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**ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION:**  
**MINIMIZING GAPS AND MAXIMIZING SATISFACTION**

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*Abstract*

On the grounds of global changes worldwide, the education system, and schools in particular, are becoming more of an autonomic commercial organization. As a result of the marketization of higher education, and of the accompanied perception of students as a customers, the need for higher education institutions to ensure delivery of quality services have become crucial, and management methodologies have been adopted pursuantly. As the customer is central to the assessment of quality, there is a shift in control in the determination of quality, and a new role acquired by the university's staff, both academic and administrative, as facilitators rather than providers of the educational service. In attempt to facilitate service, and hence to attain high degrees of students' satisfaction, a special emphasis should be placed on minimizing the gap between customer's expectations and the actual service delivered. Careful attention should be paid to the different perspectives from which service is being perceived and interpreted. The paper will present initial findings from a research on PhD level, regarding students' satisfaction from administrative service in college, highlighting perceptual gaps between service providers and service recipients and underlining gaps between students from different studying programs. Sample included approximately 500 students studying towards bachelor degree, master degree and teaching certificate, and 22 academic secretaries. SERVQUAL questionnaire was handed to both students and secretaries in order to collect and analyze the different perspectives.

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## **1. Introduction**

In a world of rapid global changes, intense commercial competition and a growing consciousness of consumers, the capability of an organization to deliver high quality services is of great importance.

The education system, experiencing parallel organizational modifications, is becoming more of an autonomic commercial organization, and is therefore beginning to draw operative conclusions regarding its organizational and managerial procedures.

In the turn of higher education into a commercial organization, their institutional boards have started to adopt corporate management methodologies in the provision of education. As a result of the marketization of higher education and of the emerging perception of students as customers (Eagle & Brennan, 2007), characteristics of the delivery of service quality became a matter of concern and discussion (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004).

Consequent of these progressions, many universities are now applying marketing theories and concepts that have been effective in the business world to the higher education setting (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

The attentiveness of higher education institutional management, both academic and administrative, to the new scenery of the academic world, is followed by a fresh, groundbreaking thinking, appearing in an attempt to attract the relevant crowds to its institution. The original thinking is conveyed by a pioneering, creative and authentic curriculum, and a deepening in administrative essentials, specifically in relation to service quality and in the cultivation of trust and assurance among students.

### **1.1. Higher Education evolution**

The historical evolution of educational institutions begins in ancient Egypt and Greece, the Roman and the Islamic empires, and continues with the rise of universities in Western Europe during the middle Ages and up to the first modern university in Germany, at the beginning of the 19th century (Volanski, 2005).

From the historic formation of educational institutions, and higher education institutions in particular, they were believed to be the workspace of knowledge and creativity. Intellectuals and public leaders wished to turn this early truth into a social asset. Universities and colleges must therefore always be redefined, in order to answer the complex needs of society. Universities should undertake new responsibilities in the professional training of the young generation: preparing for citizenship in democratic society; transferring shared values of culture; and contribute to improvement of people's lifestyle conditions to the development of community (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2014).

The formation of higher education as a system, at the beginning of the 20th century, was characterized by the social and cultural state of each country, and was shaped in accordance to the particular social, political, economic and technologic evolutions.

### **1.2. Higher Education in Israel**

Higher education system in Israel is fairly young. Since 1948, when the state of Israel was founded, and until the nineties of the 20th century, higher education institutions in Israel were largely public, including six universities and only a few regional colleges and teachers' colleges. The leading

universities in Israel have managed for years to maintain their elitist position, leaving non-academic colleges the mission to foster professional teachers (Ben-Peretz & Dror, 1992). Since the eighties, gradually, teachers' training and teachers' colleges have become academic. Consequently, colleges were requested to apply the adaptations required by the higher education council, such as expanding disciplinary knowledge, updating admission terms, and demanding higher profile of academic staff in colleges.

Teachers' colleges in Israel offer a wide range of educational programs. Undergraduates programs take hold of the main volume of teachers' training. Programs' length is four years, whereas the last year is mainly practical, either in part-time or full-time. Alongside undergraduates programs, most teachers' colleges in Israel activate advanced certification programs for master degree (M.Ed, M.Teach) which last two years, and specify in teachers' professional deepening and enrichment. Additionally, there are shortened programs for BA degree holders. These programs are characterized as Taylor-made programs, constructing each student a personal program, prepared according to students' prior academic studies and in relation to the specific track of training. Teachers' colleges are committed to high quality academic standards as well as quality administrative ethics.

### **1.3. Definition of quality**

Harvey (2014) proposed a definition of quality as the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, collective, object, action, process or organization.

The literature defines quality according to two strategies: according to central goal or outcome, or according to specific indicators which reflect and assess desired inputs.

Four broad conceptualizations of quality according to central goal or outcome are described: purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable, and four categories were identified according to a desired input: administrative indicators, student support indicators, instructional indicators, and student performance indicators (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015).

