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Customer Satisfaction in the Provided Services

Case Student Union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences,
VAMOK

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Opiskelijakunnat ovat suomalaisissa ammattikorkeakouluissa lainmäärittämiä palvelun tarjoajia. Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulun kansainvälisten tutkinto-opiskelijoiden tyytyväisyyttä Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulun opiskelijakunnan heille tarjoamiin palveluihin. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli määrittää tämänhetkinen tyytyväisyyden taso, sekä tuoda esiin mahdollisia kehityskohteita ja niille ratkaisuja.

Opinnäytteen ensimmäisessä osassa esiteltiin opinnäytetyön toimeksiantaja – Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulun opiskelijakunta VAMOK –, sekä tutkittiin tavallisia palveluihin, palveluiden laatuun, asiakastyytyväisyyteen, sekä asiakastyytyväisyyden mittaamiseen liittyviä teorioita. Kvantitatiivinen empiirinen tutkimus suoritettiin online-kyselyn muodossa. Kysely jaettiin kaikille Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulun kansainvälisille tutkinto-opiskelijoille sähköpostin välityksellä. Vaikka tutkimus oli pääosin tarkoitettu kansainvälisille tutkinto-opiskelijoille, olivat tervetulleita vastaamaan myös vaihto-opiskelijat, sekä suomalaiset, jotka opiskelivat kyseisissä tutkinnoissa.

Opinnäytteen toisessa osassa tutkittiin empiirisen tutkimuksen tuloksia. Tulokset osoittivat, että kyselyyn vastanneiden havainnot palvelujen laadusta eivät täyttäneet heidän odotuksiaan, mistä voidaan päätellä, etteivät Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulun kansainväliset tutkinto-opiskelijat ole tyytyväisiä VAMOKin tarjoamiin palveluihin. Tulokset kuitenkin myös osoittivat, ettei tyytymättömyys välttämättä johdu vain palvelun tarjoajan heikommasta suorituksesta, vaan kyselyyn vastanneiden väärin ymmärtämästä järjestön imagosta.

Opinnäytteen viimeisessä osassa ehdotettiin keinoja palvelujen kehittämiseksi. Paremmin palvelukseen kansainvälisiä tutkinto-opiskelijoita ehdotettiin, että opiskelijakunta laajentaa ja kehittää heille tarjoamiansa palveluita, sekä ottaa askelia muuttaakseen imagoaan muuksi kuin vain opiskelijabileiden järjestäjäksi.

ABSTRACT

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A student union in a Finnish University of Applied Science is a law mandated service provider. In this thesis the level of customer satisfaction within international degree students at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences in the services provided by the Student Union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMOK was examined. The aim of the study was to determine the level of customer satisfaction and suggest tactics for possible areas of development.

In the first section of the thesis the client – the Student Union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMOK – is introduced and basic theories related to services, service quality, customer satisfaction and customer satisfaction measurement are examined. A quantitative empirical research was conducted as an online survey that was sent to all international degree students at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences via email. Even though the survey was mainly targeted towards international degree students, Finnish students in these degree programs as well as exchange students were welcome to respond as well.

In the second section of the thesis the results of the survey were examined. The results showed that the perception of service quality of the respondents was lower than their expectations which indicated that the international degree students are not satisfied with the services offered to them by VAMOK. It was also indicated that the lower satisfaction might not be solely due to a lower performance of the provider but a misunderstood image of the organization.

In the last section of the thesis suggestions were made to develop the provided services. To better serve the international degree students, it was suggested that the student union should look into expanding and developing the types of services they offer and take measures to start to change their image to something more than just a student party organizer.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A student union is a law mandated student entity in all Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Universities of Applied Sciences Act 932/2014, Section 41) with the main objective to advocate and provide services for all the students at the University of Applied Sciences. The membership of a student union is not mandatory for a student but most first year students purchase a membership and stay members until graduation to receive local and nationwide benefits from the student status that the membership provides; from cheaper prices on public transport to free use of a local gym. However, this is not the case with international degree students. Even though they stay in Finland for at least three years studying a complete degree, they are less likely to become members and even less likely to stay a member of a student union for the whole duration of their studies. For example, from all the 1750 members of Student Union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences VAMOK only 59 have listed their nationality as some other than Finnish (Korpela, 2019), even though every year international degree programs at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences receive approximately 100 new students, approximately 60% of which are from abroad.

From a business perspective, an opportunity is missed here; based on the current number of international members in the student union each year dozens of possible members are lost. Even though international students respond yearly to a school wide feedback survey that includes sections related to the student union and its services, it can be hard to clearly pin point the opinions of international degree students regarding the student unions services and, hence, continuously develop these services to better meet the needs of the international students.

1.1 Aim of Thesis

The aim of this thesis is to research and determine the level of customer satisfaction among the international degree students of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences in services provided by the student union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMOK. Based on the research results suggestions will be made to further develop the services provided for international students. Ultimately the objective is to increase the number of active international members of VAMOK and, thus, the representation of international students in the student union.

Research Question:

- What is the level of satisfaction among the international degree students of Vaasa University of applied sciences regarding services provided by student union of Vaasa University of applied sciences VAMOK?
- Are there some clear areas of development regarding these services?

In addition, the aim of this thesis is to bring forth and focus on the opinions of international degree students due to a lack of accurate and focused data on their opinions. This thesis could also start a tradition of customer satisfaction measurement in the student union, not only limited to international students but all members in general.

2 STUDENT UNION OF VAASA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES VAMOK

The student union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences VAMOK was established in 1996 based on the Universities of Applied Sciences Act. Currently it has approximately 1800 members and employs two full time employees. VAMOKs main duties include law mandated overseeing of the university of applied sciences actions from the student perspective as well as creating a community within the students by organizing events, sports and activities – such as tutoring – that promote getting to know other students and having fun during student life. VAMOK currently offers services from law mandated student advocacy to leisure events. Most prominent and noticeable services for a common student include peer- and international tutoring, sports and events. (VAMOK, 2019)

VAMOK consists of two separate entities; the executive board and the representative body. 20 representatives are selected by election every year to the representative body of VAMOK. The representative body holds the highest decision-making power in the student union and its main duties include selecting the members of the executive board and other high position student representatives, making decisions regarding the guidelines of the executive board's actions and the student union's future such as budgets, financial statements, strategy and report of actions, and overall overseeing the actions of the executive board. (VAMOK, 2019)

The executive board is responsible for the overall operations of the student union such as organizing events, coordinating tutors and representing students in university of applied sciences different quality and operation entities. The board includes eight members each of which is responsible for his/her own sector: president of the executive board, educational affairs coordinator, social affairs coordinator, communications responsible, tutor responsible, event coordinator and sport and leisure coordinator. In addition, the president of the executive board acts as a representative of the employer for the two employees of VAMOK. (VAMOK, 2019)

2.1 International members

Currently VAMOK has 1750 members and of those 1750, 59 have listed some other country than Finland as their home country. Of this 59 it is not possible to specify if these

members are exchange or degree students. According to the 2018 president of the executive board of VAMOK, Sami Korpela, the number of international degree student members cover over half of the international members. However, these numbers fluctuate yearly depending on the effort made by the international tutors and the international coordinator to inform and sell memberships to the international students. (Korpela, 2019)

In the first-year of the studies international business and information technology students receive group tutoring in English, where each class has 4-5 tutors each. Other than the language being English, the international classes are tutored similarly as the Finnish classes. Exchange students receive personal tutoring by an ‘international tutor’. The tutor is responsible for the tutoring of 1-3 exchange students, which makes the experience highly personalized. In addition to personal tutoring, the international coordinator organizes a ‘welcome sauna’ and some other free-time activities for the exchange students. Both tutoring activities are a part of a contract between Vaasa University of Applied Sciences and VAMOK, where the university purchases this service from the student union. (Korpela, 2019)

In 2018 VAMOK organized an ‘integration’ course for all international students interested. The course included ten lectures held by recruitment firms, possible employers and labor unions. It had approximately 100 participants of which 90% were degree students. The course was organized due to noticing that after first weeks of starting their studies approximately 5% of international degree students and 20-40% of exchange students took part in VAMOKs basic activities – such as student parties. This is due to lack of interest in similar free-time and evening activities, especially in the case of international degree students, compared to national Finnish students. (Korpela, 2019)

The services for international students have been developed based on feedback given by the students of which the ‘integration’ course is a good example: interest towards it and its success surprised the organizer positively and it received good feedback from the participants. However, developments are quite scattered due to the international coordinator changing every year. Because the people responsible change quite often, many development objects are noticed during the year and, due to lack of time to plan the developments well enough, left as an idea to the next responsible to execute – if they see fit. If there is enough time to plan the execution of a development, it is easier to carry it to the next year

and so ensure that the developments are made – a good example of this again the ‘integration’ course: its planning started already in 2017 but the actual execution started in the autumn of 2018. (Korpela, 2019)

VAMOK has always aimed towards having all its public activities completely bilingual in Finnish and in English. This is done to ensure that international students can easily take part in all activities organized by VAMOK. Due to their bilingualism international students can also easily comment VAMOKs activities and give feedback. (Korpela, 2019)

2.2 International members in other student unions

A Benchmarking survey (APPENDIX 1) was conducted to understand the service practices regarding international students in other student unions in Finland. The questions of the survey were based on the key aspects of VAMOKs activities regarding inter and were divided into three separate categories; general information, provided services and opinions. The questionnaire was sent to respondents via email and it was open for responses for approximately three weeks. The response rate of the survey was 4%, which creates issues with reliability and generalization of the data collected.

