

## Lao Students' Perceptions towards Quality Education Service in a Selected Higher Education Institution in Central Vietnam

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**ABSTRACT** During the internationalisation at higher education institutions (HEIs) to attract more international students to study in destination countries, their satisfaction toward the quality of provided education services is crucial for evaluating the success of such HEIs. The purpose of this study was to examine Lao students' perceptions of education service quality in a selected higher education institution in Central Vietnam. A group of 307 Lao students (173 males and 134 females) from 12 departments at Ha Tinh University (HTU), Vietnam, participated in the survey. The study showed that Lao students highly appreciated a good level of service quality provided by HTU. Moreover, the satisfaction of Lao students at HTU is most affected by the hostel, the teaching staff, and the clubs, respectively. The training facility factor has a negligible impact on their satisfaction. The study also provided several implications for HEIs to improve service quality levels to increase international students' satisfaction.

### INTRODUCTION

In this globally competitive higher education market, international students have a lot of choices of studying from various higher education institutions (from now on referred to as HEIs) of different destination countries. To attract more international students, HEIs need to satisfy students' expectations in terms of education services provided to them. Many HEIs realise that quality education service is a crucial objective of HEIs' development, and it is closely related to students' satisfaction, and thus guarantees long-term sustainable success and achievements of those HEIs (Abiddin and Akinyemib 2015; Cardona and Bravo 2018; Govender et al. 2014). According to Annamdevula and Belamkonda (2016), international students are the critical customers of the educational services

offered by HEIs. Hence, their voices should have a significant role in evaluating those HEIs' education service quality. More importantly, education service quality is regularly considered as a crucial contributor to the success and an active and competitive advantage for all service providers, including HEIs (Quraishi et al. 2017).

International students' satisfaction is considered one of the main objectives of HEIs having international students. The competitive advantage comes from students satisfied with positive outcomes such as positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, students' retention, and loyalty (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Elliot and Shin 2002; Hasan et al. 2009; Wang and Tseng 2012). The quality education services provided to international students have become essential in creating a comparative advantage in today's highly competitive international education market. Besides providing quality education services, HEIs are expected to overcome many related-challenges such as cultural diversity, different learning styles, increasing demands of international students with greater choices study destinations, training programs,

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and learning environments (Abiddin and Akinyemib 2015; Naidoo 2009). The global higher education market has become attractive to HEIs and is related to the market share, productivity, return on investment, and the quality of services offered to international students (Cardona and Bravo 2018). Therefore, the education service quality is a significant performance measure of quality training and education and a main strategic factor for HEIs in delivering quality education services to international students to enhance their HE market share.

Because of the full range of destination HEIs from which students can choose, HEIs face more challenges resulting from the increase in the mobility and retention of international students worldwide. HEIs regard these challenges as threats as well as opportunities. International higher education has enhanced cross-border education with increasing students, academic programs, and institutional mobilisation (Cardona and Bravo 2018; Naidoo 2009). The ultimate objective of HEIs is not only to attract but also to maintain international students through satisfactory education service provision and to increase those students' satisfaction and loyalty (Wang and Tseng 2012).

Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed a quality service measure called SERVQUAL, which was used to measure the customer's assessment of the overall quality of the education services determined by the degree and direction of the gap between their expectations and perceptions of the actual level of performance. Service quality and related marketing concepts such as customer satisfaction and loyalty were rarely used in the higher education sector in the past (Teerooven-gadam et al. 2016). Today, this tool has been popularly used by numerous HEIs around the world to enhance their education services in order to increase their competitiveness to attract more enrolments. Jain et al. (2010) indicate that service quality in HEIs includes factors including visual appeal, outcome, campus, reputation, student input quality, industry interaction, support facilities, input quality (faculty), interpersonal relationships, curriculum, academic facilities, and processes. However, previous research has found that overseas students are often less

satisfied with their courses than other students (Pereda et al. 2007).

The developments and changes in the international education market include higher educational opportunities in source countries owing to reductions in local capacity constraints and less access to international education than previously expected (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Cardona and Bravo 2018; Tin et al. 2017). The demand for international higher education results from doubts about whether some countries can provide enough quality facilities and education services required for an increased number of enrolments from destination countries (Tran 2015). As a result, the available resources of destination HEIs cannot meet the increasing demands, as the need for international education is increasing. This situation provides both opportunities and challenges to HEIs all over the world.

