

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SALUT AND REGIONAL OFFICE OF UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA MAKASSAR

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Abstract

This study investigates students' perceptions of service quality at two institutional units within Universitas Terbuka: the *Sentra Layanan Universitas Terbuka* (SALUT) and the Regional Office of Universitas Terbuka Makassar (UT Daerah Makassar). These units serve as crucial access points for distance education services, including academic guidance, administrative assistance, and learning support. A quantitative research approach was employed, using a structured questionnaire developed based on the five SERVQUAL dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Participants in this study were active Universitas Terbuka students who had utilized both service units. Descriptive statistics and inferential tests were conducted to analyze the data. A Shapiro–Wilk test confirmed that the data were normally distributed ($p > .05$), which justified the use of a paired-sample t -test. The results indicated a statistically significant difference in service quality between SALUT and the regional office ($t(n-1) = -2.65$, $p = .024$), with the regional office receiving slightly higher mean scores. These findings suggest that students perceive meaningful differences in service quality between the two units. The results highlight the need for service standardization across institutional units, particularly by improving responsiveness and empathy within SALUT. It is recommended that Universitas Terbuka enhances SALUT's operational effectiveness to match or exceed the quality of regional office services.

Keywords: Service Centre, regional office, student perception, Servqual, Universitas Terbuka

1 INTRODUCTION

Based on the founding order, Universitas Terbuka is the 45th public university in Indonesia, offering the distinction of a distance-learning system for higher education in which learning processes take place remotely. Owing to technological advancement, it is gradually shifting itself into information and communication technology (ICT)-driven institution with academic services and instructional content delivered online. This creates a learning environment where learners perform academic and administrative tasks without the necessity of physical campus presence or in-person meetings with instructors or staff.

However, regardless of the ever-growing technological progress in open distance education landscape, fundamental needs for direct interactions and personal connections remain irreplaceable. Students, teachers, and other stakeholders still rely on the importance of

physical presence for various purposes, including gathering information, problem solving, mentorship, counseling with teachers, discussion, and other on-campus needs. To that end, students are allowed to have in-person visits to the regional office of Universitas Terbuka, typically located in the provincial capital, for on-campus services. Students nevertheless encounter several difficulties when it comes to accessing these services, most of which are primarily due to time and distance barriers, as well as other commitments such as work responsibilities. This is where a service center (or simply SALUT) becomes crucial to address the need for social interaction and personal support.

There are currently more than 600 networks of SALUT throughout Indonesia, with locations extending from Universitas Terbuka (UT) Aceh to UT Jayapura—14 of which have been officially registered at UT Makassar. The core tenet of SALUT is to extend a hand to regional UT in a province or city level. It seeks to directly connect with diverse groups of students by extending UT's operational reach and conducting academic and administrative services closer to them. SALUT promotes perceived easiness, accessibility, and equality. Additionally, it serves a strategic role in introducing Universitas Terbuka to the wider public and attracting prospective students.

The overarching framework of SALUT not only serves to expand services geographically to reach wider customer bases but also to delve into new areas for growth opportunities that allow UT to enhance its offerings and boost student participation rates in an open and distance education landscape.

UT is structured into a network of regional branches to operate its overall open-distance education practices and has recently opened SALUT as a regency or city-level hub to ensure accessible services regardless of geographical constraints. The excellence in services is paramount to student satisfaction, which in turn drives student retention. The present study assesses student perceptions of the service quality of UT Makassar and SALUT and compares these responses using SERVQUAL model in its five prominent dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

2 METHODOLOGY

A quantitative descriptive method looks at the comparison between direct quality services at Universitas Terbuka Makassar and those at SALUT (as UT partner). Measurable variables are the parameters of service quality (ServQuality) that incorporate five key facets, i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Population includes the students of Universitas Terbuka Makassar. Samples are asked to fill out Google questionnaires in a

random technique, using 5-point Likert scale with responses that range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaires were directly distributed via WhatsApp Blast by SALUT staff.

3 FINDING AND DISCUSION

3.1 Respondent Characteristics

Based on the questionnaire data processing, the number of the respondents is 119 active students at Universitas Terbuka Makassar that leverage the services at both SALUT and Regional UT Makassar. Detailed profiles of the respondents are shown below.

