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Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Maldives: Are We Listening to the Students?

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Abstract: Students are at the center of higher education which makes it essential that their voices are heard and what students perceive as high quality are known to the providers of higher education. The purpose of this nationwide quantitative survey was to find out what students identified as markers of quality in higher education. As this is the first study of its kind in the country, it is expected that the results of this study would be valuable to higher education institutions and higher education policy makers to cater the need of the students. Responses from 25.17% (N=2580) of the target population were used to statistically analyze the data. Results showed that students identified delivery and teaching methods; amount of contact; feedback; curriculum relevancy and being challenged by what they are learning; awareness and availability of support networks; relationships and interactions; and accessibility and availability of facilities as markers of quality.

Keywords: quality assurance, student voice, higher education, Maldives

Abstrak: Pelajar adalah nadi utama yang menggerakkan universiti yang menjadikan ianya satu keperluan untuk suara mereka didengari dan anggapan mereka terhadap kualiti tinggi perlu diketahui oleh institusi pendidikan tinggi. Tujuan tinjauan kuantitatif di seluruh Maldives ini dilakukan untuk mengetahui apakah ukuran kualiti pengajian tinggi bagi tanggapan pelajar. Oleh kerana kajian ini merupakan yang pertama kali dilakukan di negara

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ini, keputusan kajian dijangka memberi manfaat kepada institusi pengajian tinggi dan pembuat polisi di pengajian tinggi dalam menyediakan keperluan pelajar. Maklum balas daripada 25.17% (N=2580) populasi yang disasarkan digunakan untuk menganalisa data secara statistik menggunakan *chi-square test of independence.* Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar mengenalpasti kaedah penyampaian dan pengajaran; bilangan perjumpaan; maklum balas; kesesuaian kurikulum and cabaran yang dihadapi dalam pembelajaran; kesedaran dan ketersediaan rangkaian sokongan; hubungan dan interaksi; dan kebolehcapaian dan ketersediaan fasiliti sebagai ukuran terhadap kualiti.

Kata Kunci: Jaminan kualiti, suara pelajar, pendidikan tinggi, Maldives

Introduction

Higher education institutions are fundamental to ensuring knowledge production through continuous education of the workforce which has made modern higher education more important than ever before. Continuous improvement of education quality is considered one of the most significant tasks of the modern higher education with the realization that economic success of a nation is determined by the quality of education provided by the nation (Konting, Kamaruddin, & Man, 2009; Pavel, 2012; Ulewicz, 2017). Quality assurance is one of the key elements that contributes to building and maintaining trust in higher education which encourages a systematic and continuous development of quality of higher education (Fedeli, 2016). Needless to say, students are one of the key stakeholders in higher education and quality assurance in higher education is defined from various perspectives including but not limited to stakeholder satisfaction which clearly points out the importance of stakeholder satisfaction (Cheng, 2003; De Wit, 2020; Green, 1994; James, Kankaew, 2019; 2006; Morley, 2003; Shams, 2019).

Concept of quality in the context of higher education takes into account not only academic aspects such as teaching, learning, and curriculum but also non-academic aspects such as facilities, relationships with academic staff and peers, institutional environment as well as institutional support (Kosar, Tariq, & Kashif, 2015; Shah & Nair, 2011; Stella, 2007; Vazirova, 2016). The notion of quality has evolved over time and shifted from conformance to specifications to

meeting or exceeding customers' expectations (Angell, Heffernan, & Megicks, 2008; Shams, 2019). As we live in a world of globalization, higher education can be made more meaningful if students voices are taken into account in the interest of preparing them for the future, that is, to face the changes and challenges including those of their own careers, workplace, and society as a whole (Broadfoot, 1998; Fung, 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Given that students are at the center of higher education, it is essential that their voices are heard and they are made equal partners in quality assurance process as research indicates that involvement of students make them feel significant which in turn contribute towards student retention (Dicker et al., 2017; Janes, 1997; Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014; Roberts & McNeese, 2010; Tight, 2019).

Quality audits are considered the most important in ensuring and maintaining higher education quality. Hence, conducting quality audits by government or external bodies are a requirement in many countries as external stakeholders are the ones who are more concerned with quality assurance procedures and the independence of these bodies (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Gümüş, 2018; Naseer & Al-Al-Hidabi, 2019; Shams & Belyaeva, 2019). The Maldives Qualifications Authority is responsible for quality assurance in higher education and is the external body mandated to conduct external audits of higher education institutions in the Maldives. Maldives Qualifications Authority (2017) specifically stated that students would be interviewed during the site-visit by the external audit team from the Maldives Qualification Authority, which clearly demonstrates the prominence of students' voices in the quality assurance process.

