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LITERATURE REVIEW OF SERVICE QUALITY AND STUDENT SATISFACTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a literature review of the two concepts of service quality and student satisfaction in the context of strengthening quality assurance. It discusses the concept of service quality from the view of marketing literature and then applies this concept in the higher education sector. Tools for measuring service quality and student satisfaction for assessment of the quality of an institution are also addressed. At the end of the paper are implications for using the theoretical foundations and measuring instruments of service quality and student satisfaction to improve the quality as well as quality management at higher education institutions.

Keywords: service quality, student satisfaction, quality assurance, higher education.

TÓM TẮT

Tổng quan tài liệu về chất lượng dịch vụ và sự hài lòng của sinh viên từ quan điểm đảm bảo chất lượng giáo dục đại học

Bài viết này là một tổng quan tài liệu về hai khái niệm về chất lượng dịch vụ và sự hài lòng của sinh viên trong bối cảnh tăng cường đảm bảo chất lượng. Bài viết thảo luận khái niệm chất lượng dịch vụ từ quan điểm của lí thuyết tiếp thị sau đó áp dụng khái niệm này trong lĩnh vực giáo dục đại học. Các công cụ để đo lường chất lượng dịch vụ và sự hài lòng của sinh viên để đánh giá chất lượng của một cơ sở cũng được trình bày. Cuối bài viết là những gợi ý cho việc sử dụng cơ sở lí luận và các công cụ đo lường chất lượng dịch vụ và sự hài lòng của sinh viên để cải thiện chất lượng cũng như quản lí chất lượng tại các cơ sở giáo dục đại học.

Từ khóa: chất lượng dịch vụ, sự hài lòng của sinh viên, đảm bảo chất lượng, giáo dục đại học.

1. Introduction

Service quality has been major preoccupation for managers in numerous industries. It has also been received high attention in the higher education sector and considered as a key indicator of the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs). No longer being protected by the state, a number of factors such as public funding reductions, an

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oversupply of university places have forced HEIs to become much more competitive in attracting funding and good students. Institutions have not only cared about the quality of education product but also the quality of education service to their students. Enhancing service quality is a wise policy for an institution to be successful in competition with other HEIs.

The rise of quality assurance has also forced HEIs to enhance their service quality and student satisfaction. Institutions are under pressure of providing evidence that they are providing an education environment enabling students to achieve their learning goals. During the 1990s, interest in the measurement of service quality and student service experience was high in the higher education sector (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). In recent years, many HEIs have used student experience and satisfaction surveys to explore the student perceptions of their institutions. This kind of feedback from the service users is a useful tool for the quality management.

This paper is a literature review of the two concepts of service quality and student satisfaction that have been increasingly important for HEIs in the context of strengthening quality assurance. Although quality education has always been a priority in the higher education sector, there is a change in the interest of managers at HEIs from demonstrating the quality of education to the quality of service. The paper discusses the concept of service quality from the view of marketing literature and then applies this concept in the higher education sector. It also presents tools for measuring service quality and the use of student satisfaction as a proxy for assessment of the quality of an institution. The issue of student satisfaction is analyzed in relation with higher education quality assurance. At the end of the paper are implications for using the theoretical foundations and measurements of service quality and student satisfaction to aim at improving the quality and quality management at HEIs.

2. From Quality of Education to Quality of Service

Many attempts have been made in defining the concept of quality and they have come to a common consensus that there is no single meaning of quality. Quality is a relative concept and it means different things to different people.

The most often cited literature on quality in higher education is a foundation work of Harvey and Green (1993) in which the authors propose five approaches to defining quality. These philosophical notions provide different analytical frameworks to examine the meanings of quality in higher education including

- quality as exceptional, which views quality as something special with three variations including distinctive, exceeding very high standards, and passing required standards;

- quality as perfection or consistent, which focuses on processes and relates to zero defects and quality culture;
- quality as fitness for purpose, which judges the quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service fit its purpose - defined either as meeting customer requirements or conformity with the institutional mission;
- quality as value for money, which assesses quality in terms of return on investment and relates to accountability; and
- quality as transformation, which defines quality as a process of change with emphasis on adding value to students and empowering them.

