

STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The reform of higher education has introduced some changes in the scoring of publications and the award of degrees and academic titles. Missing are changes in the regulations concerning the financing of studies. Students still do not know how much money is spent on their education. Thus, financial resources should be reflected in the quality of information received. This article is a case study of students of Economics and Management from the Faculty of Agriculture and Economics of the University of Agriculture in Krakow and the Faculty of Management and Production Engineering of the State Vocational College in Oświęcim. The SERVQUAL survey method was applied. The research was conducted during the summer semester of the 2018/19 academic year. The results of the research indicate that students at the public college in Oświęcim have higher expectations than those from the university in Kraków. The students of the University of Agriculture evaluated the quality of their education as being closer to their expectations. Moreover, students of part-time studies are usually more demanding than their full-time counterparts. However, it is easier to satisfy lower expectations. Through appropriate marketing of the university, the marketed product can be shaped in such a way that the quality assessment is satisfactory for the university.

Keywords: quality management, higher education, quality of education, student expectations, SERVQUAL.

1. Introduction

The recent demographic trough has made it difficult for institutions of higher education to operate on the educational market. The necessity of marketing encourages learning about customer expectations through appropriate research. One method that could be used more widely is the SERVQUAL method, which is often used in other sectors of the economy. Institutions of higher education are obliged to research the quality of education, and therefore each institution has developed its own questionnaires. The diversity of forms makes it difficult to compare the quality of education between these institutions. The SERVQUAL method,

as it is linked to one standard tool, makes it possible not only to measure the perceived quality of services, but also to compare the quality expected from different universities. In this study, an attempt at such comparisons was made which resulted in the surprising conclusion that student expectations differ significantly between the institutions studied. Customer expectations from services are a factor that more clearly differentiates these schools than the perceived quality of services. University managers using this method have the opportunity to properly learn about and - through marketing actions - shape customer expectations.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of the research was to determine the expected quality and perceived quality of a given university by its students. The SERVQUAL survey method was used, in which a questionnaire prepared on Gmail Drive was applied. A link to the survey was sent out as part of classes conducted by the author. Survey results were placed in a spreadsheet and analyzed using simple statistics, including standard deviation and pivot tables. The SERVQUAL method assumes that the quality of service can be expressed as a difference between the expected quality of service and that which the customer actually receives. Even before starting their studies, students imagine the quality of the service they want to receive on the basis of their educational experience, needs and level of knowledge. In the study, the participating students were asked to evaluate each of the 22 statements twice, using a 7-point Likert scale. The first set of 22 statements referred to the expected quality of service and indicates the ideal level of the service. The second set of 22 statements is an evaluation of the service received, i.e. the level of quality that was provided to the student.

2.1. The SERVQUAL Method

The quality of services provided by an organization is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of business performance and a strategic tool for gaining competitive advantage (Gale, 1994). The higher education market has led to students increasingly being regarded as customers. Thus, higher education has become a global business and universities need to continuously explore the market opportunities for higher education services (Yusof et al. 2012).

The level of the quality of service in an educational institution can be measured with the SERVQUAL quantitative method. Herein, the number of service gaps calculated reveals priorities for modification and improvement of services in educational center (Lee, Kim, 2012).

The SERVQUAL (Service Quality) quantitative method is a service quality assessment method developed by a team of American scientists led by Professor A. Parasuraman at the University of Miami. It is derived from the 5-gap model created in 1985 by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Barry – see Figure 1 (Urbaniak, 2013). The SERVQUAL method is used widely

to measure the quality of services from the perspective of customers. It has a multi-level scale with which it is possible to assess the level of services and then indicate ways to improve it (Wolniak, Skotnicka-Zasadzień, 2009).