The international student's study destination choice process consists typically of two-stages, that is, the student either chooses a destination country first and then an HEI or chooses both the destination country and the HEI separately and independently (Annamdevula et al. 2016; Cardona and Bravo 2018; Tran 2015). Social, economic, cultural and environmental factors including safety, lifestyle, cost of living, transportation, racial discrimination, visas and immigration, friends and family, climate and culture (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Wang 2011; Wang and Tseng 2012) are associated with the choice of a destination country as a study destination, and HEIs-related factors such as study programs and courses, tuition fees, facilities, and support services, academic environment, teaching and research quality, teaching staff and teaching methods, the reputation of courses, ranking, and prestige of HEIs (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Veloutsou et al. 2015) are associated with the choice of an HEI as a study destination.

Education service offered by HEIs becomes part of services marketing in which service performances are regarded as situation-specific (Schoefer and Ennew 2006; Wang 2011), and such services cannot be treated as identical if they are carried out in different contexts and by different people or departments (Lovell et al. 2003; Veloutsou et al. 2015). Given the international student diversity, their different learning

styles, their previous living, their working experiences, and different types and levels of education service facilities offered by different HEIs, their perceptions of the overall service performance will be different, thus challenging HEIs to maintain a uniform standard of service performance (Dawson and Conti-Bekkers 2002; Wang 2011). The international students' perceptions of the education service performance can be either positive or negative, and their expectations of the performance provision are at different levels depending on individual students (Kau and Loh 2006; Wang 2011). If a positive attitude is formed, positive WMO (word of mouth) promotion, student retention, and loyalty are achieved, but the opposite is given if a negative attitude is formed (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Cardona and Bravo 2018). Thus, HEIs need to take all the above-mentioned factors into consideration so that international students can experience quality education services and provide positive attitudes toward the education service performance of those HEIs.

In Vietnam, several studies on students' perceptions of education service quality in Vietnamese higher education institutions have been conducted so far (Hoang et al. 2018; Jain et al. 2010; Nguyen 2013; Teeroovengadum et al. 2019; Truong et al. 2016). Nguyen (2013) used the SERVQUAL scale to measure the quality of service offered by a Vietnamese HEI. This scale explored the perceptions of 675 students at a Vietnamese university to determine the quality of higher education services. The results of this study showed that the three specific dimensions of the higher education service of that Vietnamese university, including tangible elements, responsiveness, and assurance. Truong et al. (2016) measured the service quality of private universities in Vietnam using a modified version of the SERVQUAL scale as recommended by Parasuraman et al. (1985) The survey questionnaire consisting of 24 questions was designed based on five service quality dimensions including Tangibles, Reliability, Empathy, Reliability, and Access. This study's results showed that there were five factors, including Tangibility, Guarantee, Reliability, Responses, and Empathy, affected students' satisfaction toward the education service provided by that Vietnamese private university. The study was conducted by Bui et al. (2016) to aim for strategies for improving efficiency for HEIs in the North of Vietnam.

68.75 percent of students from five HEIs in northern Vietnam were the respondents to the questionnaire. The findings showed that the environment of the campus and teaching quality influence the technological, social, and management structures. However, there was no relationship between campus environment, teaching quality, and management system with the goals, vision, mission, leadership, organisation design, and transparent policies within those universities. Hoang et al. (2018) reviewed the role of students' satisfaction and factors that may influence students' satisfaction at Thai Nguyen University. The main results of this study found that five elements in the SERVQUAL model influence students' satisfaction in the order of decreasing importance, namely, Tangible, Assurance, Reliability, Empathy, and Responsiveness. They also found that there was no difference in assessing the satisfaction of male and female students and first-year students and fifth-year students. These studies have strengths as well as limitations. For example, the provinces were not randomly selected (Bui et al. 2016), or only one region included (Hoang et al. 2018), which limits the generalisability of the findings.

Most importantly, these studies explored the perceptions of Vietnamese students at Vietnamese HEIs and left a big space for research in international students. However, very little evidence of research has been found regarding the Lao students' perceptions of service quality in Vietnamese HEIs, especially at Ha Tinh University.

In recent years, in addition to training Vietnamese students, Ha Tinh University, in Central Vietnam, has also prepared human resources for Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), as the process of internalisation in education (VNA 2017). Ha Tinh University has maintained the largest number of Lao students compared to other HEIs in Vietnam for the last six years. In recent years, the number of Lao students coming to study at HTU has increased rapidly. There were about 30 Lao students at HTU in 2010 on a scholarship granted by Ha Tinh province, in the university year 2016-2017, the number increased to 1,861 Lao students, and in the university year 2017-2018, the number reached 1,868 students, of which two were self-financed (VNA 2017).

The research question is, 'How do Lao students perceive the quality of education services provided by Ha Tinh University?'

