIONS
Tangibles	The equipment, tools, or furniture, required to carry out the service. Example: appearance of staff.
Reliability	Ability to make the customers to be able to rely on you, keeping to promises etc.
Responsiveness	Able to listen and show care to the customers' needs
Assurance	Ability to inflict confidence and make customers to have trust in you and to believe in you.
Empathy	Able to show care and give attention to customers.

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988

Developments in the last decade show that due to the transformation in technology and a higher demand of customers, service industries are forced to devise means to meet up with these pressures. Seybold et al. (2001) in recognising the changing attitudes of customers argue that that customers have higher demands but lower loyalty for new products and services which can negatively affects the long term profit margin. Any service delivery failure is seen as negativity for the organization's status according to Ha and Jang, (2009) and service failure transpires as a result of failure in meeting the expectations of the customer.

During the past decades, there has being the introduction of a service approach by researchers (Zeithaml, 2009; Gronroos 2007). According to Chang (2008), the idea of service quality is to be tackled from the customer's perspective, since they may all have diverse opinion such as, a different ground of assessment, different circumstances and values. Parasuraman et al. (1990) first recognized this diversity and argued that satisfaction is dependent on the service experienced from the customer's perspective.

Gronroos (2007 p483) further contributes to the argument highlighting the juxtaposition between the expectations of customer prior to a service experience with the experience of a previous service received. He presents a new model of service quality as the "Total Perceived Service Quality". It highlighted what the customer is actually aiming at, and what they asses. The service quality is dependent of two dimensions, including; the technical quality which is the aftermath of the service experienced, that is; what is delivered; and the functional quality which has to do with the operation through which the service was carried out. The two dimensions have an effect on the cognizance of quality in many ways. Based on the Total Service Quality Model, the quality of a perceived service is not dependent only on the experience of the quality dimensions used by the consumer in assessing quality to determine if quality received is good, bad or neutral.

3. Changes in the UK HE sector

As we reflect on service quality in the UK HE sector over the last three decades it is worth noting that the follow key developments took place during this timeframe:

- There was a significant expansion in the number of universities between 1984 and 2007, the UK went from 48 to 106 universities, this was primarily facilitated by legislation in 1992 which permitted the thirty polytechnics in England and Wales (and subsequently the

five Scottish Central Institutions) to obtain a university title and the in 2004 further legislation allowed colleges without research degree awarding powers to obtain a university title.

- In 1998 tuition fees were first introduced across the entire UK. These fees provided a means of funding tuition to undergraduate and postgraduate certificate students at universities, with students being required to pay up to £1,000 a year for tuition. The establishment of devolved national administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has resulted in different arrangements with regard to the charging of tuition fees in each of the countries of the United Kingdom. A report by David Greenaway and Michelle Haynes on funding in HE in the *Economic Journal* in 2003 outlined the long run trends in full-time UK students in HE and public funding per student, over the period 1980/1–1999/00 and it is noted that “here is a striking symmetry between the two. Full-time numbers doubled as successive governments made increasing participation in HE a priority, on the grounds that participation rates in the UK were relatively low by international standards. Judged in terms of aggregate numbers, the policy has plainly been successful. In 1980 just 13% of young people were in full time higher education, by 1999 it was 34%⁴ and the current government has set a target of 50% participation by 2010”. This is outlined in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Index of student numbers and public funding for Higher education

