Understanding student satisfaction and dissatisfaction - an interpretive study

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Understanding student satisfaction and dissatisfaction: An interpretive study in the UK Higher Education Context

This article represents a cross-sectional study of undergraduate students across two North West University Business Schools in the UK. A purposefully designed questionnaire was collected from 350 students. The student experience was described in the form of hand written narratives by first and final year students and had been identified by the respondents themselves as being satisfying or dissatisfying with the areas of teaching and learning and the supporting service environment. The study also assessed whether their experiences were likely to influence their loyalty behaviours with respect to remaining on their chosen course of study; recommending the university; and continuing at a higher level of study. The data was captured and analysed using the qualitative critical incident technique to capture the voice of the student and identified the critical determinants of quality within Higher Education, i.e. those areas that would influence loyalty behaviour, as being Access; Attentiveness; Availability; and Communication. A number of new determinants of quality have been identified out of the research by three independent judges, namely motivation, reward, social inclusion, usefulness, value for money and fellow student behaviour.

Keywords: Service Quality; Determinants; Critical Incident Technique; Students; Higher Education.

Introduction

Student satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) as reported annually in the National Student

Satisfaction survey, is one of the many criteria that contribute to universities' league table

positions in the United Kingdom (UK). The National Student Survey is a nationwide

initiative, which since 2005, has surveyed all final year students studying in publicly funded

Higher Education Institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the majority of

Higher Education Institutions in Scotland. According to the Unistats website[1], which is

owned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on behalf of all the Higher

Education Funding Councils in the UK, the survey yielded a response rate of 62% for the

Business Studies subject area in the 2010-11 academic session. The emphasis on what

contributes to a satisfactory or dissatisfactory student experience is set within the context of

the creation of a market for university services. Successive UK Governments have subjected

Higher Education to severe scrutiny with regards to the cost and quality of their service

provision. In particular the quality of the student experience has been positioned high on the

national agenda for some time. However, from September 2012, Higher Education

institutions are able to set fees for those opting to study in England, Wales and Northern

Ireland, up to a maximum of £9,000 per student for each academic year of undergraduate

study.

The two case study universities discussed in this article charge £9000 and £8000 for

their Business courses. The rises and variation in costs across the country is keeping the

issue of value for money very much at the forefront of any selection decision made by

prospective students.

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[1] http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/downloadSpreadsheet.doc

The National Student Survey, originally piloted in 2004, has continued to seek the

views of students on a number of aspects of teaching, assessment and on the level of support

provided by universities. Results that are made publicly available via a number of websites,

including the National Student Survey 2012 aim to ensure prospective students and other

stakeholders are given enough information to help choose a university. The National Student

Survey results is only one criterion that contributes to league tables for ranking universities

and is reported in the national media (Dean 2011). However, the survey has clearly become

important in the decision making process for rankings.

Focus of Article

The use of league tables in the university selection process has forced student opinion and the

drivers of satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction for this particular Higher Education stakeholder

to the top of universities' agenda. Dean (2011) reported that student satisfaction ratings have

been both continuously and increasingly poor and therefore potentially damaging in terms of

the recruitment and retention of staff and students. Conversely the UK Government's White

Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) reported that most students

were satisfied with their learning experience and the quality of teaching. Regardless of

whether satisfaction is high or low, it remains an issue that is often discussed by experienced

and less experienced practitioners.

A conceptual model introduced by Douglas et al (2008) and its application within the

Higher Education environment highlighted the critical drivers of satisfaction and

dissatisfaction for Higher Education students using the critical incident technique. This

encouraged the retelling in narrative form of specific good and bad experiences by students.

It was clear, from this research, that the written narratives provided a rich source of data to

help a University Faculty understand what drives satisfaction and dissatisfaction for their

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students and was compared with the traditional method of gathering student feedback using mean scores of perceptions or attitudes provided by students for specific areas of teaching and learning.

The main aim of this article is to further explore the conceptual model of Higher Education and the utilisation of critical incident technique for listening to the voice of the student. This will be achieved by using critical incident technique to survey a larger sample of undergraduate business students from two universities, in order to identify those service quality determinants that drive satisfaction, dissatisfaction (or both) and lead to a change in loyalty intentions, such as recommending the university and continuing with their programme of study at their university. Examples of the rich data provided by student respondents are included and will aid the understanding of what satisfies and dissatisfies students. It is proposed that these narratives will help in the process of diagnosing strengths and weaknesses in Higher Education Institution' service provision.

Literature Review

Higher Education in the UK

The UK is experiencing in the 21st Century what the United States of America (USA) experienced during the latter part of the 20th Century, that is, the introduction of fees for students of Higher Education. In the USA fees have risen above and beyond the rate of inflation during that time (Eckel and King 2004) with continuing rises in fees and reductions in government support (Eckel 2008). According to federal government statistics in the USA, tuition fees at public universities rose by 32% by the end of 2009 (Baker 2010). The emphasis is on increasing choice for students in the belief that competition will lead to increased quality and efficiency.

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Quality in Education

In the 1990s the quality focus shifted to include service businesses as well as

manufacturing (Bitner et al 1994) both within the USA and in the UK and in the

Higher Education sector in the UK this focus took the form of quality assurance

systems that placed an emphasis on the student experience (HEFCE, 2012). In any

service organisation, the evidence of service quality is provided during the 'moment

of truth' when the customer interacts with the organisation (Carlzon 1987) and this

concept still holds today (Carlzon 2006; Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 2004).

Customer satisfaction is often influenced by the quality of interpersonal interaction

between the customer and the staff member; the quality of which can be affected by

the customer's own (mis)behaviour (Bitner et al 1994), as well as by the servicescape

itself (Brūggen et al 2011); The servicescape being the physical environment of the

supporting services. Therefore, because of the heterogeneity of services and the

extent of customer participation varies so too does the nature of the experience

(Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 2004). Carlzon (2006) in an interview about

managing businesses proposed that within customer relationship management it was

this emotional interaction between front line staff and their customers that is the most

important issue in building loyalty. Huda and Akhtar (2010) discussed the concept of

a 'flawless performance'. Lost customers and negative word of mouth, Bitner et al

(1994) found can result from not providing a flawless performance. However, they

admitted that it was not always clear how to achieve defect-free performance. Within

services, a defect manifests through, *inter alia,* poor customer satisfaction ratings

(Biolos 2002). Biolos (2002) argued that whilst it was relatively easy to tabulate

satisfaction responses, it was less easy to 'get a feel' for the highly variable standards

that customers use and to have a full understanding of the actual cause of their

dissatisfaction. Biolos (2002) recommended that services should use a more flexible

measurement system and that they should then relentlessly probe the root causes of

any dissatisfaction.