## Aims and Objectives

This paper aims to find out the perceptions of Lao students towards education service quality at HTU. Besides, the study results will contribute to filling the gap in domestic and international literature.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The convenience sampling method used to recruit students who volunteered to help with the study and administer the survey. The survey instrument was distributed to 350 Lao students at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam, of which 307 questionnaires were returned, for an 87.7 percent return rate, which exceeds the 30.0 percent response rate most researchers require for analysis (Dillman 2000). The sample of this study was drawn from 307 respondents who completed the survey instrument. There were more male participants (56.4%) than female participants (43.6%) among the 307 Lao students who were surveyed. Of these, 54 Lao students (17.6%) were learning the Vietnamese language, 22 respondents (7.2%) were freshmen, 37 respondents (12.1%) were sophomores, 87 respondents (28.3%) were juniors, and 107 respondents (34.9%) were seniors and fifth-year students. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants.

**Table 1: An overview of respondents**

		<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>	Male	173	56.4
	Female	134	43.6
<i>Type</i>	Lao students learning the Vietnamese language	54	17.6
	Freshman	22	7.2
	Sophomore	37	12.1
	Junior	87	28.3
	Senior	107	34.9
<i>Department</i>	Vietnamese language studies	54	17.6
	Technology	46	15
	Foreign languages	1	0.3
	Economics and business administration	61	19.9
	Pedagogical and educational sciences	26	8.5
	Political science	119	38.8

*n*: Number of participants; %: Percentage

### Measures

Table 2 shows that the questionnaire was designed to survey Lao students currently enrolled at Ha Tinh University in Central Vietnam. First, social-demographic items were introduced in the questionnaire. Then, Lao students' perception of service quality at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam, was measured by a total of 48 questions. This questionnaire has seven subscales, including access to education, training program, lecturers, facilities, service capacity, student hostel, and clubs. The responses of the participants were provided at five different levels based on a 5-point Likert scale (Croasmun and Ostrom 2011).

### Analysis

All participants were provided informed consent after receiving an explanation letter stating the purpose of the research. The ethics committee of Ha Tinh University approved the research. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 was used for data analysis. The coding procedure was performed as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. To transform the discrete values into ranks, distance value was calculated as:  $(\text{Maximum} - \text{Minimum})/n = (4-1)/4 = 0.8$  (Jaafar et al. 2017). Therefore, the meanings of the rankings are judged as below:

- + 1.00 – 1.80 = Totally unnecessary
- + 1.81 – 2.60 = Unnecessary
- + 2.61 – 3.40 = Average/Optional (Necessity is optional)
- + 3.41 – 4.20 = Rather problematic/Necessary
- + 4.21 – 5.00 = Very problematic/Totally necessary

## RESULTS

Table 3 shows that the internal consistency reliability estimate for this sample was 0.83 for Access to Education Services (TCDV), 0.91 for Training Programmes (CTDT), 0.92 for Lecturers (DNGV), 0.93 for Facilities (CSV), 0.90 for University Service Capacity (NLPV), 0.93 for Students' Hostels (KTX), 0.91 for Clubs (CLB), and 0.85 for Satisfaction (SHL). Then the scores, as well as the sum of all items on the scale, were calculated.

**Table 2: Observed variables measuring perceptions of service quality**

<i>Observed variables</i>	<i>Encryption</i>
<i>ACCESS TO EDUCATION SERVICES (TCDV)</i>	
HTU provides information about admission and enrolments?	TCDV1
Administrative procedures (information provision, instructions for registration of credit courses of the semesters, etc.) of the University?	TCDV2
What are the University's tuition fee and other fees?	TCDV3
What are the support policies for special students at the University as regulated by the two countries?	TCDV4
<i>TRAINING PROGRAMMES (CTDT)</i>	
Training programs have clear goals and outcome standards.	CTDT1
The training programme is fully informed to students on the website of the University, through faculties, brochures or leaflets.	CTDT2
The training program meets students' expectations about the course.	CTDT3
The training program contents are regularly updated.	CTDT4
The training program has a good combination of basic knowledge, expertise and occupational skills.	CTDT5
Subjects are scheduled appropriately for the ability and learning process of students.	CTDT6
Subjects are promptly and fully informed for students to register and participate in the course process.	CTDT7
<i>LECTURERS (DNGV)</i>	
Have a high level of subject knowledge, profound teaching expertise, and teaching skills	DNGV1
Use ITC proficiently to support teaching	DNGV2
Ensure the class time and teaching plans	DNGV3
Have a caring and friendly attitude to students	DNGV4
Are willing to share knowledge and experiences with students	DNGV5
Assess students' learning results accurately and fairly	DNGV6
Announce the teaching plan and criteria for evaluating academic results to students in a timely manner	DNGV7
Provide references, instructions to students on how to read and look up documents	DNGV8
<i>FACILITIES (CSVC)</i>	
Textbooks/learning materials of each subject are well informed and diversified	CSVC1
Classrooms meets students' classroom learning needs	CSVC2
The library has a rich and diverse reference source	CSVC3
The library has enough space and space to meet students' learning and research needs	CSVC4
Classrooms have a reasonable number of students to attend	CSVC5
Online applications, internet access, and the website are available for effective teaching and learning	CSVC6
Health care and health support station	CSVC7
Laboratories, subject practice rooms	CSVC8
A suitable, complete and appropriate waste collection and treatment system for lecture halls	CSVC9
<i>UNIVERSITY SERVICE CAPACITY (NLPV)</i>	
Support staff satisfactorily address the requirements of the students	NLPV1
Support staff have an excellent service attitude and respect for students	NLPV2
Information relating to studying and living activities is provided to students in a complete and timely manner	NLPV3
Academic and career advisory activities to meet the needs of learning, selecting and learning for students	NLPV4
Students' queries are addressed on time and quickly	NLPV5
The University regularly offers repairs and maintenance of facilities	NLPV6
<i>STUDENT HOSTELS (KTX)</i>	
The work of ensuring security at the university is guaranteed	KTX1
The self-study space at the student hostel meets the needs of students	KTX2
Space and facilities for arts and sports participation of students	KTX3
Support policy for student hostels for Lao students	KTX4



