Investigating Academic Service Quality in Ethiopian Public Higher Education: Insights from Students' Perspectives

Zelalem Zekarias Oliso [1,*]

Demoze Degefa Alemu [2]

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[1] Department of Educational Planning and Management, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

[2] Department of Educational Planning and Management, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. demozed2008@gmail.com

* Corresponding author: Email: zelalem.zekarias@gmail.com

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Abstract:

In the existing literature, the nexus between educational service quality and students' satisfaction are well documented. However, among the elements of educational service quality, Academic Service Quality [ASQ] is not studied separately or adequately in academic settings, which could directly influence how teaching and learning unfolds. This study aims to examine students' perception towards academic service quality in Ethiopian Higher Education system. To serve this purpose, a mixed research method with convergent parallel design is implemented. The study participants are selected via purposive and random sampling techniques. A self-developed questionnaire and interviews are the main tools for gathering data. The questionnaire, consisting 61 items, is distributed to four hundred [400] randomly selected regular undergraduate Graduating Class [GC] students, while semi-structured interviews are conducted with eight key informants. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the elements that constituted the key attributes of academic service quality are perceived by students to be poor. This is reflected in low mean scores in many variables or items associated with the facets of academic service quality. The findings of this study further uncovered that poor delivery of academic services affect students' learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Academic Service Quality; Student Satisfaction; Perception; Academic Performance; Public University*

التحقيق في جودة الخدمة الأكاديمية في التعليم العالي العام الإثيوبي: رؤى من وجهات نظر الطلاب

الملخص:

في الأدبيات الموجودة، تم توثيق العلاقة بين جودة الخدمة التعليمية ورضا الطلاب بشكل جيد. ومع ذلك، من بين عناصر جودة الخدمة التعليمية، لا تتم دراسة جودة الخدمة الأكاديمية بشكل منفصل أو بشكل كافٍ في البيئات الأكاديمية، مما قد يؤثر بشكل مباشر على كيفية تنفيذ التدريس والتعلم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص تصور الطلاب تجاه جودة الخدمة الأكاديمية في نظام التعليم العالي الإثيوبي. ولتحقيق هذا الغرض، تم تطبيق طريقة بحث مختلطة ذات تصميم متوازي متقارب. يتم اختيار المشاركين في الدراسة عبر تقنيات أخذ العينات الهادفة والعشوائية. يعد الاستبيان والمقابلات التي تم تطويرها ذاتياً هي الأدوات الرئيسية لجمع البيانات. تم توزيع الاستبيان، الذي يتكون من 61 عنصرًا، على أربعمائة [400] تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من طلاب الدراسات العليا المنتظمين [GC]، في حين تم إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة مع ثمانية مخبرين رئيسيين. كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن غالبية العناصر التي تشكل السمات الرئيسية لجودة الخدمة الأكاديمية ينظر إليها الطلاب على أنها سيئة. وينعكس ذلك في انخفاض متوسط الدرجات في العديد من المتغيرات أو العناصر المرتبطة بأوجه جودة الخدمة الأكاديمية. وكشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أيضاً أن ضعف تقديم الخدمات الأكاديمية يؤثر على نتائج تعلم الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جودة الخدمة الأكاديمية؛ رضا الطلاب؛ تصور؛ أداء أكاديمي؛ الجامعة العامة.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia possesses a 1,700-year tradition of elite education that linked to the Orthodox Church. However, modern higher education began in Ethiopia in 1950 with the establishment of the ten University College of Addis Ababa (Habtamu 2003). Higher education in Ethiopia has been elitist in its nature. The majority of the school age population has not had access to higher education as the institutions were built in major urban areas of the country. For instance, the tertiary Gross Enrolment Ratio [GER] that was only 0.2% by the year 1970 had not shown any significant improvement after twenty-five years in 1995 (0.7%) which increased to only 1.5% by the year 2003 (World Bank [WB], 2004).

Although access to higher education has been extremely low in Ethiopia from 1970 to 2003, there has been a rapid expansion of higher education institutions in different parts of the country over the past fifteen years (Mulu, 2012). The number of public universities increased from two in 1991 (Tesfaye, 2011) to 36 in 2015 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016). Currently, there are 49 public universities and 128 accredited private HEIs in the country (MOE, 2018). The most recent data released by the Ethiopian MOE shows that the total number of undergraduate students attending different public universities reached more than 825, 003 over the past almost five years (MOE, 2018). This indicates that the annual intake of undergraduate students has increased dramatically.

Nowadays, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been influenced by marketization. Different push factors affect higher education to apply marketing practices in their institutions. Those push factors include: an increased competition among higher education, decreased government funding, and the increased cost of education which are the most common factors that force HEIs to adopt marketing approach (Guilbault, 2016).

The present government of Ethiopia is also designing different self-administration strategies and policies to public universities. In this year, Addis Ababa University (one of the oldest and largest universities in Ethiopia) has been officially differentiated as a self-administered university. The remaining first-generation public universities will be self-administered universities in the coming few years. The self-administering system of universities is expected to increase competition among HEIs, because universities that provide better services are expected to attract many students as compared with low service providers.

Scholars suggest service quality as fundamental and an important parameter of educational excellence in general and higher education in particular (Azam, 2018; Kandie, 2018; Malik, Danish &Usman, 2010). Similarly, Raju and Bhaskar (2017)

argued that service quality is essential for a high standard of education and a good image of higher education institutions. In addition, service quality is important for HEIs to achieve universities' objectives and promote the effectiveness of the education system (Al-Dulaimi, 2016).

In higher education, however, measuring service quality is somewhat problematic (Eshghi, Roy & Ganguli, 2008; Goran, 2014). Since the nature of Higher Education Service Quality [HESQ] is composed of multi-dimensional constructs, different scholars propose various methods of measuring HESQ (Abdullah, 2006b; Cerri, 2012; Eskicumal, Demirtaş, Arslan & Yarar, 2015). Although there is no consensus on the dimensions that HESQ constitutes, the existing literatures reveal that academic service quality, administrative service quality, and quality of student support services have been consistently applied as dimensions of HESQ in higher education (Manzoor, 2013).