Student Feedback and Student Satisfaction

Herzberg et al (1967) introduced the concept of motivating and hygiene factors (the

two-factor theory) which they said influenced job satisfaction and performance. This

idea has been related to student satisfaction and dissatisfaction with 'satisfiers' being

labelled as motivators and 'dissatisfiers' labelled as 'hygiene factors' (DeShields et al

2005). Herzberg et al (1967) found that not all motivators (satisfiers) were the

obverse of the hygiene factors (dissatisfiers) that is, fixing the hygiene factors will not

necessarily lead to satisfaction, just to no dissatisfaction. Johnston (1995) also found

in a survey of bank customers on their satisfaction that service quality dimensions

could be satisfiers or dissatisfiers or both.

Determinants of Quality in Higher Education

There has been considerable research into identifying dimensions of service quality in

Higher Education, with various authors arriving at different lists of antecedents of

quality. For example, DeShields et al (2005) used 20 variables in their research into

what satisfies American undergraduate business students. LeBlanc and Nguyen (1997)

identified 7 dimensions, whereas, Zineldan et al (2011) identified five areas.

Athiyaman (1997) identified several areas that should be explored to assess the level

of satisfaction from students. The common variables were access and responsiveness.

However, there are few studies that made use of the Critical Incident Technique to

gauge what is important to students in Higher Education in the teaching and learning

and support services contexts. Moreover, the tendency in Higher Education seems to

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be to utilise quantitative measuring techniques to seek views from students on their

satisfaction levels. Douglas et al (2008) used CIT to survey undergraduate students

on their experiences 'within and beyond the classroom'. They concluded that the

critical areas of quality from a student viewpoint were Responsiveness,

Communication and Access. They proposed that the neutral areas, i.e. those areas

that cause neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction were reliability; flexibility; aesthetics;

comfort; competence; courtesy; credibility; integrity; understanding the customer;

security; commitment; functionality and virtual resources. Whilst functionality;

socialising; motivation and friendliness were satisfying factors but management; team

work; attitude; communication and tangibles were dissatisfiers. They developed a

conceptual model of student satisfaction with their higher education experience.

These differences in what constitutes service quality within Higher Education may be

due to cultural differences. However, it is not clear from the literature why there is

such variation.

The UK National Student Survey questionnaire includes 23 statements that ask

the respondents to agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert scale (Definitely Agree;

Mostly Agree; Neither Agree or Disagree; Mostly Disagree; Definitely Disagree). An

example of one of the statements within the teaching section is 'Staff are good at

explaining things.' The areas covered were: Teaching; Assessment and Feedback;

Academic Support; Organisation and Management; Learning Resources; Personal

Development; Overall Satisfaction and Students' Union (Association or Guild). The

National Student Survey questionnaire also has a free comment section which enables

the respondents to describe a positive experience and a negative experience.

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Critical Incident Technique

Critical incident technique has been widely used in many service (and other) contexts to measure satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction and to explore their causes, for example services for airlines and restaurants (Bitner et al 1990); for banking (Johnston 1995) for hotels (Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000); for Healthcare (Kemppainen, 2000) and for wine retailers (Lockshin and McDougall 1998). Very few changes had been made to the original technique made popular by Flanagan (1954) and critical incident technique is still regarded by scholars as both valid and reliable, providing that a number of conditions are met (Gremler 2004). These conditions include that there should be more than one judge to conduct the analysis.

Studies have shown that the qualitative nature of the data results in a 'richness' of information. Johnston (1995) described the 'richness' of this critical incident technique data as being those anecdotes that described a personal experience with the service in question in considerable detail. His research into service quality within banking yielded an anecdote (narrative) with a word length average of just over 30 words, although some had exceeded 100 words. He also found that there were more positive stories from the banks' customers than negative ones. Moreover, some of the negative stories had been derived from a remembered incident from over a decade previously. However, what was significant was that although responses may have been small, the customer loyalty intentions were important to the organisations in terms of retaining and capturing customers and therefore were regarded as significant.

CIT can clearly be used to investigate sources of satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with service encounters (Gremler, 2004), although it is recognised that there are various constraints, such as remembered incidents which may have been misremembered (Johnston 1995), particularly given that the technique involves asking

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respondents to recall and describe a story about something they have experienced. However, it is regarded as a technique that provides a way in which an organisation can identify how the service affects its various stakeholders, highlight good practice and identify any failures. Given the wide use of satisfaction surveys in the education sector worldwide (Nair et al 2011) and their diagnostic use, it would seem reasonable to suggest that a technique that will provide meaningful data for teaching staff should be employed. Lockshin and McDougall (1988) found that organisations could anticipate potential difficulties and inform their customers by using CIT to anticipate and respond to customer needs. Edvardsson and Roos (2001) demonstrated that it was a tool for managing services and according to Johnston (1995) identifying quality determinants is essential to enable the service delivery to be improved. This is essential in an era where there has been a rapid growth of institutions offering Higher Education and where superior quality may give competitive advantage (Lizuka 2012). Finding out what quality means to the group of stakeholders paying for and receiving the service that is Higher Education can be achieved by critical incident technique.

Critical incident technique facilitates this by providing a mechanism for an individual's perceptions to be expressed in their own words. Content analysis is then undertaken, usually by three independent judges, in order to classify the narratives into relevant themes (variables). This qualitative procedure was compared with the traditional quantitative survey method more commonly adopted within Higher Education institutions by Douglas et al (2009). They found that using critical incident technique complemented existing methods well, particularly when there was a desire by a university faculty to see a more rounded view of the student experience. In the Higher Education context the student experience involves service encounters within the learning and teaching environs, as well as within its supporting environment.

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Methodology

Making sense of qualitative data is both difficult and time-consuming (Johnson and

Christensen 2004). Within business and management research the question of

positivism versus phenomenology is important in terms of what philosophy is at the

heart of the research (Saunders et al 2009). The phenomenologist believes that the

area of business and management is so complex that the researcher should understand

the reality behind any given situation (Saunders et al 2009). In order to get a feel for

a situation, an inductive approach is required to help build the theory and make sense

of the data and the reasons behind behaviours. Data analysis can involve a number of

techniques, including Interim Analysis, which involves the researcher alternating

between data collection and analysis. Johnson and Christensen (2004) describe this as

a discursive process, which occurs until the researcher understands enough about the

topic. This can take place over an extended period of time and involve different data

collection points. A deeper understanding of the subject matter can then be

developed.

