frontiers | Frontiers in Education

TYPE Brief Research Report
PUBLISHED 10 December 2024
DOI 10.3389/feduc.2024.1486199

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 25 August 2024
ACCEPTED 22 November 2024
PUBLISHED 10 December 2024

CITATION
Leskaj E, Leskaj A and Lipi R (2024) Striving for excellence: assessing the impact of university strategies on enhancing student services in Albanian public higher education.
Front. Educ. 9:1486199.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1486199

Striving for excellence: assessing the impact of university strategies on enhancing student services in Albanian public higher education

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This paper examines the role of university strategies in enhancing student services, to create a conducive and supportive learning environment. Recognizing that the quality of student services is integral to students' academic success, well-being, and overall experience, universities worldwide are increasingly prioritizing strategic initiatives to improve service delivery. This research synthesizes existing literature and empirical evidence to analyze the diverse strategies used by universities to improve student services and their impact on student satisfaction, retention, and success. In this article, the authors relied on secondary research in the literature of the field, as well as primary research, to fulfill the aim of this study, which is to assess student satisfaction with the services offered by higher education institutions based on their perspective, as an essential indicator for the implementation of the University's strategy and the achievement of the objectives of this strategy. This study is based on Parasuraman's Servqual model. The dependent variable in this study is the overall satisfaction of students at the University of Tirana. The independent variables are tangibleness, assurance, response, reliability, and empathy. The objectives are to: identify the dimensions of service quality; examine the relationship between the dimensions of service quality and student satisfaction; and assess the impact of each of the five dimensions of service quality individually on student satisfaction. The paper highlights empathy and reliability as important dimensions influencing student satisfaction. Recognizing this, the university should prioritize personalized attention to students, demonstrating a readiness to address their concerns and establish efficient channels for problem-solving. Based on the findings, the authors have made several recommendations, emphasizing the importance of student-centered approaches, institutional commitment, and strategic alignment in providing a supportive and enriching educational experience that supports student success and well-being.

KEYWORDS

strategies for HEI-s, student services, student satisfaction, supportive learning environment, higher education

1 Introduction

The formulation of the strategy for education in Albania has reflected the EU's recommendation for sustainable and evidence-based comprehensive analyses as critical elements for policy development in education and skills. The strategic planning process is organized into 5 phases: 1. Preparatory phase, where preliminary consultations were held for the methodology of work and the format of the strategy; 2. Situation analysis, resulting in identifying critical problems in the field of education to be addressed by the Strategy;

3. Determining the system of objectives and key activities of the Strategy; 4. Budgeting the Strategy and drafting the implementation plan; and 5. Public consultation and finalization of the document.

The vision of the Ministry of Education and Sport (MASR), as seen in the following goals, focuses on ensuring quality and inclusive education:[1]

- High-quality pre-university and inclusive education, foster the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values by the demands of a democratic society; this implies a lifelong inclusive and equality-based education system that promotes the high-quality development of every person, enhancing democracy and the nation's integration into the EU.
- Effective and efficient administration of the educational system at all levels, founded on workable procedures to guarantee accountability, transparency, and quality.
- All-inclusive postsecondary education that supports the nation's social and economic development while upholding academic integrity, transparency, and international quality standards.

The primary objective of this paper is to evaluate students' satisfaction with the services provided by higher education institutions, focusing on their perspective as a crucial indicator of the University's strategy implementation and the attainment of its objectives.[2] Firstly, the study identifies the dimensions integral to delivering quality student services, aiming to delineate the critical focus areas within the institutional framework. Following that, it thoroughly examines the relationship between these identified service quality aspects and student satisfaction, explaining how each aspect influences overall contentment. Finally, the paper undertakes a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of each service quality dimension on student satisfaction, thereby serving as an important indicator of the successful execution of institutional strategies and ultimately contributing to the enhancement of the overall academic experience within higher education settings.

1.1 National education strategy 2021–2026

The National Education Strategy is being implemented from 2021 to 2026, with the leading role in its execution being the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) as the institution responsible for the education sector. The responsibility for implementing each measure is defined in the action plan and is divided among MES, related institutions, educational institutions, local authorities, and other stakeholders. The indicative cost for implementing the Strategy is 50.81 billion lek, of which 35.57 billion (70.0%) is allocated to Pre-University Education (Policy Objective 1), 135.04 million (0.3%) for Education System Management (Policy Objective 2), and 15.11 billion (29.7%) for Higher Education (Policy Objective 3). For the medium-term period 2021–2023, the cost is estimated at 23.11 billion lek, of which 21.15 billion lek are planned in the Medium-Term Budget Program, 153.50 million lek will be secured through foreign financing, and the financial gap is 1.80 billion lek or 7.78% of the indicative cost for this period. The financial gap was smaller in 2021–8.13 million lek (0.11% of the indicative cost for that year), increasing to 215.25 million lek in 2022 (3.14% of the indicative cost for that year) and to 1.58 billion lek in 2023 (18.28% of the indicative cost for that year).[3]

The four strategic objectives of the Education and Training 2020 framework for cooperation among EU nations in education and training fully align with the National Education Strategy 2021–2026 regarding integration into the EU: (1) Encouraging mobility and lifelong learning. (2) Increasing the effectiveness and quality of instruction and training. (3) Fostering civic engagement, social cohesiveness, and equality. (4) Fostering entrepreneurship and other forms of creativity and innovation at all educational and training levels. The Strategy also aligns with the EU's recently developed Framework for Key Competencies in Lifelong Learning.

