

Quality Estimation of Training Courses Using SERVQUAL Model

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Abstract. Nowadays the training courses represent a real problem, and more and more people are interested in improving or developing new skills in order to improve their professional status. This article examines the factors that influence the quality of the training courses held by FAER organization. The training courses are addressed to the future entrepreneurs. The courses were related to various fields: management, marketing, finance and other economic subjects. Due to the basic characteristics of the services it is difficult to evaluate the quality of this kind of activity. To achieve the purpose of the paper a survey was conducted using the SERVQUAL method. The total number of respondents that participated in this survey was 194. The results reveal the fact that the training courses did not achieve the expectations of the participants and the main problems which were indicated are related to the schedule and the ability of the professors to communicate and make the participants feel comfortable during the classes. To increase the quality of these courses it is recommended to pay attention also to the relation between the lectures and the participants, not only to the quantity and the quality of the provided material.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, impact study, survey, communication, small cities

INTRODUCTION

During the last years due to the POSDRU programe the number of the training courses increased, especially for unprivileged social categories. The aim of the training courses is to improve or to develop skills for the participants especially in the field of entrepreneurship (Pocol, 2012). At the same time entrepreneurship became a mainstream business discipline in the universities (Lee *et al.*, 2005). To face the new economic realities and the competition of the new generation, people have to improve their skills, so the training courses represent an opportunity for them.

To improve the quality of the training courses the feedback of the participants needs to be evaluated. The SERVQUAL method was chosen to be applied because of the particularities of the training courses (part of services).

The objective of the research was to determine which are the factors that influence the quality of the training courses, and if the perceptions of the entrepreneurship training courses achieve the expectations of the participants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The studied target group was formed by the participants of training entrepreneurship courses in four Romanian's counties: Mures, Suceava, Arges and Bistrita-Nasaud, organized by FAER (Organization for Promoting Agriculture and Regional Economy). The sample of the target group was created using the random sample with continuous variable for an error limit of 2% and a probability of guaranteeing the results of 95%, based on information provided by the Organization for Promoting Agriculture and Regional Economy, Reghin

(Fundatia pentru Promovarea Agriculturii si Economiei Regionale, Reghin). To achieve the objectives of the paper the questionnaire was applied to 194 participants from 19 localities.

The limit error in absolute value was computed based on the formula (Merce *et al.*, 2010):

$$\Delta_{\bar{x}} = \frac{R_{\bar{x}} \cdot X_{\max}}{100} = \frac{2 \cdot 79}{100} = 1.58 \quad (1)$$

where $\Delta_{\bar{x}}$ represents the error limit in absolute value, $R_{\bar{x}}$ is the error limit in relative value, while X_{\max} is the maximum value of characteristic age.

The volume of the sample (n) was computed based on the average age of the target group, determined on a previous research, based on the data base provided by FAER as being 35.74 years old:

$$\sigma_x^2 = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^k (x_j - \bar{x})^2 N_j}{\sum_{j=1}^k N_j} = 130.39 \quad (2)$$

where σ_x^2 represents the variance, and \bar{x} is the average age of the target group.

The volume of the sample was computed based on the following formula (Merce *et al.*, 2010):

$$n = \frac{k^2 \cdot \sigma_x^2}{\Delta_x^2 + \frac{k^2 \cdot \sigma_x^2}{N}} = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot 130.39}{(1.58)^2 + \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot 130.39}{1608}} = 178.39 \text{ persons} \cong 178 \text{ persons} \quad (3)$$

where n is the volume of the sample and k is the probability of guarantee. After applying the survey, 194 questionnaires were validated.

The data was collected by using the SERVQUAL method and the descriptive statistics was used for analysis.

The SERVQUAL method was first developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry from 1983-1988. At the beginning there were defined 92 statements divided in 10 dimensions. After more tests were determinate 22 representative statements divided into 5 dimensions.

According to this, perceived service quality can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{Perceived service quality} = \text{perceived service (P)} - \text{expected service (E)} \quad (4)$$

This method is based on 22 statements divided into five dimensions: tangibles (1-4 statement), reliability (5-9 statement), responsiveness (10-13 statement), assurance (14-17 statement) and empathy (18-22 statement) (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988). Each of the statements has been evaluated twice. First the participants were asked to rate on scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means not at all essential and 7 means absolutely essential, how important each element for the training courses. Then they were asked to indicate on scale form 1 to 7, where 1 means strongly disagree and 7 means strongly agree, how do they appreciate these elements for the current situation.