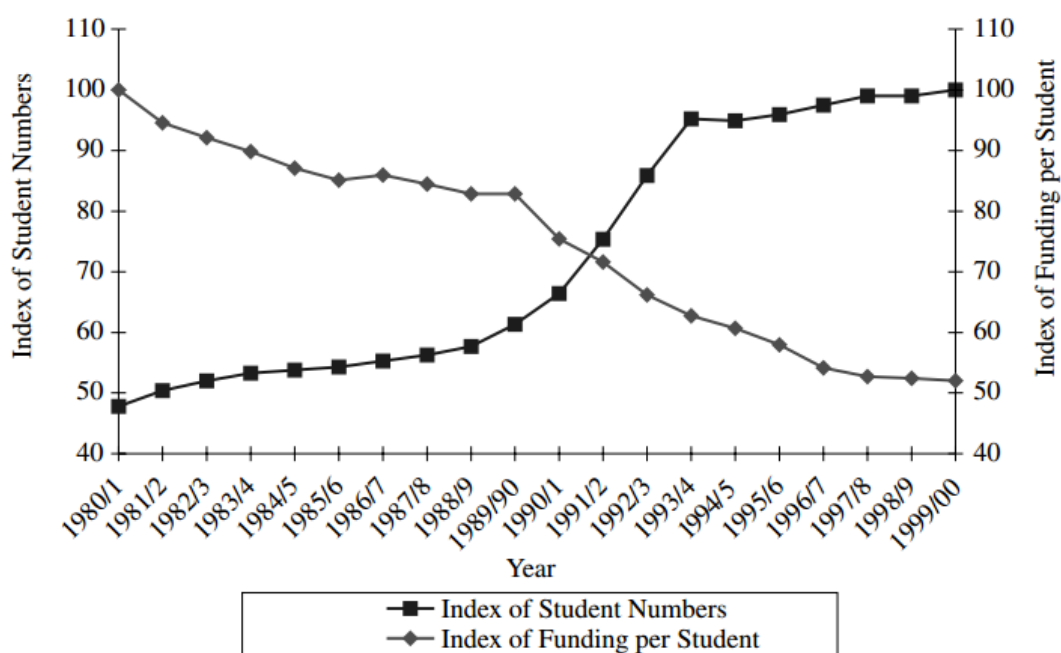


Fig. 1. Index of Student Numbers and Public Funding for Higher Education, 1980/1–1999/2000
Source: Department for Education and Skills

- A key political goal has been the desire to increase and widen participation in Higher Education in the UK. The Dearing Report of 1997 highlights that “in the UK there have been periods of rapid growth, in the late 1960s and from 1988 to 1993, with a long pause through the 1970s and early 80s“. The DoQSS Working Paper (July 2010) indicates that “the UK Higher Education (HE) sector has undergone several major

expansions over the past 50 years. Student volumes have more than quadrupled, rising from around 400,000 full time HE students at UK institutions in the 1960s to over 2 million by 2007”.

- The marketisation of higher education – In his report on “The Marketisation of Higher Education” Roger Brown outlines that “the UK, and especially English, higher education has been subject to a gradual process of marketisation since the early 1980s. The main steps were the abolition of the remaining subsidy for overseas students’ fees in 1980; the separation of funding for teaching and research, and the introduction of selective research funding, in 1986; the introduction of ‘top-up’ loans for student support in 1990; the abolition of the ‘binary line’ between universities and polytechnics in 1992; the introduction of ‘top-up’ tuition fees of £1,000 in 1998; the changes in the rules for university title in 2004 to enable institutions without research degree awarding powers to obtain a university title; and the introduction of ‘variable’ fees of £3,000 in 2006..... these attempts to marketise higher education have been accompanied by a number of other moves to reform higher education in a corporate direction. These include the remodelling of university governing bodies on corporate lines, and the development of sector-wide performance indicators (Brown, 2012a and b)”.

The impact on service quality is fairly clear; there are more students and more universities, fees have been introduced and increased in parts of the UK and there has been a clear shift towards the marketisation of higher education in the UK and the creation of students as consumers. However HEIs are not really that comparable to other businesses for example prospective students have little actual knowledge about the ‘product’, yes there is data and information available, but the experience of studying at a university is subjective and the types of student you are, the mode of study, the subject area are variable and can impact on the indicial experience, and of course. There are limited opportunities to try before you buy! Parents, empowers and other stakeholders may impact on choices made by the prospective student in terms of where or what to study, each student is different and can continue to the quality of their student experience.

From an academic perspective there is a nervousness around the concept of students as consumers, as Dr Paul Greatric, Registrar at University of Nottingham wrote in article in The Guardian in March 2011 “the very core of education is the contestability of knowledge and this sits uncomfortably with the notion that the customer is always right. What the student as consumer concept fails to capture is the essence of what really makes a high quality education for students. The essential ingredients of outstanding staff and genuine student involvement are key...Treating students merely as consumers or failing to recognise the importance of quality service are both problematic for universities”.

