

MEETING STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS: CULTURAL INSIGHTS FOR ENHANCED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Meeting students' expectations is crucial for the success and effectiveness of educational programs, and incorporating cultural insights can significantly enhance program management. This research explores the relationship between cultural dimensions and the anticipated quality of educational services. The study, conducted in a specific educational program for prospective teachers by utilizing a non-probabilistic selection of 113 trainees, examines how various cultural dimensions impact their expectations regarding educational service quality. The main research hypothesis was that there is no relationship between the six EppekQual dimensions of educational service quality and Hofstede's five cultural dimensions in a specific training program for prospective teachers in Greece. Findings indicate significant correlations between specific cultural and educational service quality dimensions. Prospective teachers who prefer rejecting hierarchy exhibit elevated expectations, particularly in curriculum and learning outcomes, highlighting the need for personalized educational experiences. Those with a neutral stance on uncertainty and risk expect equal quality across all program dimensions, emphasizing the importance of a balance between clear guidelines and flexibility. Students with a realistic long-term orientation anticipate higher-quality learning outcomes, emphasizing cultivating future-oriented virtues. Surprisingly, an orientation toward feminine values positively influences service quality expectations, particularly in curriculum and learning outcomes. Collectivism also positively affects quality expectations, leading students to seek opportunities for personal development. These insights offer valuable managerial implications for educational program design targeting to optimize program quality and meet the expectations of prospective teachers.

Keywords: *EppekQual, education management, student expectations, cultural values, service quality.*

1. Introduction

One of the major challenges faced by educational executives is the effective management of available resources to provide educational services that meet the expectations of learners (Lynch et al., 2020; Madani, 2019). The need for efficient resource management leads to the adoption of specific strategies and tools from the administrative science that contribute to making more effective administrative decisions. However, these strategies should be aligned with the principles and the broader environmental context of the educational organization to contribute to the achievement of its goals (Day et al., 2020). Measuring the quality of services offered by an educational organization serves as an assessment tool for the satisfaction of learners' expectations, thus contributing to the effective management of the organization (Athanasiadis & Papadopoulou, 2023).

Shaping the expectations of participants in an educational program is a subjective matter and appears to be influenced by various factors. In the literature, it is evident that previous experiences (Rehman et al., 2022), advertising (Tan, Choong & Chen, 2022), and demographic characteristics of students statistically significantly influence their formation (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Recent literature emphasizes the exploration of the relationship between cultural backgrounds and students' expectations of educational service quality and demonstrates that national cultural backgrounds have a significant impact on students' quality expectations (Gruber et al., 2011; Wang, 2018). However, there is limited research on the impact of individual culture on educational quality expectations.

This study investigates how the individual cultural backgrounds of prospective secondary education teachers in Greece, who are enrolled in a specific educational program, affect their expectations of educational service quality.

2. Literature review

Quality is determined by service users' expectations and perceptions encompassing student satisfaction as a key evaluation criterion. Various models assess service quality in the educational context. Among these, the EppekQual model assesses educational service quality in pedagogical training programs (Athanasiadis et al., 2023). Quality is assessed through the evaluation of six dimensions of the quality of educational services provided by an educational organization. These dimensions pertain to Academic Staff, Teaching Organization, Learning Outcomes, Administrative Services, Curriculum, and Support Services. Culture is defined at national and individual levels. Individual culture encompasses values, behaviours, and beliefs shaped by personal experiences and backgrounds (Kueh & Voon, 2007). Despite the criticism, Hofstede's model is the one utilized in various settings in measuring individual culture through five dimensions: Hierarchy/Authority, Individualism/Collectivism, Femininity/Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Short-Term/Long-Term Orientation (Hofstede, 2011).

Most of the studies mainly focus on national culture's impact on international students. For example, Zhu and Sharp (2022) examined the influence of Chinese culture in shaping the international Chinese student quality expectation in a UK university and suggested caution when assuming that the 'service quality' of Higher Education can be comprehensively understood and efficiently improved from the student perspective alone. Similarly, Sultan and Wong (2014) showed that different cultures perceive service quality differently.