For the purpose of this study, a specific attention was given to the academic service quality of the Ethiopian higher education system. Academic service quality is one of the facets of higher education service quality and highlights key attributes of academic staff, their competence, and academic facilities (Abdullah, 2006b). Reviewing literature has illustrated many prior studies have been conducted on higher education service quality. Although a number of studies have been conducted in higher education service quality, little attention has been given to students' perceptive towards higher education academic service quality.

Schools, colleges and universities have no worth without students. Students are the most essential assets for any educational institutions (Ali, Ali, Mokhtar & Salamat, 2009). Besides, students are the ones for which education has been primarily designed and they are primary recipient of educational services. The students' evaluation and feedback on higher education service quality is an imperative to pinpoint an institution's strengths and identify areas for improvement (Kontic, 2014; Ryan, 2015). The main intention of this paper was to answer the following research questions:

 i.   What is students' perception towards academic service quality of the Ethiopian higher education system?
 ii. What is the status of academic service quality in the Ethiopian higher education?
 iii. How does academic service quality affect students' learning outcomes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Higher Education Service Quality

In the literature, the term 'service quality' has been defined in various ways. In the marketing sectors, most scholars raise two main concepts while defining service quality. These concepts include: (1) customer expectation and the (2) service

provider's actual performance. For example, McConnell (2002) defined service quality as performing or fulfilling services beyond customers' expectations or the differences between what customers expected and what they really perceived after receiving the provided services. Similarly, another frequently cited service quality researcher like Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) defined service quality as the comparative analysis between customers' expectation and the actual performance of the service provider.

In the educational settings, there are various views for the term 'education service quality' (Schneider and White, 2004). For example, AL-Dulaimi (2016) defined educational service quality as quality services that universities and research institutes shall make available to students with the view to satisfy students. Furthermore, Govender, Veerasamy and Noel (2012) described educational service quality as a measurement of how well HEIs offer both academic and administrative services to students in order to meet students' needs and satisfy them. According to the most recent definition, educational service quality refers to the difference between students' expectations and their actual perceptions of service delivery (Silva et al., 2017).

2.2 Dimensions of Higher Education Service Quality

In the literature, there is no generally accepted dimension or model to measure higher education service quality. Different researchers propose different dimensions of higher education service quality. For example, Kara, et al. (2016) identified the quality of administrative service, quality of instructional practices, perceived learning gains, quality of students' welfare services, quality of teaching facilities, library service environment, lecturer quality, internet services, reliability of university examinations, quality of computer laboratory services, availability of textbooks in the library as facets of higher education service quality.

In addition, Manzoor (2013) indicated that academic resources, teaching quality, administrative service quality, and quality of student support services as dimensions of service quality in higher education. Jain, et al. (2011) summarized higher education service quality in two primary categories, namely, (1) programme quality (curriculum, university–industry interaction, input quality and academic facilities) and (2) quality of life (non-academic processes, support facilities, campus and interaction quality).

The other well known higher education service quality researchers like Abdullah (2006a,b), Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2012) and Teeroovengadum, et al.(2016) designed different models to measure higher education service quality. Abdullah proposes the new measure of higher education service quality called Higher Education Performance [HEdPERF]. The model adapted the Cronin's and Taylor (1992) performance-only or Service Performance [SEVPERF] approach. The HEdPERF model

has six dimensions, namely, non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access, programme issues and understanding.

In his later work, Abdullah (2006b) modified the existing HEdPERF instrument by comparing three service quality measurements, such as, HEdPERF, SERVPERF and the moderating scale of HEdPERF-SERVPERF within a higher education setting. In the modified HEdPERF instrument, Abdullah indicated five distinct factors, namely, non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access and programme issues by excluding understanding from former the HEdPERF instrument. The modified HEdPERF consists of 41 items. Out of these 41 items, 13 items were taken from SERVPERF, and the remaining 28 items were developed via literature review. In the HEdPERF model, the academic aspect contains only 11 constructs and these few constructs are unable to measure all academic services provided by universities (See table, 1).

Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2012) developed another new higher education service quality measure called Higher Education Quality [HiEdQUAL] model. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2012) also contend that since higher education services are complex combination of various factors, using the existing generic service quality measures such as Service Quality [SERVQUAL], Service Performance [SERPERF] and Evaluated Performance (EP) are not easy to apply in higher education sectors. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda introduced Higher Education Quality [HiEdQUAL] model which consists of 27 items, with five dimensions, viz., teaching and course content, administrative services, academic facilities, campus infrastructure and support services. Similarly, in HiEdQUAL Model, dimensions related with academic service quality encompass mere 14 items and they are not comprehensive and responsive enough to measure the quality of higher education academic services (See table, 1).

Other higher education service quality researchers like Teeroovengadum, et al. (2016) argue that although the existing higher education service quality models are empirically tested in higher education, none of them integrated the notion of the transformative quality in the development of service quality models. In response to this argument, Teeroovengadum, et al. (2016) introduced the new higher education service quality measure called Higher Education Quality [HESQUAL].

The HESQUAL model consists of five primary dimensions and nine sub dimensions such as administrative quality (attitude and behaviour, administrative processes), support facilities quality, core educational quality (curriculum, attitude and behaviour, competence and pedagogy), transformative quality and physical environment quality (support infrastructure, learning setting and general infrastructure) and included a total of 48 items. In this HESQUAL Model, the constructs of academic dimension of HESQUAL Model are few and included only 17 variables (See table, 1).

As mentioned in the earlier section, the present study focuses on the academic service quality of Ethiopian public higher education institutions. Academic service quality is one of the facets of higher education service quality and highlights key attributes of academic staff, their competence, and academic facilities (Abdullah, 2006b). It is the key dimensions of educational service quality as it directly affects the teaching learning process. Furthermore, academic service quality represents core educational processes.