According to Fedeli (2016) and Soghomonyan (2018) student involvement in quality assurance had an impact on internal as well as external quality assurance and had been recognized as one of the crucial components of institutional quality development in higher education. Given this context, the purpose of this study was to find out what students enrolled in Higher Education Institutions in the Maldives identified as markers of quality and if there were any significant differences based on factors such as sex of the student, level of the programme enrolled (undergraduate or postgraduate), discipline of the programme enrolled (business, education, or social sciences), and the type of institution (public or private).

Overall, the paper has the following threefold contributions. First, this study carries value to education policy-makers and decision-makers of higher education institutions as the findings of this study can be used to formulate policies and procedures, target specific groups of students to ensure promising and supportive academic environment, design targeted marketing campaigns, and increase the brand image of their institutions. Second, the results of this study positively contribute towards strengthening the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions through identification of what students identify as markers of quality in higher education and current status of those markers of quality as perceived by the students. Third, this study serves as a baseline for future research in the area of quality assurance in higher education in the Maldives as this nationwide study is the first of its kind in the country.

Research Design, Methodology, and Approach

A cross-sectional quantitative survey research design was used in this study as the purpose of this study was to find out what students enrolled in Higher Education Institutions in the Maldives identified as markers of quality and if there were any significant differences based on factors such as sex of the student, level of the programme enrolled (undergraduate or postgraduate), discipline of the programme enrolled (business, education, or social sciences), and the type of institution (public or private). The focus of quantitative research was on gathering numerical data and generalizing it to the population in an attempt to explain what was observed (Babbie, 2015). According to Creswell (2018) survey research is a popular quantitative research design in education as surveys "help to identify important beliefs and attitudes of individuals". Of various quantitative survey research designs, cross-sectional designs are the most popular designs used in education settings involving large-scale data collection (Creswell, 2018; Jeong & Kim, 2020; Kajander-Unkuri, Meretoja, Katajisto, Leino-Kilpi, & Suikkala, 2020). As this is a nationwide study, involving thousands of participants and aimed to collect information regarding beliefs and attitudes of participants at a particular point in time, a cross-sectional design was found to be the most appropriate design for this study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013; Creswell, 2018).

A pre-tested questionnaire (Dicker et al., 2017) which included 15 statements was modified to include additional four questions. The additional four questions collected demographic information of the participants while of the 15 statements, five statements were related to teaching and learning; three statements were related to support; two statements related to facilities; two statements related to relationships; one statement related to peers; one statement related to feedback; and one statement which asked for the overall perception of the education quality. Participants were required to indicate whether they agreed, disagreed, or were unsure about the statement.

Target population were the students enrolled in any academic programme at Diploma level or above offered by any of the higher education institutions in the Maldives as this is a nationwide study. Questionnaires were distributed by sharing the online questionnaire link with the student groups through students and staff of the higher education institutions. Data collection began in September 2019 and continued through December 2019. A total of 3059 responses were received. However, after the cleaning the data by removing the incomplete responses the sample size was reduced to 2580 which is approximately 25.17% of the target population. A sample size of 625 (CL: 95%, CI: 5%) is considered a statistically valid sample size. According to Fryrear (2015) and Ramshaw (2019) a good response rate for external surveys is between 10-20%. Since the number of responses received met the above mentioned criteria, the sample size of this study was considered statistically valid and hence, acceptable. The findings of this study are presented below.

Characteristics of the Respondents and Distribution of their Responses

Of the 2580 respondents, two-thirds were females and one-third were males. There was equal representation of both public and private higher education institutions as, after cleaning the data, the number of responses used to run the statistical analysis from both public and private higher education institutions were 1290 each. Level of programme enrolled was divided into two categories, namely, undergraduate and postgraduate. Students enrolled in programmes offered at the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) level five (diploma), level six (advanced diploma, associate degree, and professional certificate), and

level seven (bachelor's degree, bachelor's honors degree, professional diploma, and professional certificate) were considered undergraduate level while students enrolled in programmes offered at the MNQF level eight (graduate or postgraduate certificate and graduate or postgraduate diploma), level nine (master's degree, advanced professional diploma, and advanced professional certificate), and level 10 (doctoral degree, higher professional diploma, and higher professional certificate) were categorized under postgraduate level. Discipline of programme enrolled were categorized into three, namely, business, social sciences, and education. Figure 1 depicts the level of programme enrolled by the discipline.