The respondents of the survey stated that they have special services targeted for international students and that they are meant for both exchange students and international degree students. From these services, the importance of tutoring was emphasized from the services they offer, similarly as VAMOKs former president of board stated in his interview. In addition to tutoring, the respondents highlighted different types of relaxed events that mainly focus on hanging out and getting to know the other event participants, such as movie nights and bowling events, and events that aim to ease the international students’ move to Finland, such as flea market of home goods, which in addition to helping the international students start their life in Finland, promotes recycling. (APPENDIX 1, Part 2, Questions 1-4)

The respondents of the survey indicated that the international members of their student union quite actively participate in the student union’s activities and know why it is beneficial for them to be a member of the student union. The respondents also stated that the international members of the student union are quite satisfied with the services provided and that these services are developed quite determinately and continuously. It was also

stated that these developments are made to benefit both international degree students and exchange students. (APPENDIX 1, Part 3, Questions 1-7)

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Unique aspects of Services

Services are defined as all economic actions that do not produce a physical product or construct, are usually consumed as they are produced and provide intangible added value to the customer. (Wilson et. al., 2012) Services are also complex since they are constructed from different components that can or cannot be decided in advance. Due to this, it is very difficult to measure a service in its entirety. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

Services differ from common goods – other than by their more complex nature - by their unique characteristics; intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. Intangibility means that most – or all – parts of services are not easily identified, since they cannot be seen or touched. This creates issues with pricing and patenting, as well as marketing and communicating the service for customers. (Wilson et. al., 2012) For a service provider, biggest issues concerning intangibility are the difficulty of communicating their offering to the customer understandably due to the fragmented nature of services and the inability to protect their best practices by patents. For a customer the biggest hard ship is that they cannot assess the quality of the service before they have purchased it and hence, they must rely on the company's reputation and word of mouth when deciding to buy the service. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

Heterogeneity indicates that parts of a service offering cannot be standardized. This happens, because service quality is a result of many uncontrollable factors and a service outcome is dependent on the actions of employees and customers. (Wilson et. al., 2012) Heterogeneity can be seen in the differences between companies offering the same service or in the work of a single employee on different occasions. (Dotchin et. al., 1994) Due to the inability to standardize, service provider cannot be sure that the delivered service matches what was planned and sold. (Wilson et. al., 2012) However, in service field, the innate variability and adaptability is the key to customer satisfaction. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

Because services are intangible and cannot be produced and then stored, they are inseparable – produced and consumed at the same time. In addition, customers influence and

take part in the transaction which means that customers can affect other customers experience as well as their own. Due to services being produced and consumed at the same time, the role of the employee in regards of the service outcome is essential. (Wilson et. al., 2012) First they must identify the customers individual expectations and adapt the service to meet these expectations. Secondly, the employee needs to assess their own execution of the service in regards of the customers' expectations as they are providing the service. Lastly, they need to be ready to notice and react to any wrong customer reactions. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

In addition, since services are produced and consumed at the same time, they are perishable; they cannot be stored or inventoried, returned or resold. Also, perishability makes it difficult for the service providers to prepare for changes in supply and demand. (Wilson et. al, 2012) To control the fluctuations to some extent the company can increase or decrease resources answer the demand – for example a very popular hair salon could hire more hairdressers -, affect the demand by adjusting prices or access, or retain excess resources to even out the fluctuations. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

However, there is quite a lot of criticism arguing against these aspects; intangibility is not seen as core competence of services since there are so many tangible aspects linked to services, heterogeneity is not seen important aspect since there are many possibilities for standardization in the service field, many services have been found to be separable and services have been argued to be stored in systems, machines, knowledge and people cancelling out perishability. (Moeller, 2010) An early example of a different point of view on studying the core attributes of services is Lovelocks service classification table (Table 1.) from 1983 that examines services through their method of process: if the service is produced for the customer themselves or their possessions and if the service is more intangible or tangible. (Wilson et. al., 2012) More recent point of view is the FTU-framework (Table 2.). It examines services through the three stages of providing of services: Facilities, Transformation and Usage. First stage, facilities, indicates the prerequisites of providing of services – company resources. Second stage, transformation, is divided to two: goods and services since today providing goods have many service aspects as well. Transformation of goods is an indirect service and it means transforming the resources of a company – raw material, systems, whereas transformation of services means transforming the resources of the customer – their possessions, themselves. (Moeller, 2010)

Table 1. Lovelocks service spectrum (Wilson et. al., 2012)

	Services for customers	Services for customers possessions
Tangible	Physical services for customers for example transportation, spa services.	Services for tangible possessions for example car repair, dry cleaning.
Intangible	Services for customers minds for example entertainment, education.	Services for intangible possessions for example banking, legal services.

Recently, researchers have voiced more and more discontent towards these widely used core aspects of services. The reason for the discontent is overall change of focus in service marketing – from simple personal or low-tech services, to more complex high-tech services - and development of technologies that make it possible to provide services that lack these characteristics. Research to pinpoint the most core aspects and classifications of services, and hence better describe, market and sell them, continues. (Moeller, 2010)

Table 2. FTU-Framework (Moeller, 2010)

Facilities	Transformation	Usage
Pre-requisites of a service transaction – company resources.	<i>Goods – Indirect service</i> Transformation initiated by the company, using company resources. Objective to achieve sellable goods. Independent decision making for customers and company.	Benefits of the customer from transformation of company or customer resources.
	<i>Services – Direct service</i> Transformation initiated by the customer by joining resources regarding persons, objects, goods and/or data. Decisions made together - customer and company.	

3.1.1 Marketing

These unique aspects – intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability – present many challenges – and some advantages – for the marketing and sales of services compared to common produced goods. (Wilson et. al., 2012) All marketing can be considered as making a promise to a customer regarding the sold item. However, to redeem that promise a product must only entitle the promised functions and qualities promised but a service must redeem an expectation of the customer that the company can only know vaguely beforehand. (Grönroos, 1998) To describe this phenomenon a services marketing triangle (Figure 1.) was created by Christian Grönroos in 1997. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

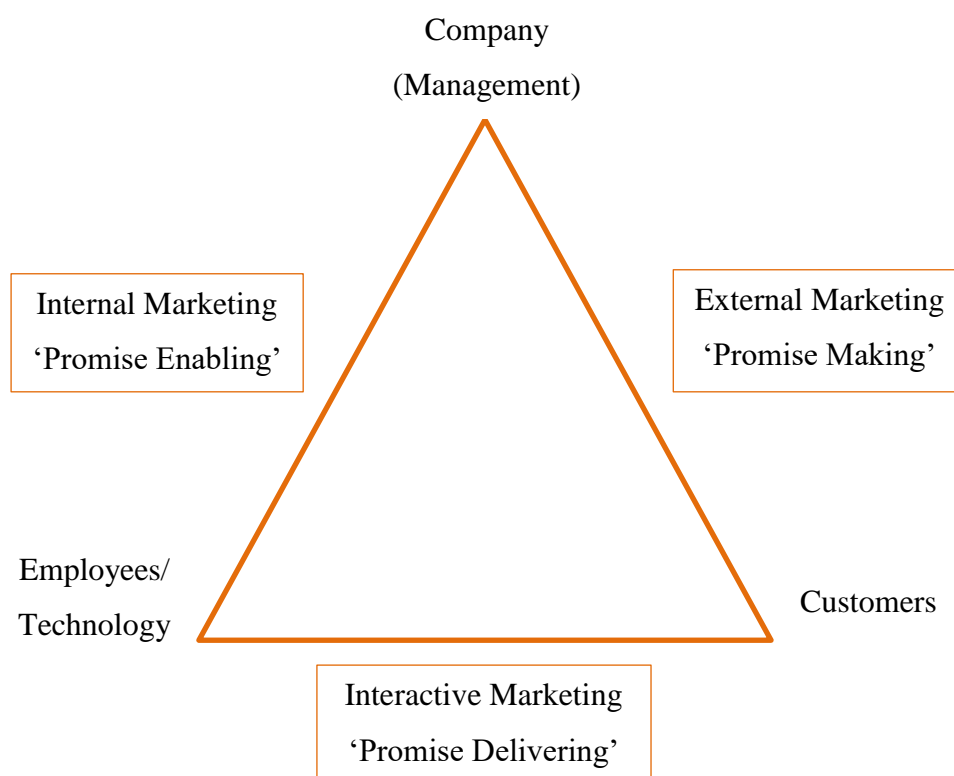


Figure 1. Services Marketing Triangle (Wilson et. al., 2012)

The most visible for a customer of the three sides of the triangle is the external marketing – making the promise. Essentially it is similar in the marketing of services and common goods; it means all measures made to make the customer aware of the offered service or product, leading ideally to purchase. In addition to external, internal and interactive marketing are needed. (Wilson et. al., 2012) However, these two differ substantially when talking about service or product marketing. (Grönroos, 1998) Internal marketing regards

to measures taken to enable the company to make the promise in the first place (Wilson et. al., 2012); in the case of a product continuous development of the product (Grönroos, 1998) and in case of services it regards to recruitment, training, motivating and rewarding the employees, in addition to providing materials and technologies for them to execute the service as well as possible. Interactive marketing in service field means keeping the promise by the actions of employees, technologies and other parties affecting the service outcome (Wilson et. al., 2012) whereas for product marketing it refers to the qualities and aspects of the product. (Grönroos, 1998)

In addition to different point of view in the basic meaning of their marketing, services need a slightly different point of view when discussing the most common marketing concept: marketing mix. A marketing mix is used to describe the aspects that the company uses to communicate with or satisfy customers. The marketing mix for goods includes four P's; product – including all aspects of the sold good such as features and quality in addition to warranties and branding -, price – inspecting the pricing decisions of a product such as price level, differentiation between markets and possible discounts and allowances-, place – including all logistic aspects of product marketing such as channels and intermediaries, storage and transportation-, and lastly promotion – indicating all aspects of sales and managing them such as salespeople, advertising and sales promotions. For services three additional P's need to be added to conform with their special nature. These P's include people, physical evidence and process. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

The first one of them, people, includes all humans interacting and playing a part in the service outcome and the customers perception; company employees, the customer themselves and other customers in the same service environment. Of course, the most obvious of the three is the employees; they have a huge part in the actual outcome since they deliver the service but, in some cases, (such as teaching or consulting) the employee itself can be the service. However, since the customer and other customers are usually present in the same environment receiving the service, they too can have a great impact on the service experience of others in addition to their own. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

The second added P is physical evidence; the surroundings of the place where the service is delivered, and all tangible products related to the delivery or communication of the service. The place of delivery can be anything from an office or store type of surroundings to a phone call with a customer; they both should communicate as well as possible the

quality of the service offered. Other tangible aspects of a service could include equipment, flyers and other printed advertisements and report formats. Since it is very difficult to evaluate the actual offering and its quality beforehand, these tangible aspects are key in reassuring the customer about the company's objectives, target segments and nature of service. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

The last P, process, quite evidently regards to how the service is delivered and its operational structure. All the steps resulting in an outcome of a service are evidence to customers based on which to assess and evaluate the service. For example, very bureaucratic services, such as the Finnish Social Service Institution, need the customer to follow many steps that might be difficult to understand which leaves the customer feeling confused and evaluating the service as bad even though it might be that the service itself is not bad, just the structure is too complex. On the other hand, some service providers offer very bare service with no extras included with a low price which might make some people think it is a bad service because they only offer the bare minimum. All in all, the process can make a huge impact on the customers experience and that is why it should be explained and communicated to customers as clearly as possible. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

These three P's are added to the marketing mix because they are all within control of the company and they all – separately and together – influence customer experience and satisfaction as well as initial and repurchase intentions. To further describe this impact a “servuction” system model (Figure 2.) was created by Langeard and Bateson in 1981. It describes the service delivery as a two-part process from the customer point of view: a visible and invisible one. The visible one includes the people and physical evidence, where the invisible one includes the process. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