The approach for this research was to draw from both qualitative and

quantitative data (Creswell, 2009, Cherryholmes, 1992). Guba & Lincoln, (1994)

have identified the postpostivist paradigm as supporting both qualitative and

quantitative research. The postpositivist paradigm they propose (ibid.) has an

ontology that is one of critical realism, an epistemology that is one of modified

objectivist and a methodology that is one of modified experimental and were applied

for this research (p.110)

The use of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques in the collection and

analysis of data had a number of data collection points. An investigation of the

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specific phenomenon in its natural setting was undertaken, that is, within the Higher

Education environs. Saunders and Lewis (2012) suggest that people are social actors

playing a part on the stage of social life and that people place their own interpretation

on the social roles they play. It is also recognized that a researcher's own values also

play a role in the definition of what is appropriate (Saunders and Lewis 2012).

Both inductive and deductive reasoning were applied to this investigation.

Inductive to explore the phenomenon of student satisfaction across two Universities

and across two cohort years, first and final year students, and deductive theories,

which used three researchers, as judges, to code student responses against service

quality determinants developed by Parasuraman et al (1985) and Johnston (1995), in

order to base the research upon. The social world of the students was understood, as

recommended by Saunders and Lewis (2012) but through using Critical Incident

Technique it was intended to deepen this understanding further. The resultant

ontological approach was subjective, however the issue of bias was mitigated by the

use of more than one independent judge being involved in the content analysis

stage. This provided for investigator triangulation, a strategy using more than one

field researcher to collect and analyse the data relevant to a specific research object,

(Downward and Mearman 2002). Critical Incident Technique is a qualitative method

that facilitates an interpretive approach in the coding of the data. It is not as restricted

as the more traditional survey method, which would be limited by the number and

type of questions asked (Saunders et al 2009). Once data is themed and coded it is

quantified, which in turn facilitates quantitative analysis. To assess reliability,

different researchers were used to evaluate whether their observations were

similar. This process is associated with an inductive approach (Saunders et al

2009). In order to avoid the threat of subject bias, care was taken over the design of

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the questionnaire particularly that it gave an assurance of anonymity to respondents.

As Downward and Mearman (2004) note, there are two main arguments put forward

to justify triangulation. The first, put in an early explicit form by Webb et al (1966), is

that triangulation increases the 'persuasiveness' of evidence. Many early studies,

however, tended to emphasise concerns to enhance the empirical reliability of

quantitative measures through triangulation (Campbell and Fiske 1959). Currently,

however, the emphasis is more general and shows concerns for enhancing the

'validity' of insights, or for adding 'completeness' to accounts (Shih, 1998). Thus,

triangulation elaborates understanding (Jick 1979) or confirms the accuracy of data

(Denzin 1989). More explicitly, Danermark et al (2002, p. 153) note the uses of

quantitative analysis to 'test' the validity of qualitative insights, or to use qualitative

work as preparation for quantitative work, and to elucidate a phenomenon in as much

detail as possible

Methods

The focus of this study was aimed at capturing the voice of the student in order to

identify what they deemed was critical to the quality of their student experience. This

involved asking individual students to focus on those service encounters that had been

particularly satisfying or dissatisfying from their point of view. The students also

indicated whether the experience might lead to a change in their future loyalty

behaviours and intentions. The objective was to explore how many events could be

themed within the existing determinants of service quality introduced by Johnston

(1995); Parasuraman et al (1995) and Douglas et al (2008). This exploration and

identification of variables took place via a process of iterative readings of the written

narratives produced.

Liamputtong (2009) provides guidance on coding qualitative data, which cited Charmaz (2006) 'on vivo' codes that help to preserve the respondent's literal meaning of their perceptions, for example, If the student mentioned 'access' then the coding assigned would be 'QD1 for Access'.

Data Collection

Given that the population of the United Kingdom is more heavily weighted towards the English counties (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010) and that there are several large, metropolitan areas within North West England region, a convenience sample of the student population was taken from two universities within Greater Manchester and Merseyside. They are referred to as HEI 1 and HEI 2 where HEI is the Higher Education Institution. The sample used was a mix of first year and final year students from both universities. Two universities were used to allow for internal reliability checks between the organisations to monitor if there was any excessive bias in the sample. The mix of first and final year student sampling was to gauge if there were differences in perceptions according to how long they had been students at their respective universities.

Design of CIT Questionnaire

The CIT questionnaire was purposefully designed to elicit a hand-written account from each student of an encounter within the university context. An earlier pilot study had shown that this could take fifteen minutes to produce a rich amount of data from the majority of respondents. The learning and teaching section of the questionnaire asked for a narrative concerning formal timetabled sessions or personal encounters with teaching staff; whilst the support services section invited narratives concerning, amongst other areas, the catering service offering, the library and interactions with office administrators. The survey instrument also provided an

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opportunity for respondents to indicate whether the experience might influence loyalty behaviours in two areas, namely, (a) repurchasing intentions (intending to study at a higher level), (b) recommending the institution to others. In total, the questionnaire had space for four separate narratives (two satisfying and two dissatisfying experiences).

There were a number of prompting questions, namely (a) What occurred? (b) How did it make you feel? Appendix 1 contains the full questionnaire. Where a student had recorded a dissatisfying encounter, the questionnaire offered a prompt to record what should have happened to turn the situation into a positive experience. The questionnaire was distributed to over 350 students during taught sessions in order that the data could be captured from the majority of full time students in their first or final year of study. The dataset was then derived from the content analysis of the written anecdotal statements. The statements were concerned with individual student perceptions of their experience of university life. To address some of the concerns within the extant literature about validity and reliability, three judges were used in the content analysis and in the coding of this qualitative data.

Results
Each narrative contained between 1 to 3 identifiable determinants of quality. The list of education-specific determinants arising out of earlier research carried out by ----- (2009) has been further updated to include definitions and keywords. The six new determinants of quality were identified from the narratives, namely (i) motivation, which concerned the level of motivation inspired by university personnel; (ii) praise or reward, where the student received unexpected praise for their performance, including a high mark for assessed work or a prize for outstanding work; (iii) social inclusion, was about meeting new people, usually fellow students; (iv) usefulness,

which pertained to a number of factors, such as the subject matter stimulating the

level of interest, particularly where it was something that could be applied to a work

place situation. This determinant also applied to feedback on assessments; (v) value

for money and finally (vi) fellow student behaviour was identified as an issue and

concerned other students' behaviour impacting on the experience of an individual.

The judges discussed their individual findings and an agreement was reached for 95%

of the themes. For the remaining themes a consensus was reached in terms of how to

allocate one or more determinants of quality to each statement.

Of the 350 questionnaires distributed (52.1%) from HEI 1; (47.9%) from HEI

2 were fully or partially completed and legible, producing 915 narratives. In a similar

pattern to that of Johnston (1995), more students recorded descriptions of positive

experiences (483 positive narratives collected). A description of positive teaching and

learning experiences was provided (88%) of the respondents; (67.9%) of the

responses included a positive narrative relating to support services. The number of

dissatisfying encounters within teaching and learning recorded was (81.5%) and

(56.3%) reported a negative experience concerning support services. Table 1 below

shows the breakdown of numbers by year of study and university of study. Where '+'

is indicated this represents a positive variable; conversely ' -' represents a negative

variable.