According to Harvey and Green (1993), quality as distinctive is the traditional notion of quality. It involves with the elitist view of the high quality of education in the time when universities are only accessible to high-class students. In this notion, universities of themselves 'quality' and do not need to demonstrate it, or in other words, there is no need of assessing quality. The education quality is guaranteed implicitly by the practices of academic staff in elite universities such as Harvard and Oxford and in German higher education. The other approaches to and variations of quality definition judge quality against predetermined standards or desired outcomes. These views of quality call for an assessment of quality and means of assessing quality.

Among different approaches to defining quality in higher education, fitness for purpose has been the most widely adopted one. Again here purpose is an elusive concept of which the meaning is dependent on whose purpose and how to assess fitness. Considering students as customers, who are sovereign, is meant that the purpose of higher education is to meet customers' requirements.

Theoretically, customers have requirements that become the specifications for the service. However, the normal practice is that service providers investigate customers' needs through market research or sale assessment. That means the providers are determining customers' requirements. Furthermore, in higher education, students are not in the position of specifying their requirements on education provision.

The substantial elements of education quality, such as curriculum, knowledge and skills provided in the courses, teaching approaches, academic standards and staff, are widespread considered as a good proxy for the quality of education. However, higher education students, traditionally, have limited options for this aspect of education quality.

Taking the view that students are primary customers of universities, it does make sense of offering students opportunities to express their needs on physical facilities, learning environment, and service delivery such as library and computer services, accommodation, health care, food, social life and so on. These elements of education

quality are a good proxy for the service delivery aspect. Attempts to measure the service quality in higher education have been paying attention to exploring student perceptions of the service delivery.

HEIs have become more student-oriented. Along with the needs for diverse and high-quality educational programs, students expect universities offer a variety of delivery options that are timely, easily accessible and user-friendly. Developing means of evaluating and managing student perceptions of the service quality continues becoming a common practice in higher education.

3. Service Quality and Measuring Service Quality

In marketing literature, it is widely accepted that the characteristics of service are intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity. These service characteristics have important implications for measuring service quality in higher education (Clewes, 2003; Hill, 1995).

The intangible attribute of service causes managers to manage to have physical evidence to provide tangible cues of service quality. The second characteristic, inseparability, means the production and consumption of service happens simultaneously. Therefore, consumer satisfaction is not only ditermined by the service provider but also other consumers. The third characteristic, heterogeneity, means that the service that the consumer receives is not standardized and dependent on the staff. This emphasizes a need for giving consumers opportunities to report on their experience with staff and delivery process.

As a result, the most common definition of service quality is concerned with consumers' judgement of the service based on what they have experienced. The judgment is made by comparing what they expected to receive with what they perceived they actually received. In this notion, the service quality is perceived by the consumer or user and is called perceived service quality.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) develope the most widely applied measurement of perceived service quality, namely the SERVQUAL, suitable for a variety of industries and sectors. In the model, service quality is measured by the gap between consumers' expectations of the service and their perceptions of service performance. The model is also called a gap analysis model of service quality.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) refine the SERVQUAL instrument and suggested five generic dimensions of quality including

1. Tangibles, which are appearance of physical facilities and personnel;

2. Reliability, which is the performing of the promised service dependably, accurately, and consistently;

3. Responsiveness, which is employees' willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

4. Assurance, which is employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to convey trust and confidence; and

5. Empathy, which is employees' caring and individualized attention.

Although the SERVQUAL instrument has been widely applied, there are many unresolved issues related to it including the accuracy of service quality measurement, the definition and measurement of expectation, the format of measurement instrument, and the context-specific dimension of service quality.

Clewes (2003) reviews literature on the measurement of quality in higher education and identifies three approaches. The first approach adapts the SERVQUAL instrument. This often uses complicated measurement techniques and occasional investigations undertaken by researchers to explore factors or dimensions of service quality. The second and the third use methods for assessing the student experience that can be divided into two interrelated categories: the quality of teaching and learning; and the total experience of an institution. The later approaches often use education-related questionnaires and annual surveys undertaken by HEIs for the purpose of quality assurance.

Along with the rise in serving students as customers, many universities evaluate aspects of the student experience beyond the quality of teaching and learning. Student feedback on their total experience of an institution helps to identify which areas of services are important to students and which are required for improvement. Assessing the service provision by the student satisfaction survey is an approach to integrate student views into management decision making (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998).