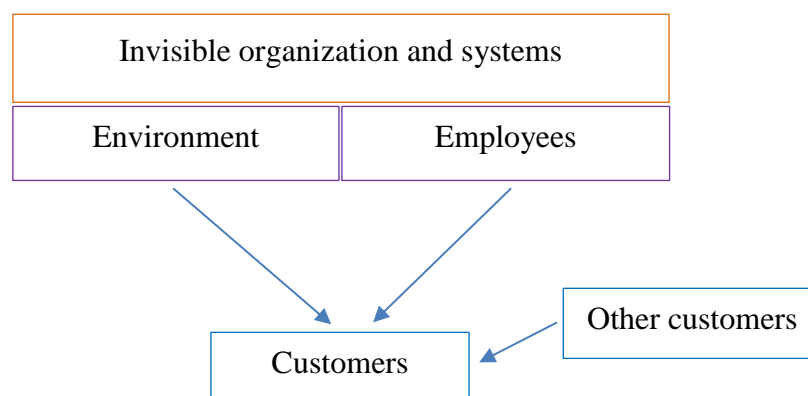


Figure 2. The “servuction” system model (Wilson et. al., 2012)

However, marketing mix has suffered a lot of criticism for its validity taken for granted. It has been one of the most used concepts of marketing since the 1960's but it has been found to not really fit to describe service marketing due to its more analytic nature. Another concept point of view for service marketing is more interactive and customer focused relationship marketing which continuously aiming towards building lasting relationships with customers and hence growing the company's market share. Of course, depending on the company's strategies and objectives both approaches can be successful, and this can be studied through Marketing Strategy Continuum (Table 3.) which describe two different points of view to marketing: transactional and relationship point of view. It lists the most key aspects of both views and on the bottom line it suggests the types of products to be marketed using said views. As a summary transaction marketing focuses on individual transactions and the customers focus is on the product and its price whereas relationship marketing focuses on creating a relationship with the customer and the customer is more concerned about the quality than the price. In relationship marketing some marketing mix elements can be used as a support but the key element is interactive marketing; meaning the people – employees and customers – interacting during the transaction and acting as marketers in addition to their operational role. (Grönroos, 1994)

Table 3. Marketing Strategy continuum; some implications (Grönroos, 1994)

<i>Strategy Continuum</i>	Transaction Marketing	Relationship Marketing
<i>Time perspective</i>	Short-term, focus on individual transactions	Long-term, focus on customer relationship
<i>Useful Marketing Concept</i>	Marketing Mix	Interactive marketing (supported with marketing mix)
<i>Price flexibility</i>	Customers sensitive to price	Customers more flexible in terms of price
<i>Quality focus</i>	Quality of output	Quality of process and interaction
<i>Measurement of satisfaction</i>	Market share (indirect)	Customer base (direct)
<i>Feedback system</i>	Customer surveys	Real time feedback
<i>Role of internal marketing</i>	Little to none significance	Very important for success
<i>Product continuum</i>	<i>Packaged goods</i> ⇔ <i>Durable goods</i> ⇔ <i>Industrial goods</i> ⇔ <i>Services</i>	

It could be argued that for service providers the most critical element in service marketing is focusing on the customer. (Wilson et. al., 2012) This is due to the fact that they are not offering a simple product but a complex process (Grönroos, 1998) that is not visible to the customer in its entirety, which in most of its steps involve the customer personally and they in addition can have an effect on their own and other customers experience and opinion of the service. (Wilson et. al., 2012) Due to this a more personalized marketing tactic such as relationship marketing could be implemented, (Grönroos, 1994) however to maintain the focus on the customer, all strategies and implementations should be done by their needs and wants. (Wilson et. al., 2012)

3.1.2 Service Design

Service design consists of planning and organizing resources, such as people and infrastructure, of a service to increase its quality and improve customer-service provider interaction. (Andreassen, et. al. 2016) The importance of meticulously designing services is growing since it influences customer satisfaction and company performance. (Andreassen, et. al. 2016; Reason et. al., 2016; Teixeira et. al., 2012) From design point of view, services have three key areas to consider: movement, structure and behavior. Movement regards to the movement through the service process. It encompasses everything from customer journey – from awareness to purchase and using the service – to customer movement and quality of services. Understanding movement is vital for customer attraction, acquisition and retention. (Reason et. al., 2016)

Structure is used to align different aspects that influence the outcome of a service – surroundings, equipment, employees, pricing and so on. It contains different outlooks of a service – an engagement, experience, organization or a performance. Better knowledge on the structure of a service helps to counteract the heterogeneity nature of services and betters the organization of the service process. Behavior happens between movement and structure – it tries to explain all behavioral aspects of services whether it is behavior of a customer, an employee or a technology. A better understanding of behavior is key in designing services since if customer, employee, or technology behavior can be influenced through design it can have a big effect on a company's performance. (Reason et. al., 2016)

To better consider the customer on the design phase of a service a customer experience model can be applied to the service design process. The model's objective is to close the

gap between customer experience and service design and hence better the quality and performance of the service to the direction of the customer. It is divided in to three different levels: value constellation experience, service experience and service encounter experience. The first level, value constellation experience, examines interactions between customer and all parts of the service organization needed to perform a given service process. (Texeira et. al., 2012) It is important to determine factors needed to process and use a service to track the most important factors and parts of the process that are not that important from both customer and company point of view and, hence, ensure the best flow in a design of a service. (Andreassen et. al., 2016; Texeira et. al., 2012)

The second level, service experience, concentrates on one certain service provider in the same field as on the first level – for example on the context of public transportation, Finnish train company VR – and examines its operations similarly as the whole field in the first level. The last level, encounter experience, studies concretely each individual interaction during a service process. Due to it being quite difficult to remember all small details within a service process, it is advised to examine this level by customer observations. (Texeira et. al., 2012) These two levels collect information on the exact experience of a customer, which will increase the understanding of customers' needs and wants and of the context of the use of the service, as well as empathy for the customer. (Andreassen et. al., 2016) The information provided by these levels of study, provide a valuable information on the wanted aspects of a service from the customer point of view and hence offer a possibility to better the service quality and customer satisfaction and finally customer satisfaction. (Texeira et. al., 2012)

3.1.3 Service quality and customer satisfaction

The quality of a service is much harder to measure than the quality of a sold good – for the quality of services is abstract and hard to identify due to their core aspects of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability. Due to lack of objective measures that a common tangible good might have – such as durability or technical aspects – the quality of services is measured through the customers perception of quality. A perception of quality means the customers personal judgement of whether the product is good. Quality forms from the measurement of perceived quality against the expectations the customer had before purchasing the product or service. (Parasuraman et. al., 1986)

The most dominant theory of service quality is SERVQUAL introduced in 1986 by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry. (Asubonteng et. al., 1996) It was created from 10 factors of service quality they found during their research (Table 4.) that describe the aspects of service that customers use to determine its quality. These factors include reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding and tangibles. (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

Table 4. Factors of Service Quality (Dotchin et. al., 1994)

<i>Factors of Service Quality</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Reliability	Consistency of performance and getting it right the first time. Company respects the promises it has made to its customers.
Responsiveness	Employees want to provide good service to customers and their timeline of providing the service, e.g. is inquiries responded eagerly or is setting up an appointment prompt.
Competence	Employees knowledge and skills to provide a service and research capability to stay on top of the developments of the field.
Access	Company is easy to reach, by telephone or through internet in addition to convenient location and operating hours.
Courtesy	Politeness, respect and consideration of the employees. Includes also consideration of customers property and appearance of the employees.
Communication	Providing the service with a language the customer understands, meaning in addition to language the words used – if the customer is well informed of the process or not at all familiar with it. Includes explaining the service process and its cost in addition to reassuring the customer that they are heard. Listening to customers.

Credibility	Being trustworthy and believable, having customers best interest as a priority. Is contributed by the company's name, reputation and personalities of its personnel.
Security	Feeling of safety, without risk or doubt. Communicated through physical safety, confidentiality and financial security.
Understanding	Making an effort to understand customer needs. Contributed by learning customers special requirements, recognizing regulars and providing personalized attention.
Tangibles	Everything physical related to the service, e.g. physical environment, tools, other customers.

However, since they aimed towards creating a tool with which a company's service quality could be measured and determined with, they further researched the factors and as a result merged the ten factors into five dimensions of SERVQUAL model (Table 5.). These dimensions include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and assurance. (Parasuraman et. al., 1986)

Table 5. Five dimensions of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et. al., 1986)

<i>Dimensions of SERVQUAL</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Tangibles	Facilities, equipment, appearance of personnel
Reliability	The ability to perform the promised service accurately and reliably.
Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide rapid service.
Assurance	Employees ability to convey trust and confidence as well as their knowledge and courtesy.
Empathy	Caring and providing the customers with individual attention.

How the SERVQUAL-system works is that it provides a basis for customer feedback questionnaires that can help the company to determine their quality of service. However,

when considering the questions, the company should take in to account customer expectations and perceived quality separately. This can be done by asking two different types of questions regarding one dimension. For example, in the case of empathy the questionnaire should have two questions, where a scale from negative to positive can be used to depict the opinion of the customer:

Expectation

Employees should provide individual attention to customers.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly agree

Perceived quality

Employees of company X provide individual attention to customers.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly agree

By considering both customer expectation and perceived quality the company receives a lot of useful information: if a poor image is due to high expectations, poor perceived quality or both. In addition, it provides more detailed measures since two questions regard to same theme but with a different point of view (Parasuraman et. al., 1986) and according to SERVQUAL model quality increases if perceived quality measures higher than expectation and vice versa quality decreases when perceived quality fails to meet the expectations. (Asubonteng et. al., 1996)

However, like many other industry leading concepts, SERVQUAL has received its share of criticism. First, the service providers researched and questioned to determine the dimensions were quite homogeneous and not very prone to a lot of customer involvement or interruption in the process – such as banks and repair companies - which can be a disruptive factor for the dimension’s general implication. (Dotchin et. al., 1994) In addition, it was found that comparing the results of the customer expectation and perceived quality questions does not necessarily provide the most accurate analysis of the quality of the service but for example a service performance measure should be used to achieve more accurate results. In addition, some researchers have criticized SERVQUAL for being too simple to effectively measure service quality in some cases. This can be corrected

to some extent by modifying the scale to conform with the company's key issues or by using the data to test an existing hypothesis. (Asubonteng et. al., 1996)

Another point of view in evaluating and determining the quality of a service – perceived quality of service - was created by Christian Grönroos in 1982. (Grönroos, 1998) It was created to provide services similar features to measure than a tangible product. Unlike the SERVQUAL-model it was never intended to be an operational tool but a theoretical tool to help researchers and field professionals understand and study the service industry better. (Grönroos, 2001) The perceived service quality model (Figure 3.) consists of four dimensions: expectations and experience – influenced by the customer –, and technical quality and functional quality – influenced by the provider. (Grönroos, 1998)