1.2 Higher education quality code

The Higher Education Quality Code is the primary guide for all quality assurance methods and processes in higher education (HE). It lays forth the quality standards set by the state that higher education institutions are required to follow. The Quality Code, authorized by the Council of Ministers Decision No. 824 on December 24, 2021, is a list of national requirements for guaranteeing the quality of all study programs.[4]

The National Student Survey (NSS), is one of the primary external quality assurance systems at the national level. Experts have devised a questionnaire through the NSS to determine student happiness. The national student survey follows the standards for evaluating higher education institutions, as outlined in the Republic of Albania's Quality Code.

The indicators and questions in the questionnaire will focus on the following areas:

1 Organization of the institution, management, and its operation.
2 Resources.
3 Curriculum, Content, and Update.
4 Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation.
5 Research activities, initiatives, studies, and publications.
6 Students and Their Support. (Ascal, 2019). Every year, this survey is conducted.[5]

1.3 The strategy of the University of Tirana and its focus on quality services

Established in 1957, Tirana (UT) is Albania's most significant public institution. 38 administrative departments, research centers, and six faculties—the Faculty of Natural Sciences, the Faculty of Foreign Languages, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Social Sciences,

1 Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026-1.pdf (pg. 7).
2 Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026-1.pdf (pg. 8).
3 Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026-1.pdf (pg 9).
4 Kodi i Cilësisë (ascal.al).
5 Arsimi I larte ne RSh (ascal.al).

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the Institute of European Studies, the Faculty of History and Philology, the Faculty of Economics, and the Institute of Applied Nuclear Physics—are the eight central units that make up the University. 36 professional master's programs, 36 first-cycle programs, 65 Master of Science programs, and 38 doctorate programs are among the offerings of the University.

The University of Tirana envisions itself as a premier educational destination for students dedicated to changing society and themselves. It has a reputation for rigorous academic preparation and in-depth scientific research.

UT Mission: "The University of Tirana is a public university that offers a full range of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. The University contributes to the development of society through three pillars of public higher education mission, scientific research, education, and public service that continuously enrich and inform each other. We offer student-centered education and promote personal and intellectual growth to prepare students for productive and responsible careers in a global society."[6]

Higher education institutions in Albania, are legally required to provide internal quality assurance since they oversee the creation of policies and procedures for quality assurance. In compliance with the Albanian Quality Code, the internal quality assurance unit at the university level establishes criteria for continuous internal quality assurance.

Quality assessment in higher education institutions in Albania, based on the National Code of Quality Standards,[7] is done through:

1 *The national survey of students, which is an assessment at the national level as explained above.*[8]
2 *Periodic institutional evaluation and accreditation, that occur at the university level.* Institutional accreditation is an assessment of the institution as a whole without focusing on the specifics of the assessment of each faculty or study program.[9]
3 *Periodic evaluation and accreditation of study programs.*[10]

Each bachelor, master, or doctoral degree study program is periodically subjected to the evaluation/accreditation process according to national quality standards. The process is the same as in institutional evaluation/accreditation, the fields are the same as in the student survey, but the evaluation is more detailed, being at the program level to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each program, in the six various fields of; faculty/department organization, resources, continuous quality assurance, and student services (APAAL and QAA, 2017).

Periodic institutional evaluation and evaluation of the programs are processes that include self-evaluations as well as independent external evaluation. At the end of each process, the Accreditation Board decides on the evaluation and accreditation period. These three processes above are independent of each other, serving a 360-degree evaluation of quality and orientation for continuous and sustainable quality assurance. All the areas involved are closely related to the quality of student services. In these processes, students are the main stakeholders who are included in questionnaires as well as focus groups and round tables to ensure in some form directly or indirectly their opinion on the quality of the institution.

The areas for which the self-evaluation reports as well as the external institutional and program evaluation are according to the State Quality Standards, as follows:

1 Organization and management.
2 Resources.
3 Curriculum.
4 Teaching, learning, assessment and research.
5 Internal quality assurance.
6 Students and their support.

The University of Tirana is accredited by the decision of the Board of Administration, No. 4. dated 27/01/2023 with the evaluation for 6 years, that is the maximum period.[11]

Any institutional or program evaluation and accreditation process shall make recommendations for which the institution or faculty/department shall take their fulfillment process and report to Ascal for implementation. Recommendations according to their importance may require that the institution undertake operational or even strategic actions, by seeking their incorporation into the institution's strategies.

As can be observed above, the vision and mission of the University of Tirana focus on quality throughout its activities, including teaching, scientific research, internationalization, and societal contribution.

Referring to the University of Tirana's development strategy for 2023–2028, the strategy focuses on quality in all 6 priority objectives (Development Strategy of the University of Tirana 23–28, 2023).