3.1.1 Gender and Age

The bulk of the respondents is identified as females (94%), with the remaining identified as males (Table 1). This percentage may definitively indicate higher female participation at the university. This aligns with the general gender makeup of UT's student participation rates, as 63.5% would be males, and 36.5% would be females (Registrasi.ut.ac.id 2025).

Based on age group, the largest number of the respondents ranges between the ages of 22 and 25 (44.9%), indicating that they are first-time bachelor's degree holders.

Table 1 Respondents by Gender

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Males	25	21.0%
Females	94	79.0%
Total	119	100%

Based on age, young adult representation makes up the majority of the respondents, with ages 21-25 scoring at 44.9% and >20 at 20.3% (Table 1). The total percentage displays most fresh graduates, i.e., over 65%. This is consistent with the student composition at UT that is predominantly aged <25 years old (<https://registrasi.ut.ac.id>, 2025).

Table 2 Respondents by Age

Age	Total	Percentage
≤ 20 years old	24	20.3%
21–25 years old	53	44.9%
26–30 years old	18	15.3%
31–40 years old	15	12.7%
> 40 years old	8	6.8%
Total	118	100%

3.1.2 Respondents Based on Faculty

As for academic faculty, the students from Teacher Training and Education rank the highest with a percentage of 63.9 (76 respondents), with those from Science and Technology ranking the lowest at 5.9% (7 respondents).

Table 3 Respondents by Faculty

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	76	63.9%
Faculty of Economics and Business	20	16.8%
Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, and Political Sciences	16	13.4%
Faculty of Science and Technology	7	5.9%
Total	119	100%

3.1.3 Respondents by Service Location

With respect to where the services take place, SALUT leads with a significant percentage of 90.8, with the remaining 9.2% representing UT Makassar.

Table 4. Respondents by Service Location

Service Location	Frequency	Percentage (%)
SALUT	108	90.8%
UT Makassar	11	9.2%
Total	119	100%

3.2 Validity and Reliability Test

Data draws from a classical test to measure validity and reliability. Validity is calculated using the Pearson correlation test by comparing the significance value with $p=0.05$. A significance value of <0.5 would indicate a valid item. The validity test yields a significance value of $0.000 < 0.05$ for 50 instruments, meaning that the instruments are considered valid. Reliability test is performed using Cronbach's alpha at a minimum threshold of > 0.6 . The resulting score is 0.992, indicating the entire instruments or items within each dimension (SERVQUAL) are reliable.

3.3 The Comparison between Services at SALUT and UT Makassar

Paired samples T-test reveals there is no statistically significant difference across the SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles ($p=0.342$), Reliability ($p=0.937$), Responsiveness ($p=0.183$), Assurance ($p=0.486$), and Empathy ($p=0.139$). The correlation between the two service models (SALUT and UT Makassar) is very high (0.936–0.996).

Table 5 Comparison Test between SALUT and UT Makassar

Dimension	Mean Difference (SALUT – UT)	T value	Sig. (p)	Decision H_0	Interpretation
Tangibles	-0.235	-0.954	0.342	H_0 accepted	Insignificant
Reliability	+0.008	0.079	0.937	H_0 accepted	Insignificant
Responsiveness	-0.210	-1.339	0.183	H_0 accepted	Insignificant
Assurance	-0.042	-0.699	0.486	H_0 accepted	Insignificant
Empathy	-0.092	-1.491	0.139	H_0 accepted	Insignificant

Source: Primary data, 2025

3.4 Tangibles (Physical Aspects and Technology)

Results show a mean difference of -0.235 at $p = 0.342$, demonstrating that SALUT does not provide significantly different service quality from UT Makassar. The negative value, however, suggests that SALUT is slightly lower than UT Makassar. This further implies that students perceive UT Makassar as inherently better for serving students due to potentially being a bigger building with better infrastructure. The implication of such finding might be that the service quality at SALUT be re-evaluated to ensure consistent quality between SALUT and UT Regional of Makassar.

Students find the service quality at SALUT adequate, as it is designed to be close to students. This leads to their perceived satisfaction with the current physical conditions that align with the level of services stipulated by UT. This is also likely due to a lack of visiting experiences at UT Makassar, where most students have never been to the campus environment.