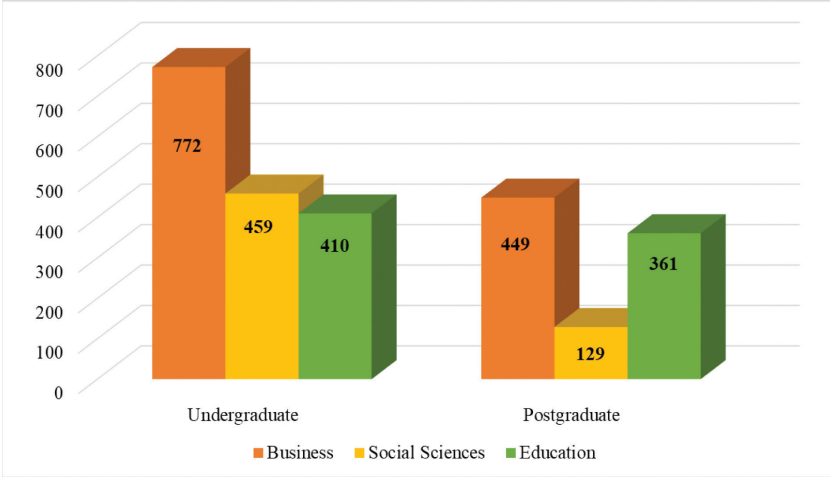

Figure 1. Level of programme by discipline.

Majority (63.57%) of the respondents were enrolled in undergraduate programmes (N = 1641) while 36.43% of the respondents were enrolled in postgraduate programmes (N = 939). As shown in Figure 1, majority (47.04%) of the undergraduate students were enrolled in business programmes (N = 772), 28.00% of the undergraduate students were enrolled in social science programmes (N = 459), and 24.96% of the undergraduate students were enrolled in education programmes (N = 410). Majority (47.82%) of the postgraduate students were enrolled in business programmes (N = 449), 13.73% of the postgraduate students were enrolled in social science programmes (N = 129), and 38.45% of the postgraduate students were enrolled in education programmes (N

= 361). Figure 2 shows the level of programme enrolled by the type of institution which was categorized as either public or private.

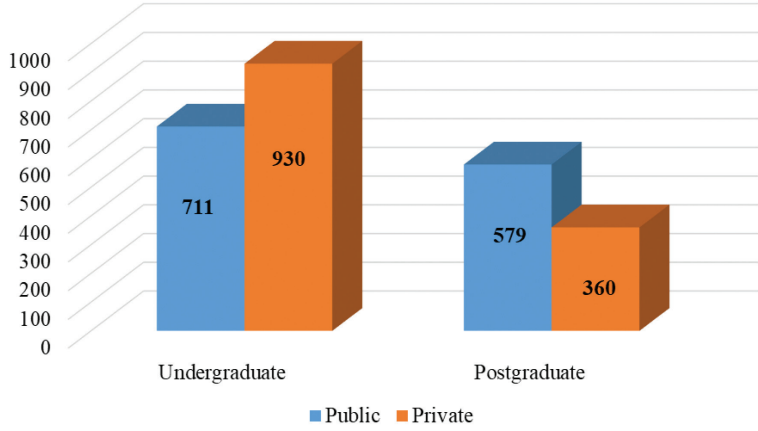

Figure 2. Level of programme by type of institution.

Majority of the undergraduate students who responded to the survey were enrolled in private higher education institutions while majority of the postgraduate students who responded to the survey were enrolled in public higher education institutions. As seen from Figure 2, 43.32% of the undergraduate students (N = 711) and 61.66% of the postgraduate students (N = 579) were enrolled in public higher education institutions while 56.68% of the undergraduate students (N = 930) and 38.34% of the postgraduate students (N = 360) were enrolled in private higher education institutions. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who agreed, disagreed, and were unsure about each of the 15 statements and how they were coded.

Table 1: Themes, Statements and Responses (%).