4. Student Satisfaction and the link with Perceived Service Quality

The term satisfaction in marketing literature is to some extent quite similar to perceived quality and is resulting from an evaluation of a product or service. Satisfaction can be defined as the feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing perceived performance in relation to the expectation (Athiyaman, 1997; Weerasinghe, Lalitha & Fernando, 2017).

Weerasinghe et al. (2017) review all available literature about students' satisfaction in higher education and do not see much change in the definitions of the concept. Students' satisfaction can be defined as a short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of students' educational experience, services and facilities.

Athiyaman (1997) presents a conceptual framework to explore the relationship between consumer satisfaction and perceived service quality as illustrated in Figure 1. Consumer satisfaction is the result of the evaluation of a specific transaction or

consumption experience, and directly and indirectly determined by the assessment of the service in terms of disconfirmation of expectations. Consumer satisfaction produces the pre-consumption attitude toward the service. Both attitude and perceived service quality are an overall evaluation of a product or service, so these two concepts can be considered as similar in meaning.

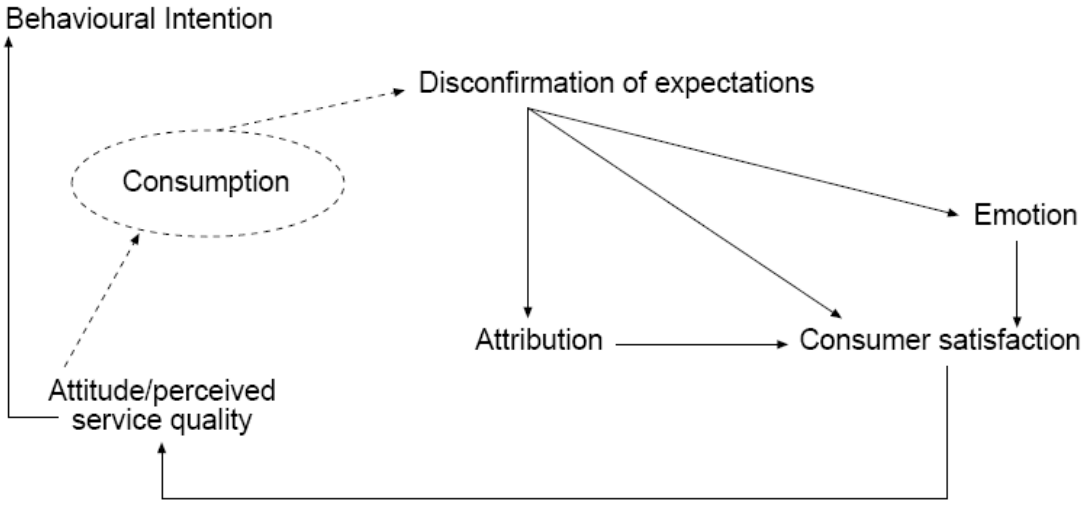

Figure 1. *Model of consumer satisfaction and perceived service quality*

Source: Athiyaman, (1997)

The author also applies this framework into the higher education sector. The difference between consumer satisfaction and perceived service quality is that the former is situation-oriented and related to specific transition while the latter is an enduring overall attitude (Athiyaman, 1997). In the case of higher education, student satisfaction of attending a class is the result of an evaluation of the goodness or badness of this class. A student's service quality perception is a function of his or her satisfaction with classes attended. In practice, measuring student satisfaction with all relevant classes would be a difficult task, so exploring perceived quality in terms of satisfaction with general university characteristics is an easier approach (Athiyaman, 1997).

Student satisfaction is a crucial element of student experience data. The student experience survey is conducted annually at the national level in the United States (US), Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the Netherlands. Questions included and service quality dimensions examined in the survey are subject to the characteristics and interest of HEIs and the higher education system. A review of literature on student satisfaction surveys reveals that there are similarities in factors used (Table 1).

More and more aspects of the student experience beyond the quality of teaching and learning have been added to the student experience satisfaction surveys. Physical and

administrative aspects of the services provided by HEIs have become significantly detailed and diverse. Aldridge and Rowley (1998) list 10 aspects of life-related services/facilities, four aspects of teaching and learning support and other different aspects of the university environment. Yusoff, McLeay and Woodruffe-Burto (2015) acknowledge the importance of relationship between staff and students along with the practices and environment of teaching and learning.