In the existing higher education service quality models; however, the constructs of academic dimension are not well researched and incorporated which directly affects the teaching and learning processes. It is fact that all dimensions of higher education models directly and or indirectly influence the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, since Academic Service Quality [ASQ] represents the core educational processes, it directly affects students' learning as compared with other dimensions of higher education services. Therefore, careful research attention should be given to assure the quality of academic services of HEIs. As we can notice from the higher education service quality models, in each model, the constructs designed under academic service dimension are too short and do not include all academic services provided in the universities. The following Table 1 shortly summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the existing academic service dimension of higher education service quality models.

Table 1: Strengths and Weaknesses of the existing Academic Dimension of Higher Education Service Quality Models

Models	Author (s)	Total Number of Dimensions and Items	Total Number of Academic Dimension Constructs	Sectors Applied	Strengths	Weaknesses
HEdPERF	Abdullah (2006b)	5 Dimensions with 41 items	11	Higher education	-Empirically tested in higher education sectors	-Constructs are not comprehensive enough to measure the quality of all higher education academic services
HiEdQUAL	Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2012)	5 Dimensions with 27 items	14	Higher education	-Empirically tested in higher education sectors	-Constructs are not comprehensive enough to measure the quality of all higher education academic services

HESQUAL	Teeroovengadum, et al. (2016)	5 Major Dimensions and 9 Dub-dimensions with 48 items	17	Higher education	-Empirically tested in higher education sectors	-Constructs are not comprehensive enough to measure the quality of all higher education academic services

Source: Authors own work

Since using a single higher education service model's academic dimension is unable to measure all academic services provided in the universities, in the present study six dimensions of HEASQM were identified via extensive literature review. These include: Academic Staff Attitude and Behaviour, Academic Staffs' Competence, Academic Facilities and Resources, Academic Programme Issues, Quality of Instructional Practices and Quality of Library Services.

According to this study, academic staffs' attitude and behaviour towards students describes constructs are associated with how university instructors or professors understand the individual needs of their students, solve students' problems, provide efficient and courteous consultations to students, encourage and motivate students to do their best and fair and impartial in grading students' academic progress. On the other hand, academic staffs' competence illustrates items associated with whether university lecturers or professors are highly educated and knowledgeable in their areas of specialization, have excellent communication skills, use latest technologies (e.g., laptops, projectors while teaching), passionate, committed and enthusiastic in teaching, being professional and ethical passionate, confident in their expert understanding of a course, and have capacity to solve students' immediate problems.

The quality of academic facilities and resource is another dimension of academic service quality. It elucidates constructs related with availability of necessary facilities and resources that are used to conduct the teaching and learning process (e.g., classrooms, lecture halls, laboratory facilities, computer labs, internet facilities, teaching tools and equipment, conference halls, auditoriums and so forth). While academic programme issues describes variables related with whether the university has flexible and satisfactory syllabus, provides reputable academic programs, has clearly defined course content and course objectives, and courses develop students' knowledge, skills and attitude.

The quality of instructional practices explains variables associated with whether the university instructors or professors follow good teaching practices, such as encourage students' active participation in their learning process, provide regular feedback to students on their performance, follow curriculum strictly and complete the syllabus on time, demonstrate adequate preparation for the lessons, provide course

outlines at the beginning of the semester and integrate both theory and practical learning experiences. Moreover, the quality of instructional practices constructs are also associated with whether the university instructors or professors apply proper assessment techniques, such as stimulate students thinking by asking challenging questions, provide clear expectations on course work and assessment, set assessment tasks that challenge students to learn, award grades that reflect individual students' ability, informs exam schedules on time and releases examination results on time. Finally, the quality of library services describes variables associated with whether the university library is equipped with comfortable chairs and tables, has adequate and latest academic resources/materials, provides a conducive environment for study, has convenient opening and closing hours, facilitates access to internet resources, staff are friendly and helpful and staff provide prompt services to students.

Studies noted that better education service quality leads to students' satisfaction and their satisfaction with better service quality improves academic performance. For example, Ahmed, et al. (2010) in their empirical study argued that students who receive better service quality can perform good academic results as compared with students who experience or get low services. Dhaqane and Afrah (2016) pointed out that students' satisfaction with service quality promotes both academic achievement and retention of the students in the university. Martin and Tracey (2001) and Jelena (n.d) contended that highly satisfied students in educational service quality are considered achievers, who strive to achieve and are energetic to work and learn effectively because satisfaction builds enthusiasm in students, and the student can find his/her learning to be more engaging and fruitful.

3. Method
3.1 Research Design

In the present study, a mixed research approach with convergent parallel design was followed. This is because convergent parallel design allows the researcher to converge or merge both quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). In the study, both primary and data sources were used. The primary data sources are Graduating Class [GC] students, teachers, department heads, college deans, student union representatives, while the secondary data sources include prior empirical studies, articles, journals, PhD dissertations, and various government policy documents.

3.2 Population and Sampling Techniques

The study participants were selected via random and purposive sampling techniques. In the Southern part of Ethiopia, there are a total of ten universities are found. From the total of ten public universities, 3 (30%) universities were randomly selected from three different differentiations, such as research, applied and

comprehensive universities. Accordingly, the study was conducted in Arba Minch, WolaitaSodo and Jinka Universities. Among regular undergraduate students, Graduating Class [GC] students were purposefully selected because they have ample experience regarding the services provided by their respective universities. From the total of 5982 graduating class students, the minimum required representative sample size of students was selected randomly at the confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% using Yamane (196) sample size determination formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{[1 + N(\llbracket e \rrbracket^2)]}.$$

Where, **n** is sample size, **N** is total the population size and **e** is the level of precision.

Thus, $n = \frac{5982}{[1 + 5982(\llbracket 0.05 \rrbracket^2)]}$ =400. Of which, 285 were male students and the remaining 115 were female ones. In addition, students from different universities, sexes, colleges and departments were selected via proportionate stratified sampling technique. The following Table 2 shortly summarizes the total target population and sampling procedures that followed in the present study.