Adequately defining quality requires a wide-ranging strategy to target central goals and outcomes, and a detailed strategy to identify quality indicators which can be used to assess and assure that goals have been achieved (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015).

### **1.4. Service quality in educational institutions**

Service quality in the educational sector is considered an important, yet a complex and multifaceted concept, and therefore lacks a single definition of quality.

The uniqueness of student as a customer depends largely on the period of time and intensity of the service connection, and at the same time on the difficulty of withdrawing from this connection, the role of students in the service environment, and the importance of student-to-student interaction in affecting satisfaction (Rowley, 1997).

As the customer is recently central to the assessment of quality, there is a shift in control in the determination of quality, and the new role acquired by the university's staff, both academic and administrative, bases staff members as facilitators rather than providers of the educational service (Dibb & Simkin 2010).

Pitman (2000) claims that the administrative staff moves beyond the processes of mere service-providers and incorporates a mentor role into their processes. Moreover, administrative staff tends to relate closely to students, perceiving them as internal customers.

According to Robson (2000), general administrative staff realize that their role is to support and enhance student experiences.

As the role of administration appears highly important in the provision of quality service, the need to empirically examine the dominant dimensions which take part in the service act is essential, and the urge to enhance service quality accordingly emerges.

### 1.5. The gap model of satisfaction

According to De Jager and Gbadamosi (2010), it is imperative for higher education institutions to monitor the quality of services they provide in order to commit themselves to ongoing enhancements.

The service quality model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) specifies that customers' quality perceptions are influenced mainly by 4 gaps between: 1. customer expectations and management's perceptions of customer expectations. 2. Management perception of customers' expectations and service quality standards, 3. Service quality standards and the actual service delivered, 4. Delivery and communication regarding the service to customers, and 5. Difference between customers' expectations and perceptions (in association with gaps 1-4). In order to diminish these gaps there is a necessity to involve assessment procedures, as well as communication and control processes implemented in managing employees.

Figure 1 illustrates five gaps detected within the process of service delivery.

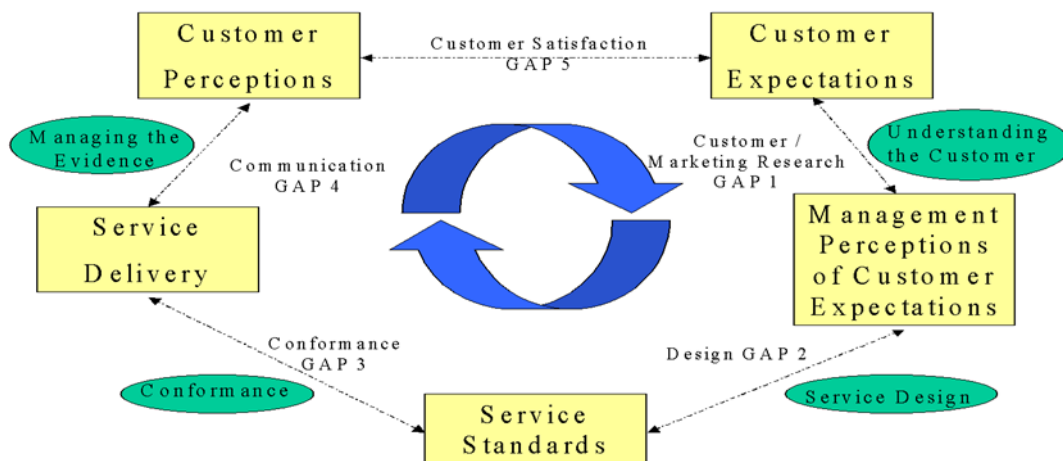


Figure 01. Service gap model (Parasuraman et al., 1988)

## 2. Problem Statement

The projected perceptual gap between service providers (academic secretaries) and service recipients (students from different programs), will affect students' perceptions in relation to the quality of administrative service in the Kibbutzim College of education.

## 3. Research Questions

- What differences in perception exist between students and administrative staff concerning the quality of administrative service?
- What differences in perception exist between students from different programs (B.Ed, M.Ed, Teaching certificate) concerning the quality of administrative service?

Research Hypotheses: Perceptual gaps will be found between students and administrative staff and between students from different studying programs.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The proposed study will strive to shed light on the significant dimensions of administrative service in higher education, and on the weight and influence it has on students' overall satisfaction from their studies. It will further attempt to expose the perceptual gaps between students and administrative staff, and will highlight the main areas to be treated. Initiation of an intervention program towards service quality improvement, and the carrying out of a service contract, are two means by which future enhancement of students' satisfaction and reduction of perceptual gaps might take place. The results of present research are expected to assist and direct decision makers and employees in the formation of an agreed service policy headed for minimizing perceptual gaps and maximizing students' satisfaction.