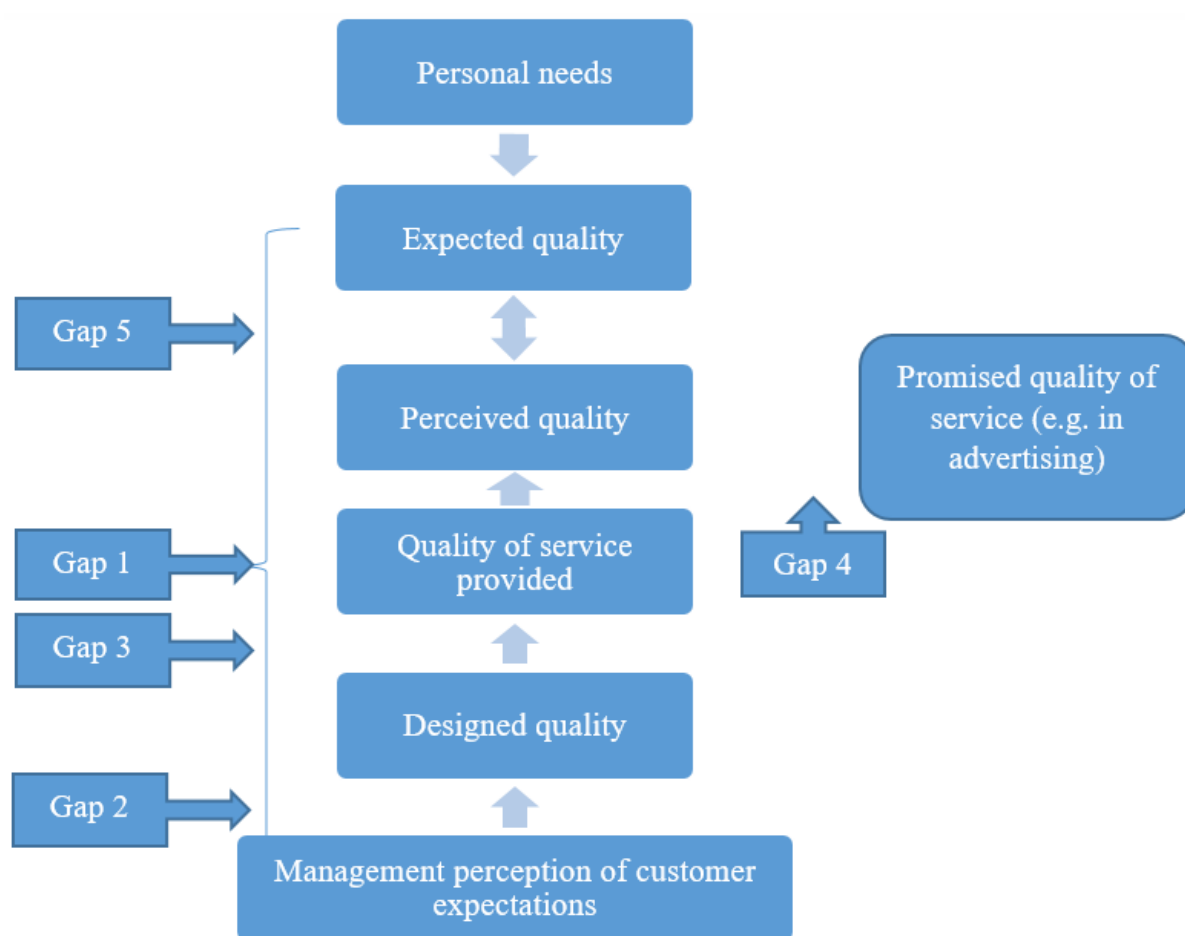


Figure 1. The SERVQUAL model of service quality. Source: Radosław Wolniak, Bożena Skotnicka–Zasadzień, 2009, Wykorzystanie metody SERVQUAL do badania jakości usług w administracji samorządowej [Using the SERVQUAL method to study quality of service in local-government administration], Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice, p. 38.

2.2. Gaps in the SERVQUAL method

A gap in the SERVQUAL method is understood as a gap between tested quality (e.g. perceived, expected, planned quality) and reference quality (e.g. designed service quality). For example, if the designed quality is level 7 on the Likert scale, while the quality indicated by the customer is 5, the gap (difference) between the planned and perceived quality is “-2”.

The first type of gap thus measured refers to the discrepancy between customer expectations and that what the highest levels of management imagine student needs to be (Figure 1). The size of this gap is influenced by the organization’s marketing research, bottom-up communication, and the number of management levels in the organization.

The second type of gap in the SERVQUAL method represents an inconsistency between the concept of a service and its actual characteristics. The size of the gap is influenced by, among other things, the involvement of management in service quality problems, setting goals, standardization of tasks, and discerning opportunities.

The third gap represents the discrepancy between the service provided and the specification for the creation of service quality. The size of this gap depends, among other things, on teamwork, training of employees for the work they are assigned, adaptation of technology, the perception of control, and the system of supervision and control.

The fourth gap represents the difference between the service promised and that which is delivered. Factors influencing the size of this gap include vertical communication and the tendency to overstate promises.

The fifth gap is the result of the previous gaps. This is the difference between what customers/students expect and what they receive. Comparing the expected (E) to the perceived (P) quality of service yields an answer to the question of how the quality of service may be perceived by the customer:

- when $E < P$, this means that expectations have been exceeded (surprising quality),
- when $E = P$, this indicates that the expectations have been met (satisfactory quality),
- when $E > P$, this means that expectations have not been met (unacceptable quality).

The developers of this method included the following among the factors that shape customer expectations (Witkowska, 2007):

- oral communication,
- personal needs,
- prior experiences,
- communication skills of service providers.

The SERVQUAL method consists of 22 carefully selected pairs of questions. The first set of questions is used to measure the level of performance the customer of a particular service expects. The second set of questions is used to assess the level of the service, which the given customer received.

The SERVQUAL method focuses primarily on the organization's drive toward continuous improvement, taking the whole enterprise into account in this process. All employees are involved in creating an open and effective communication system. This may be one of the key indicators of areas that require improvement, as well as serve to identify those activities that should be continued (Kadlubek, 2013).

In applying the SERVQUAL method, certain obstacles may be encountered. The main ones include the use of inappropriate parameters for quality assessment - this obstacle can be overcome by conducting a survey at the first stage of research. Another obstacle is the representativeness of the research sample – if the population of consumers of a given service is difficult to determine (this is often the case with tourism), it may be very difficult to draw a representative sample, and conducting research on the population as a whole is time-consuming and costly (Balińska 2015).

3. Original research – description of the respondents

Students of the State Vocational College in Oświęcim more often than students from the University of Agriculture rely on the opinions of their colleagues to choose a place to study. The local nature of the SVC in Oświęcim means that direct contact between current students and potential students may be more frequent. Less frequent is that students received first-hand information from friends or fellow students at the University of Agriculture. It is clear that direct contact for students of the State Vocational College is more important than opinions found online. In the case of students at the University of Agriculture, the Internet is the dominant source of information. As a source of information, the respondents from the University of Agriculture indicated students in second place (Figure 2).

There seems to be greater diversification of information sources among students of the University of Agriculture. Most frequently indicated as combined sources of knowledge about the university were the Internet and students of that university. When recruiting students, it is important to employ influencers who express positive views on Internet forums in contact with potential students. The popularity of social media is growing as is the significance of the influence of those people who have a significant group following their statements on the Internet. At a time when the number of students is decreasing, the importance of this type of person in marketing educational services will grow.