4. Service Quality in the UK HE sector

If we apply the Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988, revised dimensions of service quality to UK Higher Education and Service Quality we can see how the changes over the last three decades have impacted on students and the way the UK Higher Education is funded, marketed and provided:

4.1 Tangibles

The increase in student numbers over the decades (see table 2) and number of higher education institutions has resulted in increased competition between institutions.

Table 2: Increase in student numbers and students obtaining university degrees, UK

	First degrees			Higher degrees		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
1920	3,145	1,212	4,357	529	174	703
1930	6,494	2,635	9,129	1,123	200	1,323
1938	7,071	2,240	9,311	1,316	164	1,480
1950	13,398	3,939	17,337	2,149	261	2,410
1960	16,851	5,575	22,426	2,994	279	3,273
1970	35,571	15,618	51,189	11,186	1,715	12,901
1980	42,831	25,319	68,150	14,414	4,511	18,925
1990	43,297	33,866	77,163	20,905	10,419	31,324
2000	109,930	133,316	243,246	46,015	40,520	86,535
2005	122,155	156,225	278,380	63,035	62,050	125,085
2010	144,980	185,740	330,720	93,375	89,235	182,610
2011	153,235	197,565	350,800	96,280	97,990	194,270

Notes:

All figures are for students from all domiciles
Full-time first degree students only

Major breaks in series

1925 -Excludes higher degrees awarded without further study

1973 -includes universities in Northern Ireland

1994- includes former Polytechnics and the Open University from now on

2000 -includes students qualifying from 'dormant' status - where a student is not actively studying for their qualification. This may be where there is an administrative delay between completion and award. These qualifications were not previously recorded. The main impact is on the number of doctorates.

Sources: *Statistical abstract for the United Kingdom 1935, Board of Trade*

Annual abstract of statistics, ONS/CSO

Higher Education Statistics Agency

The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) was established in 1993 following a government white paper seeking further coherence in HE data and statistics. In terms of tangibles HESA provides information on “facilities spend” which is an individual HEIs expenditure on student facilities such as sports, careers services, health, counselling, etc. divided by the number of full-time equivalent students in the latest year. HESA also provides information on “academic services spend” which outlines how much a university spends on library and computing facilities (staff, books, journals, computer hardware and software etc. but not buildings), museums, galleries and observatories divided by the number of full-time equivalent students in the latest year.

The importance of replicating industry standard equipment and professional resources to prepare students for employment has resulted in the creation of specialist facilities such as:

- **University of South Wales – The Hydra Minerva Suite**

“The Hydra Minerva Suite allows academic staff to construct complex operational scenarios to test the operational and managerial capabilities of students. The Hydra Minerva Suite is used by Police Staff College, and many national police forces to train officers at all levels.

There are over 60 Hydra simulation centres throughout the world, mainly owned by emergency services with just a few in universities. The Hydra community is focused on providing real learning and research opportunities for expert practitioners working in the emergency services, criminal justice, and military and government fields, so the Hydra Minerva Suite is a state-of-the-art facility” (University of South Wales website).

- **University of the West of Scotland – ACORN**

“Used in conjunction with the University’s existing acute simulation, ACORN is the missing link to simulate the complete patient journey. ACORN features four designated areas; the DOMUS home care environment, reception space, GP consulting room, and treatment room. In addition to this, UWS has collaborated with NHS 24 and is in the process of developing an 'out of hours' telecommunication station which will support students and provide opportunities to further develop prioritisation and decision-making skills. Simulated exercises undertaken in the facility see students take on the role of District Nurse within the home care setting, treating patients with long term conditions and hospital discharges. They also take on the role of receptionist and are required to triage mock ‘patients’ who call or ‘drop in’ for appointments with the GP or Treatment Room Nurse. The triage system replicates that used in primary care practice. The GP and treatment room stations allow students to develop the skills of clinical assessment, investigations, interpretation of blood results, prioritisation, decision making, health promotion, and communication. Additionally, it affords the opportunity for students to practise clinical skills within a safe and supported learning environment. The immersive nature of ACORN equips students with hands-on practical skills as well as problem solving skills to prepare them for clinical practice” (University of the West of Scotland website).