## 5. Research Methods

The features of quantitative research, which emphasize measuring distinct aspects of organizations and conducting procedures of comparing individuals or groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), along with its objective nature, which facilitates validity and reliability (Nasser, 2001), are key considerations in selecting the appropriate methodologic paradigm and method.

The SERVQUAL questionnaire was used to measure service quality of administrative staff. The instrument includes 22 statements, point to five dimensions of service quality: tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Research Variables according to the SERVQUAL questionnaire, include the following features:

Tangibles: physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.

Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.

Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.

Empathy: caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

Cluster sampling will be used such that students will be sampled according to the purpose of study: bachelor's degree, master's degree, and teaching certificate. Additionally, 22 academic secretaries will be asked to answer the same questionnaire.

Descriptive findings of pre-test examination, regarding the different perceptions of students from different programs, and regarding students in general and academic secretaries will be presented and discussed following.

## 6. Findings

The total score of students' perceptions regarding the quality of administrative service they receive was 5.33 on a scale of 1-7. The total score of secretaries' perceptions of the service they deliver was 5.99 on a scale of 1-7.

Findings comparing students' group and secretaries' group demonstrate significant differences in four of the five categories: reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Secretaries rate the service they deliver to students considerably higher than students, while the largest gap is concerning empathy, and then, in descending order, responsiveness, reliability and assurance. No significance was found in tangibles category (table 1).

**Table 01.** Pre-Test findings regarding differences between students and secretaries

	Students	Secretaries	T
Tangibles	5.01 M (1.04) SD	4.72 M (0.96) SD	1.25
Reliability	5.55 M (1.19) SD	6.35 M (0.53) SD	3.11**
Responsiveness	5.52 M (1.20) SD	6.44 M (0.61) SD	3.55***
Assurance	5.59 M (1.25) SD	6.38 M (0.53) SD	2.95**
Empathy	5.01 M (1.28) SD	6.06 M (0.60) SD	3.79***
Total	5.33 M	5.99 m	

The total score of the perceptions of students regarding the quality of administrative service studying towards B.Ed degree was 5.20 on a scale of 1-7, the total score of students studying towards master degree was 5.60, and the total score of students studying towards teaching certificate was 5.27. Findings indicate significant difference between students studying towards master degree and students studying towards B.Ed and towards teaching certificate in four variables in descending order: reliability, empathy, assurance and responsiveness. No significance was found in tangibles category. No significant difference was found between B.Ed students and teaching certificate students (table 2).

**Table 02.** Pre-Test findings regarding differences between students from B.Ed program, M.Ed+M.Teach programs, and teaching certificate program.

	<b>B.Ed</b>	<b>M.Ed+M.Teach</b>	<b>Teaching Certificate</b>	<b>F</b>
Tangibles	4.90 M (1.03) SD	5.12 (0.90) SD	5.05 (1.16) SD	2.160
Reliability	5.38 (1.25) SD	5.88 (1.01) SD	5.51 (1.20) SD	8.04**
Responsiveness	5.43 (1.22) SD	5.76 (1.07) SD	5.41 (1.25) SD	3.81*
Assurance	5.47 (1.33) SD	5.89 (1.02) SD	5.46 (1.27) SD	5.71**
Empathy	4.85 (1.27) SD	5.36 (1.03) SD	4.92 (1.45) SD	7.24***
Total	5.20 M	5.60 M	5.27 M	

## 7. Conclusion

The service quality model specifies that customers' quality perceptions are influenced fundamentally by five gaps. The first gap according to the model, between students' expectations and management's perceptions of students' expectations, was empirically examined in this study. Findings of the study confirmed the theoretical assumption that there are conceptual gaps in relation to administrative service quality, between service providers, the academic secretaries in present study, and students. The significant differences between secretaries and students, which came up in four out of the five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, illustrates the reality within which services are the result of management perceptions and choices rather than of a genuine examination of students' perceptions and needs.

Students' rated reliability and assurance higher than responsiveness, empathy and tangibles. this finding corresponds with the study of Nell and Cant (2014) who suggested that the ability of the Student Administrative departments to perform the service dependably, accurately and on time was the most important feature relating to service for the students.

The significant differences which were observed between M.Ed and M.Teach students and B.Ed and teaching certificate students, placing master degree students' perceptions higher than the other two groups, could be explained on the grounds of students' mature age and due to the fact that master degree students are more familiar with academic demands and stresses, and are therefore more realistic as far as their expectations. Further, the design of masters' programs is typically much shorter and structured, which summons less conflictual occurrences and more positive perceptions consequently.

The unambiguous and consistent results of the study intensify the need of higher education institutions to be alert to students' expectations. The obligation to match expectations in order to minimize perceptual gaps between secretaries and students, lies on the institutional management. A future service contract is offered as a mean through which a match of expectations can take place, and an enhancement in students' satisfaction may consequently occur.

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