Take in Table 1. Breakdown of the number and percentage of narratives by University

and by Year of Study.

Although not all narratives could be described as providing 'rich' data, it was still

possible to theme even the more sparse descriptions according to the appropriate

quality determinant. The cut-off point in deciding what was a critical area was at a 5%

response rate in line with ----- (2008) and Johnston (1995); those achieving less that 5%

responses were deemed to be 'neutral' variables of quality and judged to be not so critical to students. The neutral categories were found to be tangibles; care; cleanliness, comfort; commitment; competence; courtesy; flexibility; friendliness; functionality; integrity; motivation; praise; reliability; responsiveness; security; and other student behaviour. Based on the 5% cut off point, eight variables were identified as being the primary determinants of quality within Higher Education.

Satisfiers / Dissatisfiers in Higher Education

The positive narratives described a range of experiences within the teaching and learning environment and were categorised using the HE determinants of quality. Table 2 below illustrates the frequencies of the narratives for each independent variable and the higher percentage of responses show that the critical areas for teaching and learning are: Attentiveness; Communication and Usefulness, whereas for the support servicescape the critical areas are Access; Attentiveness and Value for Money. The variables that are deemed critical have been highlighted in bold within Table 2.

Take in Table 2. Independent Variable Frequencies of Responses for Teaching, Learning and Assessment and for Support Services

Critical Determinants of Quality in Higher Education

The critical determinants of quality within Higher Education shown by these findings are:

(a) *Access* - This is defined as the physical approachability of service location, the level of ease of finding way around the environment, the clarity of the route, ease of contact with university staff. The keywords provided for the theming of this

determinant of quality were convenient hours of operation / location/ sign-posting,

access to services / facilities / buildings/ rooms / tutors /virtual resources. This

determinant of quality was more of an issue for the support services than for teaching

and learning (see Figure 1) and varied by year and university. A breakdown of HEI 1

results yielded a 40% response rate on the Access variable by final year students but

only a 10% response rate for first year students. Whilst a breakdown of HEI 2 results

produced a response rate of around 15% for first year students but above 20% for

final year students. Access appeared to be both a satisfier and a dissatisfier for

support services, but produced less than a 5% response for dissatisfaction within

teaching and learning. 'Access' provided *verbatim* in the example narrative below

was concerned with the student's access to library services (textbooks).

> *"I had taken out library books over the summer to write my
> dissertation, when term started again I couldn't renew them as the
> library system said that my student status had expired. I had to go to
> see my programme leader to get it sorted out which took about a week.
> I felt angry as the school office was telling me I had to pay late fees
> for books the library was telling me I couldn't return."*

A total of 47 narratives expressed dissatisfaction with this variable in the support

service context and also included access to computers, textbooks, and car parking

facilities. A small number of the responses (n = 18) contained positive experiences

within the teaching and learning context and 13 responses detailed dissatisfaction in

the teaching and learning servicescape. The impact on loyalty intentions appear to be

significant with (n = 13, 72%) of students confirming that the positive experience was

likely to lead to them recommending their university to others.   For the negative

experiences, the impact was that less than half of the respondents in both universities

indicated that their experience would adversely affect their recommending their

university to others (n = 5, 38%).

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Take in Figure 1. Access Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support
Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) as percentages.

(b) *Attentiveness* (helpfulness) - was defined as willingness of contact staff to provide

help or giving the impression of being interested in the student; providing support.

Some of the keywords used to help the judges in their content analysis were

helpfulness, interested, attentive to needs, and readiness to provide service. This

determinant of quality triggered a large response in both teaching and learning and

support service contexts, with 81 positive narratives describing a teaching and

learning experience, 34 negative narratives in the teaching and learning area, 74

positive support service narratives and 17 negative support service narratives. Figure

2 below refers.

Take in Figure 2. Attentiveness Variable by University and Year of Study (for
Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) as percentages.

The majority of respondents in both universities indicated that they would recommend

the university (n = 65, 80%) and continue with their studies (n = 61, 75%) based on

their positive experiences in teaching and learning. However, only a small percentage

(n = 12, 35%) of respondents in both universities indicated that their negative

experience would adversely affect their intention to recommend the university.

Clearly, there is a level of tolerance with this quality determinant.

> *"Succeeding in [Named] University, as I am another EU country's
> student. When I arrived in the UK my language skills were not good,
> but with the help of lecturers I'm still studying in [named degree]."*
>
> *"During this year first semester, I had an assignment to do in [named
> subject]. I finished my assignment but I felt there was something
> wrong with the structure, so I went to my lecturer and he helped
> (directed) in finding where the problem was and I found it in the end."*
>
> *"Staff is always kind and helpful."*

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"Year 1 and 2 modules taught by (name supplied) and (name supplied). Believe to be the most well thought out and structured lectures with plenty of support and supervision available. One of the 1st modules to use Blackboard e-learners website."

"I liked the way the tutors conducted their lectures with the help of hand-outs and guidance. They are always, or most of the time available for assistance."

"During exam period / coursework hand in dates, not enough resources in the form of computers / printers, queues for computers were very long – led to further panic and frustration. Worried I wouldn't be able to hand work in on time because no access to computer at home."

"Not being able to get a text book when need [sic] as other students haven't returned them. Frustrating. Should have higher fines."

(c)   Availability - was defined as the amount of time that each member of a Faculty

team can give to the students. It also included the availability of service goods,

including the quantity and range of goods made available to students. This was not a

critical determinant of quality but nevertheless warrants some discussion as there was

a response rate of 6.8% in the support service environment section of the

questionnaire. The narratives indicated dissatisfaction in this area. Some examples of

the comments are given below. Figure 3 shows that this determinant of quality was

an issue for HE1 final year students, but not the first year students.

Take in Figure 3. Availability Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support
Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) as percentages.

"Parking situation. We pay £156 per year, and we are still not guaranteed a parking space. Frustrated and annoyed with uni. Stop people using it on a pay and go. Only sell enough permits for car parking spaces and only allow these people in."

"Poor computers – either system was down can't log on. Printers not working. Angry, could not get my work finished on time. Should maintain computers at a level so they can be used when needed."

"No proper food in the canteen as in halaal food. It made me feel annoyed."