1 Improvement of teaching and innovation of studies
2 Boosting internationalization and mobility
3 Advanced scientific and applied research at the University
4 Strengthening social commitment, outreach, and visibility
5 Improved working conditions and infrastructure
6 Promotion and support for quality assurance

As seen above, explicitly, the 6th area of the UT Development Strategy 2023–2028 is entirely dedicated to supporting and promoting quality assurance.[12]

Referring to the strategic priorities defined in the UT 23–28 strategy and the areas of quality assessment at the institutional and programmatic level, explained above, a high consistency in content is observed between them. This consistency is identified as above, between the UT strategy; processes, activities, and operational strategies implemented; as well as mechanisms to evaluate quality,

6 Vision and Mission - UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA (unitir.edu.al).
7 Microsoft Word - ENGLISH_PVKM e Kodit te Cilësisë_Perkthim_2021.doc (ascal.al).
8 Student Questionnaire (ascal.al).
9 manuali vleresimit institucional ial 2016.pdf (ascal.al).
10 Udhëzues për procedurat, kriteret dhe dokumentacionin për vlerësimin e riorganizimit të Institucioneve të Arsimit të Lartë (ascal.al).
11 Accreditation Board with decision no. 4 dated 27.01.2023, accredits the University of Tirana with a maximum accreditation of 6 (six) years - UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA (unitir.edu.al).
12 Development-Strategy-of-the-University-of-Tirana-2023-2028.pdf (unitir.edu.al).

which also serve for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the strategy.

2 Literature review

2.1 Importance of strategic planning and service quality assessment in higher education institutions

Leskaj (2017) points out that government agencies must focus on the citizens, understand the changing environment, and consider the presence of private competitors who tend to be more adaptable and customer-centric.

Over the last two decades, strategy in higher education has become an increasingly important subject of research. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners have made major contributions to higher education management research, exploring various areas of higher education strategy.

Strategic management at the organizational level includes mission statements for higher education institutions (Arias-Coello et al., 2020; Hladchenko and Benninghoff, 2020; Seeber et al., 2019), strategic plan development and implementation (James and Derrick, 2020; Morphew, 2018), and the use of instruments such as SWOT analysis and Balanced Scorecard (Hladchenko, 2015).

The research of Parakhina et al. (2017) demonstrates the possibility of resolving the determined problems of strategic management in universities by developing new working mechanisms of internal growth that respond to external changes. They include:

- select strategies for leadership in quality, achieving unique competitive advantages through vertical and horizontal diversification, cost, time, image, etc.
- achieve university mission and goals through well-balanced indicators for specific department functions and tasks.
- improving orientation of strategic management inside the network, inter-university, and international interactions and alliances.

According to Marinoni (2019), higher education institutions developing internationalization strategies face multiple challenges and pressures, including revenue generation, talent competition, branding and reputation, international research and publications, international student recruitment, and the use of English for research and instruction. Each of these pressures requires strategic planning to balance growth and quality in internationalization efforts.

According to Amoli and Aghashahi (2016), total quality in schools strives to provide an integrated and process-oriented quality management system. In this sense, integrating strategic planning at universities is one of the general management principles to improve the quality of education because we need strategic planning to observe changes in university processes and to fulfill objectives.

According to Chen (2015), research on the quality of the service offered to students in higher education not only provides specific analyses but also helps university managers to identify areas of strategic focus and develop service quality strategies.

Universities need to understand students' needs and requirements and find ways to satisfy them because, in this environment, students are stakeholders and customers, and customer satisfaction and service quality are closely related. Ozsen et al. (2023) clearly state that university leaders must prioritize continuous quality development in their strategic plans.

According to Amoako et al. (2023), higher education institutions must take initiatives to improve academic services to significantly raise student satisfaction. Academic services of interest include high-quality education, competent teaching, research expertise, relevant curriculum, faculty assistance, effective teaching methods, accurate evaluations, and a positive learning environment.

Improving the quality of university services lies in universities' ability to create a climate and culture that promotes change through decision-making and human resources (Semarak, 2016). Swanson and Davis argue that service organizations pay attention to customer perceptions of service quality because this helps them develop strategies to improve customer satisfaction. Student satisfaction is essential in evaluating the quality of university services, so universities must conduct continuous research to understand the actual situation (Hasan, 2008; Parves and Ho Yin, 2010).

Ozsen et al. (2023) conducted comprehensive secondary research on strategy adaption for sustainable quality management. Sustainability, which began with environmental issues, results to be a critical term affecting all organizations' areas. Universities, as human-centered institutions, have embraced the "sustainable development" concept in terms of internal and external service quality. To achieve long-term quality development at universities, managers should consider two basic questions: How do university administrators implement a "sustainable quality management" system in their institutions? How do these tailored methods relate to different aspects of universities?

According to Ghobehei et al. (2019) and Tan et al. (2017), quality of service, is a key source to create competitive advantage. Quality service is a strategic strength that tries to build, sustain, and develop institutions' competitive advantages.