4.2 *Reliability*

The improvements in technology and availability of data have had a significant impact on the provision of service quality in the HE sector. Before a student even selects which institution they intend to apply for they can access a vast amount of online data, statistics and qualitative and quantitative information to enable them to make an informed, evidenced-based decision about their further study. Improved access and availability of data and information on higher education providers means that potential students can now identify their priorities for a place of study and then easily compare information and data across institutions. The *reliability* of an HEI can be considered by potential students, parents, employers and other stakeholders through the following:

- At the click of a mouse a potential student can now access information on history of their preferred HEI, the location and transport arrangements, teaching standards, sports facilities and even notable alumni!

4.3 *Responsiveness*

As competitiveness increases so does the importance of responding to the needs of potential students, employers, professional bodies and other stakeholders. Universities have had to demonstrate their nimbleness and flexibility and offer programmes and degrees that meet the demands of the markets, demands that have included expansion of part time study, provision of flexible study routes to enable students in full time employment to undertake part

time study as part of their continuing professional development, online and distance learning modes of delivery and the creation of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) in 2008.

Another key factor has been the growth of international markets and the significance of globalisation of student cohorts and provision. Nick Foskett highlights in “The Marketisation of Higher Education and Student as Consumer” (2011) that “from a very low base in the 1970s and 1980s, the growth of international markets has been rapid: by 2007–2008 UK universities had 235,000 students enrolled from outside the European Union, and a further 115,000 EU students, which represents 13 per cent of the total student body.” Forkett believes there are two main drivers for the growth of international markets, firstly the need for HEIs to consider all forms of income to reduce reliance on central funding and secondly growth of global trade, communications and interconnectedness has stimulated a global view of higher education (Deem 2001).

4.4 Assurance

There are a range of mechanisms utilised by HEIs across the UK to assure the standards of their awards, there is some differentiation across the four countries that make up the United Kingdom but there are also shared approaches which are common to all UK universities these including, inter alia:

- External Examiners
- Subject/Programme Review
- Institutional Review (undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS))
- Peer Review
- Professional and Statutory Body Accreditation
- Annual monitoring activities

All of the above involve external or peer review, and focus on the ability of the HEI to maintain the standards of their awards and to enhance and protect the student experience. There is a formal report and/or outcomes from all of these activities which are available for potential students, current students, employers etc. to review, this external, independent reflection can provide additional confidence in the academic quality of the award. These reports and outcomes are used by HEIs to promote their provision and portfolio and form part of the service quality mechanisms.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education was published in 2014 and it sets expectations that all UK higher education providers are required to meet. The code is published by the Quality Assurance Agency who are an independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising higher education institutions on quality and standards. The code applies to all providers of UK higher education across all four nations and according to the QAA website www.qaa.ac.uk the purpose of the code is to “safeguard the academic standards of UK higher education, to assure the quality of the learning opportunities that UK HE offers to students, to promote continuous and systematic improvement to UK higher education and to ensure that information is publically available”.

The code ensures that this is consistency in higher education and a baseline of standards across all HEIs this help provide a reassurance to students, parents and other stakeholders.

4.5 Empathy

In the mid-90s there was an increased emphasis on students engaging in their university experience, and in the quality assurance and enhancement of their programmes of study. This resulted in the development of “sparqs” - student partnership in quality Scotland, formerly student participation in quality Scotland in 2003, an agency which put students at the centre of decisions which affect the quality or governance of the students’ learning experience. 2005

saw the launch of National Student Survey (NSS) an annual survey of all final year undergraduate degree student in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, Universities in Scotland are not required to take part but as of 2010 12 of the 19 Scottish HEIs did participate. NSS aims to assess undergraduate students' opinion of the quality of their degree programmes.

In 2013 sparqs published guidance on the development and implementation of student partnership agreements (SPAs), SPAs aim to promote a shared understanding of what an individual and an HEI can expect from each other. SPAs promote collaborative working between students, students' associations and institutions and demonstrate a clear commitment to partnership working and involving students in shaping their experience at university.