**Table 2: Contd...**

<i>Observed variables</i>	<i>Encryption</i>
Students have enough and clean accommodation with suitable equipment (clothes hanging lines, water heaters, Wi-Fi, TV...)	KTX5
Food service is provided sufficiently and cleanly in hygiene and safety	KTX6
Electricity and water systems are provided fully and conveniently	KTX7
The University's health station is fully equipped with good service capacity	KTX8
Waste collection and disposal system are suitable, adequate and clean at the hostel	KTX9
<i>CLUBS (CLB)</i>	
Clubs university are diverse and varied	CLB1
Clubs meet the needs and interests of students	CLB2
The form and content of club activities are suitable to the cultural characteristics of Lao students	CLB3
Promote students' creativity and skills	CLB4
Promote students' responsibility to the community and society	CLB5
<i>SATISFACTION (SHL)</i>	
What is your overall level of satisfaction with the University facilities?	SHL1
What is your overall level of satisfaction with the University student hostel?	SHL2
What is your overall level of satisfaction with the results of the learning at the university?	SHL3
What is the overall level of satisfaction with the University's educational services?	SHL4

**Table 3: Internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha)**

<i>Observed variables</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
Access to Education Services (TCDV) TCDV1, TCDV2, TCDV3, TCDV4	0.83
Training Programmes (CTDT) CTDT1, CTDT2, CTDT3, CTDT4, CTDT5, CTDT6, CTDT7	0.91
Lecturers (DNGV) DNGV1, DNGV2, DNGV3, DNGV4, DNGV5, DNGV6, DNGV7, DNGV8	0.92
Facilities (CSVC) CSVC1, CSVC2, CSVC3, CSVC4, CSVC5, CSVC6, CSVC7, CSVC8, CSVC9	0.93
University Service Capacity (NLPV) NLPV1, NLPV2, NLPV3, NLPV4, NLPV5, NLPV6	0.90
Students' Hostels (KTX) KTX1, KTX2, KTX3, KTX4, KTX5, KTX6, KTX7, KTX8, KTX9	0.93
Clubs (CLB) CLB1, CLB2, CLB3, CLB4, CLB5	0.91
Satisfaction (SHL) SHL1, SHL2, SHL3, SHL4	0.85

Table 4 shows that in the eight subscales, most of the students surveyed have a rating score of 3.64 - 4.05. It is a score with a relatively good level

of service quality. The average level of the groups of variables has not much variation, showing that the views of many Lao students have an agreement.

**Table 4: Lao students' perception of service quality at Ha Tinh University**

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Smallest value</i>	<i>Biggest value</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Order</i>
Access to Education Services (TCDV)	3.92	3.83	4.04	0.08	4
Training Programmes (CTDT)	4.00	3.91	4.10	0.07	2
Lecturers (DNGV)	4.05	4.02	4.08	0.03	1
Facilities (CSVC)	3.86	3.72	3.97	0.08	7
University Service Capacity (NLPV)	3.90	3.82	3.97	0.06	6
Students' Hostels (KTX)	3.64	3.47	3.78	0.10	9
Clubs (CLB)	3.92	3.84	3.99	0.07	5
Satisfaction (SHL)	3.82	3.45	4.02	0.26	8

M: Mean; SD: Standard deviation

The subscales with higher values include the DNGV variable group of Lecturers (DNGV) and Training Programmes (CTDT). The satisfaction level of the Students' Hostels (KTX) subscale was rated at the lowest level of 3.64, which shows that Lao students are not satisfied with the conditions of the student hostels.