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> *"Library- lack of resources, books. Not enough supervision on
> students who maybe went for a social event. Don't have long enough
> opening hours. It made me come in the library less and use others.
> Should make sure more books and computers are available to all and
> ensure more silent study areas and longer hours."*

(d)   Communication - was defined as the ability of the university to communicate

with their students in a language they understand. This included clarity, completeness,

and accuracy, both the verbal and written form, and the ability of university

employees to listen to and understand the student. It included explaining the service

itself, the costs involved, the trade-offs between service and cost, assuring the student

that a problem will be handled. The keywords provided to judges to aid in their

decision-making were teaching methods, feedback on module / subject, cancelled

classes, work placement supervision, and module organisation. This variable

produced a large response from students, with 80 narratives including a description of

a satisfying encounter in the area of teaching and learning, and 135 narratives

describing a dissatisfactory teaching and learning encounter. The larger response

came from HEI 2 with 58 students recording a positive teaching and learning incident,

as opposed to just 22 from HEI 1. Adverse comments from each university were

similar (63 HEI 1: 72 HEI 2). Figure 4 below refers.

Take in Figure 4. Communication Variable by University and Year of Study (for
Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) as percentages.

There were far less narratives concerned (n = 3, .01% positive experiences; n = 6, .03%

for negative experiences) with support services in terms of communication. Some

examples of communication-themed narratives are provided below:

> *"Teacher making jokes but in an appropriate time and keep on
> teaching seriously."*

> *"Use of very simplistic terms within an otherwise complicated subject
> in putting cases into everyday terms and in injecting enthusiasm."*

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"Not just reading, but involved different activities to help to learn and focus more such as videos, group work."

"Going through worked examples of past exam questions as a group".

"The topic was boring, too easy, lecturer was in a bad mood and stressed. Felt disappointed. The lecturer should have explained why she was moody or apologised for being stressed."

"I had bought a book for the class which wasn't on the current year's reading list but was on a previous one. The tutor wasn't happy that I had bought this book as he was using it to photocopy lecture notes and give us the exercises to complete. I felt upset as the book was relevant to the course and I had spent money on it. The tutor could have explained that he was using that book to plan classes out of and I would have just used it for private study and not bought it to class."

(e)   *Social Inclusion* - was defined as meeting new friends and feeling a sense of belonging. This was identified by the students as a satisfier with a number of responses concerned with the social aspect of university life. There were 10 positive narratives in the area of teaching and learning and 23 in the support services area. Examples of social inclusion are provided below:

"Meeting colleagues outside uni."

"Freshers Week."

"On the first week all people I encountered were very friendly. I felt more relaxed and helped me settle in better."

"Too many introduction lectures in the first week. I felt distanced. Couldn't go out and make new friends as much."

(f)   *Usefulness* - was defined as the subject matter stimulated the level of interest

from the student, the topic can be applied in the work-place, or in real life situations;

industry-based learning, computer programmes. It was also applied to feedback

received on assignment submissions and informed feedback on examinations.

Although the definition did not include how this would apply to the support services

environment, one respondent referred to usefulness in his narrative. This is provided

below. The keywords provided for judging were added-value, learning, meaningful

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and add to skills. Usefulness appears to be largely a satisfier with 41 descriptions

concerning a positive teaching and learning experience that was useful to the student.

> *"When I received a piece of coursework back, I was given good feedback which enabled me to improve in the future. It made me feel good as I knew what I needed to do to improve my mark."*

> *"Learning to use a wide range of computer programs, especially excel for accounting purposes. Felt competent using unfamiliar computer programs."*

> *"Using Blackboard for help and guidance in modules."*

> *"The 'jobs worth' security staff who work in the library and don't seem to do anything useful. Either sack them or get rid of the card swipe gates and make guards do something for their money."*

(g)   *Value for money* - was defined as the fees paid for a programme of study,

library fines, and printing costs. It also included goods sold as part of the service, for

example, cafeteria / bistro products. Keywords were Expensive, value, price, cost.

The concept of feeling they had received value for their money was mainly in the area

of support services, with 34 negative responses received for this area.

> *"Paying stupid amounts of money for education. There should be more help from the uni with finance."*

> *"I got a big library fine. They could have let me off with the fine."*

> *"Food services (lack of decent, cheap food)."*

> *"Paying for printing – disappointing."*

> *"The food prices are lot more expensive in the Students Union than in town."*

(h) *Achievement* - was defined as when the student feels a sense of achievement,

usually regarding something they have learned, for example, encountering a new

software package, or developing presentation skills. A sense of achievement was

referred to in a positive light in 27 teaching and learning narratives.

> *"In (subject named) tutorials were very involving and very helpful towards passing the course. I felt confident in that subject."*

> *"For our [name supplied] module we had to deliver a 30 min presentation. This helped us to gain skills which will be useful later in life. I felt I had really achieved something as I had never spoken in front of people while presenting slides."*

In summary, a number of rich narratives covering a wide range of determinants of quality in Higher Education were collated and analysed. Figure 5 below shows each determinant of quality in terms of the number of responses that were themed according to the variable in question.

Take in Figure 5.

Every determinant is represented in the students' feedback, but Communication and Attentiveness where the variables that resulted in the most response (Communication = 224 narratives; Attentiveness = 206 narratives). Figure 6 shows the determinants of quality for Higher Education in order of frequency.

Take in Figure 6. Determinants of Service Quality in Higher Education for Business School Students in order and count of frequency.

Discussion and Recommendations

The main aim of this research was to test the validity of the conceptual model of student satisfaction with their university experience developed by Douglas et al (2008). This aim has been achieved by utilising the qualitative research method known as Critical Incident Technique on a larger scale, involving more student respondents over two universities, rather than one. This study has shown that the critical areas of quality, i.e. those that will both satisfy students and dissatisfy students were as follows:

Teaching and Learning Quality Determinants:

- Access;

- Attentiveness;

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- Communication;

- Availability was critical only for Final Year students in both universities and

  for First Year students only in one university (HEI 1).

Within an earlier study Douglas et al (2008) Communication was also a critical area

for students in the context of teaching, learning and assessment. Therefore the

findings here validate earlier findings with regards to Communication.

Support Services Quality Determinants:

- Access;

- Attentiveness (Final Year only). It was a Satisfier, but not a Dissatisfier for

  First Year students).

- Availability;

- Communication (First Year students only for both institutions; Final Year

  students only for HEI 2). It was a dissatisfier but not a satisfier for Final Year

  students of HEI 1.

Within the earlier study by Douglas et al (2008) Access was also a critical area. The

Responsiveness variable resulted in a relatively small number of responses from this

study with less than 2% in each context. This differs from the earlier findings of

Douglas et al (2008) who proposed that this was a critical area for their study

University. It is not clear why this should vary, although that study was smaller than

this current study and involved only one institution. The neutral variables in this

study were Tangibles, Care, Cleanliness, Comfort, Commitment, Competence,

Courtesy, Flexibility, Friendliness, Functionality, Integrity, Motivation, Praise,

Reliability, Responsiveness, Security, and Fellow Student Behaviour (refer to Table 2

for the percentage scores); thus agreeing to a large extent with the findings of

previous studies.