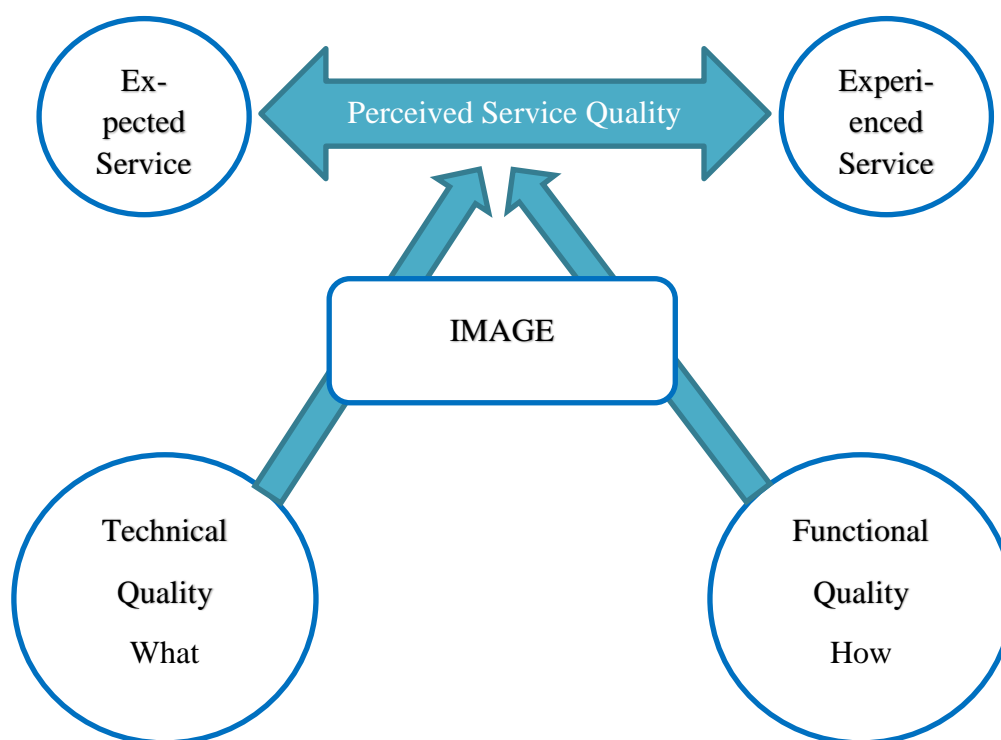


Figure 3. Perceived Service Quality Model (Grönroos, 1998)

Perceived service quality is influenced firstly by the customers own expectations; these expectations are created by the company's made promises through e.g. marketing. Secondly, during the service process, perceived quality is influenced by the technical and functional qualities of the service; what is offered as an outcome and how the process is organized. These two qualities are commonly filtered for better or for worse through the company's image – for example a company with a very compelling image can get away

with some mistakes in their service process. After experiencing the service, the experience is compared with the expectations and as a result of that comparison, the perceived quality of the service is determined. (Grönroos, 1998)

Even if many researchers have found that service quality is a multi-dimensional concept most service quality studies focus on the functional quality of a service – how the service process is organized and essentially how the service is offered. Though both functional and technical quality impact equally perceived quality of services research has found that functional quality has slightly bigger impact on company image than technical quality. This means that service process and interaction between a customer and employee can greatly impact the company image, in addition to customers perceived quality. (Kang et. al., 2004)

Customer satisfaction is closely related and the result of service quality. (Parasuraman et. al., 1986; Grönroos, 1998) They are structurally similar however, in case of quality or satisfaction, expectations are defined differently. In the case of quality, expectations mean the needs and wants of the customer. In the customer satisfaction case, expectations are defined as customers predictions and assumptions of the process of impending transaction. (Parasuraman et. al., 1986)

A theory where connections between customer satisfaction and service quality can be seen is Richard Oliver's expectation-disconfirmation theory (Figure 4.) which describes how customer satisfaction is formed. Some similarities to Grönroos' perceived service quality model can be seen in Oliver's theory, since perceived service quality is, not considering the difference in expectation point of view, similar to Oliver's disconfirmation. (Grönroos, 1998; Spreng et. al., 2002)

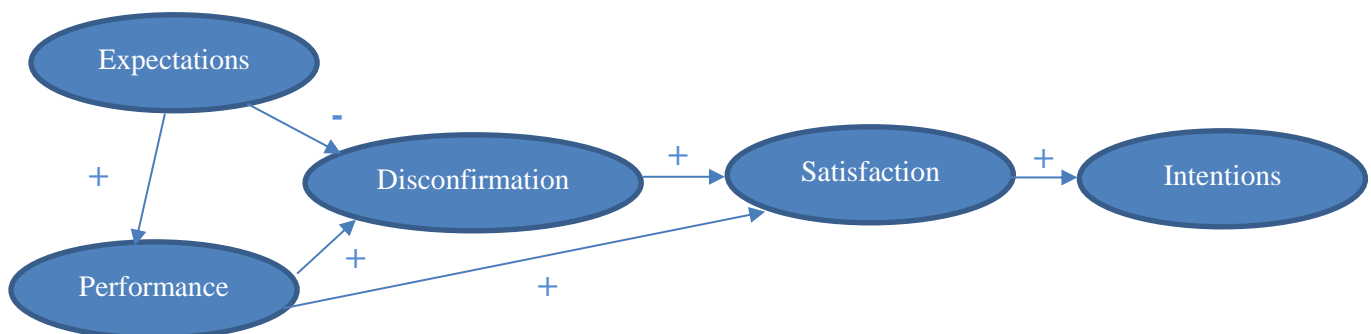


Figure 4. Expectation-Disconfirmation Model (Spreng et. al., 2002)

The model of the theory explains the relations of different actions in service process and their effect on customer satisfaction. Similarly, as Grönroos' perceived service quality, the disconfirmation is determined by the customers comparison of their expectations and their received service performance. Expectations can have negative affect on disconfirmation if the performance is worse or also sometimes on par with the customers' expectations. If disconfirmation is negative, it has a negative effect on customer satisfaction as well. However, if performance exceeds the customers' expectations the disconfirmation is positive, and the customer is satisfied. Customer satisfaction has also a positive effect on customers future intentions meaning that if a customer is satisfied with a service, they are more likely to intent to repurchase the service. (Spreng et. al., 2002)

In addition to service quality, other factors can increase customer satisfaction. Research has shown a positive correlation between continuous development and improvement. This is due to service processes becoming more and more effective and hence increase in service quality. To ensure the thorough implementation of developments it is key for the management to commit to the development initiative, establish an organizational culture of quality and reward employees to encourage development implementation. Research has shown that training and goal setting is not enough to motivate employees to reach the level of improvement needed to ensure increase in customer satisfaction. It is more important to create motivation systems – such as competitions – to engage the employees in addition to clearly demonstrate managerial commitment to the issue to increase the morale of employees. (Koval et. al., 2018)

3.2 Measuring Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and value are widely recognized as the most important measures for companies regarding their performance, financial performance, continuous improvement and competitive advantage. (Garver, 2001) Most used mean of gathering this valuable data is customer surveys. They are more common in the service field where there are no easily measurable qualities to assess within the business itself – such as manufacturing quality - but they can also be used in the product manufacturing field to determine customers perception of the product and possible services related to it. A general model for customer satisfaction survey formation (Figure 5.) describes three general steps including customer needs determination, creating and using the survey and questionnaire implementation. (Hayes, 1998)

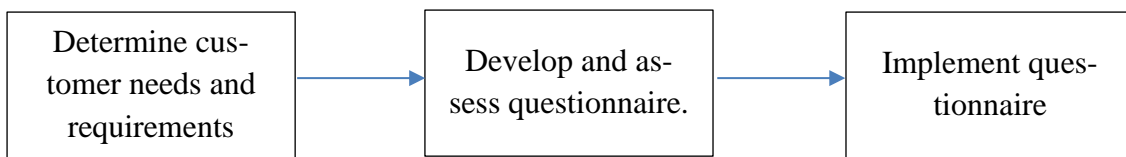


Figure 5. General Survey Formation Model (Hayes, 1998)

In the first stage, customers' requirements and needs – or the quality dimensions of the service - must be identified. From a theoretical point of view quality dimensions such as SERVQUALs tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy can be used, in addition to detailed examples of these dimensions. It is key to know the customer needs since it gives an advantage to better serve and satisfy customers and if the needs and requirements are known, a satisfaction survey is developed easier since its purpose is to evaluate to what extent are the customers satisfied with each different quality dimension. (Hayes, 1998)

The second step is the development of the survey. The main aim of this step is to create a survey that provides specific information about customer perceptions relating to the dimensions determined in the first stage. Special attention should be given to the selection of questions in the survey and size and quality of the sample which answers the questionnaire to best ensure reliability and validity. The third and last step is using the questionnaire. The uses can vary from assessing the current state of customer satisfaction to evaluating its fluctuations over time. (Hayes, 1998)

Customer satisfaction surveys have two big benefits; providing information about the performance level of a business unit or units in different times and places and providing improvement and development ideas if the information from the surveys is interpreted carefully and within a frame work. This not without problems, since customer satisfaction surveys have been notorious to show too high level of satisfaction, there are no standardized scales of satisfaction and these surveys are massively over used in some fields. This last problem rises another problem; customers are not interested to answer surveys anymore. (Lin et. al., 1997)

There are four issues that should be focused on to better the quality and result of customer satisfaction surveys; sampling frames, quality survey data and instruments, non-response issues and reporting and interpretation. Due to lack of resources and time every customer can not be surveyed which presents the problem of uncontrolled and aimless sampling

which introduces unknown biases to the survey results. This problem with sampling can be reduced firstly by determining the right sample size – some fields of service require a bigger sample to determine more finer nuances where some fields require only a smaller sample and statistical deductions to interpret the result for a bigger group of people. Secondly, the target population should be monitored – does the survey cover a sampling of every possible customer or does it have some limitations such as minimum income or age. These limitations should be carefully considered to fit the objective of the survey. Thirdly, segmentation of the chosen target population should be carefully examined – since people tend to view satisfaction differently over time, segmenting customers by for example their usual purchase time, can help to figure out what type of developments customers from each segment need. (Lin et. al., 1997)

The second issue regarding customer satisfaction surveys' quality is the quality of the survey instrument and the data it provides. To increase the quality of the survey instrument, first deleting scales that show to be affected too much by personality, intelligence or abilities of the respondent could be considered. However, this elimination might result in false survey results. Second suggestion could be to discard all neutral or vague items from the survey. The items should show a positive or negative attitude towards the object and not to be difficult to interpret and understand. (Lin et. al., 1997)

The third issue is non-response which is a common problem with surveys. The biggest issue with it is not knowing which or what kind of people do not answer the survey and hence generalization of the results might not be reliable. Multiple different incentives – such as raffles with prizes – can be used to lure customers to answer the survey, however this can also create a bias in the sample: some respondents might be intrigued by the incentive, but it also might drive some further away from answering the survey. (Lin et. al., 1997)