### DISCUSSION

This research examined Lao students' perception of service quality at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam. The main findings indicate that in general, Lao students perceived the satisfaction of the factors of education service performance related closely to their living and learning at HTU, as this study confirmed the previous study results (Arambewela and Hall 2009; Hasan et al. 2009; Jain et al. 2010; Veloutsou et al. 2015). Also, the satisfaction of Lao students currently studying at Ha Tinh University is most strongly affected by the student hostel, the teaching staff, and then the clubs. The facilities factor has a negligible impact on Lao students' satisfaction. However, this finding is not in line with the previous researchers for Vietnamese students (Bui et al. 2016; Hoang et al. 2018).

According to the 2015 Project of Improving the Quality of Training and Management of Lao Students in Ha Tinh University in 2015, Lao students studying at HTU are gentle, hardworking, honest, modest, and polite to teachers, having a collective sense of responsibility. They also like cultural activities and sports and get along well with Vietnamese students (News 2017). Besides, the Lao students' community has a characteristic of being quite self-reserved, because they spend most of the time in the hostel except at the class time with their lectures. Therefore, having a suitable living environment and facilities at the hostel is a necessity or priority for Lao students. This was confirmed in this research result that the factor of hostels played an important role in Lao students' perception of satisfaction.

Besides, according to the 2015 Project, due to the lack of basic knowledge before going to study at Vietnamese HEIs, the Vietnamese language competency is still limited, so the ability to understand lecturers' is still slow. Thus, their learning results are not high, and the number of Lao students having average and weak academ-

ic results accounts for over seventy percent. Therefore, lecturers who directly teach Lao students should be more responsible and take care of them more, such as slow teaching, and frequent discussions so that Lao students can catch up with the lectures. It is a crucial conclusion for further upcoming studies regarding international students' perception of service quality in higher education institutions that need to be conducted considering the above things seriously.

There are several recommendations in order to enhance education service quality at HTU. First, HTU support staff must be trained in service quality-related programmes such as in the areas of customer service, general knowledge, interpersonal communication and cultural diversity awareness of foreign students. Second, appropriate feedback mechanisms should be reinforced in order to assess whether service deadlines and the promises are met, as well as dedicated responsibilities of HTU staff to solve Lao students' problems. Third, the appropriate changes to technology and systems must be made so that they are supportive of all HTU services, including being student-friendly and earning the trust and confidence of Lao students. Fourth, Lao student hostels' facilities including the hostel rooms and entertainment facilities need to be improved so that Lao students are comfortable with using such facilities. Fifth, teaching staff must understand the above-mentioned difficulties facing Lao students. There is a need for teaching staff to think of the issues related to language barriers, cultural differences, communication challenges, and catering for the academic needs of Lao students.

This study has a few limitations. The main limitation is the sampling process used. The sample was taken from only one selected university in Vietnam. The random selection of participants significantly reduces this but does not entirely remedy this shortcoming. The second limitation relates to the sampling and self-reported measurements. This could also lead to bias in the findings and was cross-sectional research, which does not allow reliable results. Future studies are expected to take these limitations into consideration.

### CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to assess the satisfaction of Lao students at Ha Tinh Univer-

sity, Vietnam. The researchers adopted a descriptive quantitative research design and applied descriptive analysis for the study. The study evaluates the actual situation of facilities and education services at Ha Tinh University and discovers the factors affecting the satisfaction of Lao students with the education services provided by Ha Tinh University, Vietnam. The results show that the Lao students at Ha Tinh University have the most satisfaction on the hostel, the teaching staff, and the clubs, respectively. The facilities factor for training has a negligible impact on their satisfaction. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first research to examine Lao students' perceptions of service quality in Ha Tinh University that contributes to the few studies for other higher education institutions in Vietnam in general.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

There can be several recommendations. First, the study results have helped to provide essential recommendations and foundations in developing solutions to improve the quality of education service provided by Ha Tinh University, Vietnam, and to improve the satisfaction of Lao students at Ha Tinh University, in a particular case. Furthermore, in the broader contexts of Vietnamese higher education institutions, this research's results will provide critical considerations and implications for different levels of leaders to find measures to enhance the education service quality for attracting more international students. Future research should focus more on a broader sample of participants for a better generalisation and perspectives of participants from a more detailed interview.

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