Limited research explores the influence of individual culture on quality expectations in the educational context by combining Hofstede's model with specific service quality models to find correlations between individual cultural characteristics and students' expectations of service quality in tertiary education. A study among these is that of Tsiligiris et al. (2022) who concluded that individual culture influences student service quality expectations in higher education as they indicate a large number of statistically significant correlations between the cultural dimensions and the service quality expectation items surveyed in the study.

Understanding how students form expectations regarding the quality of educational services in tertiary education provides significant information for the administration of the educational organization. This insight aids in the planning and effective delivery of educational programs. Such information contributes to ensuring the quality of inputs, processes, and outputs as part of the overall academic service system in tertiary institutions (Ali et al., 2020).

3. Materials and methods

This research investigates the relationship between EppekQual's six dimensions of educational service quality and Hofstede's five cultural dimensions in a specific pedagogical training program for prospective teachers in Greece. The main hypothesis of our research is that there is no relationship between Hofstede's cultural and EppekQual's dimensions based on trainees' expectations of educational service quality.

The specific program is an annual initiative independent of the candidates' primary studies. Its successful completion ensures the acquisition of essential pedagogical competence following the Greek law, thereby qualifying candidates for entry into the teaching profession. The program admits a total of 2000 students and is offered across 7 branches throughout Greece. For the sake of convenience, one branch was selected for this research, and evaluated based on the demographic characteristics of the students to ensure its representativeness for the entire program. The research involved the participation of 113 aspiring teacher candidates, constituting a participation rate of 56.5% of the total branch population. Within this participant group, 39.8% were male, and 60.2% were female.

Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the structural validity of both scales. The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, demonstrating their reliability. In this research, the authors used an alternative form of Hofstede's cultural dimensions scale, consisting of five dimensions and twenty statements, to assess the individual cultural backgrounds of aspiring teacher candidates (Furrer et al., 2000). Participants rated these statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree), with higher scores indicating alignment with the right end of the polarity and lower scores indicating alignment with the left end.

To ensure the structural validity of both the cultural and EppekQual scales (used to measure educational service quality), the researchers conducted confirmatory factor analysis using IBM AMOS 22. The results indicated stability in the structure of both scales. Specifically, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of approximation (RMSEA) values were 0.886 and 0.077 for the EppekQual scale, and 0.767 and 0.079 for the cultural scale, just below the 0.08 threshold. Loadings on

the individual statements of the EppekQual scale ranged from 0.930 to 0.622, while for the cultural scale, they ranged from 0.874 to -0.299. While some statements in the Hofstede scale had loadings below 0.5, the researchers chose not to remove them, as doing so would improve fit indices but affect the scale's content validity. Multicollinearity among the dimensions of the Hofstede scale was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and low correlations among the independent variables (VIF<1.6) ruled out multicollinearity issues.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and the EppekQual scale scored 0.972, while the cultural scale scored 0.817, confirming the reliability of both scales since these measurements exceeded the 0.7 threshold. Statistical analysis methods included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to investigate the relationship between individual cultural backgrounds and educational service quality expectations.

4. Results

The prospective teachers in the study exhibited tendencies towards rejecting hierarchy (M=2,72, SD=1,031) and individualism (M=3,84, SD=1,436). They also leaned more towards adopting feminine values (M=3,05, SD=0,906), avoiding uncertain situations and risks (M=3,91, SD=0,467), and having a future-oriented perspective (M=4,06, SD=0,461). Regarding the expected quality of educational services, the participants had very high expectations across all fields. Administrative Services (M=6,26, SD=0,847) and Learning Outcomes (M=6,22, SD=0,784) displayed the highest expected quality, while Support Services and Facilities (M=6,01, SD=1,007) had the lowest score of expectations among the others. High standard deviations indicated significant deviations in opinions from the mean.

The cultural dimension related to feminine/masculine values significantly influenced expectations among prospective teachers across all facets of program quality. Short-term/long-term orientation had a weak but significant impact on learning outcomes expectations. Individualism/collectivism and hierarchy rejection/acceptance negatively correlated with certain quality dimensions. Learners with a future-oriented cultural orientation expressed high expectations in specific quality statements related to pedagogical knowledge and administrative efficiency. Those averse to uncertain situations held high expectations for learning outcomes and administrative staff efficiency.