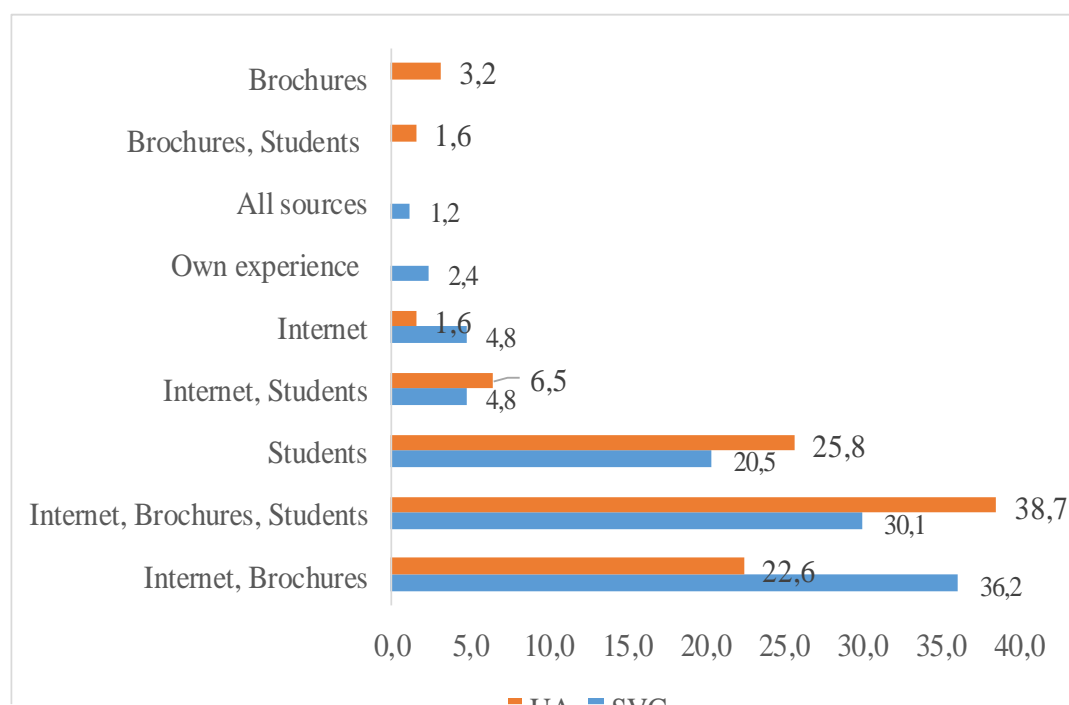


Figure 2. Sources of information about the school. Source: own work.

One person in five studied at the State Vocational College in Oświęcim is an adult over 30 years of age, working and aware of their goals. Among the respondents of the UA Krakow, young people under 22 years of age are predominant. In interpreting the survey results,

one should take into account differences in experience resulting from the age of the respondents. It seems that this may have an impact on the declared expectations (Figure 3).

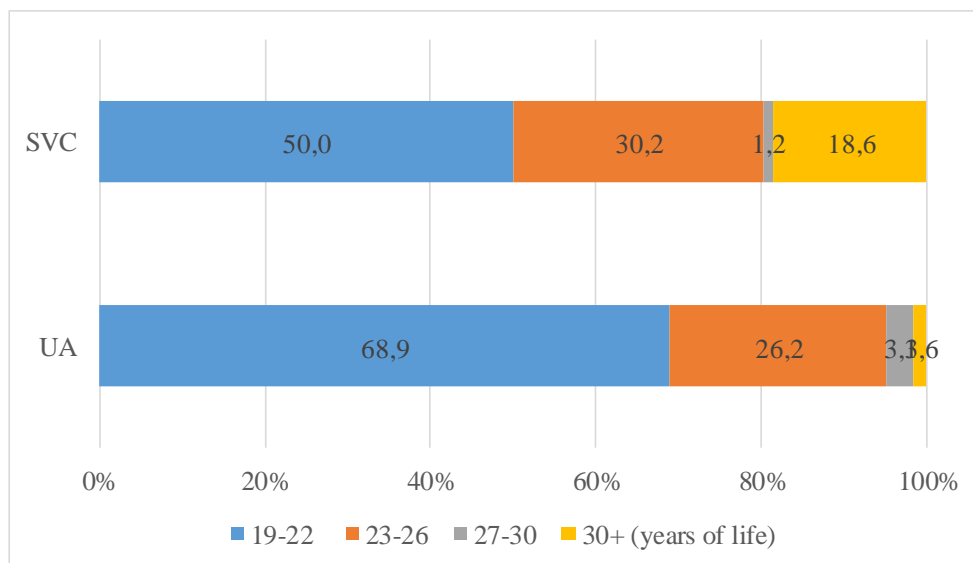


Figure 3. Age structure of the respondents from SVC Oświęcim and UA Krakow. Source: own work.

The desire for professional advancement motivated a significant group of students from the State Vocational College in Oświęcim to take up studies (four out of ten questions). In the case of the University of Agriculture, one in three respondents indicated this motivation. The differences may result from the fact that the SVC group included more people over 30 years of age who, while working, were given an opportunity for promotion, provided that they continued their education. Employed persons often have a proposal to take on a managerial position on condition that they increase their knowledge of management (Figure 4).

One in three persons from the University of Agriculture indicated that they had decided to study because they had excessive free time. Such an answer to this question was provocative for those, it would seem, who have no specific needs.

Many responses concerned personal development in the broad sense of the term: “desire to continue education”, “earning a higher degree” - i.e. quite general declarations, which occurred at a similar frequency in both studied groups of students. Only one person among the students of the State Vocational College in Oświęcim indicated the proximity of the school as a motive for studying. Two people from the University of Agriculture emphasized increased income as a motivating factor for studying. Four people indicated that they were persuaded to study by their immediate family – all were students of the State Vocational College in Oświęcim. This school makes it possible for young people from small towns and rural areas to study without breaking their close ties with friends and family.

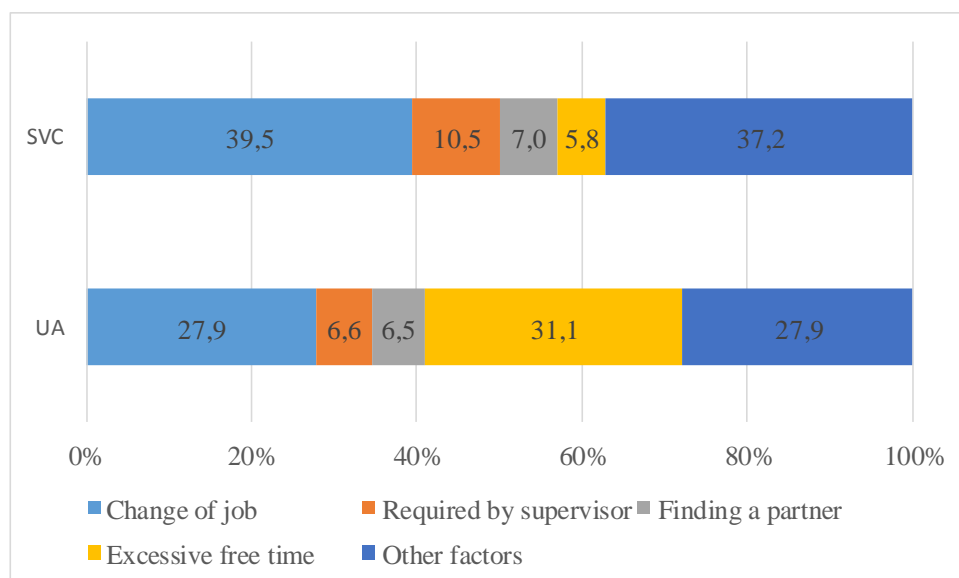


Figure 4. Motives for taking up studies. Source: own work.