2.2 Role of service quality on student satisfaction in higher education institutions

2.2.1 Service quality in higher education institutions

The concept of service quality is always examined from the perspective of the consumer. Paraskevas (2021) defines service quality as the difference between client expectations and perceived performance.

Parasuraman et al. (1988) concluded that a comparison between service expectations and actual service experience determines consumers' views of service quality (Rowley, 1996).

Parasuraman et al. (1988) identified 10 factors applicable to all service types as indicators of service quality. These 10 dimensions include visibility, dependability, responsiveness, competence, accessibility, civility, communication, assurance, and understanding. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), these 10 aspects are combined to create the five dimensions model—Servqual: reliability, empathy, responsiveness, tangibility, and assurance.

Parasuraman et al. (1988) proposed five service quality dimensions.

a) Tangibility: physical facilities, technological equipment, staff.
b) Reliability: the ability to perform the service dependably and accurately.

c) Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and the ability to inspire confidence.
d) Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust.
e) Empathy: caring and individualized attention given to customers.

According to Mizuno and Bodek (2020), quality is a strategic goal that promotes the company's competitiveness, and there is a link between the company's performance and its ability to attain high quality, assuming that this is how it improves its competitiveness (Spetzler et al., 2016).

As stated by Lennard (2018), the phrase "service quality" in higher education was adopted by businesses. There is a discussion over whether universities resemble commercial organizations (Cantwell et al., 2021). Measuring the quality of higher education as a service can be challenging due to its unique characteristics (Knight, 2008; Marc et al., 2023). On the other hand, according to Lipi et al. (2024), in developing countries, particularly ex-communist ones, the public lacks literacy and interest in public service, political economy, fiscal system, legal systems, social paradigms, and economics, largely attribution of public goods provision to central and local governments.

Services have unique characteristics and are intangible (Costa et al., 2022). These traits are perishable and cannot be stored, despite the use of video technology.

As students are the primary consumers of higher education institutions, numerous authors have expressed an interest in exploring this field of research. As competition in the higher education sector grows, the service quality offered to students has become a strategic priority for HEIs.

2.2.2 Student satisfaction

According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), satisfaction is a consequence of the consistent performance of educational institutions and systems. Suppose an educational institution offers a program that promotes learning, e.g., when it has the infrastructure to provide education and academic and professional development services. In that case, students are more satisfied and motivated to complete their studies (Elliot and Shin, 2002).

According to Petrusch and Vaccaro (2019), higher education institutions must meet the needs and expectations of their target market as well as other stakeholders. However, students' needs must remain a top priority. As a result, it is critical to satisfy or meet client expectations in areas such as service delivery.

Marzo Navarro et al., (2005) identified two categories of factors influencing student satisfaction with higher education: personal and institutional factors.

Individual factors include age, gender, workplace, preferred learning style, and student performance, while organizational factors include quality of teaching, responsiveness of teachers, clear expectations, and educational activities. Wilkins and Balakrishnan identified teacher quality, physical facilities, and effective use of technology as critical factors in student satisfaction. The quality of the academic environment, the quality of feedback, the rapport between instructors and students, the relationships among students, the course material, the academic centers, the librarians, and the chances offered to the students, all have a significant role in how satisfied students are with their university. In addition, learning capacity, academic flexibility, university status and prestige, independence, faculty interests, student growth and development, student orientation, campus climate, institutional effectiveness, and social conditions are considered critical issues for student satisfaction (Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013).

Research suggests that academic service and infrastructure impact student satisfaction and loyalty (Ali et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Service quality and its relationship with student satisfaction

Satisfaction can be defined as a positive emotional state determined by evaluating various aspects of the relationship between the consumer and the organization. According to Maria Stock et al. (2017), user satisfaction is met by meeting their expectations and needs regarding a product or service.

The quality of the service is directly correlated with student happiness. In an Indian study, Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) discovered a positive correlation between service quality and student satisfaction, indicating that higher levels of service quality result in higher student happiness. A study carried out in Portugal by Duarte et al. (2012) corroborated this. Similarly, Khoo et al. (2017) discovered in their Singaporean study that there was a substantial correlation between student happiness and the quality of the services offered by the private higher education sector. A study of the educational sector in Malaysia found a positive relationship between visibility (an indicator of service quality) and student satisfaction. Tangible factors were found to measure students' satisfaction with the University (Mansori et al., 2014).

Cuthbert's (1996) study revealed that the content dimension (3.34) received the highest score. However, he added that more is needed to prove that visibility is the main factor in student satisfaction, as he believes that service is paramount. A study by O'Neill, Perisau, and McDaniel found that assurance is essential. It highlighted that students are more interested in information, behaviors, and skills to build trust as part of the assurance dimension (Hasan, 2008). Nonetheless, research also presents conflicting views regarding the significance of the physical components of service quality. Smith and Ennew's et al. (2006) research into higher education demonstrates the difficulty of perceiving consumer pleasure when deciding between an emotional and functional assessment. For example, students can evaluate objects based on their technical features, appearance, safety, and empathy (emotions). If users expect modern facilities and universities that can perform the assigned tasks but do not offer modern and comfortable physical conditions may be evaluated negatively. In this study, they also concluded that services such as canteen and accommodation directly or indirectly affect the evaluation of universities. According to Umbach and Porter (2002), faculty size also plays a vital role in student satisfaction. Magasi et al. (2022) study in Tanzanian universities found that tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and compliance were significant predictors of student satisfaction with higher education. Ali et al (2022) confirmed in their research the link between satisfaction and academic and administrative services. According to the findings of Amoako et al. (2023), administrative service, academic service, and physical evidence are important components of service quality provided by higher education institutions to achieve student satisfaction. This illustrates that student pleasure extends beyond the lecture hall experience.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research methodology