The first step was to established the level of quality for each dimension by using the following formula (Banciu *et al.* 2005):

$$SQ_j = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n_j} (P_{ij} - E_{ij})}{n_j} \quad (5)$$

where SQ_j represents the quality of the service for the dimension $j, j=1, \dots, 5$

P_{ij} represents the perception for statement i from dimension $j, i=1, \dots, 22, j=1, \dots, 5$

E_{ij} represents the expectation for statement i from dimension $j, i=1, \dots, 22, j=1, \dots, 5$

n_j represents the number of statements for dimension j

Based on the quality's level of each dimension the general level of the service's quality can be computed:

$$SQ = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^5 SQ_j}{5} \quad (6)$$

where: SQ represents the general level of the service's quality; SQ_j represents the quality of the service for the dimension $j, j=1, \dots, 5$

The score can be positive, negative or zero. The positive value indicates that the quality of the delivered services is higher than the costumers' expectations. The negative score indicates that the quality of the delivered service is below the costumers' expectations. If the score is zero it means that the delivered services' quality meet the costumers' expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the research showed the fact that, generally, the quality of the entrepreneurship training courses was below the participants' expectation (Tab. 1).

Tab 1

The scores of each dimension

Dimensions	Perception Scores	Estimation Scores	Total Scores
Tangibles	6.54	6.6	-0.06
Reability	6.64	6.75	-0.11
Responsiveness	6.66	6.8	-0.14
Assurance	6.66	6.85	-0.19
Emphaty	6.42	6.53	-0.11
Average	6.584	6.706	-0.122

As it can be observed in Tab.1 the higher score, even if it is negative, was obtain in the case of the tangibles. This fact is not surprinsing at all, if the data presented in Tab. 2 is also analysed. As it can be observed when the participants were asked to rank on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means less important, and 5 the most important, the tangibles were considered by almost 59% of them to be less important dimesion for evaluating the quality of the training courses (Tab. 2).

The assurance dimension, that refers to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence, registered the lower score (minus 0.19). That means that the lectures did not know how to deliver the message to the participants, and the

message was not adapted to the structure of the group. This gap can be also because of the different level of education of the participants.

The most important dimension in the present study was the reability in more than 43% of the cases. It is absoltly normal to be like this because the reabilty refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Also those who participate to training courses want to develop and to get new skilles, and for them it is very important that the information is delivered at the high level how it was promised.

Because of the heteorogenity of the group (different age, different education level, different employment level) the lectures could not achieve the participants expectation neither in the case of the emphaty dimension.

Tab. 2 shows the dimensions' importance score. The reability dimension seems to be the most important one, followed by the assurance dimension and responsiveness.

The same trend was noticed also in the case of other studies (Gibson, 2009). In other studies (Bryslan and Curry, 2001), about the catering services the most important dimension was as well the reability, but the next two were the responsiveness and tagibles. This difference of the dimensions' importance score from one study to another can be influenced by the characteristics of the analysed services and their particularities. Banciu *et al.* (2005) found almost the same order for the dimensions' importance, the only difference was between the second and the third position, which were reversed.

Tab. 2

Dimensions' importance score

Dimensions	Verry important	Important	Moderatily important	Unimportant	Verry unimportant
Tangibles	2.31	12.31	13.08	13.85	58.46
Reability	43.08	21.54	15.38	13.85	6.15
Responsiveness	14.62	30.00	32.31	20.00	3.08
Assurance	27.69	22.31	22.31	21.54	6.15
Emphaty	12.31	13.85	16.92	30.77	26.15

CONCLUSION

The quality of the training course developed by FAER organization were below the expectations of the participants. The higher gap was found in the case of the reability dimensions which was perceived by the participants as being also the most important. As an overall appreciation, its dimension, no matter the category of services, seems to have the biggest weight in evaluating the services' quality. In the future, in order to improve the quality of the training, the lectures should be better trained on one hand, and the participants groups should be more homogenous, so the content and the method of teaching could be adapted exactly to the specificity of the group. The tangibles elements such the rooms, modern technologies do not prime in the option of the participants when they evaluated the training services, but this does not means that they should be neglected.

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