5. Changes in the Italian HE sector

In Italy we have 96 universities (67 public ones accounting for 92% of enrolled students, and 29 private ones with 8% of students, including 11 online universities with 2, 6% of students).

In the last decades we also experienced an increase in the number of universities (7% from 2000 to 2015) and of degree programs offered (66% from 2001 to 2012), and from 1993 to 2012 university education has become accessible to broad sections of the population (graduates in the population of working age increased from 5.5 to 12.7%, among young people aged between 25 and 34 years it has gone from 7.1 to 22.3%) (MIUR 2015; Anvur 2013).

But another very interesting development of the Italian HE sector was the change of the approach to work and towards students. In the 80's there was the abandoning of the writing machines replaced by the personal computer. It was a great revolution for teachers and administrative staff and consequently in the relationships between teachers and practitioners who started to have a different role in the administrative services. The way to change that role was later improved by other important changes in Italy and was characterized by the ancient but always up-to-date idea to consider the student in a central role for services. In Bologna and Paris universities were established between a teacher and a group of students who had the right to participate to the government of the university (Jaspers, 1959; Haskins, 1974). Now we can relive a proper evolution of our times.

Steps towards service quality:

- interest in the total quality
- development of the Public Administration
- interest in the public communication
- the Italian university reform of the "3 plus 2"
- competition among universities
- the economic crisis.

5.1 Interest in total quality

At the beginning of the 90's our country suffered a real invasion of the Japanese concepts and philosophies based on the total quality, then developed for the Western context through the famous model TQM (Total Quality Management). It was a great change not only for large industrial and manufacturing companies, but also for medium and small enterprises, public or private organizations operating in services, so for universities those were beginning to be seen as business contexts: the concept of stakeholders, so the involvement outside the university, and the close involvement of the staff were two important features of that approach in Italy. The "must", through training, was to accept everything from customer-student even if he/she

could ask for too much without a real need: the customer was “the king” and the customer satisfaction was the quality. In the universities the formal implementation of the quality was soon abandoned, however, retaining some aspects of culture at the level of basic principles and some techniques (such as process management) and many application tools. Indeed, the TQM brought to positive guidelines, such as the continuous improvement, the attention to the environment, health and safety at work, adoption of systems oriented to excellence, all the way to the green economy, investment in human capital, environment and relations with stakeholders, with standards based on social responsibility.

5.2 Developments in public administration

Moreover, in Italy the 90's were an important period because they marked the evolution of the public administration (PA) with the consequent impact on the university and its services offered. New citizen rights (so student rights) were recognized through laws and changed the approach of everybody in the civil society: from the role of submission to the role of participation. That was the great difference. From the law n.241/1990 on the right of access to administrative documents, there was a continuous improvement through other laws focused on the concept of the administrative transparency: ensure the maximum possible flow of information both within the administrative system, and between the latter and the outside world. Other important laws linked to that concept are the following laws and regulations: n.150/2000 on the communication of the public administration; n.196/2003 on the protection of the personal data; n.150/2009 on the efficiency and transparency of the public administration; n. 190/2012 on the prevention and repression of corruption and lawlessness in the public administration.

Today the PA is asked to be impartial, citizen-oriented, credible, and apolitical and based on skills, representative of values, where everyone is responsible and where to find areas that produce quality and reducing costs (OCAP, 2016).

5.3 Interest in public communication

Consequently and in parallel, in the last two decades we also witnessed an important development of the public and institutional communication with a first national association that was born in university and that gathers teachers and practitioners of the communication world. That interest is now centered on services online.

5.4 Italian University reform of the “3 plus 2”

With the Ministerial Decree n. 509/1999 that prompted a university reform of the “3 plus 2” (concept of transversality) and marked the “university autonomy”, the system of the studies was completely renewed and implemented from the academic year 2001-2002. In particular, for the first time we spoke about “contribution fees” and “student contract” that changed the relationships between the three parties of the university, or better from teachers and administrators towards students in a bidirectional way.