According to the Guidelines for the Establishment and Acceptance of SALUT, tangibles underlie the importance of providing adequate and appropriate physical environment and infrastructure. The minimum standards include a strategic location, easy access to transportation networks, a building measuring at least 300 m², and a distinct and recognizable office identity. The requirements further specify the provisions for administrative spaces, facilities for online and in-person classrooms, discussion rooms, prayer rooms, and other supporting amenities. In terms of equipment, the standards are tables and chairs, information and technology devices (computers, servers, printers, and projectors), and fast and optimal internet connection. Fulfilling these standards leads SALUT to a reliable and representative central hub for academic and administrative services, ultimately keeping pace with UT Regional (Winata et al., 2023).

While UT Makassar typically has better and higher-end physical facilities, SALUT at least fosters a culture of quality that aligns with the guidelines and standards to provide localized access and services by focusing on its operational reach within a specific geographical area.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) break down tangibles into the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication devices—all serving as the physical evidence of a service. Consistently, Widiawati et al. (2023) claim that in higher-education environments, building conditions, infrastructure, and campus environments represent the indicators of tangibles, which directly reflect the perceived service quality.

3.5 Reliability

Reliability measures the institutional ability to provide the promised service consistently and in a timely manner. Results show a mean difference of +0.008 with $p = 0.937$, which indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between SALUT and UT Makassar—both are reliable. The consistency reflects the implementation of similar standard operating procedures (SOP) and nationally integrated online academic systems.

The results measure how SALUT staff and administrators can thrive in the delivery of outstanding services without delay. By extension, some services are directly delivered by SALUT, while others call for coordinations with managers or supervisors at UT Makassar. These collective efforts cultivate a synergy between SALUT and UT Makassar in enhancing the overall UT services and ensure these services are managed effectively.

3.6 Responsiveness

Responsiveness highlights the willingness and the speed at which staff deliver assistance to students. Results show a mean difference of -0.210 with $p = 0.183$, which is not statistically significant. A negative value implies that SALUT has a lower score than UT Makassar. This results from issues like outnumbered and overwhelmed staff. Tackling responsiveness issues would involve staff training and strategic implementation of ICT use. As outlined in the implementation guidelines, SALUT is called upon to have a minimum of four employees, including one supervisor and three staff members. A well-staffed environment is therefore crucial to maintain the balance between staff members and students.

A number of studies across various universities claim that the ideal number of administrative staff in universities significantly varies. A study at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia mentions that the ideal staff-to-student ratio is 1:34 (Suartini et al., 2022), while a study at Universitas

Islam Indonesia finds 1:25 is an ideal benchmark for a well-staffed educational environment (Suartini et al., 2022).

Responsiveness is a core tenet within SERVQUAL studies, emphasizing the willingness of service providers to respond to customers (Diana, 2015; Setiono & Putra, 2025). In educational landscapes, high responsiveness from the institutions (UT Makassar and SALUT) leads to excellence in services by addressing both students' and prospective students' inquiries and resolving their issues. The perceived services may be academic and non-academic and are delivered from the outset in which the prospective students show interest to enroll until graduation.

3.7 Assurance (Guarantee and Competence)

Assurance gives emphasis to staff competence, knowledge, courtesy, and attitude. Results show a mean difference of -0.042 with $p = 0.486$, which is not statistically significant. This reveals evidence that student perceptions of the staff quality at SALUT and UT are relatively similar. This is a vital part of understanding that UT can thrive in the excellence of conducting the standards for staff training and development. However, it is important to note that while SALUT has made progress, the process of improving excellence in service and communication skills is ongoing.

At the core of assurance within service systems is the ability to nurture customer trust through guarantee, competence, and credibility of service providers. Providing assurance in customer services reflects organizational competence, staff hospitality, the politeness of interactions, and the guarantee of operational security. In practice, customers (or students in the sense of educational services) feel assured of the provided services when staffs that have in-depth product knowledge are able to provide accurate information, maintain professionalism, demonstrate friendliness, and mitigate potential issues or risks while engaging in a service (Parasuraman et al., 1986; Setiono & Putra, 2025).

Parasuraman et al. (1986) break down the conception of assurance into several components: 1) communication, by which service providers are able to provide accurate information to customers, 2) credibility—the extent to which customers trust in the integrity and reputation of service providers, 3) security—a guarantee that customers are free from risk, harm, or doubt during a transaction, 4) competence—staff knowledge and proficiency to provide appropriate services, and 5) courtesy that makes up respectful, friendly, and polite interactions.