The fourth issue is reporting and interpretation of the survey results. This problem arises partly from the nature of customer satisfaction surveys, because they usually do not view service process but rather concentrate on to a specific transaction and because customer satisfaction is affected by multiple factors. First, to easier report and interpret the results, distinctions between the respondents' differences in age, gender, nationality and other qualities should be clearly reported to determine their critical distinctions that might influence their answers. Second, heterogeneity of the survey items can make it harder to

interpret the result. However, the heterogeneity is also a good thing since using different types of survey items to ask a similar question can reduce the amount of random or negligent answers. Thirdly, there is a difference of an opinion in survey methodologies of the nature of used items. Some say that open ended questions should be preferred to establish the important factors in customer satisfaction, while others prefer the respondents ranking or checking predetermined qualities. At the end, customer satisfaction survey has two minimum requirements: it should include specific questions about factors of quality, since they are less vague and more accurate than questions of a more general nature and on the other hand including open ended questions to better understand the answers to the questions regarding a specific factor. Lastly, if the survey items do not present an accurate range scales – for example an opinion scale from 1 to 3 will only show results from either positive or negative extreme – statistical analysis results can lead to wrong decisions due to the lack of more fine-tuned opinions regarding the issue. (Lin et. al., 1997)

To see the full picture of customer value and satisfaction a single type of surveying might not be enough. Research has shown that best practice company's in customer satisfaction use multiple tools to measure customer value and customer satisfaction. Such tools include both quantitative and qualitative tools, which are synthesized to the best ability into a customer performance model (Figure 6). (Garver, 2001)

Quantitative measures of customer satisfaction include transaction and relationship surveys, complaints, lifecycle surveys, bench marking, won-or-lost and why surveys and problem resolution and handling. Transaction and relationship surveys are similar in nature but different in their time frame; transaction survey focuses on one individual transaction and the customers experience in it whereas relationship survey is more an overall survey focusing on customers general experience and perception of the company. Relationship surveys are viewed as the classic customer satisfaction survey used periodically to check the satisfaction of current regular customers. Transaction – or critical incident – surveys are only used to monitor a specific transaction and its result. However, transaction surveys are good for rapidly detecting and handling problems in service and indicating improvement areas. (Garver, 2001)

Collecting data on customer complaints is valuable for many reasons. It is important to monitor the level of service in a problematic situation to make it easier to spot development areas and ensuring that the transaction ends favorably for both parties. However,

complaints have one huge advantage that rarely anyone thinks about. Complaints can offer a different view of the company's operations and hence lead to development and improvement on areas that were undetected from the inside of the company. Thus, companies really want their customers to complain when there is a reason. In addition to complaints, life cycle surveys are key for business to business companies which customer relationships are measured in years, since customers opinions and needs can fluctuate a lot during the life cycle of the business relationship, and it is important to track these fluctuations to retain the customer and ensure future intentions to use said supplier. As stated, this type of survey is only beneficial for longer term business relationships and relationships lasting 24-hours or less do not really benefit from it. (Garver, 2001)

Surprisingly maybe, bench marking surveys also hold an important role in detecting the level of customer satisfaction. On the contrary to transaction and relationship surveys that provide a company data on customers perception of the company's quality and performance, benchmarking surveys provide customer perceptions on the quality and performance of the whole market. The data is used in strategical planning, identifying the company's competitive advantages and opportunities and weaknesses of the market. Bench marking can result to continuous improvement, but its biggest benefit is enabling lasting advantage. Another a bit surprising and new view on customer satisfaction are won-lost and why? – surveys that focus on, for example after tender, detecting what attributes made the company win or lose the business and why did they win or lose. This survey is also used to collect data on customer behavior and their reasoning for that behavior. (Garver, 2001)

Lastly, problem resolution and handling hold similar value to customer satisfaction as complaint handling. Problem resolution and handling is separate tool from complaints because only a small percentage of customers complain thus leaving the company with a need of a separate tool to measure how smaller problems are resolved and handled. The core difference between the two is that complaint data is reactive where a problem resolution and handling data is proactive. The data collected from these transactions is valuable in ensuring the retention and loyalty of customer even though experienced problem; if the process of problem solving is efficient and fair the result in the end is positive for the customer. (Garver, 2001)

The qualitative methods include focus groups and in-depth interviews, customer visits and observations, feedback from customer service and sales representatives and literal comments from surveys. Focus groups and in-depth interviews take place before and/or after the quantitative surveys. Their main concern is to determine the reasons behind the results of the quantitative survey, especially the extreme answers. In addition, data to select questions related to features for quantitative surveys can be collected with this tool. These in-depth interviews are multifunctional across different fields of business; however, customer visits and observations are most beneficial for longer term business to business relationships. In those visits, the company aims to better understand the customer's business processes by observing the process and interacting with the employees. The goal is to develop more personalized products or services to that customer to ensure their satisfaction and loyalty. (Garver, 2001)

To fully understand the customer, it is beneficial for the company to collect information from its own employees that work with the customers on a day-to-day basis – salespeople and customer service representatives. Because these employees spend so much time interacting with the customer, they are the first ones to know if there is something lacking in the business process in the eyes of the customer. Lastly, literal comments collected from quantitative surveys offer a good look at the company strengths, weaknesses and areas of development. In addition, these comments create a sense of relationship between the customer and the company management and its internal employees that might not ever have direct communication with an individual customer. (Garver, 2001)

The key step after collecting all before-mentioned data on customer perception, satisfaction and reasons behind them, is to the best ability try and merge this data together to clearly use it for strategic decision making and development implementation. To make this task easier, companies implement a customer performance model (Figure 6.) which explains the relations between the different surveying tools and makes it easier to integrate this data to provide a whole picture of the client. For clarity's sake, only quantitative methods are presented in the customer performance model. However, when implied to an actual company, qualitative methods are included appropriately to explain and elaborate on the results of the quantitative survey results. (Garver, 2001)

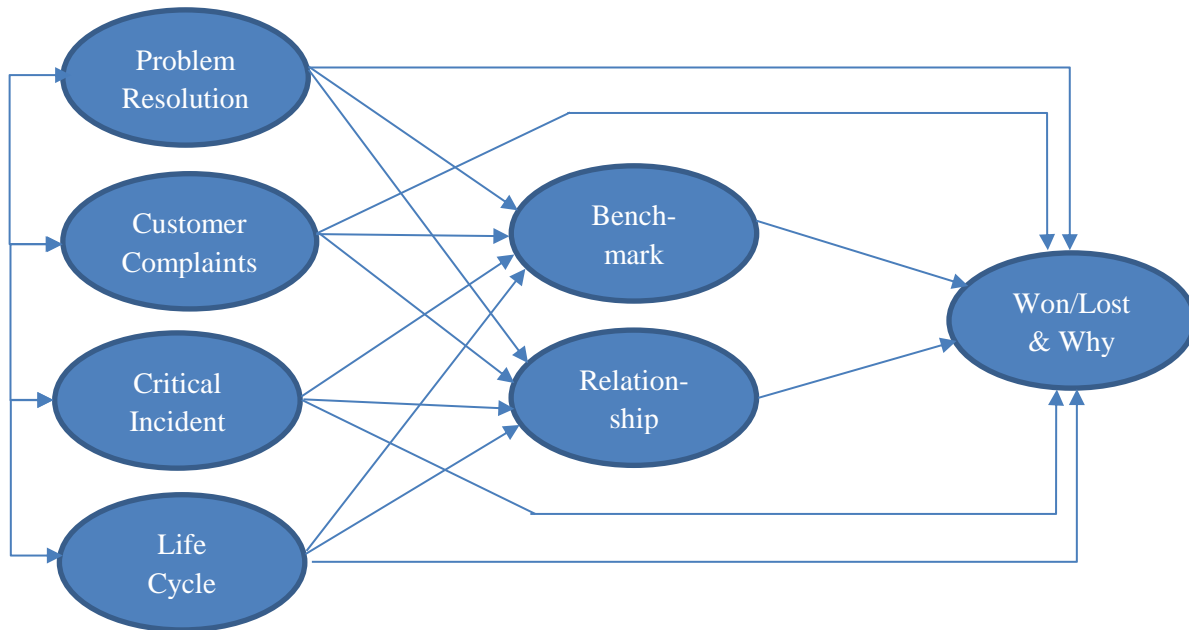


Figure 6. Customer Performance Model (Garver, 2001)

4 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND RESULTS

4.1 Research methodology

The aim of the research conducted was to provide a general view of the level of satisfaction with the services provided by the Student Union VAMOK for the international degree students at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMK. Since there has not been any similar survey conducted focusing on this customer group the object of this research is also to provide a starting point for other possible research relating to international members of a student union or any other similar organization. For this purpose, a quantitative survey was chosen as the method of research as it provides a good general outlook into the chosen customer segment's perceptions of the quality of the services provided and possibly offers information on areas of development.

The survey was based on collected theory relating to service aspects, service quality and customer satisfaction. SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman was selected as the backbone of the questionnaire but the image part of Grönroos' perceived service quality was utilized as well. The questionnaire (APPENDIX 2.) included 42 questions which were divided into four different categories; general information, expectations, perceptions and image. The questionnaire was sent via email to all international classes of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences comprising both International Business and Information Technology degrees. The answers were collected during an approximately two-week period and the amount and quality of responses was monitored during that time to ensure most reliable results.

4.2 General information

The survey attracted 25 responses, of which 14 listed their nationality as some other than Finnish. Of these 14, 8 were members of VAMOK which, comparing to the total number of 59 international members of the student union (Korpela, 2019) would give this survey a response rate of 13,5%. However, some international non-members and Finnish students of these degrees responded to the survey as well, which can give additional insights and information on the perceived quality and value of the student union's services.

In the first section of the survey general information on the respondents was gathered, such as their nationality, age, gender and years of study at Vaasa University of Applied

Sciences. The nationalities of the respondents (Figure 7) were divided similarly as the typical classes of International Business programme: 40% Finnish and 60% international students. The nationalities of the international respondents were also quite adequately represented - second most responses were from Vietnamese students, which is the second most common nationality in these degree programs. The gender distribution of the respondents was also quite even; 60% of the respondents identified themselves as female and 40% as male. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 31 years.

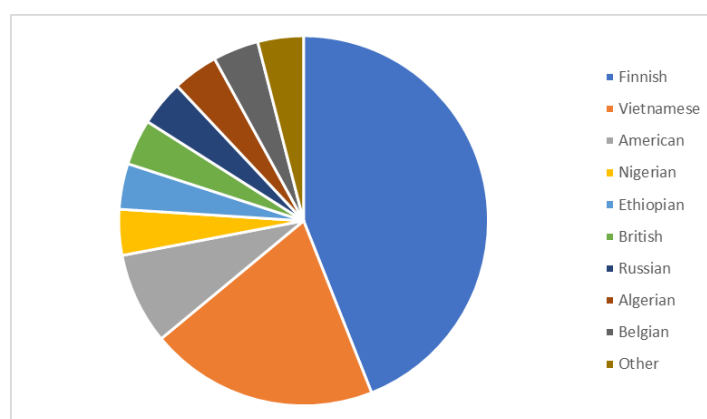


Figure 7. Nationalities of the respondents

In addition, the years of study were quite evenly distributed among the survey respondents (Figure 8) having approximately same amount of answers from 1st and 3rd year students as well as 2nd and 4th or more year students. This will give a more overall opinion on the student union's services since the survey respondents vary from customers of one year to customers of four or more years. The most prominent degree within the respondents was International Business with 21 respondents, second was Information Technology with 3 and also 1 exchange student responding to the survey.