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The area that created the most dissatisfaction in this study was

Communication. However, its impact on the students' loyalty intentions was

relatively small, with only 28% for HE 1 and 26% for HEI 2 indicating that they

would be adversely influenced in their recommendation of the university. It is

nevertheless clearly an area that both universities should focus their attentions on.

Moreover, in order to reach the standard of flawless performance, it is recommended

that an analysis by Higher Education Institutions of their satisfiers would assist in

identifying how the service gets it right for their primary customers.

A number of responses provided a suggestion about what should have

happened to make their experience a more positive one. In the area of teaching and

learning this was 75% of responses and for support services this was 52% of

responses. This will be the subject of future work as it included some useful

suggestions that could be used for training purposes and for the setting of standards of

service.

There was some overlap between some of the determinants of quality, for

instance, social inclusion and friendliness. However, most of the narratives make

interesting reading and do indeed contain rich data that is a lot more meaningful than

mean scores for perceptions or attitudes, which on their own tell an individual staff

member very little about their professional practice and how they might improve.

This could be a much more effective mechanism for measuring and improving service

quality in an educational setting.

It is recognised that this article has focused on one type of student to gather

perspectives of university life, that is, the business undergraduate. It would be

interesting to also seek the views of a broader sample of undergraduate and post-

graduate students as well as other stakeholders to assess whether communication,

access and attentiveness are critical to quality for them. This research could also be

extended to students of other disciplines outwith the business subject area.

The implications for universities and their staffing groups are that the above

critical areas are where the focus needs to be made, as they are both satisfiers and

dissatisfiers, which will impact on loyalty behaviours, including word of mouth.

Word of mouth will strongly influence final year students in what they say via the

National Student Survey which can adversely impact league table positions.

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Table 1: Breakdown of the number and percentage of narratives by University and year of study.

		Teaching and Learning (+) (n = 273)	Teaching and Learning (-) (n = 252)	Support Services (+) (n = 213)	Support Services (-) (n = 177)
	Number plus % of the total number of respondents (i.e. out of 309)				
HEI 1	First Year	48 (5.2%)	38 (4.1%)	35 (3.8%)	20 (2.1%)
	Final Year	91 (9.9%)	100 (10.9%)	76 (8.3%)	63 (6.8%)
	Total	**139**	**138**	**111**	**83**
HEI 2					
	First Year	73 (7.9%)	62 (6.7%)	59 (6.4%)	48 (5.2%)
	Final Year	61 (6.6%)	52 (5.6%)	40 (4.3%)	43 (4.7%)
	Total	**134**	**114**	**99**	**91**

Table 2: Independent Variable Frequencies of Responses for Teaching, Learning and Assessment and for Support Services

| Variables	TLA Satisfiers	TLA Dissatisfiers	SS Satisfiers	SS Dissatisfiers
Access	**5.8%**	4.2%	**15.5%**	**15.2%**
Tangibles	Nil	Nil	0.3%	0.6%
Attentiveness	**26.2%**	**11%**	**23.9%**	**5.5%**
Availability	1.3%	3.9%	3.6%	**6.8%**
Care	0.3%	0.3%	1%	0.3%
Cleanliness	0.3%	Nil	1%	0.6%
Comfort	0.3%	0.6%	Nil	Nil
Commitment	0.3%	Nil	0.3%	Nil
Communication	**25.9%**	**43.7%**	1%	1.9%
Competence	1%	1.3%	1.6%	3.6%
Courtesy	0.3%	0.6%	Nil	Nil
Flexibility	0.6%	1.9%	0.3%	1.3%
Friendliness	2.3%	0.6%	2.3%	1.6%
Functionality	2.6%	0.3%	3.6%	4.2%
Integrity	0.6%	Nil	Nil	0.3%
Motivation	2.3%	1.3%	0.6%	Nil
Praise	2.6%	Nil	0.6%	0.6%
Reliability	0.6%	2.3%	Nil	0.6%
Responsiveness	0.3%	1.3%	0.6%	0.3%
Security	0.3%	Nil	0.3%	Nil
Social Inclusion	3.2%	Nil	**7.4%**	1.9%
Usefulness	**13.3%**	2.3%	2.9%	0.3%
Value for Money	0.3%	1%	1%	**11**%
Achievement	**8.7%**	1.9%	0.3%	0.3%
Other Students	0.3%	2.3%	0.3%	0.3%
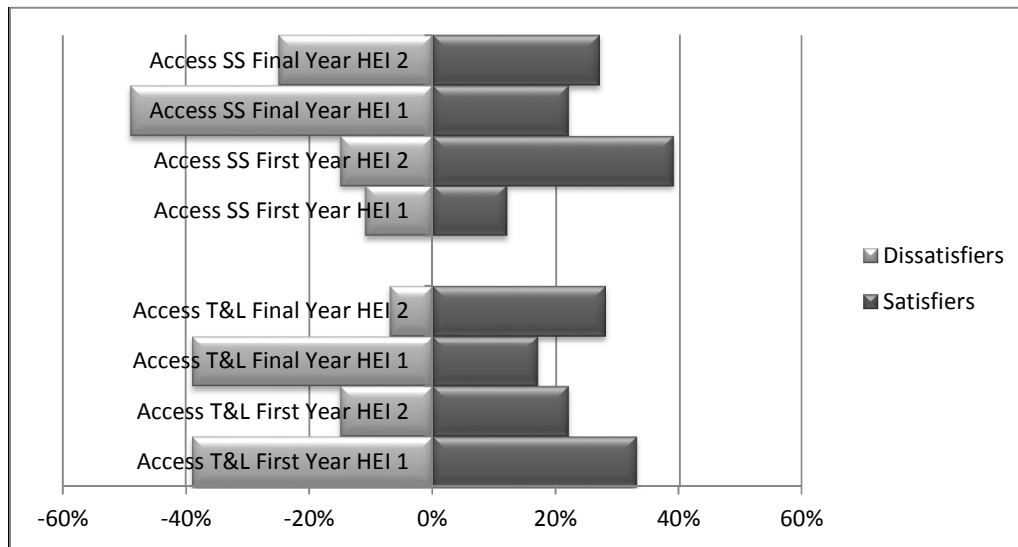
27

