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## Research notes

## Quality evaluation in post-graduate diploma courses from the students' perspective: An exploratory study in Brazil



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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to evaluate the quality perceived, from the perspective of students, in post-graduate diploma courses in the Brazilian context. Post-graduate diploma courses in Brazil are called *lato sensu* courses as opposed to *stricto sensu* courses, which is a term used for Master's Degree and Doctorate courses. Based on the literature on quality in services, the main constructs regarding quality in this field were addressed, in addition to studies that investigated the quality of services in Higher Education Institutions. A questionnaire with 32 items was applied to 358 individuals at a major university in the northeast of Brazil. By means of exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, five dimensions relating to SERVQUAL attributes were formed: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. As a contribution to the field, this study suggests the validity of quality perception indicators analyzed in the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and their adaptation to the robust SERVQUAL methodology.

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## 1. Introduction

Changes in the social, political and economic environment have occurred recently in Brazil and have led to a marked increase in the number of higher education institutions and greater access to this type of education (Bueno, Rocha, Veiga, & Duclós, 2015). By the end of 2011, the country had 6.5 million university students. Of these, 6.3 million were undergraduate students, and 173,000 were in post-graduate courses, more than twice the number at the beginning of the decade (Brasil, 2014). Many of the changes that have occurred in the area of education are derived from new products offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEI), which have gained strength due to increasing investments by the federal government, changes to the legislation and programs such as PROUNI, FIES and REUNI (Bueno et al., 2015; Saraiva & Nunes, 2011).

Given that post-graduate diploma courses represent an important segment in higher education, generating greater knowledge, skills and competences than undergraduate courses, they have also become strategic to the institutions that

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operate in this field, being an important investment in methods that will promote greater learning and student satisfaction. A better understanding of the attributes of the quality of education that most influence this satisfaction has become an important source of information for HEI so that they can make better investments in the post-graduate segment.

In the literature, several studies have analyzed the quality perceived in higher education services (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Mondini, Domingues, Correia, & Mondini, 2012; Zwierewicz, 2008). However, research in this field has established indicators and dimensions of quality from particular theoretical or methodological concepts, which in turn have limited its results. In this context, the present study evaluated the quality of services provided by HEI based on the dimensions of the SERVQUAL methodology, which is an established and respected model among academics and managers, as it was developed specifically for the context of services from a rigorous methodological process. This forms the research question: Which attributes of the SERVQUAL model have an influence on the quality of service as perceived by post-graduate diploma students?

The objective of this work is to evaluate which attributes of service quality are considered more important in the opinion of students on post-graduate diploma courses, using the SERVQUAL model. The results may serve as a basis for strategic decisions of HEI that intend to invest in improving their courses, and make theoretical contributions that improve knowledge regarding research on quality in services.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Service quality

Good service provision can be considered a core competency for any organization, including those that are essentially service providing companies and those in trade and industry, whose products are only of interest to consumers if they are accompanied by diverse services that complement their main activity (Karpen, Bove, Lukas, & Zyphur, 2014). Thus, it can be said that there is hardly any economic activity without services to support its existence. The importance of this area may also be due to a growing share of the economy (Wirtz & Zeithaml, 2015; Lovelock, Wirtz, & Hemzo, 2011; Grönroos, 2009) and the constant need for improved management by dint of competitiveness and increasing demand, which are characteristics of the economic environment of this century.

Studies on services have always been present in the administration literature, especially marketing. In general, these studies, in addition to emphasizing the importance of services to the economy, also seek to investigate ways to ensure their quality, as in the works of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985 and 1988) and Senff et al. (2015), with the authors questioning the methods for assessing the level of quality in services using the SERVQUAL model. With this model, the quality of a service is measured through a gap analysis between the customer's expectations and actual delivery. Studies that assess service quality using the method created by Cronin and Taylor (1992 and 1994), the SERVPERF, are also commonplace. With this method, the quality in services is measured by their own performance.

The study of quality in services took shape in the 1980s. One of the earliest scholars was Grönroos (1983), who drew up the model of the perceived quality of services, which considers the customer's perception in relation to services as a factor for measuring their quality. This was followed by the theories suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1985 and 1988), which developed into the SERVQUAL method, defined as a parameter for evaluating the comparison between the quality expected and the quality experienced through the dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1993) also established the concept of a tolerance zone, an area (zone) between what the customer understands as the desired service and what he tolerates as the minimum acceptable service. The desired service is the level of quality that the customer wishes to receive, while the lowest acceptable level represents the minimum level that the customer accepts as tolerable (Jager & Gbadamosi, 2013).

Cronin and Taylor (1992 and 1994) criticized the SERVQUAL scale, arguing that evaluating expectations would not be the most appropriate method, and that it would be sufficient only to assess the perceived performance following delivery of the service. They developed the SERVPERF, although this scale uses the same attributes of assessment of SERVQUAL (Salomi, Miguel, & Abackerli, 2005). Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2005) also described five dimensions by which customers can evaluate the quality of the service received: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles.

Berry and Parasuraman (1991) argue that the essence of quality of service is performance. Grönroos (2009, p. 83) conceptualizes that "quality is perceived at all levels of the relationship structure and, thus, accumulates to form a general perception of quality at any particular moment." Berry (2010) conceptualizes that the tolerance zone grows due to the confidence that the organization builds with its customers, suggesting that reliability is an important attribute in the customer's perception of quality. The evaluation of service quality can thus be regarded as the result of customer experience after its implementation, since the heterogeneity of its execution prevents a prior assessment and the experience provided by good service transforms it into anticipation for the next occasion. This requires continuous improvement by the company.

### 2.2. Attributes of quality in higher education institutions

Other studies that deal with service quality and its attributes for satisfaction in higher education have contributed to this study. Mondini et al. (2012), analysing the satisfaction of students of HEI in the states of Santa Catarina and Parana in Brazil, point out that the main attributes that influence the choices of a post-graduate student are reputation, location, the concept

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