Table 2. Summary of Target Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

SN	Target Population	Total	Sample	%	Sampling Technique	Name of Sampled Universities	University Differentiation
	Universities Located in the Southern Part of Ethiopia	10	3	30%	Simple Random	Arba Minch University [AMU]	Research
						WolaitaSodo University[WSU]	Applied
						Jinka University [JKU]	Comprehensive
	Graduating Class [GC] Students	5982	400		Simple Random		

Source: Authors' own work

3.3 Instruments

The data were collected via interviews and questionnaires. The semi-structured interview was conducted with some key informants, such as college deans, department heads, teachers and student union representatives to compare or relate quantitative data. The self-developed questionnaire was prepared via intensive literature review. The questionnaire has two parts. The first part of the questionnaire includes the respondents' demographics. The second part of the questionnaire contains six dimensions of academic service quality, namely, academic staffs' attitude and behaviour, academic staffs' competence, academic facilities and resources, academic program issues, quality of instructional practices and quality of library services. The

questionnaire included 61 items. The response options were gauged in a Five-point Likert scales ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree [SD] to 5=Strongly Agree [SA].

Before formal dissemination of the questionnaire, the instrument's validity and reliability was checked. The validity of the questionnaire was checked by experts who selected from Arba Minch University, School of Pedagogical and Behavioural Sciences [SPBS]. The experts were chosen based on their teaching experiences in HEIs, research experiences and well-informed knowledge of the discipline of Educational Planning and Management.The experts were encouraged to provide necessary oral and written comments. Based on the experts' oral and written comments, necessary amendments were made.

Upon the completion of the instrument validation process, the questionnaire was piloted at Hawassa University (non-sampled and one of the research universities in Ethiopia). The pilot test was conducted in 20 graduating class students in order to check the reliability of the instrument. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was checked via Cronbach's alpha coefficient 0.5 using SPSS v.20. The reliability result was judged according to George and Mallery (2003) rule of digit: > 0.90 = Excellent, 0.80 - 0.89 = Good, 0.70 - 0.79 = Acceptable, 0.60 - 0.69 = Questionable, 0.50 - 0.59 = Poor, < 0.50 = Unacceptable. The table below shows the reliability coefficient of academic service quality and its sub dimensions. The reliability analysis result confirms that the internal consistencies of the items were very strong. The following Table 3 summarizes the reliability result of the questionnaire.

Table 3: Reliability Results of Academic Service Quality Questionnaire (N=20)

Facets/Dimensions	N0. of Items	Deleted Items	Cronbach's \Alpha Result	Leveled as George &Mallery (2003)
Academic Service Quality				
Sub Dimensions				
Academic Staffs' Attitude and Behaviour	10	-	.813	Good
Academic Staffs' Competence	9	-	.800	Good
Academic Facilities and Resources	12	-	.912	Excellent
Academic Program Issues	5	-	.845	Good
Quality of Instructional Practices	18	-	.905	Excellent
Quality of Library Services	7	-	.868	Good
Full Scale	**61**		**.962**	**Excellent**

Source: Authors' own work

3.4 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis Method

Before formal collection of quantitative data, brief orientations were given to the study participants on the purpose of the study and nothing will harm them for being part of the study. The respondents' informed consents were secured and their suitable time to fill and return the questionnaire was also considered. Finally, with the

help of SPSS v.20 quantitative data were analyzed, and descriptive statistics were used to describe respondents' demographics and students' perception towards academic service quality. In addition, qualitative data were qualitatively analyzed using verbatim and direct quotations to compare and or relate with the quantitative findings.

4. Results

4.1 Respondents' Demographics

In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their general background information. This information includes gender, age, study university, program division, year of enrollment, college/institute/school, university choice and current semester Cumulative Grade Point Average [CGPA]. A total of four hundred twenty questionnaires were distributed to regular undergraduate students to increase the return rate and four hundred questionnaires were properly filled and the required number was returned back to the researcher.

The following Table 4a and Table 4b show the respondents' demographic information.

Table 4a: Respondents' Demographics by Sex, Age, Study University, Program Division and Year of Entry (N=400)

Demographics	Category	(F)	(%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
Sex	Male	285	70.9	71.3	71.3
	Female	115	28.6	28.8	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	
Age	25 & below	315	78.4	78.8	78.8
	26-30	78	19.4	19.5	98.3
	31-35	4	1.0	1.0	99.3
	36-40	2	.5	.5	99.8
	41 and above	1	.2	.3	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	
Study University	AMU	177	44.0	44.3	44.3
	WSU	172	42.8	43.0	87.3
	JKU	51	12.7	12.8	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	
Program Division	Regular	400	99.5	100	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	
Year of Entry	2010 E.C	7	1.7	1.8	1.8
	2011 E.C	59	14.7	14.8	16.5
	2012 E.C	334	83.1	83.5	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	

Source: Authors' own work

Where; AMU=Arba Minch University; WSU=Wolaita Sodo University; JKU=Jinka University; E.C=Ethiopian Calendar; %=Percentage; F=Frequency

Table 4a presents the demographic characteristics of respondents. There were 285 (70.9 %) male respondents and the rest 115 (28.6%) were female participants; indicating that majority of respondents were male students. As we can see from the respondents' age composition, majority of study subjects were in between 25 and below and 26-30 years old 315 (78.4%), followed by 78 (19.4%) and few of them were in between 31-35 years old 40 (10.8%), showing that many study participants were adults and mature enough to fill the questionnaire. Regarding respondents' study university, program division and year of entry, the majority of respondents 177 (44%) and 172 (42.8%) participated in the study from Arba Minch and Wolaita Sodo Universities, respectively and few of them 51(12.7%) participated from Jinka University and all participants 400 (100) were regular undergraduate students. In addition, most participants 334 (83.1%) joined the university since 2012 E.C, showing that the majority of study participants were fourth year students.