Figure 1: Access Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) **as percentages.**
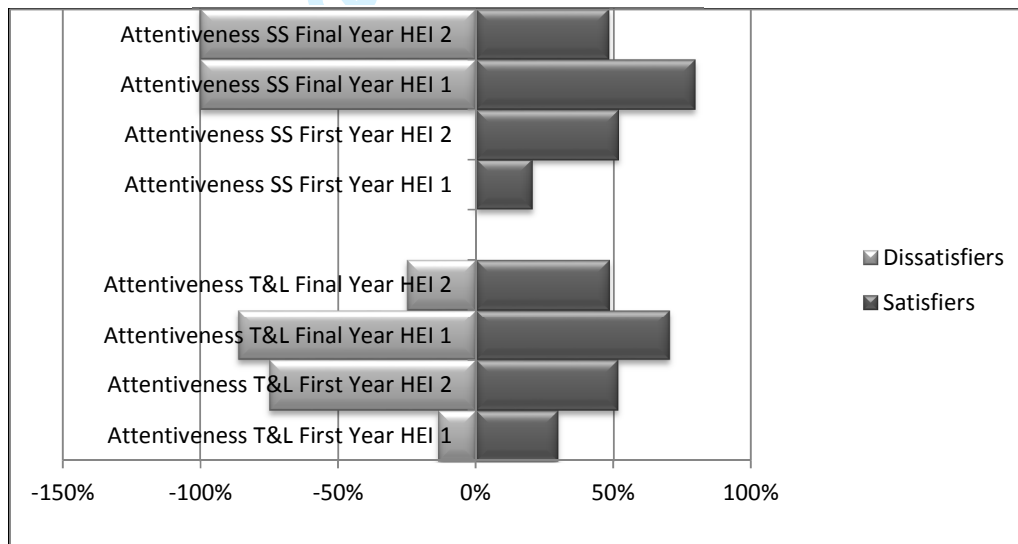

Figure 2: Attentiveness Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) **as percentages**
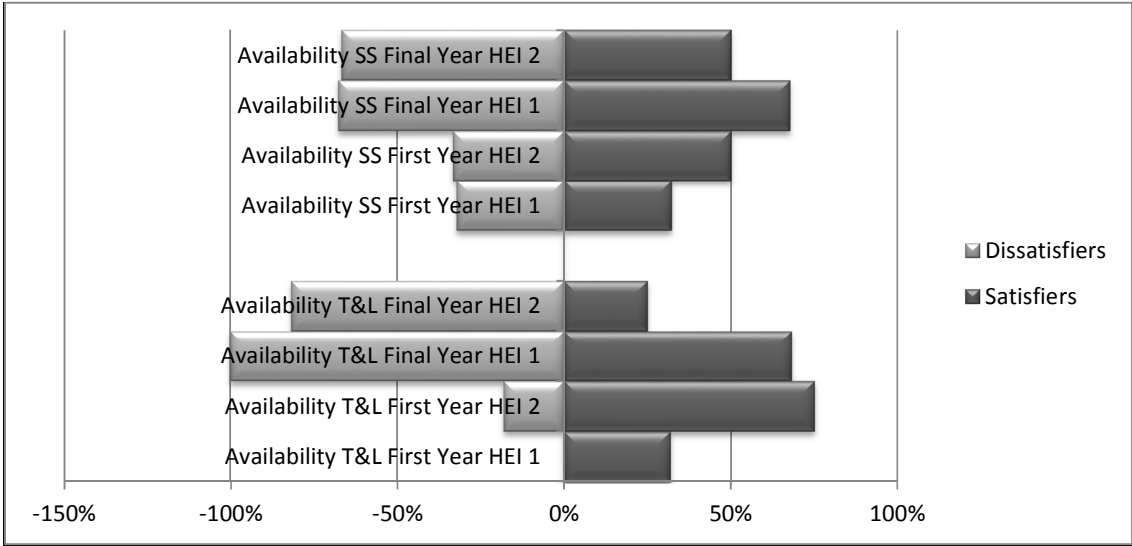
Figure 3: Availability Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) **as percentages.**
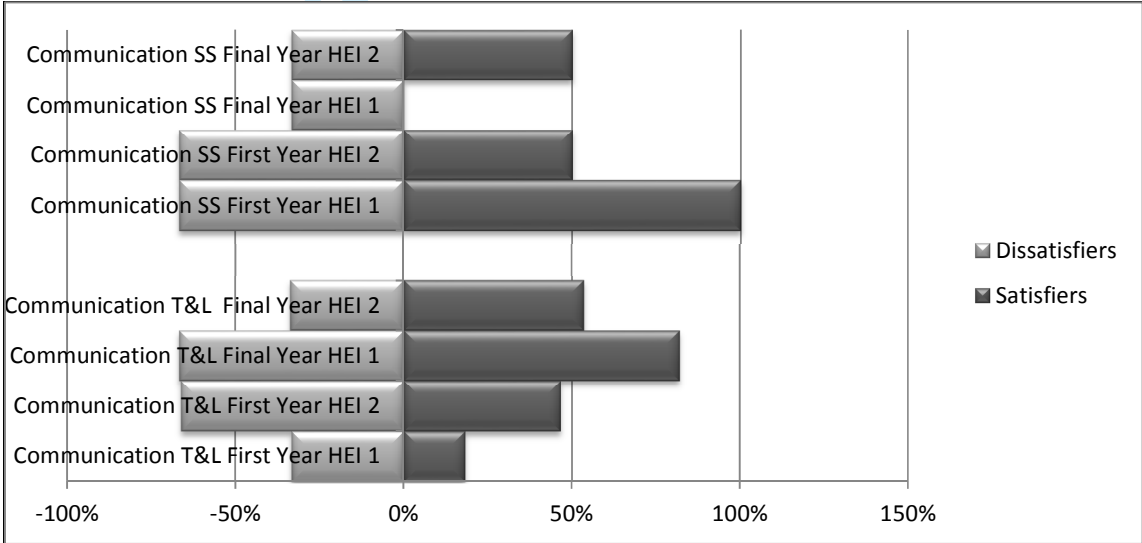