An important factor shaping student expectations is whether or not tuition fees are charged. Three fourths of the surveyed SVC students are part-time students who pay for their studies. The situation is reversed in the group of UA students - most of them do not pay for their education. This factor influenced the expectations regarding the quality of education, as well as the perceived quality (Figure 5).

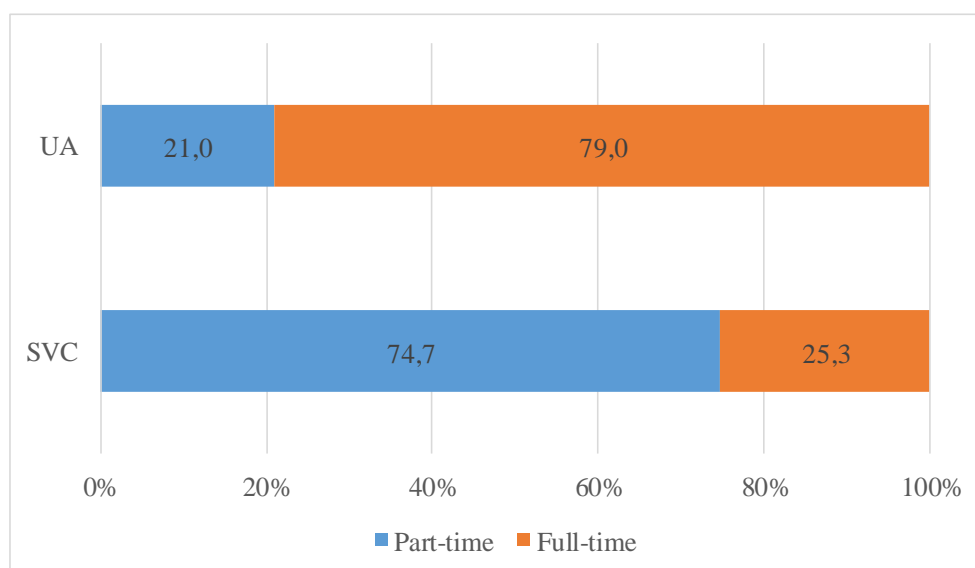


Figure 5. Share of students in full-time and part-time programs in the study sample. Source: own work.

As the majority of them are enrolled in part-time programs, the SVC students can also be employed full-time. Income also reflected the age of the respondents, which is higher in the group of SVC students. For this reason, students from Oświęcim indicated higher income brackets more often than their colleagues from Krakow. The area around Oświęcim and Tychy has a wealth of companies in the automotive sector, where knowledge counts. Owners and managers encourage employees to study in order to improve the quality of production and thus

improve the value of their company. Student employees are more aware of their goals and expectations from the school. They know in practice the issues raised during the classes. They often already work in positions requiring knowledge in the fields covered in the curriculum (Figure 6).

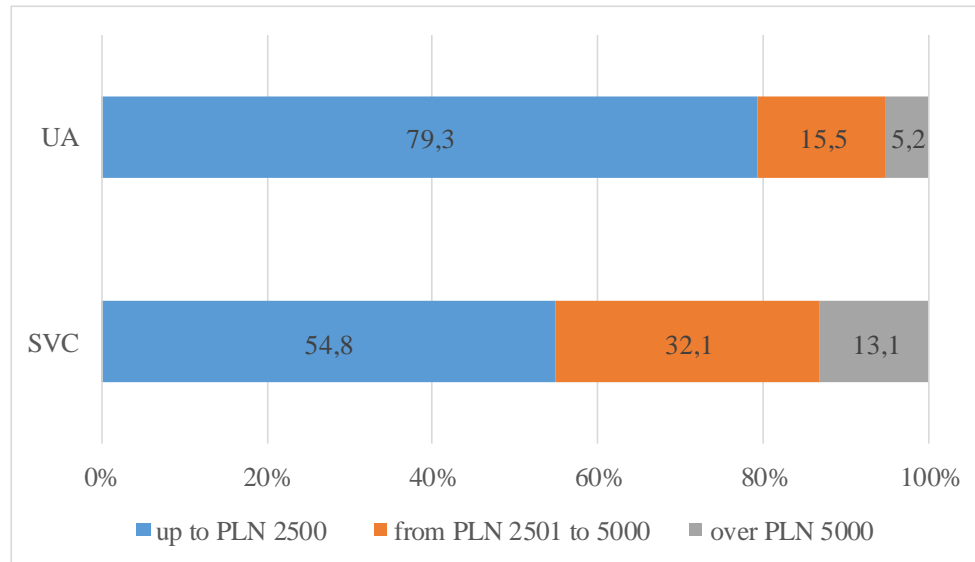


Figure 6. Income level of students from the SCV and UA. Source: own work.

4. Results

The research shows that the University of Agriculture in Krakow better meets the expectations of students than the State Vocational College in Oświęcim in every area of quality (Figure 7). This was particularly the case in terms of empathy and tangibles. It can be said that the high expectations of the students of the State Vocational College in Oświęcim are the reason why the University of Agriculture came out on top. The working, older, and highly demanding students of the State Vocational College perceive the quality of their school as being lower than the students surveyed at the University of Agriculture who are younger, less demanding, and have strategic goals that are less clear. The SERVQUAL method is authoritative for the comparison of perceived and expected quality. In this respect, the University of Agriculture performs better, but this is only because of the lower expectations of UA students, who are younger and who mostly do not pay for their university studies out of their own pocket. It is as in the well-known proverb, “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth;” in other words, the quality is not as important as it is in the case of a “horse” that has to be paid for. While this may not an argument for full payment for studies, but it is an argument for considering educational vouchers that go to students. Thanks to these vouchers, the student would be aware of the costs of education and thus their expectations for the quality of education would be higher.