Table 4b: Respondents' Demographics by College, University Choice and Current Semester CGPA

Demographics	Category	F	(%)	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
College/Institute/School	CBE	70	17.4	17.5	17.5
	CNCS	64	15.9	16.0	33.5
	CAS	39	9.7	9.8	43.3
	CMHS	44	10.9	11.0	54.3
	SPBS	15	3.7	3.8	58.0
	SL	16	4.0	4.0	62.0
	AMIT	17	4.2	4.3	66.3
	AWIT	11	2.7	2.8	69.0
	SVM	3	.7	.8	69.8
	SI	9	2.2	2.3	72.0
	CE	17	4.2	4.3	76.3
	CEBS	5	1.2	1.3	77.5
	CSSH	90	22.4	22.5	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	
When I entered this institution, it was my:	First Choice	130	32.3	32.5	32.5
	Second Choice	88	21.9	22.0	54.5
	Third Choice or lower	182	45.3	45.5	100
	Total	**400**	**98.6**	**100**	
Current Semester CGPA	2.00-2.49	30	7.5	7.5	8.0
	2.5-2.99	82	20.4	20.5	28.5
	3.00-3.49	171	42.5	42.8	71.3
	3.5 and above	115	28.6	28.8	100
	Total	**400**	**99.5**	**100**	

Source: Authors' own work

As illustrated in table 4b, study participants replied their respective colleges, institutes and schools. Among seven colleges, two institutes and four schools, many participants 90 (22.4%) were from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 70

(17.4%) were from the College of Business and Economics [CBE], 64 (15.9%) were from the College of Natural and Computational Sciences [CNCS] 64(15.9%), followed by the College of Medicine and Health Sciences [CMHS] 44(10.9%) and the College of Agricultural Sciences [CAS] 39(9.7%) and few of them 3 (.7%) and 5(1.2) were from the School of Veterinary Medicine [SVM] and the College of Education and Behavioural Studies [CEBS], respectively, revealing that most study participants were from the social sciences and humanities, business and economics and health sciences . Finally, concerning respondents' university choice and current semester CGPA, the majority of participants 182 (45.3%) replied third or lower choice, showing that most students are placed to universities out of their choice. Among the study participants, the majority of students 171 (42.5%) were in between 3.00-3.49, 115 (28.6) were 3.5 and above and few of them 30 between 2.00-2.49; indicating that students' academic performance is good.

4.2 Academic Service Quality

In the next part of the questionnaire, items pertaining to the academic service quality are prepared. The respondents' perspectives towards academic service quality were examined from six sub dimensions of academic service quality. These include: (1) academic staffs' attitude and behaviour towards students, (2) academic staffs' competence, (3) quality of academic facilities and resources, (4) academic programs issues (5) quality of instructional practices and (6) quality of library services. Interviews were also conducted with some key informants to support the quantitative findings. In-depth descriptions with data from the questionnaire and interviews are presented next.

Table 5. Academic Staffs' Attitude and Behaviour Towards Students (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Positive attitude towards students	400	1.00	5.00	2.4625	1.08237
2	Understand the individual needs of their students	400	1.00	5.00	2.8800	1.23060
3	Show sincere interest in solving students' problems	400	1.00	5.00	2.9875	1.15788
4	Welcome students' questions and comments	400	1.00	5.00	3.0650	1.25087
5	Provide efficient and courteous consultations	400	1.00	5.00	2.9800	1.20965
6	Provide students with regular feedback	400	1.00	5.00	2.9350	1.23879
7	Provide students with the expected knowledge	400	1.00	5.00	3.4100	1.16632
8	Willing to go out of his or her way to help students	400	1.00	5.00	3.3450	1.16161

9	Encourage and motivate students	400	1.00	5.00	3.4200	1.16059
10	Fair and impartial in grading	400	1.00	5.00	2.8825	1.36321
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
			Grand Mean		**3.03675**	**1.202189**

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for the studied variable. Students were asked to respond to their perception towards the attitudes and behaviours of the academic staff members. As per the table results, the grand mean value (M=3.03675, SD=1.202189) was somewhat above the average mean value or three on the five-point Likert scale, indicating the respondents' positive response. However, many items' mean values were below the average mean value. For example, the mean value for item one (M=2.4625, SD= 1.08237), two (2.8800, SD=1.23060), three (M=2.9875, SD=1.15788), five (M=2.9800, SD=1.20965), six (M=2.9350, SD=1.23879) and ten (M=2.8825, SD=1.36321) respectively were below the average mean value of three. This finding confirms that students perceive the teachers' attitude and behaviour towards students as poor in many items, particularly items related with providing consultation services, giving frequent feedback on students' progress and their fair and impartial grading. In consistent with this quantitative finding, interview participants also disclosed some teachers' poor attitude and behaviour towards students. One of the interview participants and a Student Union V/President at WolaitaSodo University [WSU] shared that:

> Some teachers are not providing proper consultation services for students who need support. Many students are academically weak in our university. For example, in this academic year, 1,200 freshman students were registered in warning for the upcoming semester. The reasons for students' weak academic performance may vary. However, teachers play a significant role in improving students' academic performance (Interviewee, D).

Another interview participant and a Student Association Representative at Wolaita Sodo University [WSU], has responded with issues related to teachers' disciplinary problem. His interview response extracted from the interview transcript reflects the others' view: "In our university, for example, most teachers respect their professional ethics, but some teachers have disciplinary problems. Most of the time, female students face sexual harassment problems by those teachers who have disciplinary problem" (Interviewee, B).