According to Saunders et al. (2009), there are two main research approaches: inductive and deductive. Deductive studies use theory deductively and establish it at the beginning of the study. In this study, a deductive approach was chosen because other studies that have been conducted were reviewed first, and then the variables included in the study were identified and tested the theory.

The focus is on the University of Tirana, as students receiving services from this institution will be included in the study. Through completing questionnaires by the students, we learned about their perceptions and experiences regarding service quality dimensions. The strategy used is a case study because this institution was included in the study. This research used a quantitative method to investigate the quality of services at the University.

This quantitative study is based on deductive reasoning, referring to the purpose, method, objectives, and statistical analysis performed. According to Kent (2020), a study that primarily focuses on quantitative data is considered a quantitative study.

According to the quantitative model of the study, the numerical data collected have been processed to create a picture of a trend or relationship between the variables of the study, also the statistical results aim to argue the hypotheses of the study. The collected data were measured numerically, aiming at inferential statistics referring to the tests and techniques used. Correlation and linear regression tests aimed to support the study's hypotheses through a correlational and causal analysis, referring to the hypotheses raised based on previous studies. Also, as described in the study, the sample of this study is probabilistic, which is an element that undoubtedly affects the statistical power of the study. The study data was collected during January 2024, with a response rate of 95%. We can also say that we have a sufficient study sample referring to the analysis done, as well as the number of variables and predictors. Although the data are measured mainly on a Likert scale, since perceptions, attitudes, and experiences were mainly measured, their measurement scales were abundant from 1 to 7, considering the study variables for tests and analysis as continued variables.

The main tests that were used to analyze the data of this study were the correlation and regression tests, where the correlation test was used simply as a preliminary regression test.

3.2 Nature of the study

Robson (2002) states that descriptive studies aim to develop an accurate profile of organizations, places, or groups. This study aims to create a profile of the University of Tirana. Studies that establish causal relationships between variables are called explanatory research (Saunders et al., 2009). The population in this study is all students receiving services at UT, and within this broad framework, the sample size is 150 individuals. The sampling is probabilistic random.

3.3 Construction of the questionnaire

In this study, we used SERVQUAL instruments (Parasuraman et al., 1988) for several reasons. First, the SERVQUAL model is the most widely used scale in many service industries (Asim and Kumar, 2018), as well as the dominating scale for measuring service quality in higher education (Fernando and Lalitha, 2017; Gupta and Kaushik, 2018). Second, various scholars from around the world (Alemu, 2023; Akhlaghi et al., 2012; Chopra et al., 2014; Chui et al., 2016; Magasi et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016; Yousapronpaiboon, 2014; Ruso et al., 2014; Kajenthiran and Karunanithy, 2015; Sefer Ada, 2017), used the SERVQUAL to assess the quality of services provided to students in higher education institutions. According to Lennard (2018), several scholars have used the SERVQUAL instrument, and they argue that it is an effective method for evaluating the quality of services provided by higher education institutions.

This research will use a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 27 questions divided into 7 sections, where the first section contains general questions about gender, faculty, etc. In contrast, the other 6 sections contain questions corresponding to the variables included in the study, such as service quality, tangibility, empathy, reliability, assurance, and responsiveness. The questions are measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. The main variables in this study are student satisfaction and Servqual dimensions. Previous studies on student satisfaction regarding the Servqual quality model determine that student satisfaction is a dependent variable, while the service quality dimensions are independent variables (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

3.4 Data collection and processing

Primary and secondary sources have been utilized to ensure data for this study. The primary data collection instrument is the questionnaire, using students' responses as data for hypothesis testing. Secondary sources are the result of a literature review, which includes scientific articles, case studies, reports, UT strategy, Albania's education strategy, etc., related to service quality and student satisfaction. Once the questionnaires had been collected, the data were input into SPSS 23. From the literature review, hypotheses to be tested were derived, and to better understand the service quality model, which is one of the study's variables, the relationship of each dimension of the model with satisfaction will be studied to see which dimension positively impacts student satisfaction.

3.4.1 Hypotheses in the study

> *H*1: "There is a significant relationship between tangibility and student satisfaction."
>
> *H*2: "There is a significant relationship between reliability and student satisfaction."
>
> *H*3: "There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and student satisfaction."
>
> *H*4: "There is a significant relationship between assurance and student satisfaction."
>
> *H*5: "There is a significant relationship between empathy and student satisfaction."