Table 1. *Factors in total student experience satisfaction surveys*

Harvey (1995)	**Hill (1995)**	**Aldridge and Rowley (1998)**	**Yusoff, McLeay and Woodruffe-Burto (2015)**
• Library services • Computer services • Refectories • Accommodation • Course organization and assessment • Teaching staff and teaching style • Teaching methods • Student workload and assessment • Social life • Self-development • Financial circumstance • University environment	• Library services • Computing facilities • Catering service • Accommodation • Course content • Personal contact with academic staff • Teaching methods • Teaching quality • Student involvement • Work experience • Financial service • Feedback • Joint consultation • Bookshop • Careers service • Counseling welfare • Health service • Students' union • Physical education • Travel agency	Services/facilities for students • Accommodation • careers service • catering services • child care • cleanliness of campus • counseling • health care • recreation and sport • students' union • welfare rights Teaching and learning Teaching and learning support including: • general • computer services • library services • mediaTech services Teaching and learning development Equal opportunities, disability and special needs, and environment Communication, consultation, feedback and complaints	• Professional comfortable environment • Student assessments and learning experiences • Classroom environment • Lecture and tutorial facilitating goods • Textbooks and tuition fees • Student support facilities • Business procedures • Relationship with teaching staff • Knowledgeable and responsive faculty • Staff helpfulness • Feedback • Class sizes

Sources: Aldridge and Rowley (1998), Weerasinghe et al. (2017)

5. Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Use of Student Satisfaction Evaluation

Foundation literature of quality assurance has its origins in the business world where quality assurance has been considered as a process in which a producer/provider commits to a customer that its goods or services meet standard consistency. Quality assurance has been introduced into the higher education sector to call for the accountability of HEIs to the government and external stakeholders. HEIs have been put under pressure to demonstrate explicitly their quality and effectiveness. Early definitions of quality assurance derive from the approach to quality as fitness for purpose and describe it as about ensuring the existence of mechanisms, procedures and processes at HEIs to make sure that desired quality is delivered (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Vlãsceanu, Grünberg and Pârlea (2007) present the UNESCO conceptualization of quality assurance in higher education. Quality assurance is described it as an all-embracing term referring to a continuous process of evaluating the quality of a system, institutions, or programs. The term conveys multiple meanings. The function of quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement. Many systems differentiate between internal quality assurance, namely intra-institutional practices of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education, and external quality assurance, namely inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programs. Quality assurance is often considered as a part of quality management.

Recent views on quality assurance in higher education give more emphasis on external stakeholders. Harvey (2018) defines quality assurance as "the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality". The author reports that he changes the quality assurance definition in order to capture the core meaning of the concept which often states or implies that quality assurance is something done to institutions by an external agency.

Literature on quality assurance is much influenced by the US approach. In the US, quality assurance began as a self-regulatory activity organized by non-governmental accreditation bodies and this has been included both internal self-assessment and external review (Rhoads & Sporn, 2002). According to Rhoads and Sporn (2002), there have been two viewpoints about the basis for evaluation in quality assurance including the evaluation of peer institutions and programs and the evaluation of clients. Among the clients' evaluation, the use of the student evaluation has increasingly become common. The student satisfaction survey is often a part of the student experience survey. The student experience and engagement surveys carried out in the US, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands are the most influential ones (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015).

Student satisfaction has been a part of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the US. The NSSE has run since 2000 and been revised in 2013. It has three main purposes that are institutional improvement, public advocacy and documenting good practice (Kuh, 2009). The survey includes around 100 questions covering a wide range of specific learning activities and conditions along with individual demographics and educational contexts. The core questions of the NSSE focus on 5 aspects, namely participation in dozens of educationally purposeful activities; institutional requirements and challenging nature of coursework; perceptions of the college environment; estimates of educational and personal growth since starting college; and background and demographic information (NSSE, 2018). It has been very interesting that one of the most common uses of the NSSE data is for the accreditation purpose because student engagement is specified in the guidelines of the accreditation toolkits. In particular, this guideline also shows institutions the ways to match specific items in the NSSE instrument with the standards of accrediting bodies (NSSE, 2013). At the university level, the results of the survey have been used to explore aspects of student experience needed to be improved and for internal quality enhancement (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015).