Table 1. Correlation table: EppekQual service quality vs Hofstede culture dimensions.

<i>EppekQual Dimensions</i>	<i>Cultural Dimensions</i>				
	<i>LTO</i>	<i>UAI</i>	<i>MAS</i>	<i>IDV</i>	<i>PD</i>
<i>Academic Staff (ACS)</i>			-,192*		
<i>Curriculum (CUR)</i>			-,336**	-,212*	-,313**
<i>Support Service Facilities (SSF)</i>			-,193*		
<i>Learning Objectives (LRO)</i>	,187*		-,304**		-,286**
<i>Administration Services (ADS)</i>			-,264**		-,203*
<i>Teaching Process (TGP)</i>			-,206*		

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Discussion

Our research has identified statistically significant correlations between various cultural dimensions and dimensions of educational service quality. Consequently, our initial hypothesis has been rejected. We observed a negative correlation between the dimension related to hierarchy acceptance/rejection and three out of the six dimensions of educational service quality. Importantly, this dimension did not exert a statistically significant influence on trainees' expectations regarding Academic Staff, Support Services and Facilities, and Teaching Processes. The partial negative correlation of this dimension with a subset of quality dimensions is supported by existing literature and other empirical studies (Furrer et al., 2000; Tsiligiris et al., 2021). Prospective teachers in our study tend to reject hierarchy, indicating an expectation for the Curriculum and Learning Outcomes to be customized to their needs, resulting in elevated expectations. Specifically, the statement evaluating trainees' expectations regarding the appropriateness of the program's purpose and objectives exhibited the highest correlation. We also noted a positive correlation between the dimension of acceptance/avoidance of uncertainty and all six dimensions of educational service quality, although it did not reach statistical significance. In our research, trainees maintain a neutral stance toward uncertain situations and risks, evaluating all

dimensions of educational program quality equally in their expectations. In contrast to our finding, Tsiligiris et al. (2021) concluded that uncertainty avoidance is positively and statistically significantly related to two service quality dimensions. Participants in our study adopt a realistic long-term perspective, resulting in high expectations for the quality of learning outcomes. Hofstede et al. (2011) state that a high long-term orientation represents the cultivation of virtues oriented towards future rewards (p. 240). The dimension of orientation toward feminine/masculine values exhibited statistically significant relationships with all dimensions of educational program quality, contrary to the corresponding finding of Kueh and Voon (2007). The dimension of Individualism/Collectivism was substantiated, showing a statistically significant association with the Curriculum dimension.

6. Conclusion

The effective management of an educational program particularly in the context of prospective teachers, requires a nuanced understanding of their needs and expectations (Athanasiadis et al, 2018). The findings from our research offer valuable insights into the effective management of an educational program when dealing with prospective teachers. To optimize the program's quality and meet the expectations of the participants, managers of the educational program should consider several implications. By recognizing the rejection of hierarchy among prospective teachers and their desire for personalized educational experiences they can adapt the curriculum and learning outcomes to align with individual needs and goals (Kubat, 2018). The program's purpose and objectives must be articulated and resonate with the expectations of trainees, as this dimension had a significant impact on their perceptions of quality (Dhamodharan et al., 2010). As we acknowledged that trainees maintain a neutral stance towards uncertain situations and risks, the educational program design ought to strike a balance between providing clear guidelines and fostering flexibility (Veness, 2010). Educational managers must avoid over-restrictive rules and regulations that may hinder creativity and adaptability in the learning process (Acar et al., 2019). In contrast they may leverage the inclination of participants towards a realistic long-term perspective by emphasizing the development of skills and knowledge that have long-term value, including employability (Scandurra et al., 2023) and academic excellence (Lerman, 2013). The impact of orientation toward feminine values on expectations of service quality, especially in the Curriculum and Learning Outcomes dimensions could encourage a supportive and inclusive learning atmosphere that values collaboration, empathy, and interpersonal skills (Kubat, 2018).

Incorporating these managerial implications into the design and management of an educational program can help create a learning environment that aligns with the cultural dimensions and expectations of prospective teachers. By recognizing and accommodating these cultural factors, educational institutions can enhance program quality and better prepare their students for successful careers in teaching.

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