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4 Study findings and their interpretation

4.1 Descriptive statistics and their analysis

The study involves 150 students, of which 47.3% are bachelor's students, 19.3% are professional master's students, and 33.3% are research master's students, among whom 75.3% are female and 24.7% are male.

The survey's mean and standard deviation, all work together to give a more accurate visual and tabular data summary (Tables 1–2). Additionally, the T-test has been used to observe significant differences in means, for example, between two independent groups, such as males and females, concerning the dimensions of service quality and the level of satisfaction (Tables 3–4).

To see if there are significant differences between genders regarding the level of service quality dimensions among students, the T-test was used. The result was that in no case ($p > 0.05$) were statistically significant differences between genders observed as the p-value was greater than 0.05 (Table 4).

TABLE 1 Descriptive data on service quality.

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Tangibility	150	3.00	1.41
Empathy	150	3.11	1.60
Responsiveness	150	3.46	1.64
Reliability	150	3.93	1.65
Assurance	150	4.16	1.73

The quality of service consists of 5 dimensions: * Tangibility (M = 3, sd = 1.41), * Empathy (M = 3.11, sd = 1.6), * Responsiveness (M = 3.46, sd = 1.64), Reliability (M = 3.93, sd = 1.65), Assurance (M = 4.16, sd = 1.73), the Assurance dimension is reported to be higher than the others, according to the table above. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 2 Descriptive data on satisfaction.

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Satisfaction	150	4.110	2.03

Satisfaction consists of 5 questions with an average score (M = 4.110, sd = 2.03). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

To see if there are significant differences between genders regarding the level of satisfaction among students, we used the T-test. From the above table, we observe that for satisfaction, no ($p > 0.05$) statistically significant differences are found between genders, as the p-value is more significant than 0.05.

4.2 Hypotheses testing

H1: "There is a significant relationship between tangibility and student satisfaction."

Pearson correlation was utilized to determine whether there is a significant relationship between students' satisfaction and tangibility. We can observe from the above table that there is a statistically significant correlation ($p \leq 0.01$) between them. Tangibility and satisfaction have a strong positive association [$r(n = 150) = 0.655$, $p \leq 0.01$]. The outcome suggests that as satisfaction rises, so does tangibility (Tables 5, 6).

To assess the effect size of tangibility on satisfaction, simple linear regression analysis was used according to the following model: $Satisfaction = B0 + b1 * tangibility + \varepsilon t$.

εt is the error coefficient, B0 is the constant coefficient, b1 is the tangibility coefficient,

and satisfaction is the dependent variable, tangibility is the independent variable.

Model: Satisfaction with tangibility. It is noteworthy that the coefficient of determination, the Adjusted R Square, displays a value of 0.426. This shows that the tangibility variable accounts for 42.65% of the variance in satisfaction.

As the t-statistic in absolute value is more significant than two ($t = 10.557$), or if we observe its significance, its p-value is reported ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), satisfaction has a significant positive association with tangibility (b1 = 0.949).

Tangibility increases satisfaction by 65.5% (Beta = 0.655).

$Satisfaction = 1.268 + 0.949 * tangibility + \varepsilon t$.

H2: "There is a significant relationship between reliability and student satisfaction."

We used the Pearson correlation to determine whether there is a significant association between student reliability and satisfaction. We can observe from the above table that there is a statistically significant correlation ($p \leq 0.01$) between them (Table 7).

TABLE 3 T-test of mean differences in service quality by gender.

	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	p
Tangibility	Female	113	2.87	1.27	−1.657	0.104
	Male	37	3.38	1.72		
Assurance	Female	113	4.28	1.69	1.548	0.124
	Male	37	3.78	1.83		
Reliability	Female	113	4.03	1.55	1.111	0.272
	Male	37	3.64	1.91		
Responsiveness	Female	113	3.46	1.54	0.021	0.983
	Male	37	3.45	1.94		
Empathy	Female	112	3.11	1.49	−0.036	0.972
	Male	37	3.12	1.89		

Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

Reliability and satisfaction have a strong positive connection [r(n = 150) = 0.810, $p \leq 0.01$]. The outcome demonstrates that as satisfaction rises, so does reliability (Table 8).

To assess the effect of reliability on satisfaction, we performed a simple linear regression analysis using the following model:

*Satisfaction = B0 + b1 * reliability + εt*.

TABLE 4 T-test of differences in means of satisfaction by gender.

	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	*p*
Satisfaction	Female	113	4.11	1.97	0.006	0.995
	Male	37	4.11	2.27		

Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 5 Pearson correlation between satisfaction and tangibility.

		Satisfaction	Tangibility
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	**0.655**** 0.000
	N	150	150
Tangibility	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	**0.655**** 0.000	1
	N	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data. The bold value represents the Pearson correlation coefficient between satisfaction and other dimensions like tangibility, reliability, assurance, and empathy.

εt- is the error coefficient, B0 is the constant coefficient, b1 is the reliability coefficient, satisfaction is the dependent variable, and reliability is the independent variable.

Model: Satisfaction with Reliability. As the coefficient of determination, we note that the Adjusted R Square has a value of 0.654. This shows that the reliability variable accounts for 65.4% of the variance in satisfaction.