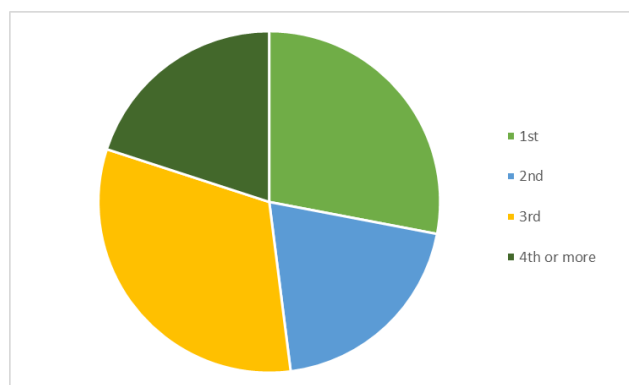


Figure 8. The years of study of the survey respondents

4.3 Expectations

The second section of the survey included questions aimed to measure the expectations of the respondents for a student union in general. The dimensions of Parasuraman et. al.'s SERVQUAL model were used as a basis for the questions and the respondents were asked to state their opinion on questions regarding these dimensions and the services offered by a student union in general, on a scale of 1 to 5 – disagree to agree.

Though the survey attracted 25 answers, through the next three sections of the survey only the 13 answers of the international respondents studying an international degree at Vaasa University of Applied Sciences will be examined and discussed since the objective of the research was to examine the international degree students' satisfaction with the provided services.

The first two questions of the survey (APPENDIX 2, Questions 1-2) regarded the tangible aspects of the services, mainly the accessibility of the services – such as the student union's office and events – and the recognizability of the board and employees of student union. Figure 9. shows the means of the answers of the respondents regarding the tangible factors of a student union's services; the respondents mostly agree that the services of a student union should be easily accessible and their staff recognizable but evidently the respondents feel that the accessibility of the services is more important.

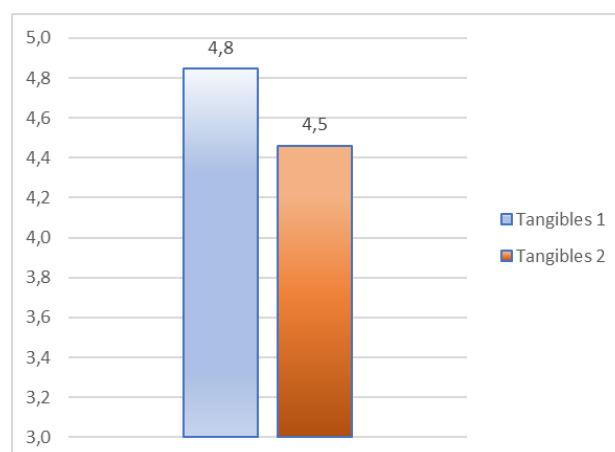


Figure 9. Mean results of the respondents' expectations regarding tangible aspects of a student union's services.

The next set of questions (APPENDIX 2, Questions 3-5) included expectations regarding the reliability and accuracy of the service. The means of the results of these questions

(Figure 10.) show that the respondents felt very confident in their answers. Especially the first two questions relating to language, communication and information acquisition resulted in unanimous opinion. This indicates that international degree students appreciate clear and understandable communication and information about the services very highly.

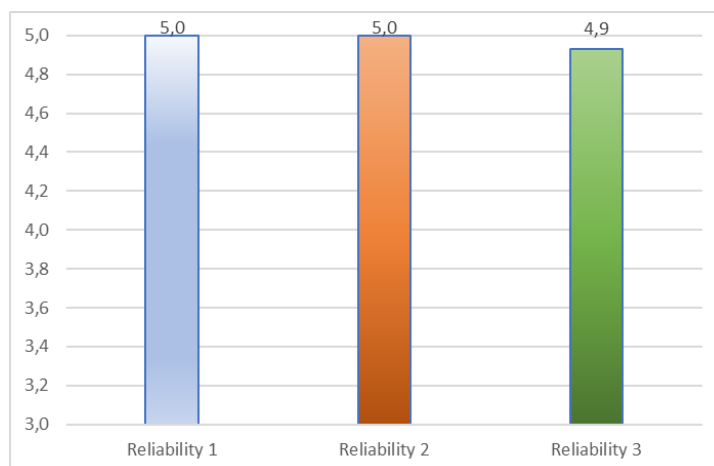


Figure 10. Mean results of respondents' expectations regarding reliability and accuracy of a student union's services

The third section of the questions regarding customer expectations (APPENDIX 2, Questions 6-8) included three questions relating to responsiveness – meaning the availability and accessibility of employees as well as communication between a customer and an employee. The respondents' opinions – shown as means in Figure 11. - regarding this matter were also quite clear; they expect alert and willing service in a language they understand.

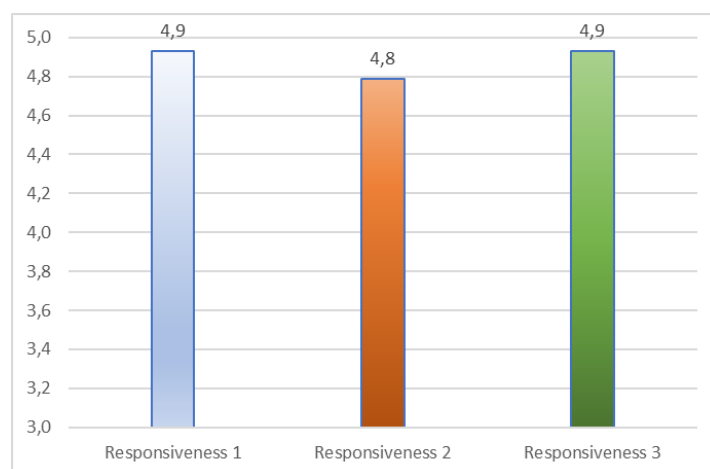


Figure 11. Mean results of respondents' expectations regarding responsiveness in a student union's services

The next dimension which expectations were examined in the survey was assurance. This section included three questions (APPENDIX 2, Questions 9-11) regarding trust towards a student union as a service provider and the feeling of being understood and heard as a customer. The results (Figure 12.) show a slight difference in opinions when comparing the first question regarding the overall ability to trust the student union as a service provider and the third question regarding trusting the board members to be the best advocates for international students towards the management of the university of applied sciences. Though the respondents agree with both their opinion is much more neutral when regarding advocacy of the employees of a student union. The result of the question of being understood and heard as a customer (APPENDIX 2, Question 10) falls in the middle of the other two results; the respondents are more confident in their opinion regarding this matter than the advocacy but more neutral than the overall trust in the service provider.

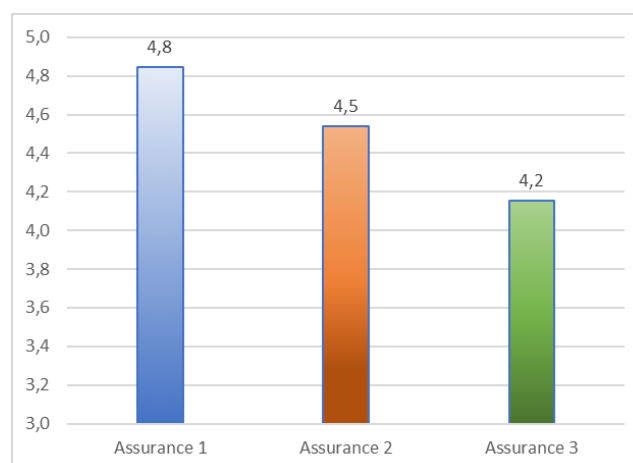


Figure 12. Mean results of respondents' expectations regarding assurance in a student union's services

The last dimension examined is empathy. This section of the survey included four questions (APPENDIX 2, Questions 12-15) regarding the service provider's understanding and essentially "feeling for" the customer and their unique needs. The results for these questions (Figure 13.) show mostly no change in the attitude shown in all other sections of the survey – the respondents think they should feel included and considered – except for the last question (APPENDIX 2, Question 15) which examined the respondents opinion on having different services for international and domestic students. Even if the mean is slightly more on the positive side the overall results also show many negative opinions regarding this.

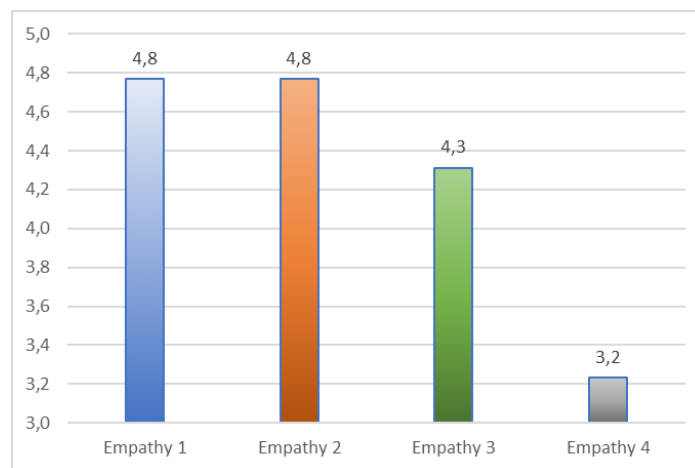


Figure 13. Mean results of respondents' expectations regarding empathy in a student union's services

4.4 Perceptions

The third part of the survey dealt with respondents' perceptions of the quality of services provided by the student union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMOK. The same structure of questions remained but, in this section, they presented more detailed and specific scenario relating to VAMOKs services. The questions were answered in a similar manner than in the expectations section of the survey – on a scale from 1 to 5, disagree to agree. To later conclude the level of customer satisfaction the results of the questions related to the perceptions of the service will be presented side by side with the before shown results on the questions related to service expectations.

In the first part the experiences with tangible aspects such as accessibility of VAMOKs office and events in addition to recognizability of VAMOKs employees and board members were examined (APPENDIX 2, Questions 16-17). The results (Figure 14.) show weaker performance than what the respondents expected; the mean answer in both questions decrease by approximately 0,7. This indicates that the respondents do not find VAMOKs services as accessible as they expect and that the recognizability of the board members and employees could be improved. The accessibility factor rose a bit higher than the recognizability of employees, but neither of them reached the expectations of the respondents.