In parallel, the need of a measuring system of evaluation both centrally and peripherally comes and in a systematic and continuous way. Among the aspects, the evaluation from students gave them a more important role, and the evaluation culture was gradually applied to all services offered to the student in order to collect feedback from students and families, consequently to adjust every kind of service to the real needs.

5.5 Competition amongst universities

As companies, there was a real competition among universities that recently appears characterized as a benchmarking among them with the aim of improving service quality, till the force of placement because university is teaching, research, but also support services,

social values, and above all work for the environment and civil development, so progress from individual to collective, from local to social, from individual-student to professional-citizen. For Karl Jaspers, important German philosopher and one of the most representative personalities of the university life also recognized by the American university system, “by its very name the university is a universe”. And we cannot forget that a university is a subject of public interest (Massei 1992; Mancini, 1996; Borgonovi 1998).

5.6 The economic crisis

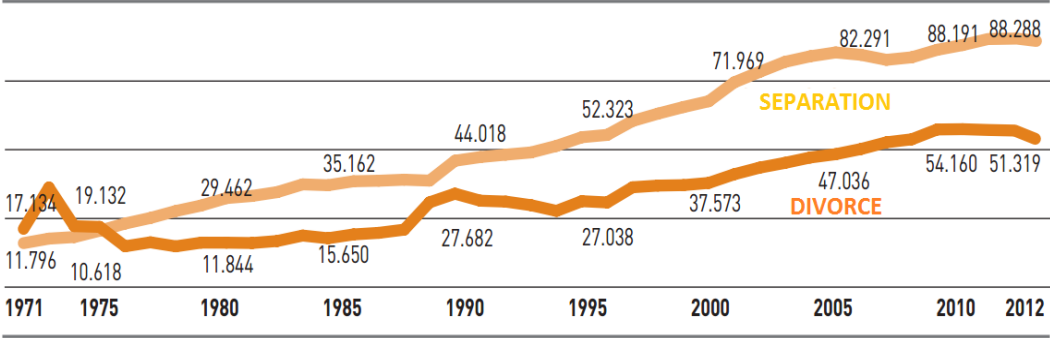
Last but not least, the effect of the economic crisis of the last decade increases the interest in the universities offering economic degree and brought to an important interest in introducing sons in the university (7% of students coming from families with medium-high education and white collar class).

After the expansion in the 80’s and 90’s, the economic crisis has led to a reduction in resources and a training rationalization. The recent university reform, introduced with the law 240/2010, has rethought governance and introduced new mechanisms for evaluation and accreditation of courses and universities.

We must point out that economic crisis had and have an important impact on families who try, as mentioned, to introduce sons in order to hope to a different life style. Unfortunately the important impact on families also concerns the deterioration of relations between parents that almost always depends on the loss of job especially by the father. That changes the financial capacity together with family balance and the sense of instability of the children, that is, greatly changes the level of quality of life.

The continued deterioration in the relationship between parents or spouses has led to a serious situation of separations and divorces that deserves reflection.

Figure 2: Separation and divorce statistics



Maybe for that social situation, currently parents have a crucial role in relations with the university, and they often take the place of children. Over the past two decades, the generation of parents has a level of schooling higher than that of some decades ago.

To continue to study the low-income students and their families have adopted real "survival strategies". The data confirm the growth of the level of education as well as show how the parental level of education is a relevant factor in accessing university studies. Changes in ways of living and studying induced by the crisis show how families in modest socio-economic condition consider investing in the university of the children reply to favor the "social ascension" (RUI, 2015).

- As far as tuition and fees are concerned, they are different between state universities and private universities, and among private universities. In some universities there is no

difference between EU and non-EU students, in others the tuition fees are different but with the opportunity to explain their particular situations (that's a non-EU citizenship but living in Italy).