Because the t-statistic's absolute value is more than two (t = 16.824), or because of its importance,

the p-value is (p = 0.000 < 0.05), satisfaction and reliability have a substantial positive association ($b1$ = 1.004).

Reliability increases satisfaction by 81% (Beta = 0.810).

*Satisfaction = 0.164 + 1.004 * reliability + εt*.

H3: "There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and student satisfaction."

We used the Pearson correlation to see if there was a significant association between student responsiveness and satisfaction. We can observe from the above table that there is a statistically significant correlation ($p \leq 0.01$) between them (Table 9).

Responsiveness and satisfaction have a strong positive association [r(n = 150) = 0.750, $p \leq 0.01$].

The outcome demonstrates that as satisfaction rises, so does responsiveness (Table 10).

To assess the extent of the effect of responsiveness on satisfaction, we used simple linear regression analysis according to the following model:

Satisfaction = B0 + b1 * Responsiveness + εt.

TABLE 6 Regression of satisfaction relationship with tangibility.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients		T	*p*
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.268	0.297		4.265	0.000
	Tangibility	0.949	0.090	0.655	10.557	0.000

F = 111.441, R2 = 0.426. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 7 Pearson correlation between satisfaction and reliability.

		Satisfaction	Reliability
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	**0.810**** 0.000
	N	150	150
Reliability	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	**0.810**** 0.000	1
	N	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data. The bold value represents the Pearson correlation coefficient between satisfaction and other dimensions like tangibility, reliability, assurance, and empathy.

TABLE 8 Regression of the relationship between satisfaction and reliability.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients		T	*p*
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.164	0.254		0.645	0.520
	Reliability	1.004	0.060	0.810	16.824	0.000

F = 283.055. R2 = 0.654. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 9 Pearson correlation between satisfaction and responsiveness.

		Satisfaction	Responsiveness
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	0.750** 0.000
	N	150	150
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.750** 0.000	
	N	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 10 Regression of the relationship between satisfaction and responsiveness.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients		*t*	*p*
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.888	0.259		3.432	0.001
	Responsiveness	0.932	0.068	0.750	13.780	0.000

$F = 189.896$, $R^2 = 0.559$. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

TABLE 11 Pearson correlation between satisfaction and assurance.

		Satisfaction	Assurance
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	**0.773**** 0.000
	N	150	150
Assurance	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	**0.773**** 0.000	1
	N	150	150

**The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data. The bold value represents the Pearson correlation coefficient between satisfaction and other dimensions like tangibility, reliability, assurance, and empathy.

TABLE 12 Regression of the relationship between satisfaction and assurance.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients		*t*	*p*
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.331	0.276		1.200	0.232
	Assurance	0.909	0.061	0.773	14.823	0.000

$F = 219.731$, $R^2 = 0.595$. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

Satisfaction is—the dependent variable; Responsiveness—is the independent variable; B0 is—the constant coefficient; b1—is the responsiveness coefficient; εt is the error coefficient.

Model: Satisfaction with Responsiveness. It is noteworthy that the coefficient of determination, the Adjusted R Square, displays a value of 0.559. This shows that the responsiveness variable accounts for 55.9% of the variance in satisfaction.

Because the t-statistic's absolute value is more than two ($t = 13.780$), or because of its importance, the *p*-value is ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), satisfaction and responsiveness have a significant positive relationship ($b1 = 0.932$). Responsiveness increases satisfaction by 75% (Beta = 0.750).

$Satisfaction = 0.888 + 0.932 * Responsiveness + \varepsilon t$.

H4: "There is a significant relationship between assurance and student satisfaction."

We used Pearson correlation to determine if satisfaction and assurance among students are significantly correlated. We can observe from the above table that there is a statistically significant correlation ($p \leq 0.01$) between them (Table 11).

Assurance and satisfaction have a strong and positive correlation [$r(n = 150) = 0.773$, $p \leq 0.01$]. The outcome demonstrates that as satisfaction rises, so does assurance (Table 12).

To assess the extent of assurance on satisfaction, we used simple linear regression analysis according to the following model:

$Satisfaction = B0 + b1 * security + \varepsilon t$.

Satisfaction—dependent variable; security—independent variable; B0—constant coefficient; b1 assurance coefficient; error coefficient.

Model: Satisfaction with assurance. The Adjusted R Square coefficient indicates the value of 0.595 when used as a determinant. This shows that the assurance variable accounts for 59.5% of the variance in satisfaction.

Satisfaction and assurance have a substantial positive connection ($b1 = 0.909$) since the t-statistic in absolute value is more significant than

TABLE 13 Pearson correlation between satisfaction and empathy.

		Satisfaction	Empathy
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	**0.786**** 0.000
	N	150	150
Empathy	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	**0.786**** 0.000	1
	N	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Authors' estimates based on research data. The bold value represents the Pearson correlation coefficient between satisfaction and other dimensions like tangibility, reliability, assurance, and empathy.