Table 6 . Academic Staffs' Competence (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Theoretical and practical knowledge	400	1.00	5.00	2.6750	1.18655
2	Knowledgeable in their areas of specialization	400	1.00	5.00	2.8775	1.25356
3	Excellent communication skills	400	1.00	5.00	3.3775	1.16119
4	Prominent researchers	400	1.00	5.00	2.8375	1.11544
5	Use latest technologies while teaching	400	1.00	5.00	3.7600	1.17296
6	Passionate, committed and enthusiastic in teaching	400	1.00	5.00	3.4650	1.05668
7	Being professional and ethical	400	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.19942
8	Confident in their expert understanding of a course	400	1.00	5.00	3.6150	1.08615
9	Capacity to solve students' immediate problems	400	1.00	5.00	3.3450	1.20607
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
				Grand Mean	2.88525	1.043802

Source: Authors' own work

The above Table 6, shows the descriptive statistics for items related with teachers' academic competence. The study participants indicated their level of agreement on the five-point Likert Scale. As it has been shown in the table, the grand mean value (M=2.88525, SD=1.043802) is below the average mean value of three, showing the respondents' negative responses. This finding suggests that students have poor perception towards teachers' academic competence.In concurrent with this quantitative finding, the interview participants mainly at Jinka University were sharing teachers' poor academic competence and academic rank. Among interview participants, a head in the department of Psychology at Jinka University felt that:

> In our university, teaching and learning is good, but I have a reservation on quality of education. To be honest, we have shortage of experienced and high academic rank teachers. Still, there are many BA degree holder faculty members who have been teaching in many departments. For example, in the department of Hotel and Tourism Management all teachers are BA degree holders and have been teaching undergraduate students (Interviewee, F)

Similarly, another interview participant and a Dean, College of Social Sciences and Humanities [CSSH] at Jinka University further shared shortage of skilled manpower and its impact on quality education. His interview response that taken from interview transcripts shortly reflects the views of others:

> Since our university is one of fourth generation universities, there are shortages of skilled manpower. For example, in the College of Natural and Computational

Sciences [CNCS] and partly in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities [CSSH], most teachers are BA degree holders. In addition, presently, we have been launching various MA programs without available skilled manpower. In order to launch MA programs, the departments that run Postgraduate [PG] programs need to have at least one and more Ass. Professors and PhD holders. How MA degree holders teach MA candidates or how long guest professors teach MA candidates? I think we are compromising education quality in the name of program expansion (Interviewee, B).

In addition, another interview participant at ArbaMinch expressed issues related to teachers' academic competence. Among interview participants, a fourth year Sport Science department student and Students' Association Representative at Arba Minch University shared that:

Honestly speaking, there are some teachers who have poor academic competence and disciplinary problems. I observe teachers who didn't deserve the university lecturer position. In addition, most teachers have disciplinary problems, like insulting students, inappropriately handling students, providing inappropriate feedback to students and so on (Interviewee, G).

In the same vein, a Student Association Representative and a fourth year Sociology and Social Anthropology student at Arba Minch University was comparing some university teachers with secondary school teachers. His interview response extracted from the interview transcript represents others' thoughts. In his own words:

The university service didn't meet the expectation that I have before joining this institution. Since the university is training center, I expected to obtain high experiences from teachers and others stakeholders. However, the experiences, the necessary knowledge, skill and attitude that obtained from the teachers are not comparable with my expectation. In my observation, high school teachers are better than some teachers in the university. The university teachers come to classroom with lab top and read from PPT slides and leave the class. What knowledge, experiences can I get from such teacher? Amazing! (Interviewee, E).

Table 7. Academic Facilities and Resources (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Classrooms are modern and up-to-date	400	1.00	5.00	2.7750	1.23214
2	Classrooms are equipped with teaching aids	400	1.00	5.00	2.7900	1.26090
3	Classrooms are well ventilated and comfortable	400	1.00	5.00	3.0500	1.31408
4	Classrooms have functional natural and artificial lighting	400	1.00	5.00	3.0300	1.24014

5	Classrooms have enough tables and chairs	400	1.00	5.00	3.6025	1.13698
6	Classrooms have enough sitting space	400	1.00	5.00	3.6300	1.17753
7	Adequate auditoriums, conference halls	400	1.00	5.00	3.2775	1.22033
8	Adequate lecture rooms	400	1.00	5.00	3.5775	1.13896
9	Adequate teaching laboratory facilities	400	1.00	5.00	2.6675	1.23927
10	Adequate computers labs and internet facilities	400	1.00	5.00	2.8175	1.24421
11	Quiet places to study within campus	400	1.00	5.00	3.4675	1.18425
12	Adequate teaching tools and equipment	400	1.00	5.00	2.9475	1.25246
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
	Grand Mean				**3.13604**	**1.2201041**

Source: Authors' own work

As shown in the above Table 7, students responded to the availability of academic facilities and the resources of their respective university. As we notice from the above table, students have somewhat positive reflection regarding the availability of academic facilities and the resource of their university as the grand mean (M=3.13604, SD=1.2201041) is above the average mean value. Although the grand mean value somehow exceeds the average mean value of three, students disagreed on the items that related with the quality of the classroom environment (M=2.775, SD=1.2321), the adequacy of laboratory equipment (M=2.667, SD=1.2392), the quality of internet services (M=2.817, SD=1.2442) and the adequacy of teaching tools (M=2.947, SD=1.2524). These findings confirm that the majority of the variables or items explaining the attributes of academic facilities and resources were perceived by students to be very poor.

In consistent with the above quantitative finding, most interview participants expressed the inadequacy of necessary academic facilities and resources at their university. Among interview participants, a Psychology department teacher at WolaitaSodo University was expressing how a shortage of classrooms influences student learning. His interview response that excerpted from interview transcript shortly summarizes others' thoughts:

> In our university, for example, we have shortage of classrooms. Since there are shortages of classrooms, sometimes we are forced to cancel regular classes. If we cancel the regular classes, we are unable to complete the courses that are assigned to a given semester. See how classroom itself affects students' learning? (Interviewee, A).

The other interview participants were also sharing the inadequacy of laboratory equipment and poor internet access on the campus. One of the interview participants and a Geology department teacher at Arba Minch University shared that: "If there is shortage of laboratories, teachers are unable to teach practical lesson and that limits students from gaining practical education"(Interviewee, H).

Moreover, an interview participant and a Computer Science department teacher at WolaitaSodo University explained the role of internet access in learning. Her interview response typically represented the views of others. She noted that:

Internet service is as a key in facilitating learning. Indeed, students use internet for encouraging purpose, in one hand and others are not using for good reason, on the other hand. This doesn't mean that all students are not using internet for encouraging purpose. Many students download educational materials via internet and attend You Tube presentations and demonstrations. Hence, poor internet service on the campus directly affects students' learning (Interviewee, A).