Figure 3: The parents' level of education of university students observed from surveys Eurostudent

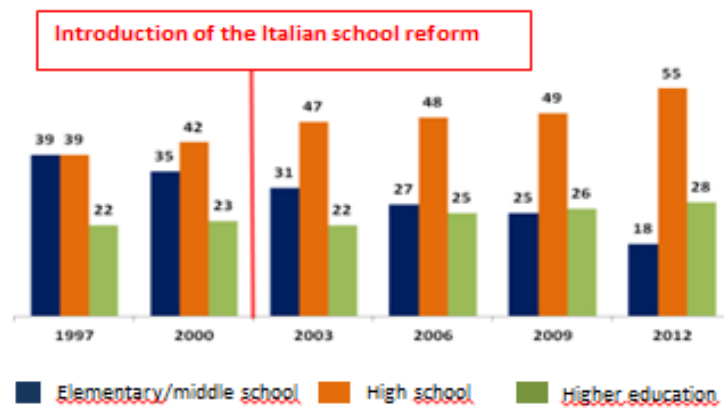
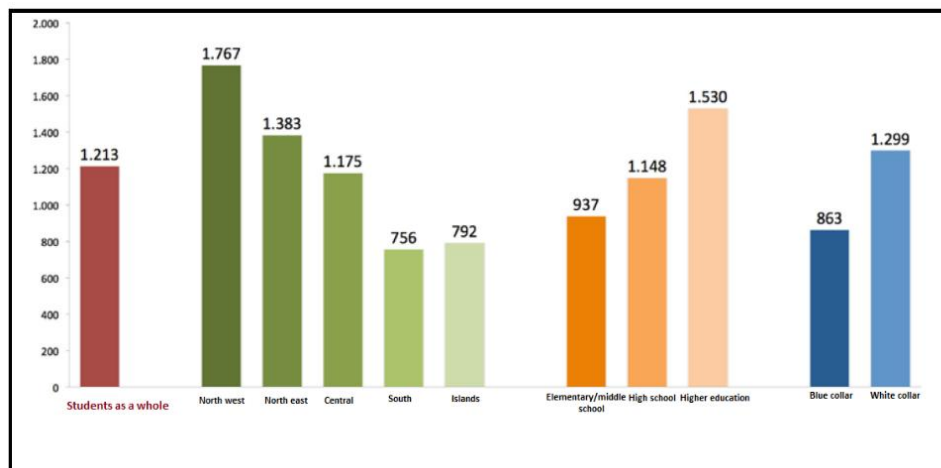


Figure 4: Average amounts of tuition fees by geographical area of the location of the course, by level of education and parents' employment status



But the effects of the economic crisis have been also on financial aids: in every university, state and private, there is the opportunity of the total exemption on the basis of identical parameters on the whole national territory, but the private university can add other financial aids from their university funds.

- *Bocconi University*

With respect to a difficult socio-economic context, Bocconi University's policy is focused on economic sustainability in order to meet the economic needs of the families with kids interested in its degree programs. In particular, where national law does not protect students from the middle-class families, it offers a system of reduced tuition fees adjusted to the economic conditions of the student's family, till the exemption of the 60% of the tuition fees.

Moreover, Bocconi has tried and is trying to replace each kind of front-line service in an online service in order to simplify and facilitate any kind of operations and to replace any kind of contact that can lead to difficulties and timing to the customer.

These facilities can also lead to greater participation of students than parents, because students are subjects so-called “digital natives”.

6. Reflections on changes in Service Quality in the Italian HE sector

Service quality depends above all on what every individual (teacher, student, administrative) can give each other, but it also depends on the historical period and the generations who live it. In general, we are facing a generation of parents –before students- . Emphasizing “in general”, our relationships are very often with a particular kind of parents: they are parents who don’t know exactly the meaning of real “sacrifice”, because they lived far away from war periods as the generations of their parents who gave and are giving a lot to their sons (for us the students’ parents). Indeed, they are experiencing another type of difficulty, but more social than economic, because they are living also on the wealth attained by their parents, above all when they are separated or divorced. And, especially in a private university, also the middle-class parents are living a similar situation.

That new generations of parents and consequently of sons are often used to ask for exceptions and to contact those responsible or the top management. Moreover, also the parameters of the national consumer price basket has changed: smartphone, tablet PC, e-book reader, car sharing, etc. have been included for the national data on consumption and inflation. So everything is or must be automated, facilitated and all of us are engaged in finding a way to give the best service, to avoid relational tensions and problems of relationships. Indeed, we are oriented towards the care of the relationship through teaching and support services.