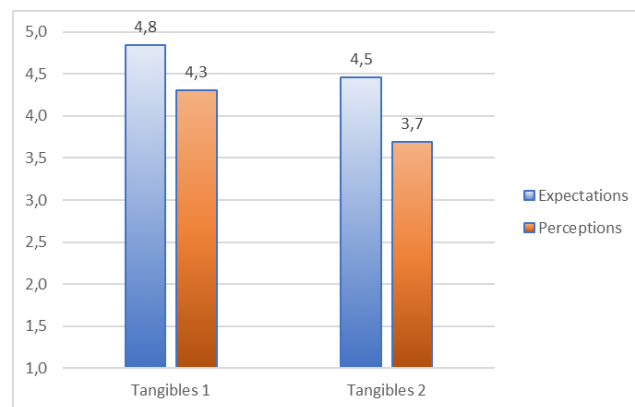


Figure 14. Mean results of the respondents' perceptions compared to their expectations regarding tangible aspects of the student union's services.

In the second set of questions (APPENDIX 2, Questions 18-20) the information availability, the language chosen to communicate and share information with and the accuracy of that information when compared to the actual services of VAMOK was researched. Similarly, as the results in the tangible aspects questions, the results (Figure 15.) regarding the respondents' experiences with reliability and accuracy of VAMOK's services show an approximate 0,9 negative difference between the expectations and perceptions. Even though the respondents agree slightly or more confidently that VAMOK offers reliable and accurate services the perceptions still failed to reach the expectations. The best result the respondents gave to the information and communication of VAMOK being provided in English (APPENDIX 2, Question 18) with only 0,7 negative difference between their expectation and perception.

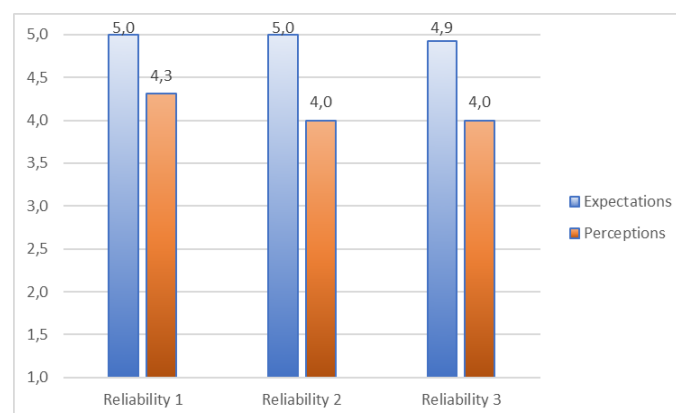


Figure 15. Mean results of the respondents' perceptions compared to their expectations regarding reliability and accuracy of the student union's services.

Responsiveness in the perception part of the survey (APPENDIX 2, Questions 21-23) studied the respondents experience with VAMOK from a customer service perspective; whether the services are provided in English and how easy it is to approach and get service from the customer servants – the employees and board members of VAMOK in this case. The results (Figure 16.) follow a similar pattern to previous comparisons between the respondents' expectations and perceptions but in this category the differences between the questions are bigger with a mean negative difference of 0,8. The question regarding the language that VAMOKs services are offered in (APPENDIX 2, Question 21) had the smallest negative difference of 0,4 when the two following questions regarding the approachability and eagerness to help had a negative difference of 1,0. This can be due to the fact that the respondents did not find the board members and employees of VAMOK easily recognizable, which can affect their approachability and, hence, the feeling of them being eager to help.

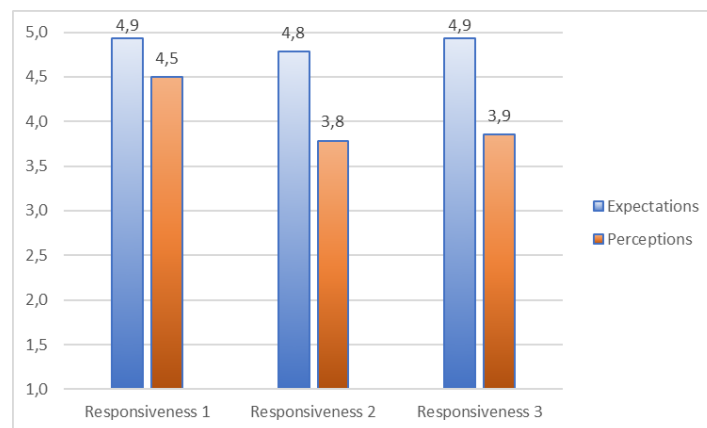


Figure 16. Mean results of the respondents' perceptions compared to their expectations regarding responsiveness of the student union's services.

The respondents experience of assurance in VAMOK's services, such as trusting the service provider and VAMOK's level of understanding the respondents' special needs was examined in the fourth section of the perception part of the survey (APPENDIX 2, Questions 24-26). When compared to the expectations section, the results (Figure 17.) present the same trend as previous questions have - with a mean negative difference of 0,8 between the expectation and the perception. The best performing of the three were VAMOK's overall trustworthiness as a service provider and the board members being the best advocates of international students with a 0,5 and a 0,6-negative difference to the expectations. However, for the question of VAMOK understanding the different needs of

international students (APPENDIX 2, Question 25) the negative difference was 1,2. This can indicate that the feeling of not being understood has an influence on the respondents' experience of overall trust towards the service provider and, thus, shows a more negative result on the two other questions in this section.

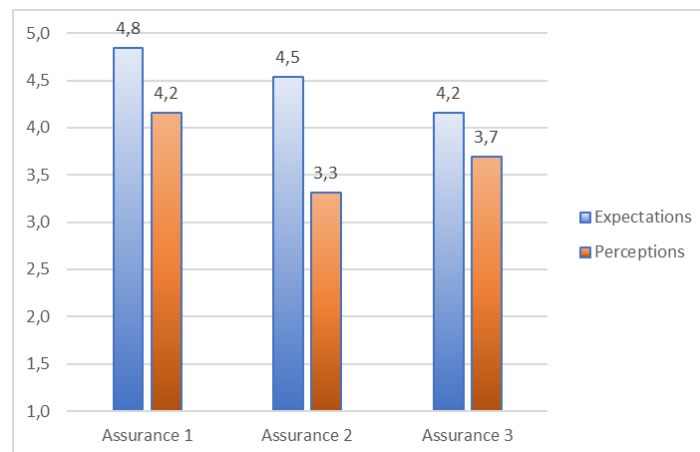


Figure 17. Mean results of the respondents' perceptions compared to their expectations regarding assurance in the student union's services.

The respondents' perceptions of empathy in VAMOKs services were the last part of the survey linked to Parasuraman et. al.'s SERVQUAL model. It included questions examining the feeling of being included and considered in VAMOKs operations, receiving help from the student union to find a place in the student community and if the services for international students differ from the ones provided for domestic students. (APPENDIX 2, Questions 27-31) The results (Figure 18.) show a similar negative trend as the previous section in comparisons have shown except for the last question regarding the difference in provided services for international and national students (APPENDIX 2, Question 31). This comparison has a 0,7 positive difference but since the expectation of the differentiation of services was quite negative the respondents might consider agreeing to this statement as a negative choice. The respondents also felt that VAMOK helps the international students to find their place in the student community almost as expected – the mean answers have only a 0,1-negative difference. The question regarding feeling included (APPENDIX 2, Question 28) had the biggest negative difference of 1,0. This can be due to previously examined lack of being understood which can generate a feeling of not being included.

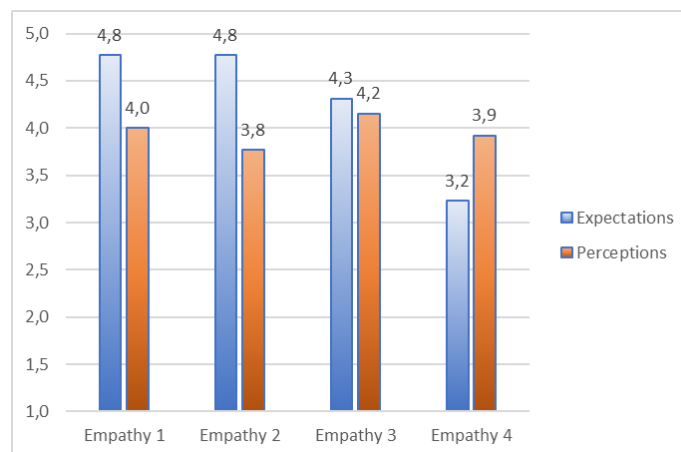


Figure 18. Mean results of the respondents' perceptions compared to their expectations regarding empathy in the student union's services.

4.5 Image

In the last section of the survey – as suggested by Grönroos' perceived service quality model – the image of VAMOK is examined. This is done by first determining the membership status of the respondent and their reasoning behind it, asking the respondents to answer three statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – disagree to agree and finally with some open-ended questions.

38% of the respondents were not members of VAMOK. The reasons for not being a member included arguments mostly related to high price and not enough value. These respondents saw VAMOK as only an event and student party organizer and the respondents felt that since they are, for example, introverted or not interested in events containing alcohol, they would not get their money's worth from VAMOK's membership. On the other hand, 62% of the respondents stated to be a member of VAMOK. Their reasons for being a member were mostly related to the benefits the membership brings – benefits such as free use of a local gym and regional and nationwide discounts.

The opinion statements (APPENDIX 2, Questions 32-35) included opinions on the benefits of being a member of VAMOK, if events suitable for the respondent are organized frequently and if the developments already made on services targeted towards international students are a good thing. The respondents indicated with their answers (Figure 19.) that they feel they have benefitted from being a member of VAMOK and that the

developments made to the services offered are good in their opinion. However, the respondents had quite a low opinion on events that interest them being organized regularly. Consequently, the answers to the last two questions (APPENDIX 2, Questions 36-37) that the respondents could freely state their development ideas and services they would like to have in the future, included a lot of new event ideas. These ideas included, for example, movie nights and other non-alcoholic events, trips, events and such that are only possible in Finland, job fairs and seminars to name a few. Development areas mostly included bringing the international degree students and exchange students closer together and creating opportunities for the international degree students to interact and get to know the Finnish students. Other ideas included services helping the international degree students with setting up a Finnish bank account and to deal with the migration services.

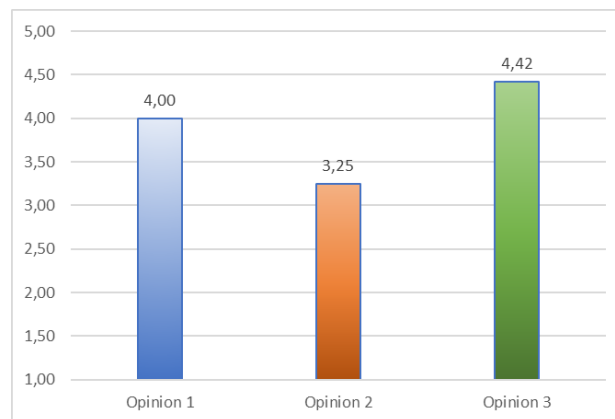


Figure 19. Mean results of the respondents' opinions regarding the student union's services.