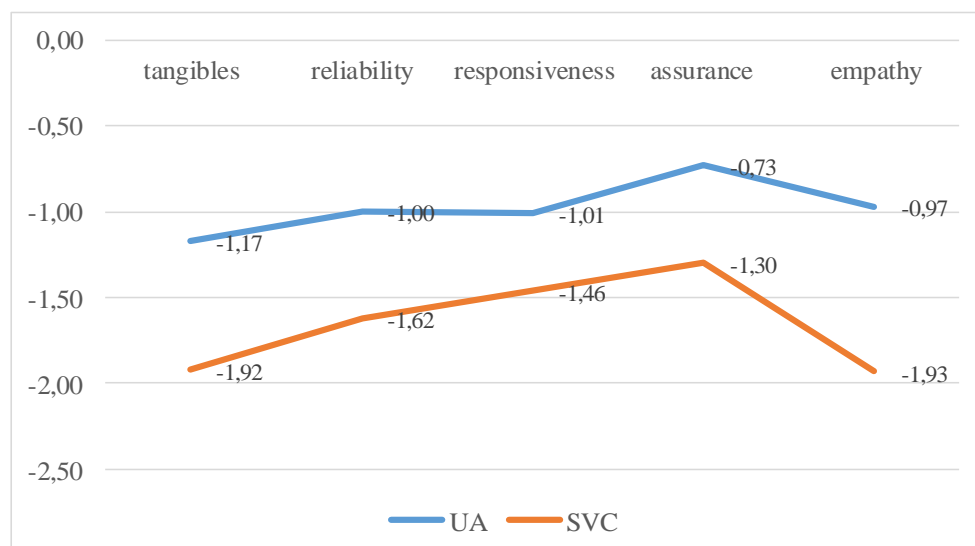


Figure 7. Servqual areas evaluated (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) at the SVC Oświęcim and UA Krakow. Source: own work.

The values shown in Figure 7 show the difference between expected and perceived quality. The perceived value is subtracted from the expected value, both expressed on a Likert scale (from 1 to 7). The data in Figure 7 show that perceived quality has never been greater than expected quality value (no positive values in Figure 7). The closer the value is to zero, the closer the school is to the level of quality the student expects.

The quality area described as “tangibles” includes the interior and exterior appearance of the school and its premises, as well as the infrastructure, such as parking lots, which were expected at the State Vocational College in Oświęcim. The information included in Figure 7 shows that the equipment, as well as the clothing and behaviour of the lecturers, is more appropriate for students of the University of Agriculture (the area of tangibles). This may also be interpreted differently, namely that the expectations of the SVC students in this area are higher than those of the University of Agriculture students (Figure 8). Students of the SVC have higher requirements than UA students do in terms of the general manner in which employees and the school itself present themselves.

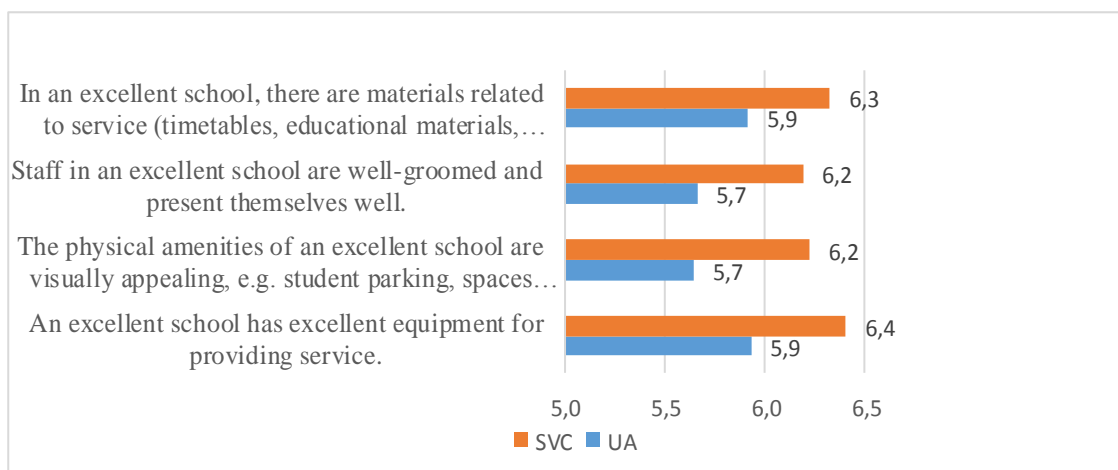


Figure 8. Level of expectations of SVC students and UA students in the area of “tangibles”. Source: own work on the basis of questionnaire responses.

What seems to be very important for a school is the area of “reliability,” also referred to as dependability, conscientiousness or solidness. In this area as well, the gap between expected value and perceived quality is smaller at the UA Kraków (Figure 7). The service provider delivers the services offered properly and at the declared level. Excessively high student quality expectations may be due to a promised quality that is too high in brochures and other advertising materials (Figure 9). From the point of view of quality management, it is better not to promise too much, not to offer something that cannot be ensured. It is better to promise less and have the customer be happy to have received more than they had been promised.

The area of “responsiveness” refers to the speed of action and responding to the requirements of the student as a customer. In the students’ opinion, the readiness to provide quick assistance is closer to the expectations of the UA Kraków (Figure 7). It is a university at which all employees are employed on a full-time basis and are strongly attached to their place of employment. The SVC Oświęcim focuses on practical education, where there is room for employing people from business practice on a part-time basis. These people work professionally outside the university and the university is a supplemental employer. All the signs of customer dissatisfaction and disappointment are reflected in this area. For example, having to wait a long time for an answer to a question via e-mail leads to student dissatisfaction. The high expectations of the students at the SVC in Oświęcim contributed to the poorer position of the SVC in the area of “responsiveness.” (Figure 10).