Theme	#	Statement	Response (%)		
			Disagree	Unsure	Agree
Overall	S09	I think I am getting a high quality education from my institution.	12.8%	23.6%	63.6%

Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	3.9%	4.7%	91.4%
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	38.8%	13.6%	47.6%
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	21.3%	8.5%	70.2%
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	12.0%	10.5%	77.5%
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	7.0%	9.3%	83.7%
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	41.1%	25.6%	33.3%
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	25.6%	38.4%	36.0%
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	19.4%	25.2%	55.4%
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	5.1%	5.4%	89.5%
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	8.5%	6.6%	84.9%
Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	17.5%	14.3%	68.2%
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	21.7%	14.0%	64.3%

Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	4.3%	5.8%	89.9%
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	8.2%	5.4%	86.4%

As seen from the Table 1, 63.6% of the participants believed that they received a high quality education from their institution. It is extremely concerning that majority of the respondents were not satisfied with the amount of contact they had with their academic staff. Moreover, a vast majority were not aware of the support networks that were available to them at their institutions which could be a possible explanation why only 36.0% of the respondents expressed that their experiences were improved by the support networks available to them.

Differences in Responses Based on Factors

Chi-square test of independence was carried out to check whether there was a statistically significant difference in responses based on the factors such as sex of the student, level of the programme enrolled (undergraduate or postgraduate), discipline of the programme enrolled (business, social sciences, or education), and the type of institution (public or private). For the purpose of this analysis, those who responded "disagree" and "unsure" were combined (Dicker et al., 2017). All chi-square tests were performed using a 5% significance level. The standard level of significance used to justify a claim of a statistically significant effect is 0.05 (Walter & Andersen, 2013). Table 2 shows the results obtained using chi-square test of independence based on the sex of the respondents.

Table 2: Differences in Responses Based on the Sex of the Respondent.

Theme	#	Statement	Result
Overall	S09	I think I am getting a high quality education from my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 16.4011$ $p = 0.000051 < 0.05$
Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 15.9014$ $p = 0.000067 < 0.05$
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 2.7967$ $p = 0.094456 > 0.05$
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 4.5354$ $p = 0.033201 < 0.05$
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 13.456$ $p = 0.000244 < 0.05$
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0$ $p = 1 > 0.05$
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 5.5814$ $p = 0.018152 < 0.05$
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.7566$ $p = 0.384395 > 0.05$
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 22.6701$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 16.7532$ $p = 0.000043 < 0.05$
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 12.2339$ $p = 0.000469 < 0.05$
Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 2.2346$ $p = 0\ .13495 > 0.05$
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 8.4468$ $p = 0.003657 < 0.05$
Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 3.4218$ $p = 0.064343 > 0.05$
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 4.132$ $p = 0.04208 < 0.05$

Statistically significant sex-specific differences were seen under five of the six themes, namely, teaching and learning, support, relationships, facilities, and feedback. As shown in Table 2, there was no statistically significant sex-specific differences with regards to the satisfaction with the amount of contact with academic staff; relevancy of the curriculum, contribution of support networks to improved experiences; contribution of accessibility towards ease in learning; and contribution of interaction with peers towards improved educational experience. Although there was a statistically significant difference between males and females with regards to their perception of overall quality of education received, it is remarkable that majority of the male respondents (58.1%) and female respondents (66.3%) agreed that they received high quality education

from their institutions. Table 3 shows the results obtained using chi-square test of independence based on the level of programme enrolled of the respondents.

Table 3: Differences in Responses Based on the Level of the Programme Enrolled.

Theme	#	Statement	Result
Overall	S09	I think I am getting a high quality education from my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 13.0406$ $p = 0.000305 < 0.05$
Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 19.5107$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 5.3123$ $p = 0.021175 < 0.05$
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.8884$ $p = 0.345907 > 0.05$
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 3.3518$ $p = 0.06713 > 0.05$
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.1122$ $p = 0.737612 > 0.05$
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 16.4011$ $p = 0.000051 < 0.05$
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.0098$ $p = 0.921079 > 0.05$
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 6.5132$ $p = 0.010708 < 0.05$
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.0473$ $p = 0.827769 > 0.05$
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 67.7899$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.5923$ $p = 0\ .441533 > 0.05$
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 4.63$ $p = 0.031418 < 0.05$
Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 23.0247$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.0878$ $p = 0.766956 > 0.05$