The quality level of the same service offered by two different practitioners in two different moments can be perceived in a different way by customers because we are facing to different customers and we must be able to recognize the type of customer, his/her personality, his/her past, etc.: it means that quality depends also on practitioners’ way and his/her relational capacity to offer service. Moreover, the end product and/or the production procedure or service process are composed by many end products you must follow, face and solve for the customer. University students must be considered with existing and potential connotations: firstly as potential customers, then as human resources who do not lose their connotation of customers, with a duration and a stability, with a loyalty expressed from their enrolment, and finally with a connotation of partners (Baccarani 1998-a, 1998-b).

In order to face our context, we can’t forget the internal relationships: the consistency of the behavior and the coordination as well as the close collaboration among offices are essential for a successful outcome (Fiocca, 1994; Fiorentini, 1994). Indeed, the idea turns to a new managerial qualities respecting individual autonomy (Corvi, Fiocca 1996). I deeply agree with the following key-words, that is the dimensions of service quality:

- tangibles (sports, careers services, counselling, library, computing facilities, stages, etc),
- reliability (the improvement in technology and the access to a vast amount of online data and statistics information, etc.),
- responsiveness (placement, internationalisation, reduced tuition fees, etc.),
- assurance (awards, etc.),
- empathy (students engaging in their university or a commitment to partnership, development of partnership agreements, etc.).

In particular, due to the special social and economic period, the Italian approach must be focused on the importance of human resource involved in the relationship.

The attention to the customers' needs, or better the listening is the first step to achieve a good perception from the customer, even if you can't completely solve or you can't solve his/her problem or specific request.

The second step concerns the achievement of loyalty: clear explanation of the opportunities within a frame of regulations of the community (if necessary, explanation of their importance, that's to avoid discrimination), demonstration of a real will to satisfy his/her request, avoid promises if you know you can't keep them, flexibility only if you can have motivated and documented customer's requirements (always to avoid discrimination), coordination and coherence of behavior among the involved offices.

The third step concerns the involvement of the customer: that means to make him/her participate to the service quality (for example, as mentioned, a cooperation between administrative staff and student in case of exception requests; or an online service available to the customer through data he/she easily entered and which produces a timely response).

The fourth step is represented by the feedback. We can organize a wonderful and perfect service from our point of view, but if that service doesn't meet (completely) the customers' need, it is absolutely useless.

In addition to reports from services, yearly collected feedbacks help to update regulations and to implement and innovate services.

Moreover, we can't forget that in the university one of the most important communication channel is the "word of mouth" (Baccarani, 1998-a).

7. Conclusions

This paper introduced the concept of service quality and the changes within the higher education sector resulting in the need for changes within the way we deliver service quality to our students and customers. Reflections from an administration perspective from within the HE sectors of Italy and the UK presented, demonstrate the converging and shared influences of external factors on service delivery and service quality over the previous decades. Figure 7 represents the key factors for service quality based on the reflections from an Italian and UK perspectives for the higher education sector.

We have to improve services that must be useful to our customers in our historical period. We must offer services with quality but within regulations for everybody. Firstly listening, understanding, will to solve problems in order to create the right environment to grow up, to face society, and to improve it.

Training and motivation are fundamental keys for service quality, without them we can't speak about service quality in a historical period in which human resources and relationships are the basis of the outcome. Moreover motivation of the administrative staff and participation for students also means sense of belonging to the institution, with the consequent internal consensus that can lead to the creation of "value" whose term also means "I am able" (Corvi, Fiocca, 1996). With this internal consensus leading to the external consensus and added value to society.

The community and the social aspects are of course fundamental as well for the attention to a behaviour that must look more at the public environment rather than mere personal interests (Invernizzi, 1996).

Finally the findings suggest that each service within an HEI must be measured in the implementation (realization) phase to figure out what does not work and then to repair using techniques and measurements based on service quality theory.

Figure 7: The key factors for improving service quality in higher education.



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