

Chapter 9

Cross–Cultural Approach to Evaluation of University Services

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ABSTRACT

Increased competition between universities is generating the need for in-depth analysis of the processes underlying evaluation of university service because of its implications for student behaviour. Cross-cultural analysis of student perceptions is a fundamental approach. This chapter attempts to review the concept in the light of dimensional models of culture proposed by Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Schwartz (1994). Thus, based on a theoretical framework that reviews the main contributions to the concept of culture and evaluation of university service, a proposal has been developed for evaluating university service from a cross-cultural approach. The results show cultural differences between students from four different nationalities. Furthermore, Hofstede's (2001) model has been found to be the most appropriate for evaluating cultural differences in this context.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Europe is currently immersed in a dynamic evolutionary process. Universities must necessarily adapt to the changes taking place in their political, legal, economic, social and technological environment (Caruana *et al.*, 1998), which are having a basic impact on the way university services are provided. The processes

higher education institutions are currently dealing with include increased flows of people between universities, and in particular the international mobility of university students. The appearance of a series of economic and administrative facilities for student exchange has increased the international movement of students (Beerli *et al.*, 2002). In addition, higher education institutions have also shown a growing trend towards internationalisation (Mazzarol, 1998). All of this has consequently increased competition between universities for students who now move from one

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4458-8.ch009

region to another, more easily than ever before. A cross-cultural approach, that examines differences between nations, has become fundamental in any research in this context. Gogolin (2002) says that the use of a mono-cultural perspective in educational research means opportunities for progress in this field are being missed.

Furthermore, increased mobility as a consequence of competition between higher education institutions highlights the need to establish a conceptual framework to evaluate university services, placing the student as the main recipient of those services. The notion of competitive advantage was foreign to this sector, but nowadays it is vital for universities to understand that they are in a market (Oldfield & Baron, 2000), and they need to be aware not only of what society demands from them in terms of graduate training and qualifications, but also of students' perceptions of their educational experience (Munteanu *et al.*, 2010). Changes in demand justify the importance of analysing the processes that lead to evaluation of the service and determine consumers' future behaviour (Marzo *et al.*, 2005). It is fundamental to develop studies that provide an understanding of student profiles and behaviour, as they are the main customers for university services (Marzo *et al.*, 2005; Redding, 2005; White, 2007). Studies in this area are more appropriate than ever, especially those that take a cross-cultural approach.

From a conceptual and operational approach there are three main constructs in the marketing services literature for evaluating services marketing: service quality, satisfaction and value (Cronin *et al.*, 2000). The complex relations between these and other concepts such as image and loyalty mean that researchers must accept a holistic perspective, assuming the importance of antecedents in understanding behavioural responses, because the mere evaluation of satisfaction or service quality would be incomplete (González-Gallarza & Gil, 2006b).

Although we are immersed in processes of globalisation and integration that have led to the standardisation of various consumer characteristics, there are still cultural differences in certain aspects of consumer behaviour. Complex theoretical models on cultural differences, like those developed by Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Schwartz (Schwartz, 1994, 1999; Ros & Schwartz, 1995; Schwartz *et al.*, 2001), and their influence on other researchers' work, show the validity of this approach and its impact on various areas of knowledge. In the area of university service, culture has been shown to influence the service evaluation process (Pritchard, 2006; García-Aracil, 2009). However, the results of cross-cultural academic research flow slowly (De Mooij, 2000). There is still a relative paucity of literature in this context and hence a need for deeper exploration and development.

This work tries to provide a review of the concept of culture as a tool for cross-cultural analysis and its application to the evaluation of university service, based on constructs such as service quality, perceived value and satisfaction. It also includes an empirical proposal for cross-cultural analysis of the process of evaluating university service. In pursuit of this twofold objective, first of all we present the conceptual framework, including the main theoretical formulations for the dimensionalisation of culture and its application to the study context, and a review of the processes underlying service evaluation, especially perceived value, but also other related variables such as service quality, image, satisfaction and loyalty. Secondly, we consider the existence of cross-cultural differences in university student perceptions of these variables. Thirdly, we discuss and comment on the findings in the light of established theoretical models. Finally, the contributions, limitations and future lines of research arising from this work are presented by way of conclusion.

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