Results presented in Table 3 shows that irrespective of the level of programme enrolled, students believed that a variety of teaching methods were used (70.2%), they were challenged by what they were learning (77.5%), their curriculum was relevant (83.7%), lecturers (89.5%), accessibility (68.2%), and the feedback (86.4%) had a positive impact on their learning. Statistically significant programme level-wise differences were seen in the rest of the aspects with a very high

percentage of the participants agreeing with the statements except for the statements under support theme. A deeper analysis showed that 38.3% of the postgraduate students and 30.5% of the undergraduate students were aware of the support networks available which could be one of the reasons why only 36.2% of the postgraduate students and 36.0% of the undergraduate students found support networks improved their learning. Although there was a statistically significant difference between postgraduate students and undergraduate students with regards to their perception of overall quality of education received, majority of the postgraduate respondents (68.1%) and undergraduate respondents (61.0%) agreed that they received high quality education from their institutions. Table 4 shows the results obtained using chi-square test of independence based on the discipline of programme enrolled of the respondents.

Table 4: Differences in Responses Based on the Discipline of the Programme Enrolled.

Theme	#	Statement	Result
Overall	S09	I think I am getting a high quality education from my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 24.1606$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 14.8068$ $p = 0.000609 < 0.05$
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 11.8481$ $p = 0.002674 < 0.05$
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 14.0201$ $p = 0.000903 < 0.05$
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 7.1599$ $p = 0.027877 < 0.05$
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 78.12$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 125.3546$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 123.629$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 35.6096$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 12.9175$ $p = 0.001567 < 0.05$
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 20.2413$ $p = 0.00004 < 0.05$
Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 93.679$ $p = 0\ .00001 < 0.05$
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 33.6664$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$

Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 21.0653$ $p = 0.000027 < 0.05$
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	$\chi^2_{(df=2,\ N=2580)} = 3.1457$ $p = 0.20745 > 0.05$

Statistically significant discipline-specific differences were seen under five of the six themes, namely, teaching and learning, support, relationships, facilities, and peers. As seen from Table 4, irrespective of the discipline, students believed that the feedback received helped them to do better. A deeper analysis showed that 85.3% of the students enrolled in business discipline programmes, 88.1% of the students enrolled in social science discipline programmes, and 87.0% of the students enrolled in education discipline programmes agreed that feedback helped them to do better. Areas where statistically significant differences were observed, significantly lower percentage of students enrolled in social science discipline and business discipline programmes agreed with the statements compared to the students enrolled in education discipline. Table 5 shows the results obtained using chi-square test of independence based on the type of institution enrolled of the respondents.

Table 5: Differences in Responses Based on the Type of Institution Enrolled.

Theme	#	Statement	Result
Overall	S09	I think I am getting a high quality education from my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.6694$ $p = 0.413249 > 0.05$
Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 1.9877$ $p = 0.158584 > 0.05$
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 34.9593$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.1851$ $p = 0.667011 > 0.05$
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 3.5586$ $p = 0.059237 > 0.05$
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 28.4392$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 2.7907$ $p = 0.094813 > 0.05$
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 8.2385$ $p = 0.004101 < 0.05$
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 1.412$ $p = 0.234728 > 0.05$
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.4137$ $p = 0.520117 > 0.05$
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 14.8015$ $p = 0.000119 < 0.05$

Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 2.8603$ $p = 0\ .09079 > 0.05$
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 6.0817$ $p = 0.013659 < 0.05$
Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 1.7109$ $p = 0.190872 > 0.05$
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 0.3306$ $p = 0.565331 > 0.05$

Statistically significant institution type-specific differences were seen with regards to the level of satisfaction with the amount of contact they had with academic staff; relevancy of the curriculum; improvement of experience having support networks available to them; doing better in modules that their favorite lecturers taught on; and the belief that classrooms and laboratory facilities in the institution were good markers of quality as shown in Table 5. Results revealed that 53.5% students enrolled in private higher education institutions were satisfied with the amount of contact they had with academic staff while only 41.9% of the students enrolled in public higher education institutions were satisfied with the amount of contact they had with academic staff. According to the study, 79.8% of the students enrolled in private higher education institutions and 87.6% of the students enrolled in public higher education institutions agreed that the curriculum was relevant to them. One third (33.3%) of the students enrolled in public higher education institutions and 38.8% of the students enrolled in private higher education institutions agreed that having support networks available to them improved their experiences while 87.6% of the participants from public higher education institutions and 82.2% of the participants from private higher education institutions agreed that they felt they did better on modules their favorite lecturers taught. Results revealed that 62.0% of the students enrolled in public higher education institutions and 66.7% of the students believed that classrooms and laboratory facilities in their institutions were good markers of quality.