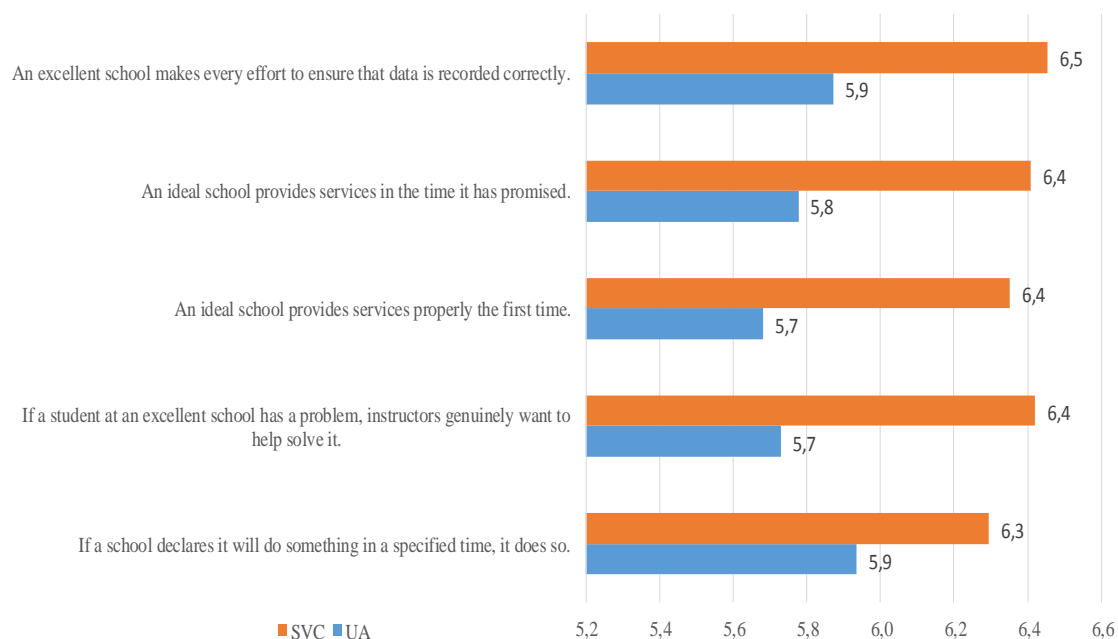


Figure 9. Level of expectations of students of the SVC and students of the UA Kraków in the area of “reliability”. Source: own work on the basis of questionnaire responses.

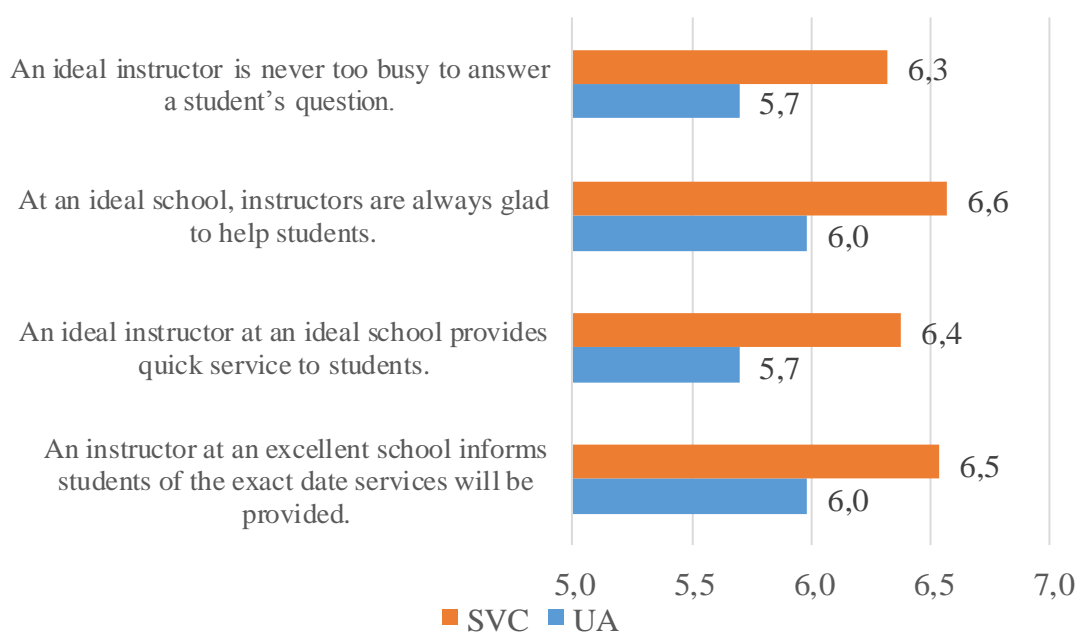


Figure 10. Level of expectations of students of the SVC and students of the UA Kraków in the area of “responsiveness”. Source: own work on the basis of questionnaire responses.

The area of “assurance” is the ability of the school’s staff to inspire confidence in the student. It consists of courtesy, reliability and creating a sense of security, as well as the level of knowledge and qualifications presented by the staff. At this point, it is worth recalling that the calculations presented in Figure 7 should be read in such a way that the staff of the

UA Krakow meets the expectations of students to a greater extent than their colleagues from the SVC in Oświęcim. However, this is not only the result of the knowledge and skills of the staff of UA Krakow, but also, as can be seen in Figure 11, the lower expectations of students regarding instructors and the university itself at UA Krakow.