Table 8. The Nature of Academic Program Issues (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Flexible syllabus	400	1.00	5.00	3.2225	1.08671
2	Reputable academic programs	400	1.00	5.00	3.0925	1.16289
3	Displays professional image	400	1.00	5.00	3.4050	1.08809
4	Defined course content and objectives	400	1.00	5.00	3.7350	1.02097
5	Courses develop students' Knowledge, Skills and Attitude	400	1.00	5.00	3.3850	1.20016
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
			Grand Mean		**3.368**	**1.111764**

Source: Authors' own work

According to the above Table 8, students were asked to respond to the nature of academic program issues of their respective university. As we see from the table, the grand mean 3.368 (SD=1.111764) is above the average mean. In addition, all items' mean scores are above the average mean value, showing the students have a positive perception towards the quality of academic programs. However, the qualitative data indicates inconsistent findings regarding academic program issues. For example, interview participants at WolaitaSodo University shared poor academic program expansion as weaknesses of the university. Among interview participants, a Student Union President at Wolaita described that:

In program expansion, our university is weak, particularly in opening or launching new academic programs at undergraduate level as compared with other Ethiopian universities. There are many decisive programs that support the country's development. For example, we have no software engineering departments. The students must join the programs that they have interest to

learn. For example, students highly want programs like theatrical arts, chemical engineering, textile engineering and software engineering programs. However, you couldn't find such academic programs at our university (Interviewee, B).

On the other hand, interview participants at Jinka University were explaining the academic program expansion as strengths of the university. One of interview participants and civics and ethical studies teacher shared that:

Our university has been working on academic program expansion. For example, the university has opened a weekend Under Graduate [UG] programs in different distance centers and launched a regular MA program in some departments like Agricultural Economics, Social Anthropology and so forth. Since the surrounding community members have lack of access to higher education, the academic program expansion has its own role in order to make the higher education accessible to all surrounding community members those who need further education (Interviewee, C).

Table 9. Quality of Instructional Practices (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Follow good teaching practices	400	1.00	5.00	3.3475	1.12021
2	Encourage active learning	400	1.00	5.00	3.5625	1.06956
3	Provide regular feedback	400	1.00	5.00	2.9200	1.16490
4	Follow curriculum strictly	400	1.00	5.00	3.0250	1.29172
5	Complete the syllabus on time	400	1.00	5.00	2.8375	1.2384
6	Preparation for the lessons	400	1.00	5.00	3.5275	1.01579
7	Provide course outlines	400	1.00	5.00	3.9075	.99570
8	Stimulate students thinking	400	1.00	5.00	3.5700	1.04299
9	Expectations on course work	400	1.00	5.00	3.5700	1.05017
10	Completion of the syllabus	400	1.00	5.00	3.3950	1.05202
11	Set assessment tasks	400	1.00	5.00	2.7475	1.29148
12	Integrate theory and practice	400	1.00	5.00	2.8050	1.13145
13	Grades reflect students' ability	400	1.00	5.00	3.4425	1.21671
14	Placement services on time	400	1.00	5.00	3.3150	1.24283
15	Informs exam schedules on time	400	1.00	5.00	3.6925	1.13630
16	Registration takes place timely	400	1.00	5.00	3.7275	1.05405
17	Classes take regularly	400	1.00	5.00	3.5600	1.13341
18	Releases grades on time	400	1.00	5.00	3.4700	1.20321
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
	Grand Mean				**3.35**	**1.13616**

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated in the above Table 9, eighteen items associated with the quality of instructional practices were developed to examine students' perspectives. The study participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on each item. As we can see from the table, the grand mean score (M= 3.35, SD=1.13616) shows the grand mean is above the average mean value, indicating that students somewhat positively

rated the quality of instructional practices at the university. However, when examining the mean scores of each item, students' response to some items are below the average mean value. For example, the mean values for item three (M=2.9200, SD=1.16490), five (M=2.8375, SD=1.2384), eleven (M= 2.7475, SD=1.29148) and twelve (M=2.8050, SD=1.13145) respectively are below the average mean value, showing that students have a poor perception towards teachers' feedback system on students' progress, duration of completing the syllabus, integrating theory and practice while teaching, and setting assessment tasks that challenge students to learn. Consistent with these quantitative findings, the majority of interview participants uncovered some teachers' commitment related problems in instructional practices. Among interview participants, a Physics department teacher at Arba Minch University explained that: "some teachers are not providing regular feedback on students' academic progress. In addition, those teachers not even properly score the exam papers and release grades that didn't reflect individual students' ability" (Interviewee, C).

Another interview participant also expressed the duration of course completion within a given academic semester. One of the interview participants and Student Union V/President at Wolaita Sodo University [WSU] felt that:

> Some teachers are not properly beginning as well as completing courses on time. They begin the semester courses about the end of the semester. Those teachers enter into the classroom two or three times in a week and complete the whole semester course. (Interviewee, J).

Moreover, the other interview participants shared poor practical education at the university. Among them, a fifth year Computer Science department student at WolaitaSodo University was explaining how poor practical education affects students' learning. His interview response reflects others' view:

> Many filed of studies like health sciences, natural sciences and technology fields demand practical education as compared to the other sciences. Frankly speaking, the practical education is poor in most Ethiopian universities, including ours. The rationale behind for poor delivery of practical education is inadequate supply of laboratory apparatus and chemicals and that limits students from acquiring practical lesson (Interviewee, A).