The excellence in academic and non-academic services at SALUT lies in the communication skills of its administrators or supervisors to present the comprehensive details of institutional products or services, such as study programs, accreditation, UT services, learning systems, and academic terms, among other things. Credibility embodies the reputation of SALUT staff or supervisors in providing accurate information. Security and competence foster a culture of strong security by mitigating errors in databases, course registration, and registration schedules—thereby minimizing harmful circumstances for students. These harmful circumstances may lead to material and non-material losses (Mulyawan & Rinawati, 2016) (Lukma et al., 2024, Nopiyanti & Imania, 2024).

3.8 Empathy (Compassion and Personal Attentiveness)

Empathy cultivates an environment where staff exhibits personal attentiveness and compassion toward students. Results highlight a mean difference of -0.092 with $p = 0.139$, which is statistically insignificant. SALUT marks a lower score than UT Makassar, making it necessary to cultivate compassionate behaviors in the SALUT environment through soft-skills training and the development of personal interactions. This is particularly important to mitigate a sense of isolation among distance students.

Empathy is the cornerstone of the SERVQUAL model, as it focuses on personal attentiveness and compassion toward customers (jurnal.asian.or.id.). It nurtures a trusting environment where service providers tap into a deeper understanding of each individual's distinct needs, circumstances, and preferences. In the context of higher education, empathy measures the degree to which teachers, academic staff, and administrative staff demonstrate genuine compassion and individual attentiveness to each student. It manifests, for instance, in the easily accessible educational services, effective communication skills of the staff, and institutional efforts to cater to student needs and expectations at a personal level (Mulyawan & Rinawati, 2016; Nopiyanti & Imania, 2024).

A large body of studies has worked on empathy, suggesting consistent results that empathy has positive significant effects on students as service users. When the perceived empathy for students is higher, their overall satisfaction with campus services grows. Mulyawan et al. (2016) claim that empathy accounts for 21% of the variance in student satisfaction—the highest predictor among other quality dimensions. Rinala et al. (2013) confirm this finding by identifying a positive effect between empathy and student satisfaction.

Significant effects of empathetic services are driven by the personalization that makes students feel valued and understood, which is inherent to emphasizing. A study at Universitas

Andalas also corresponds to this—exhibiting a clear pattern of the overall increased satisfaction with service quality when students feel valued by the service providers. The study measures the positive correlation between student satisfaction that arises from the feelings of being valued and the decisions that campus services should entail more empathetic services. In addition to the increased satisfaction, empathetic interactions lead to positive views toward the perceived services; empathizing builds strong favorable rapports as staff taps into deeper understanding of how students really feel and what they really need. Such personalized treatment and customized approach tend to reinforce positive institutional values and, in turn, affect student loyalty (Lukma et al., 2024; Mulyawan & Rinawati, 2016; Nopiyanti & Imania, 2024).

4 CONCLUSION

The current work develops the five dimensions of SERVQUAL (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) in the services at SALUT and UT Regional Makassar and captures insignificant differences between the two service models. The current finding suggests a relatively similar and consistent quality between them and finds no indications that SALUT may be at a competitive disadvantage in the service activities.

However, it is important to note that while both models excel in reliability, SALUT marks slightly lower scores in tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy owing to less extensive resources and centralized facilities and understaffing. Despite these shortcomings, students remain fulfilled with the overall experiences, as SALUT has strived for a minimum standard of service quality stipulated by Universitas Terbuka.

SALUT has strategically served its roles in strengthening UT's presence within a designated region by bringing services closer to students and local communities. However, there are areas for growth in infrastructure, staff responsiveness, and soft-skills training to empower empathy and service communication, ultimately bringing SALUT on par with UT Regional Makassar. With ongoing improvement within these areas, SALUT may even cultivate stronger offerings, expand its reach, and gain a competitive edge over UT Regional Makassar. The current work has its limitation—a relatively small sample size and imbalanced user groups at SALUT and UT Regional Makassar, thus creating limits on the generalizability of findings to the population. Furthermore, a singular use of questionnaire instrument may result in perception bias as it only captures students' subjective assessment, while the study confines the investigation to SERVQUAL framework only without entailing other relevant factors. To enhance future studies, it is therefore vital to identify a larger and more proportional sample

size, work on a wider lens using mixed approaches for greater validity of findings, and incorporate variables that include technology, digital accessibility, and student socio-economics to generate more comprehensive and impactful findings.

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