In the UK, HEIs using student satisfaction data to aim at improving the service quality has performed since the mid-1980s (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). The National Student Survey (NSS) which includes aspects of student overall satisfaction of an institution has been performed since 2005. The purpose of the NSS is to support quality assurance and accountability, direct prospective student to the best possible provision, and drive improvements in the quality of teaching and learning (William & Mindano, 2016). The NSS key factors on student perception include (1) teaching of their course, (2) assessment and feedback, (3) academic support, (4) organization and management, (4) learning resources, (5) personal development , and (6) and overall satisfaction. The use of student satisfaction data has been varied by HEIs in the UK. While some institutions find those data bringing about numerous positive results because they have had opportunities to explore student demands and then improve student experiences, other institutions criticize that they have been unsure whether or not they close the feedback loop and implement quality enhancement interventions (William & Mindano, 2016).

In Australia, quality assurance in higher education has been given more emphasis since 2000. Numerous policies on the quality assurance framework for higher education have been issued such as the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, the Education Service for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act, and the formation of an external agency named Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). Since 2007, the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) has been launched to measure student perceptions of their university experience. The aim of the survey is to improve student outcomes as well as enhance the quality of education provided by universities. The

questions are divided into six areas of student engagement including academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, and supportive learning environment (AUSSE, 2018). The AUSSE has three questionnaire sets to undergraduates, postgraduates and staff.

The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), which is based on the instrument used in the USA National Survey of Student Engagement, is one of three questionnaire sets of the AUSSE. The SEQ collects information on the education experiences of the first- and third-year undergraduate students. It has been further developed and included new and redesigned items. Focus groups, cognitive interviews, pilot testing and expert review have been done to increase the validity of the SEQ. Therefore, it is considered as a highly valuable quality enhancement activity in Australian higher education (Coates, 2008).

6. Reflection on the issues in Vietnam

Service quality in higher education has been received attention in Vietnam along with the educational quality assurance activity beginning in the early 2000s. The earliest publication on this topic can be considered as an article by Nguyễn Thành Long (2006) on "Using the SERVPERF scale to evaluate the quality of undergraduate training at An Giang University". The author uses the SERVPERF model, which is an adapted version of the SEVRQUAL, proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1992) to collect the student feedback as a primary data in order to evaluate the training quality. In the operationalized model, the dependent variable is student satisfaction and the independent variables are teachers, facilities, trust of students in the school and the sympathy of the supporting staff. The explanatory power of this regression model is moderate. The model shows that the most important determinant of the student satisfaction of training quality is the teacher.

The view that higher education is a service and that students are customers has strongly grown in recent years. There are more and more attempts to measure the service quality provided by Vietnamese universities. Papers on the topic of service quality are published in different scientific journals administered by universities. Some well-organized articles are:

- "Evaluation of students' satisfaction on training quality of Can Tho University of Economics and Business Administration for the 2012-2013 period" (Nguyễn Thị Bảo Châu & Thái Thị Bích Châu, 2013)
- "Factors affecting the level of students' satisfaction of training at the Faculty of Economics, Law" (Nguyễn Văn Vũ An, Lê Quang Trung & Bùi Hoàng Nam, 2014)
- "Quality of training services and student satisfaction - Hanoi University of Economics, Vietnam National University" (Phạm Thị Liên, 2016)
- "Factors affecting students' satisfaction with facilities and service of the Forestry University" (Nguyễn Thị Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Thị Phượng & Vũ Thị Hồng Loan, 2016).

- "Factors affecting satisfaction on training service quality: a study from alumni of Ho Chi Minh City University of Agriculture and Forestry" (Võ Văn Việt, 2017)

These articles use either factor analysis or the SERVPERF/SERVQUAL to examine the explanatory power of dimensions of service quality, such as physical facilities, reliability of performance, responsiveness of staff and university, knowledge and courtesy of staff, empathy of university, on the student satisfaction of the training quality. Table 2 shows factors that have been included in the student satisfaction surveys of the above articles.