Students' Perception of Quality and its Association to Markers of Quality

A total of 14 statements were identified as markers of quality (Dicker et al., 2017) and chi-square test of independence was carried out to check whether there was a statistically significant relationship between

students' perception of quality and each of the markers of quality. The results obtained are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Relationship Between Students' Perception of Quality and the Markers of Quality.

Theme	#	Statement	Result
Teaching and Learning	S06	The methods used to deliver (teach) my modules influence how well I do in them.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 8.4499$ $p = 0.003651 < 0.05$
	S11	I am satisfied with the amount of contact I have with academic staff.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 237.47$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S13	A variety of teaching methods are used to help me learn.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 317.9935$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S14	I am challenged by what I am learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 212.2986$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S15	My curriculum is relevant to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 140.5281$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Support	S04	I am aware of what support networks are available to me in my institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 114.557$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S05	It has improved my experience having support networks (e.g. career guidance) available to me.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 85.9954$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
	S12	I feel I have been made aware of my future career prospects.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 301.6132$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Relationships	S01	The lecturers I have impact upon my learning.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 2.415$ $p = 0.120179 > 0.05$
	S02	I feel I do better in modules that my favorite lecturers teach on.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 6.3663$ $p = 0.011631 < 0.05$
Facilities	S03	The accessibility of facilities (e.g. library) in my institution makes my learning easier.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 113.4632$ $p = 0\ .00001 < 0.05$
	S08	The classrooms and laboratory facilities in my institution are good markers of quality.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 132.5596$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Peers	S07	The interactions I have with my peers have improved my educational experience at this institution.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 78.6812$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$
Feedback	S10	The feedback I get in class and assignments helps me to do better.	$\chi^2_{(df=1,\ N=2580)} = 149.8987$ $p = 0.00001 < 0.05$

Results showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between students' perception of quality and 13 out of the 14 identified markers of the quality, namely, methods used to deliver (teach) modules; amount of contact with academic staff; variety of teaching methods used; being challenged by what they were learning; relevancy of curriculum; awareness and availability of support networks; awareness of career prospects; relationships with academic staff; accessibility and availability of facilities; interactions with peers; and feedback received. There was no statistically significant relationship between students'

perception of quality and their belief that the lecturers they had impact upon their learning (S01). This clearly indicates that identified markers of quality played a key role in influencing students' perception of quality of higher education they received.

The Big Picture: Discussion and Recommendation

A total of 14 statements were identified as markers of quality (Dicker et al., 2017) and were categorized under six themes, namely, teaching and learning, support, relationships, facilities, peers, and feedback. Results showed that students identified all five statements presented under teaching and learning, which covered the teaching methods, delivery methods, curriculum content, and contact time to have a significant relationship with their perception of quality of higher education they received. According to Greatbatch & Holland (2016) teaching and learning is not the only factor students associated with quality. Studies showed that students wanted to be taught by academic staff who were well versed and enthusiastic about the subject they taught in addition to academic staff being empathetic, approachable, helpful and patient, and encourage students to develop their full potential indicating that in addition to teaching and learning, students associated other factors such as relationships and feedback with quality (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016). The results of this study is consistent with previous research which discussed principles of learning and performance indicators relating to higher education teaching and learning (Criddle, 2016; Groccia, 2012; Leiber, 2019).

A deeper look into the results showed that while majority of the respondents were not satisfied with the amount of contact they had with academic staff, there was a statistically significant difference in terms of the level and discipline of programme enrolled and the type of institution. Postgraduate students reported they were less satisfied with the amount of contact compared to the undergraduate students. Although the reason remains unclear, it could be due to the fact that unlike undergraduate programmes, a vast majority of postgraduate programmes are offered either in block-mode, virtual-mode, or a combination of both and at the same time academic staff teaching at postgraduate level are in most cases part-time staff. Students enrolled in programmes categorized under business discipline were less satisfied with the amount of contact they had with academic staff compared to

that of education or social sciences. Moreover, students enrolled in public higher education institutions were less satisfied with the amount of contact they had with academic staff compared to that of private higher education institutions. As this is a quantitative study it did not seek to understand specific reasons. Therefore, future investigations could fruitfully explore this issue.