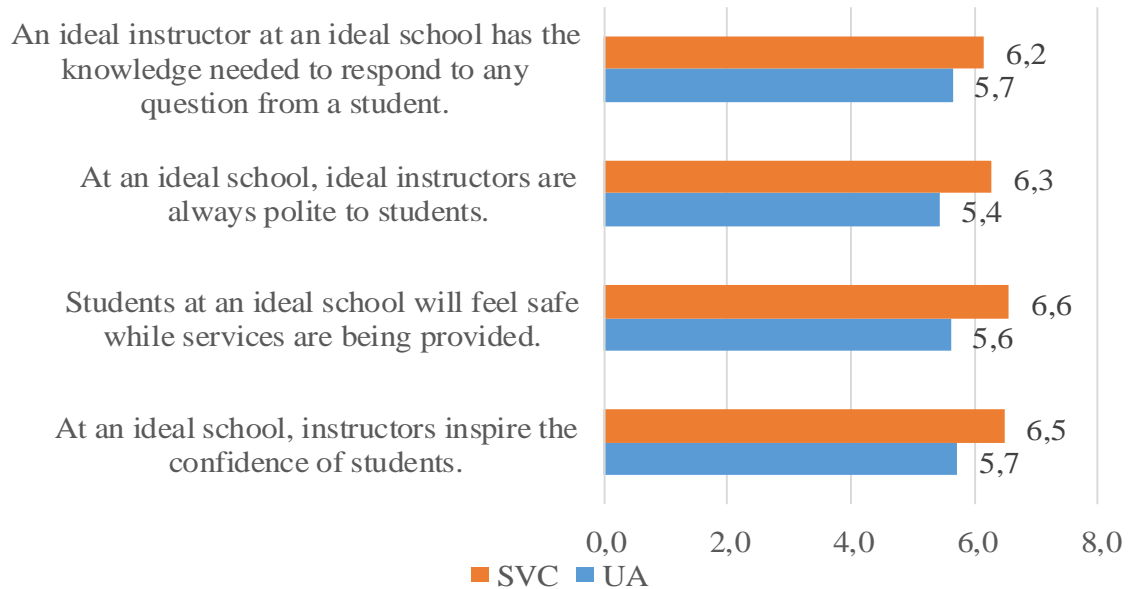


Figure 11. Level of expectations of students of the SVC and students of the UA Krakow in the area of “assurance”. Source: own work on the basis of questionnaire responses.

The area of “empathy” describes whether the service provider is able to understand the individual needs and expectations of the customer, as well as to identify with them. In this area, the expectations of SVC Oświęcim students were much higher than those of UA Krakow students (Figure 12). Therefore, it is much easier to meet the expectations for quality of UA Krakow students. The surveyed group of students from the SVC in Oświęcim included a large number of employed people with domestic responsibilities arising from having families. They also expect more because they pay for their studies. Some receive reimbursement from their employers, but the flow of financial resources through their hands increases their expectations from a school.

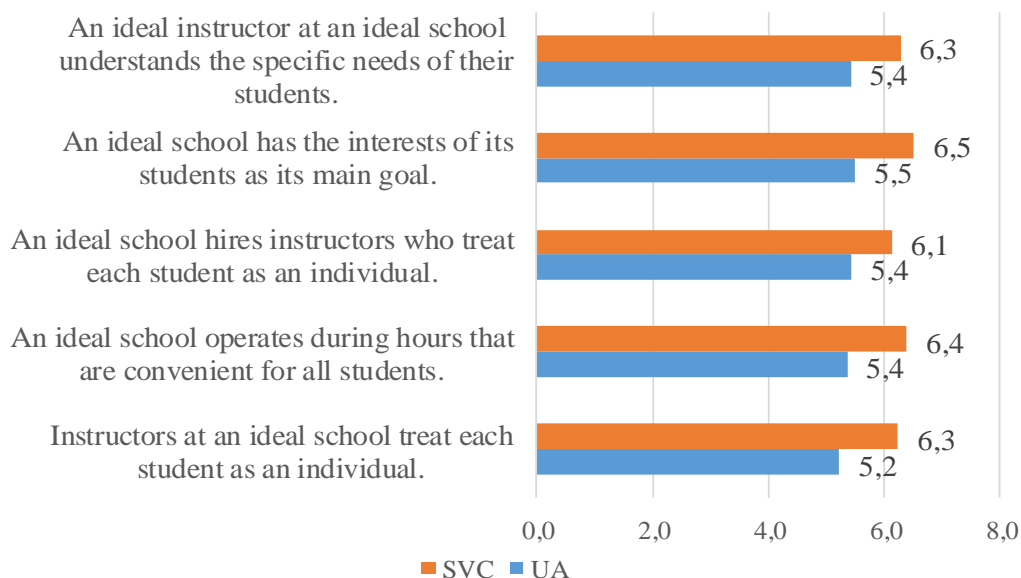


Figure 12. Level of expectations of students of the SVC and students of the UA Kraków in the area of “empathy”. Source: own work on the basis of questionnaire responses.

The quality perceived in both schools was at a similar level. Only the physical facilities (Question no. 2 in Figure 13*) and the timetable (Question no. 19 in Figure 13) in the SVC received a significantly lower score.

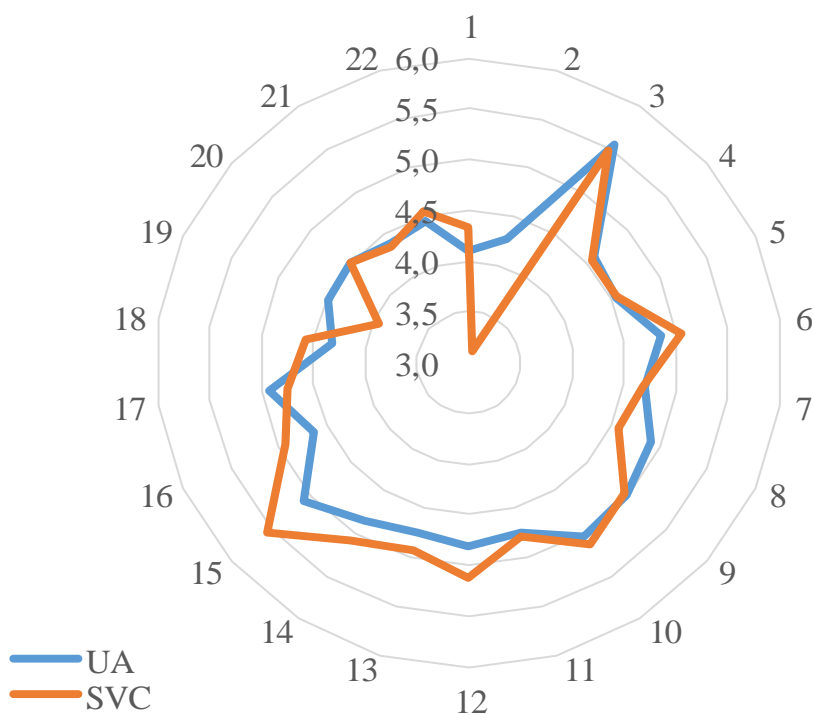


Figure 13. Perceived quality of services at the UA and SVC.