TABLE 14 Regression of the relationship between satisfaction and empathy.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients		*t*	*p*
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.003	0.228		4.407	0.000
	Empathy	0.0389	0.065	0.786	15.411	0.000

4F = 237.507, R^2 = 0.615. Source: Authors' estimates based on research data.

two (t = 14.823) or if we evaluate its significance, the p-value is displayed (p = 0.000 < 0.05). Assurance increases satisfaction by 77.3% (Beta = 0.773).

With assurance, satisfaction rises by 77.3% (Beta = 0.773).

*Satisfaction = 0.331 + 0.909 * security + εt*.

H5: "There exists a significant relationship between empathy and student satisfaction."

We employed Pearson correlation analysis to examine the strong association between empathy and student happiness. We can see a statistically significant correlation between them ($p \leq 0.01$) in the table above. Empathy and satisfaction had a strong positive association [r(n = 150) = 0.786, $p \leq 0.01$]. The result shows that as empathy increases, so does satisfaction (Tables 13, 14).

To assess the extent of the effect of empathy on satisfaction, we conducted a simple linear regression analysis using the following model:

*Satisfaction = B0+ b1 * empathy + εt*.

Satisfaction—dependent variable; empathy—independent variable; B0—constant coefficient; b1.

coefficient of empathy; *εt* error coefficient.

Model: Satisfaction with empathy. We observe that the Adjusted R Square displays the value of.615 as a coefficient of determination. This suggests that the empathy variable accounts for 61.5% of the variance in satisfaction. Satisfaction and empathy have a substantial positive connection (b1 = 1.003) since the t-statistic in absolute value is more significant than two (t = 15.411), or if we evaluate its significance, the p-value is displayed (p = 0.000 < 0.05). Satisfaction is raised by 78.6% (Beta = 0.786) when there is empathy. Empathy increases satisfaction by 78.6% (Beta = 0.786).

Satisfaction = 1.003+ *0.389 * empathy + εt*.

5 Conclusion

The Servqual model of service quality was chosen as a theoretical model in this study to measure the satisfaction of students of the University of Tirana based on their perspective. This model includes five dimensions of service quality, tangibility, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and assurance.

Based on the findings analysis, it is revealed that the five dimensions of service quality have positive relationships with student satisfaction. Simple linear regression analysis was used to estimate the extent of the effect of dimensions on student satisfaction, demonstrating that tangibility increases satisfaction by 65.5%, reliability by 81%, assurance by 77.3%, empathy by 78.6%, and responsiveness by 75%. Among the service quality dimensions, students rated assurance higher, followed by reliability. While tangibility is the dimension with the lowest evaluation. So, students expect higher quality in the lecture halls, modern laboratory equipment, better lighting and thermal conditions, etc. Also, the dimensions of empathy and responsiveness have a lower rating; students have higher expectations from the university's willingness to help and support and the ability to inspire empathy.

5.1 Future directions

Considering implementing the development strategy 23–28 at the University of Tirana, it is imperative to prioritize cultivating a quality culture across six key objectives. To ensure the successful execution of this strategy and the delivery of high-quality student services, it is recommended that several measures be adopted based on the study's findings. Firstly, the University should use frequent surveys and questionnaires to gage service quality. These surveys serve the dual purpose of identifying weaknesses and prioritizing areas for improvement, ultimately enhancing student satisfaction and revision strategies. Moreover, they provide valuable feedback for refining strategy implementation and informing ongoing regulatory actions.

As highlighted by the study, one notable area requiring immediate attention is the infrastructure. Students have consistently rated infrastructure poorly, underscoring the necessity for particular focus, particularly with the onset of the new development strategy 23–28. Creating conducive and comfortable learning environments fosters student productivity and satisfaction. Addressing infrastructure shortcomings aligns with the University's goal of enhancing student experience and academic outcomes.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of functional and updated student information channels. These channels should be diversified and professionally managed to serve the student body better. Effective communication channels disseminate information efficiently and foster a sense of connection and engagement within the university community.

Finally, the study highlights reliability and empathy as important dimensions influencing student satisfaction. Recognizing this, the University should prioritize personalized attention to students, demonstrating a readiness to address their concerns and establish efficient channels for problem-solving. By demonstrating reliability and empathy, the University can foster a supportive environment conducive to student success and satisfaction.

5.2 Study limitations and prospects for future research

First, this study included only UT, which, despite being the most important and largest institution of higher education in the country, cannot be used to generalize about the quality of educational services in all higher education institutions across the country.

Second, a limitation that is encountered in every study is subjectivism about primary data collected by students, because we do not know the degree of sincerity in their responses.

Third, time is another limitation in this study because the study is intersectional and probably presents a picture only of that time.

This study explains the quality of services from the perspective of students, i.e., service users, and has not considered the views of the providers of these services, so there is a need for further studies that consider the views of both parties to facilitate finding common solutions for quality improvement.

Further research can be carried out by combining various quality assessment instruments to highlight the greatest weaknesses in service delivery in higher education institutions and taking into account strategies to minimize them and increase the quality.

Future research may also be needed to test the same variables in other HEIs. Applying the model to other universities can result in different results.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

EL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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