Respondents identified all three statements categorized under support, which included being aware of support networks available to them and its contribution to their performance and career, to have a statistically significant relationship with their perception of quality of higher education they received. It is unfortunate that only one-third of the students are aware of the support networks available to them, which could possibly explain students' lack of agreement with its contribution to their performance and career. From these results it is clear that compared to male students, more female students; compared to undergraduate students, more postgraduate students; and compared to education and social sciences, less number of business discipline students are aware of the support networks available to them, whereas there is no statistically significant difference between the students enrolled and public and private higher education institutions. This is not only an important finding in the understanding of the markers of quality education from students' perspective, but also knowing the significance of it provide critical information to the service providers with regards to students' awareness (or lack thereof) support services they provide which in turn could inform the design of future orientation programmes and marketing decisions of the higher education institutions.

Statements under the theme relationships focused on the relationships with the lecturers and results showed that more than 84% of the respondents agreed the relationships were a significant marker of quality while 86% of the respondents agreed feedback they receive in class helped them to perform better. Criddle (2016), Groccia (2012), and Leiber, (2019) identified feedback as a quality indicator while Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor (2003) reported that it is the quality of the interaction that leads to the quality of the learning experience where lecturer and student relationships are the key. Moreover, nearly 90% of the respondents reported that interactions with peers improved their educational experiences. A popular explanation of this could be that assessment are designed with a group work component at all levels and

nowadays it is very common among the Maldivian students to form study groups and learn together. Past research indicated that students gained academic and personal benefits from this study approach (Arendale, 2014; Bradshaw & Hendry, 2006). Hill et al. (2003) also reported that relationship with peers played a key role in the quality of students' learning experiences. These findings were consistent with past research conducted in other countries. Although the reasons were not explored in this study, the results could be used to inform policy decisions by the higher education institutions to ensure a conducive learning environment with required support was provided to their students as students are a key stakeholder and play a significant role in higher education quality assurance (Shams & Belyaeva, 2019).

Analysis of the statements under the theme "Facilities" showed that majority of the students indicated that the classrooms and laboratory facilities in their institutions were good markers of quality and the accessibility of facilities such as a library in their institutions made their learning easier. This was found to have a significant relationship with the students' perception of the quality of education they received indicating its significance in students' educational experiences. This finding was also in line with past research which had confirmed facilities such as well-equipped classrooms, laboratories, and libraries which greatly enhanced student satisfaction (Adnan, Mohamed, Tarek, Mun, & Hosny, 2016; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Helgesen & Nesset, 2007; Ijaz, Irfan, Shahbaz, Awan, & Sabir, 2011; Maddox & Nicholson, 2014; Thomas, 2011).

Overall, relevancy of curriculum, use of variety of teaching methods, and being challenged by what they were learning were identified as strengths while two major areas of concern were identified from this study, namely, contact time with academic staff and students being unaware of support networks available to them. It is recommended that while building on the strengths identified, efforts are put in place to address the areas of concerns identified. Further studies are necessary to delve into the reasons for students' dissatisfaction with the amount of contact they had with academic staff. Potential and registered students could be made aware of support networks available to them through marketing activities and orientation programmes conducted for students as there is evidence that student support is critical to success in today's higher education (Ciobanu, 2013; Kaur, 2016).

Lastly, another key finding of this study is that a vast majority of the students reported that feedback they received in class as well as the methods used to deliver (teach) modules influenced their academic performance. It is noteworthy that there was a statistically significant relationship between the students' perception of the quality of the education they received and the feedback they received. In addition, there was a statistically significant relationship between the students' perception of the quality of the education they received and the methods used to deliver (teach) modules influenced their academic performance. In the light of this, it is recommended that higher education institutions take into account the importance the students placed into these aspects as these might be the factors that ultimately enhanced their performance. Moreover, building on these aspects would strengthen and improve the reputation of the services provided attracting best students to the institutions (Angell et al., 2008). To sum up, it is recommended that service providers use the results of this study to strengthen the internal quality at the same time conduct further research to explore the specific details pertaining to each of the markers of quality discussed in this study.

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