* Question numbering in the questionnaire: 1 – The school has excellent equipment to provide services; 2 – The physical facilities at the school are visually appealing; 3 – Instructors are well-groomed and present themselves well; 4 – Materials related to services are attractive and attract attention; 5 – If the school states that it will do something in a given time, it does so; 6 – When a student has a problem, instructors genuinely want to help; 7 – The school provides quality services the first time; 8 – The school provides services at the time they were promised; 9 – The school makes every effort to ensure data is recorded correctly; 10 – Instructors inform students of the exact date services will be provided; 11 – Instructors offer quick service to students; 12 – Instructors are always glad to help students; 13 – Instructors are never too busy to answer a student’s question; 14 – Instructors inspire the confidence of students; 15 – students feel safe while services are being provided; 16 – Instructors are always polite to students; 17 – Instructors have the knowledge needed to answer any question from a student; 18 – Instructors treat each student as an individual; 19 – The school operates during hours that are convenient for all students; 20 – The school hires instructors who treat each student as an individual; 21 – The school places the interests of its students as its main goal; 22 – Instructors understand the specific needs of their students.

Source: own work.

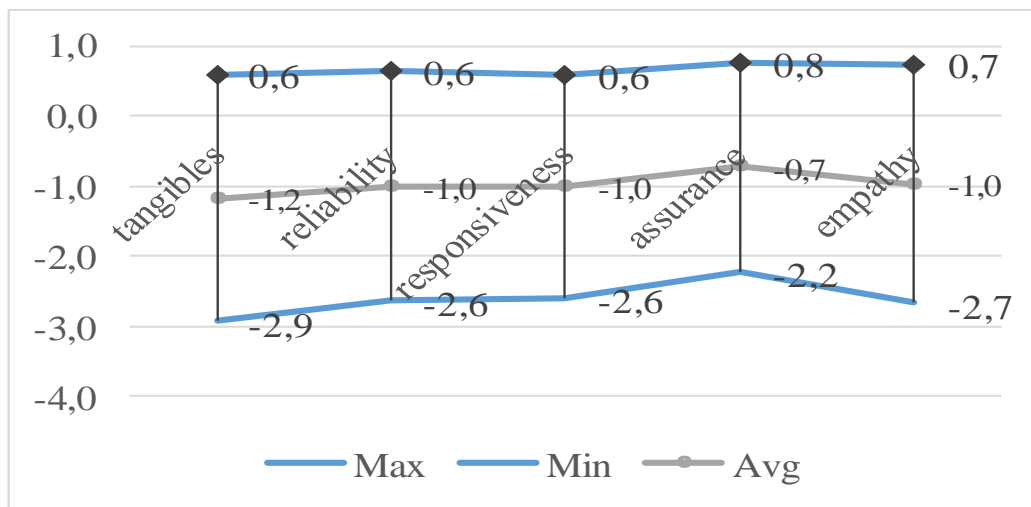


Figure 14. Minimum and maximum values for the areas of quality assessment for the UA Krakow. Source: own work.

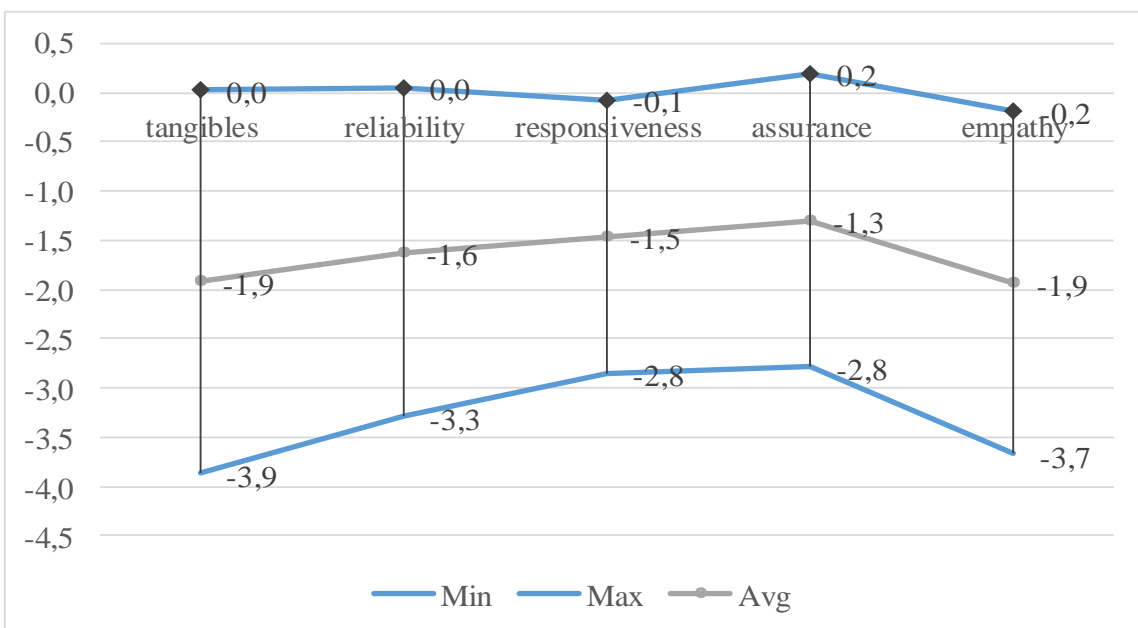


Figure 15. Minimum and maximum values for the areas of quality assessment for the SVC Oświęcim. Source: own work.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the fifth gap used in the SERVQUAL method. This gap is the difference between what students expect and what they receive during their studies. A comparison was made between the expected and perceived quality of educational services. The analysis shows that their expectations were not fully met.

The University of Agriculture comes the closest to meeting the expectations of its students. In the area of "assurance," the results are only 0.73 points short of meeting customers' expectations. The lowest score for the university in Kraków was given in the area of "tangibles," in which the expectations in relation to the perceived quality were 1.7 points lower. It should be noted that the University of Agriculture performs better in comparison to its competition, not a thanks to receiving higher ratings for perceived quality, but mainly due to the lower expectations of students regarding the quality of services provided.

Perceived quality had less influence on the position in the ranking of the surveyed universities than expected quality. In their assessments, the students of the SVC in Oświęcim were more differentiated than the students of the UA in Kraków.

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