When examining all the 25 answers of the survey a very slight difference in expectations and more dramatic changes in perceptions can be noticed. For the most part, the negative differences between expectations and perceptions seem to even out, which indicates that the level of satisfaction with VAMOKs services is higher among the Finnish students studying in international degrees compared to their international class mates, except in questions regarding empathy. The answers of the Finnish students seem to evaluate the consideration and inclusion of international students more pessimistically than the international students themselves.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Customer satisfaction is formed when the perceived or experienced quality of service reaches or exceeds the expectations, assumptions and guesses that the customer has of the service. (Parasuraman et. al., 1986) The aim of this research was to determine the level of customer satisfaction among the international degree students of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences towards the services provided by the student union of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences, VAMOK. According to the results of the quantitative research it can be concluded that the level of satisfaction in the provided services is quite low among the international degree students. However, this might not be only due to low performance of the service provider, but the low level of perceived quality can be influenced by the image (Grönroos, 1998) that VAMOK has among the international degree student respondents of being only an organizer of student parties.

The research method of quantitative research and an online survey was suitable for providing a guideline for development for the client of the thesis, though some reliability concerns may arise from the low response rate of the survey. To attract more responses in the future a small raffle could be added to entice the students to respond to the survey or an option of filling the survey physically, for example during a school break, could be an option.

5.1 Reliability, Validity and Suggestions for further research

Reliability of a research is measured by examining will the research conducted provide similar results if the study is repeated on different times, to different respondents. (Heale et. al. 2015) In the case of this thesis, low response rate creates a large problem concerning the study's reliability; because there were not enough respondents, a deeper analysis of the results, such as the dependency relations between different variables, could not be performed thus making it hard to compare with any future studies relating to this subject. In addition to lack of analysis, the low response rate effect also the overall generalization of the data; if more responses would have been gathered, from different study years and nationalities, a more comprehensive and long-lasting opinion could have been formed. Reliability of this study can also be affected by the yearly changes of members in the executive board, hence each year the experience can be different from the next. However, a higher response rate covering all years of study equally, could have decreased this issue.

Accuracy of the measured data in relation to the aim of the research is called validity. (Heale et. al. 2015) In this thesis, the aim of the research was to determine the current level of satisfaction among international degree students and find out if there were some areas of development. In this regard, the study is valid, since it answers to the research questions. However, the low response rate affects this as well: since the research question is very vast – covering all the services in a more general sense – the validity is affected by the lack of responses. If the research question would have been more clearly limited, for example concentrating on one specific service such as tutoring, the amount of answers could have provided more valid data. In addition, more limited research question could be easier to grasp for respondents and hence also help the validity of the study. Similar issues of validity and reliability can be detected in the bench marking survey results.

To research this subject further, more student unions could be benchmarked or researched to determine best practices regarding services provided for international degree students. This could also be done through a nationwide survey examining international students and their satisfaction with student unions in Finland through the Union of Finnish Student Unions of Universities of Applied Sciences, SAMOK. In addition, a more in-depth qualitative survey could be conducted in Vaasa University of Applied Sciences to determine the reasons behind the current examined results, such as the effects of VAMOK's image on customer satisfaction.

6 DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of the bench marking survey and the customer satisfaction survey some development areas are indicated; the perceived quality or the experience of a customer, the offered services and the image of the student union. These development areas and the tactics to improve them (Table 6.) mostly relate to communication and its clarity, and feelings of trust and inclusion.

Table 6. Development suggestions

<i>Area of Development</i>	Goal	Examples of tactics to reach the goal
<i>Perceived Quality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching and/or exceeding the expectations of international students of VAMOK • Increasing the desirability of the membership of VAMOK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating and advertising all events and services clearly in English • Bringing the board members and employees of VAMOK closer to the international students to increase the recognizability and approachability of them and hence increasing the feeling of trust and inclusion • Organizing possibilities for the international students to mingle with and get to know other students – both Finnish and international to increase the feeling of inclusion and community • Collecting development ideas for example yearly to better understand the different needs of international students.
<i>Offered Services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attracting more international participants to VAMOKs activities • Serving the international students better • Increasing the desirability of the membership of VAMOK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-alcoholic events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job-fairs ○ Movie and pizza nights ○ Crash course in living in Finland • Other services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Co-operation with a local bank to help the international students set up a Finnish bank account

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Information of and/or help with the mandatory paperwork for the migration office ○ Flea market of home goods to help the international students set up their life in Finland
<i>Image</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase the perceived quality of VAMOKs services and ultimately customer satisfaction ● Break the illusion of being only a student party organizer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide clear and understandable information on all services VAMOK provides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Starting from the basic concept of “what is a student union” and emphasizing aspects other than parties ● Communicate clearly the benefits of having a student status in Finland <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Benefits and discounts locally and nationwide such as free use of gym

6.1 Action Plan

Based on the development suggestions an action plan (Table 7.) can be drafted to help implement the found developments. An action plan is a tool to use, when implementing strategic decisions or developments in addition to following up with the progress of the implementation. With an action plan it is easy to communicate to all team members of what is coming up. (Service Design Toolkit, 2019)

The action plan is divided into several sections, most commonly into four: action, responsible person and/or team, time frame and resources. A separate column with notes can be added to provide a space for special marks on the action, if needed. The first column, action, describes what is to be done. The action listed should be clear and easy to understand. The second column lists the responsible person of the action listed and a possible team connected to it. Time frame in the third column states a start and an end date for the

action to be completed. Lastly, resources such as time of the team or funds reserved for the action are listed. (Service Design Toolkit, 2019)

Table 7. An Action Plan Draft based on development suggestions

<i>Action</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Movie and Pizza Night	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Coordinator • Tutor Coordinator 	First month of school (approx. 1 st – 31 st of September)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-hours of work per coordinator • Small budget for pizza and snacks 	Pizza night can be organized together with exchange students' Welcome Sauna-event
Ensuring Communication in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications responsible 	Whole term of operation (1 st of January – 31 st of December)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be included in all working hours of the communications responsible 	
Collection of Development Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of Executive Board • International Coordinator 	At the end Autumn semester (approx. 1 st – 15 th of December)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40-hours of work for International Coordinator • 15 to 20 hours of work for President of Board 	Ideas can be collected at the same time as the course feedback for Finland 101-course is collected
Providing more comprehensive information on VAMOK's services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutors of international degree programs • Communications responsible 	Whole academic year (1 st of September – 30 th of May)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least half of lessons reserved for tutoring • At least half of overall communication of VAMOK 	The focus of information should be at least half of the time on something else other than student parties

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BENCH MARKING SURVEY

Student Union VAMOK is client for a bachelor thesis regarding services provided for international degree students of VAMK and their satisfaction with these provided services. For a wider perspective it would be helpful if you could answer these short questions regarding your student union's international members and services provided to them.

If you have any further questions or comments regarding this questionnaire don't hesitate to contact me by the information provided in the email.

Thank you so much!

Aija Hokkanen

Student, Vaasa University of Applied Sciences

1. Name of Student Union
2. Position of Respondent
3. Number of members in Student Union
4. Of which international members (exchange and degree students)
5. Approximately how many of the international members are degree students?

1. Student union has specially targeted services for international students.

Yes/No

2. These services are mainly targeted towards...

Exchange students/Degree Students/Both

3. What kind of special services are offered (tutoring, events, etc.)?
4. Other notable things regarding services targeted for international members (coming developments, projects, etc.)

1. International students (exchange and degree) are aware of the benefits of being a member of the student union.

Don't Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

2. International degree students actively participate in student unions activities (events, tutoring, giving feedback, etc.)

Don't Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

3. Exchange students actively participate in student unions activities (events, tutoring, giving feedback, etc.)

Don't Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

4. How satisfied international students (exchange and degree) are approximately in the student union's services?

Not at all satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied

5. How continuous is the development of services for international students (exchange and degree)?

Scarce and aimless 1 2 3 4 5 Determined and continuous

6. These developments are mainly focused towards services for...

Generally, all international students/Exchange students/International degree students

7. Notions or comments regarding these statements

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

Student union VAMOK is a client for a thesis regarding customer satisfaction in the services they offer.

The chosen group to measure this satisfaction from is international degree students from VAMKs IB and IT programs.

Exchange students and Finnish students studying in these degrees are also welcome to answer this survey since all data collected will be given to the client of the thesis.

This survey is comprised of 4 separate parts: general information, expectations, perceptions and image. It should take approximately 10 minutes to answer the survey.

Thank you already in advance for your answer!

General Information

1. Nationality
2. Age
3. Gender

Man/Woman/Other/Prefer not to say

4. Degree

IB/IT/Exchange Student

5. Study Year

1st / 2nd / 3rd / 4th or more

Expectations

Tangibles

1. Student Unions services (such as their office and events) should be easily accessible for students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

2. Student Unions board members and employees should be easily recognizable

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Reliability and Accuracy

3. All student unions communication (such as social media and emails) should be available in English

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

4. Student Unions services should be easily understandable, and it should be easy to acquire information about them

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

5. Services provided by the student union should conform with what was advertised or otherwise communicated

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Responsiveness

6. All student unions services should be provided in English

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

7. All Student Union board members and employees should be easily approachable to all students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

8. Student Union board members and employees should be eager to help all students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Assurance

9. International students should be able to trust the student union as a service provider

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

10. Student union should make an effort to understand the different needs of international students regarding their student life in Finland

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

11. International students should trust the board members to be their best advocates towards the management of the school

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Empathy

12. International students should feel that the student union takes them into consideration

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

13. International students should feel included in all student unions events and other services

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

14. Student union should make an effort to help the international students to find their place in the student community

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

15. The services (such as tutoring and events) offered to international students should differ from the ones offered to national students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Perceptions

Tangibles

16. VAMOKs services (such as their office and events) are easily accessible for students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

17. The board members and employees of VAMOK are easily recognizable

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Reliability and Accuracy

18. All VAMOKs communication is available in English in addition to Finnish

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

19. It is easy to understand and find information about the services that VAMOK provides

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

20. VAMOKs services conform with the information that is available of them

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Responsiveness

21. VAMOKs services are provided in English

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

22. VAMOKs board members and employees are easily approachable to all students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

23. VAMOKs board members and employees are eager to help all students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Assurance

24. VAMOK is a trustworthy service provider for international students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

25. VAMOK understands the different needs of international students regarding their student life in Vaasa

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

26. VAMOKs board members are best advocates of international students towards VAMKs management

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Empathy

27. VAMOK takes the international students of VAMK into consideration

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

28. VAMKs international students feel included in all VAMOKs events and other services

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

29. VAMOK makes an effort to help international students find their place in the student community

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

30. VAMOKs services (such as tutoring) for international students differ from the services provided for national students

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

Image

31. I am a member of VAMOK

Yes/No

32. Why/Why not?

Opinions

33. It is beneficial for me to be a member of VAMOK

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

34. Student events and other services that I am interested in are frequently organized

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

35. Developments made in services for international students (such as Finland 101 course) are in my opinion a good thing

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

36. How would you develop VAMOKs services for international students?

37. What kind of services would you hope VAMOK offered to international students in the future?