Table 2. *Factors affecting student satisfaction at Vietnamese universities*

Nguyen Thanh Long (2006)	**Nguyen Van Vu An et al. (2014)**	**Pham Thi Lien (2016)**	**Nguyen Thi Xuan Huong et al. (2016)**
Classrooms and laboratories Learning and teaching equipment University landscape University commitment Information system Responsiveness of faculty and supporting staff to students Teaching methods Identifying student needs Counseling	Curriculum Faculty Organization of training • Internship plans • Professional contests for students • Soft-skills courses • Time-table • Re-examination Physical facilities • Library services • Website • Classrooms • Well-equipped learning aids • Stadium and sport equipment • Parking Supporting staff Extra-curricular activities, recreation and sport activities	Physical facilities • Learning materials • Classrooms • Library services • Online applications Faculty Curriculum Knowledge and courtesy of staff • Manager • Administrative staff • Information on Website • Academic and career counseling activities	Classrooms and laboratories Library services Dormitory Equipment for physical education, entertainment activities Catering services Water and electricity systems Information system University clinic Post office and banking system Managers' ability Repairs and maintains of facilities Security system User manual of factilities Guidance information, guidance map Collection of student feedback on learning environment Responsiveness of supporting staff

Similar to the student satisfaction surveys mentioned in Table 1, the student satisfaction surveys conducted by the Vietnamese scholars also includes a great number of physical and administrative aspects of the services provided by universities. However, because of focusing on the measuring instrument of service quality and student satisfaction, the use of these student satisfaction surveys favors quantifiable variables and does not adequately address qualitative factors in explaining student satisfaction. Student satisfaction and higher education service quality need to be investigated in a broader context of higher education quality assurance.

Early efforts to build up capacity on quality assurance for higher education in Vietnam were made in the framework of Higher Education Project 1 in the early 2000s. Due to the higher education management is highly centralized and the limited autonomy of universities in decision making, all activities of Vietnamese universities from academic, personnel and financial issues to quality assurance have been compliance-driven (Do, Pham & Nguyen, 2017).

The implementation of quality assurance is for the purpose of accreditation because accreditation is compulsory by the education law. There have been two sets of quality assessment standards in the Vietnamese accreditation system, in parallel with the institution and program levels. The latest set of standards for assessing the quality of HEIs comprises 25 standards and 111 criteria. The set for the program level comprises 11 standards and 49 criteria. Both the standard sets have referred to the two corresponding standard sets of the ASEAN University Network. The current standards of quality accreditation at both the institution and program levels are maintaining higher requirements than the previous standard sets because the government has emphasized not only on input and process, but also on outcomes of HEIs. The Vietnamese education accreditation system has increasingly given focus on continuous quality improvement through quality assurance in order to meet stakeholders' needs.

Students' survey is one of the most important quality assurance tools that many Vietnamese HEIs use for collecting the opinions and evaluation of students about their satisfaction of the university experience. In practice, a great deal of Vietnamese universities has carried out student surveys as well as other stakeholder surveys using their own questionnaires and survey instruments, and results of these surveys have not showed to the university leaders in a systemic way (Do et al., 2017). Therefore, the implementation of these surveys is mostly for serving compliance with the accreditation regulations.

Literature on service quality, student satisfaction and quality assurance in Vietnam shows that there have been efforts in applying the foundation theories and demonstrating the current issues in a rapidly growing higher education system. However, the application of measurement of service quality and customer satisfaction in the Vietnam higher

education sector needs to concern about the characteristics of education service and about locating the concepts in the context of quality assurance.

7. Conclusions and implications

University and college students are increasingly considered as customers and consulted about their expectation and evaluation of the services provided by HEIs. Student satisfaction has become one of the central concerns of quality assurance and accreditation in the higher education sector. In addition, HEIs have increasingly had to run under forces of marketization that demand competitiveness, efficiency and consumer satisfaction. Enhancing service quality has also become a major concern for managers in HEIs.

There have been numerous efforts made by scholars in different disciplines, notably marketing and higher education, to address higher education service quality from the data of student satisfaction. Important implications can be derived from these research results.

- Dimensions of higher education service quality are diverse and context-specific. The measurements of service quality founded in marketing literature are useful instruments, but they need to be revised in order to capture unique attributes in the higher education sector.
- The collection and evaluation of data on student satisfaction of service quality provided by HEIs need to go further than the purpose of compliance with quality assurance and accreditation regulations and aim at quality enhancement.

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