Table 10. Quality of Library Services (N=400)

SN	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Has comfortable chairs and tables	400	1.00	5.00	2.9400	1.20833
2	Has adequate and latest academic resources/materials	400	1.00	5.00	2.8175	1.21980
3	Provides a conducive environment for study	400	1.00	5.00	3.4350	1.17227
4	Has convenient opening and closing hours	400	1.00	5.00	3.5275	1.18649

5	Facilitates access to internet resources	400	1.00	5.00	2.8450	1.31159
6	Staff are friendly and helpful	400	1.00	5.00	2.4450	1.14027
7	Staff provide prompt services to students	400	1.00	5.00	2.7925	1.24028
	Valid N (listwise)	400				
	Grand Mean				**2.9717**	**1.21129**

Source: Authors' own work

As shown in the above Table 10, there are a total of seven items constructed to investigate students' perception towards the quality of library services. As we notice from the table, the grand mean 2.9717 (SD=1.21129) is below the average mean value, revealing that students have a poor perception towards the quality of library services of their respective university except for a very few items. As evidenced in quantitative finding, the qualitative data also revealed that the quality of library service is poor. Although similar problem do not exist in three study universities. Those at least share some common problems associated with the quality of library services, such as adequacy of necessary and updated educational materials and internet access in the library. Among interview participants, a fifth-year Law department student at Arba Minch University shared that:

> In the beginning of each semester, the course teachers provide course outlines before starting the course. In the course outline, there are many references. Our teachers order us to read those references books from library. However, we cannot find those reference materials in the library. Therefore, there is shortage of reference materials in the library and that affects our learning (Interviewee, I).

Another interview participant a Student Union V/President at WolaitaSodo University adds a lack of recent materials and poor internet connection in the library. His interview response that taken from interview transcript represents others' thought:

> There are four libraries on the campus, such as Main Library, Social Science Library, Natural Science Library, Female Library and Technology Library. However, the libraries are not equipped with necessary educational materials. If you go to the library, you cannot find recent educational materials. Not only that but also you can't find local books in the library. Many books are foreign authored and there is also a shortage of latest reference materials in the library. Moreover, the internet connection is poor in the library. We cannot easily access and download necessary materials and kill our time while struggling with poor network connection (Interviewee, J).

5. Discussion

The main aim of this study is to examine students' perception towards academic service quality of Ethiopian higher education. To this end, mixed research approach with convergent parallel design was used. In both quantitative and qualitative findings, study participants have somewhat positively reflected their perception towards academic service quality of their respective university. However, in the majority of sub-dimensions that described the academic service quality, students' perception was poor. Among sub dimensions of academic service quality, students have poor perception towards academic staff members' attitude and behaviour towards students, academic staffs' competence and quality of library services as the grand means were below the average mean value. The qualitative findings also assured that some teachers have poor perception towards their students and some other teachers are weak in providing guidance and counseling service to students. The qualitative findings also uncovered that some teachers have poor academic competence, in one hand and other teachers have poor educational levels particularly in the fourth generation university on the other hand. Furthermore, the qualitative findings also confirmed that the libraries that found in the three sample universities are not equipped with updated and necessary educational materials and there is a poor internet access in the library.

Regarding academic facilities and resources, students have positive reflection on the availability of some academic facilities and resource of their university to some extent. The majority of the variables or items explaining the attributes of academic facilities and resources were perceived by students to be very poor. Similarly, qualitative findings also confirmed that poor quality of classroom environment, inadequate supply of laboratory equipment and teaching tools and poor internet access in their universities were the most common challenges that affect students' learning. In consistent with these findings, Solomon, et al. (2018) in their study also observed that Ethiopian higher education students have poor perception towards academic service quality and that reflected in low satisfaction scores.

The study found that students have positive perception towards the nature of academic programs issues at their university. However, qualitative data show inconsistent findings with regard to academic program issues. For example, the study participants at Wolaita Sodo University shared poor academic program expansion as weaknesses of the university, whereas good academic program expansion as strengths of Jinka University. The study also found that students have somewhat good perception towards the quality of instructional practices. However, students were disagreed on the majority of items that explaining the attributes of quality of instructional practices, such as, teachers' provision of regular feedback on students' progress, duration of completing the syllabus, integrating theory and practice while teaching and setting assessment tasks that challenge students to learn. In concur with these quantitative findings, the qualitative findings also confirmed that some teachers are not providing regular feedback on students' academic progress, not completing the

assigned course based on the academic calendar and not constructing tests that measures students' learning objectives.

6. Conclusion

The overall research sought to investigate students' perspectives towards academic service quality in Ethiopian public universities. From the findings and discussions of the study, the researchers reached at the following conclusions: Although students are positively rated for some sub dimensions of academic service quality, they have poor perception towards many sub dimensions and variables or items that describing academic service quality. More specifically, among the elements of academic service quality, students tend to have poor perception towards teachers' academic competence and the quality of library services. In addition, in the majority of variables or items describing academic staffs' attitude and behaviour, academic facilities and resources, quality of instructional practices were perceived by students to be very poor.

7. Recommendations

Based on this conclusion, the researchers make the following recommendations: (1) In the majority of elements that describing academic service quality, students perceived mean scores as low. Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] should identify those dimensions of academic services and variables that have low perceived mean scores in order to take necessary measures and improve academic service quality. (2) Since the way some teachers perceive their students are not positive, the university should design different professional training programs so as to improve teachers' attitudes and behaviours towards students. (3) Presently, Ethiopia is found in the era of rapid higher education expansion. The shortage of skilled manpower is the most common challenge, particularly in fourth generation universities. Thus, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education in collaboration with universities should recruit skilled manpower in different programs and departments so as to reduce skilled manpower shortage. (4) Inadequate supply of laboratory equipment, poor internet connection and lack of organized computer laboratories mainly affect students' learning outcomes. The universities in collaboration with MoE should make all the necessary educational materials and equipments available at their universities.

8. Research Limitations/Implications

In this study, the students' perspectives towards academic service quality were examined using three public universities that situated in the Southern part of Ethiopia. The findings and conclusions of the study cannot be generalizable to all Ethiopian public universities. Future researchers and scholars should conduct their study in all Ethiopian public universities by taking a representative sample from the whole Ethiopian public universities. Furthermore, although mixed research approach was

employed in the current study, further comparable studies should conduct a mixed research using experimental design to better determine the influence of academic service quality on students' learning outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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