Figure 4: Communication Variable by University and Year of Study (for Support Services [SS] and Teaching & Learning [T&L]) **as percentages.**
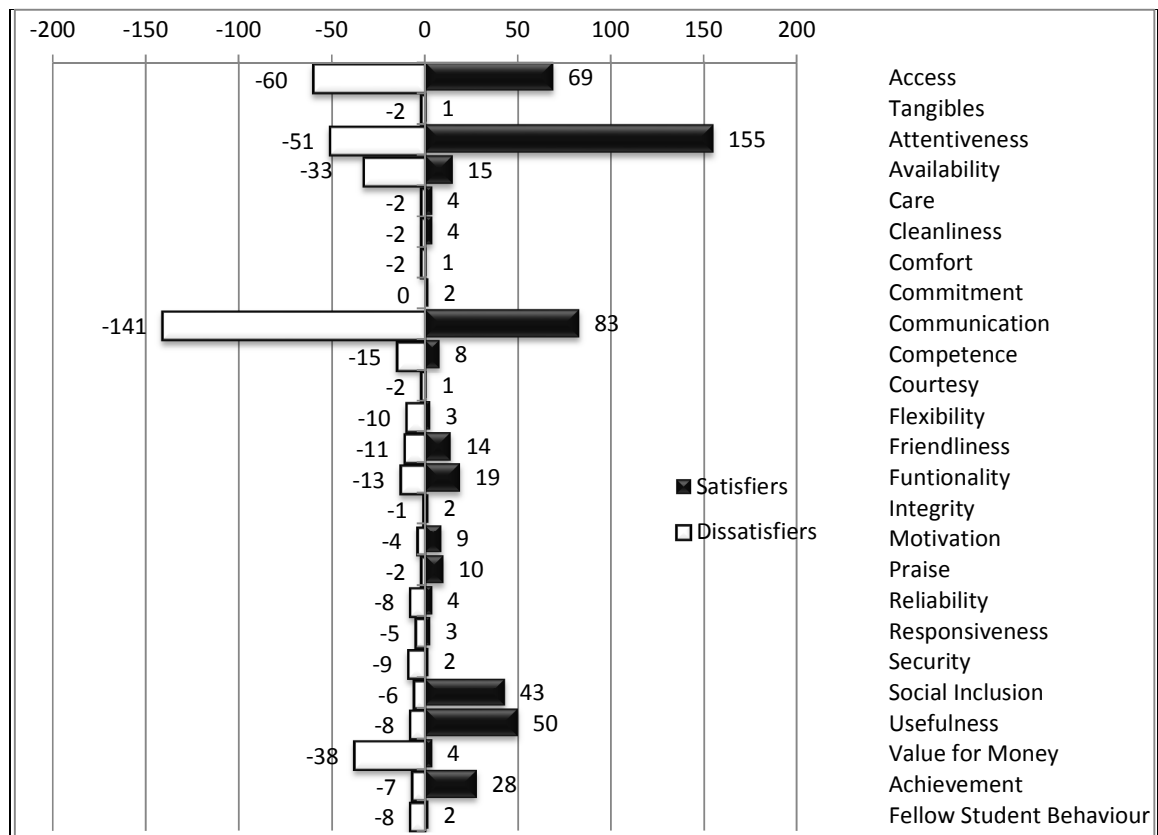
29

Figure 5: Counts of the sources of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction in Higher Education
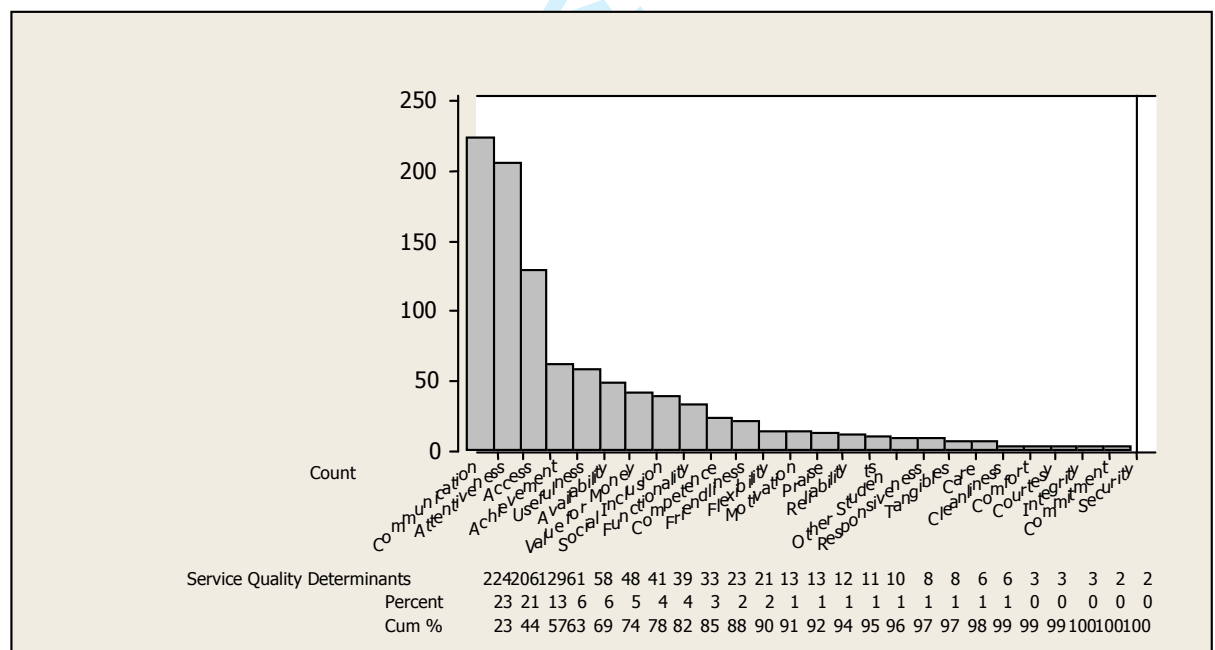

Figure 6. Service Quality Determinants in Higher Education for Business School Students in order and count of frequency.

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Appendix 1

STUDENT EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU (PLEASE TICK THE RELEVANT CIRCLE)

◯ Male   ◯ UK Student
◯ Female   ◯ International EU Student
                ◯ International Non-EU Student

SECTION 2: TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCES

1. **Please describe a <u>positive</u> Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experience that you have at this university.**

(a) What occurred?

(b) How did it make you feel?

(c) Would this positive experience influence any of the following:
     (i)   You recommending the University
     (ii)   You enrolling for further study at this University
     (iii) You staying on the course.

2. **Please describe a <u>negative</u> Teaching, Learning and Assessment Experience that you have at this university.**

(a) What occurred?

(b) How did it make you feel?

(c) Would this positive experience influence any of the following:
     (i)   You recommending the University
     (ii)   You enrolling for further study at this University
     (iii) You staying on the course.

(d) What could have happened to improve the situation?

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SECTION 3: SUPPORT SERVICES EXPERIENCES

3. Please describe a <u>positive</u> Support Services Experience that you have at this university.
(a) What occurred?

(b) How did it make you feel?

(c) Would this positive experience influence any of the following:
    (iv) You recommending the University
    (v) You enrolling for further study at this University
    (vi) You staying on the course.

4. Please describe a <u>negative</u> Support Services Experience that you have at this university.
(a) What occurred?

(b)
    How did it make you feel?

(c) Would this positive experience influence any of the following:
    (iv) You recommending the University
    (v) You enrolling for further study at this University
    (vi) You staying on the course.

(d) What could have happened to improve the situation?

Total Number of Words = 9004