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The assessment of administrative service quality in higher education is the top

Employee of the UFRGS Engineering School developed tool to measure how the academic community perceives the quality of the administrative service

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When we picture the services provided by a Higher Education Institution such as UFRGS, what usually comes to mind is a traditional classroom setting with a professor and students. In times of pandemic, we may also consider distance learning and other remote activities. May it be in-person or remotely, for such settings to be made possible, there is a multiple core of support services and administration employees working, active in many affairs, like promoting activities, assessing institutions, solving technical problems, enrolling students, or even recruiting teachers. Even though it is often invisible to the final user, the student, this supporting job certainly shapes his/her experience in the university. In spite of that, when the educational institution is assessed, these services are frequently not much taken into consideration.

From this context, [Damian Steppacher](#), administrator and civil servant for the UFRGS Engineering School, has developed, in his [master's thesis](#), a new tool to assess the administrative services in Higher Education Institutions, seeking for reliability and objectiveness. The tool is called Headsqual, after the words Higher Education Administrative Service Quality, and it can be used to assess not only the competences of the administrative employee (such as professional conduct and problem-solving skills, for instance), but also specific service provision matters (like having simple and standard processes and easy access to information).

According to Damian, Headsqual aims to fill a gap in the assessment structures available nowadays, since they all have some disadvantage: some are solely focused on the teaching, or, at most, offer just a limited space for infrastructure assessment, for instance; on the other hand, others are too generic, failing to address specific services. Damian stresses that the assessment structures used today by the universities and the Federal Government could also be improved. "They are subjective, and the way the questions are conceived can result in problems of comprehension," he said. The assessment of Higher Education Institutions and their services is mandatory by law – such as the [10.861/2004](#), which created the National Assessment System of Higher Education ([Sistema Nacional de Avaliação do Ensino Superior - SINAES](#)) and other legal instruments of performance assessment.

Even with their weaknesses, these existing instruments were used as a basis, a Headsqual starting point from which the researcher collected data on the attributes – the aspects being assessed – and sentences – what is actually added to the questionnaire. From each attribute, a sentence is created: "We could use 'agility' as an attribute. Then, the sentence would be 'The service was provided with agility,' because the question must be friendly to the user."

After this appraisal, Damian created a cohort from many different departments of the University, such as the Division of Human Resources and the Office of Institutional Evaluation, in order to validate the tool. According to him, this step was crucial in order to calibrate the Headsqual to the scenario of UFRGS. Some sentences were even re-written to be made clearer to user-assessor respondents. "Likewise, making Headsqual ready to be used in other universities would require questionnaire adjustments, due to differences of linguistic regional variants, for instance," he explained. After the validation of the experts, Damian conducted a pre-test with students, and afterward applied the questionnaire in order to assess the administrative services of the Engineering School, making use of the same system UFRGS utilizes to operate the assessment processes of the employees. Each segment of the School was assessed by five respondents from three sections of the university community - administrative employees, docents, and undergraduate students – chosen randomly. The decision of using these three groups aimed to compare the opinion of each regarding the administrative service of the Engineering School.

The study aimed to measure the difference between the expectation (using the significance the user attributed to the service) and the performance received. The results found by the researcher show that the significance perceived is similar throughout all the participating groups, but, on the other hand, that the performance is seen distinctively among them. The administrative employees assess the administrative service in a more positive way than the other users, and this contrast of opinion is even more noticeable if compared to the view of the professors; it means that, among the three groups of users, the docent is the one which assesses the quality of the administrative service the lowest.

The researcher points out some reasons for such difference in the performance assessment. In his view, for being the ones responsible for the administrative service, the employees have a more general comprehension of the process: the steps to be followed, the factors involved (both positively and negatively), and which of those variables rely on other sectors, for instance. "The employee is capable of having a more accurate perception of the causes that make the service provision not optimal: the problems, the delay, and the factors that depend on other people. This may be the reason why they are milder in the performance assessment," he emphasizes.

On the other hand, Damian says, the docent has a more user-centered perspective for being in a position of "receptor" of the administrative service, what might rise his/her expectations about service quality. According to him, being unaware of the whole process and the set of variables involved may also explain the difference in the assessment. The researcher also claims that the literature points out that teachers see involvement in administrative activities as a hindrance to teaching practice. "The more the teacher gets involved in the administrative service, it is perceived as an obstacle to his/her primary focus, which is teaching," he explains.

Damian aims to further his research on the subject during his doctorate, adding a new variable: innovation. One of the possibilities would be using Headsqual as background to a research on the use of this tool to promote organizational innovation and intra-entrepreneurship. "Assessing services constantly is a key factor to promote improvements, and the Headsqual is a good tool to do so, but it does not promote direct level changes; therefore, it is required to transform organizations through innovation and intra-entrepreneurship," underlines the researcher. Another possibility would be transforming the tool in something wider, that could be tested in the management of other sectors of the government, like the City or State Government.

The study was transformed into an [article, which was published in the *Studies in Higher Education* journal](#). The thesis which originated the article was developed during the Master's Academic Program in Operation Management in Federal Public Universities, supervised by professors [Carla Schwengber ten Caten](#) and [Maria Auxiliadora Cannarozzo Tinoco](#). The main goal of the Master's, which is now offered as a [professional degree](#), is to capacitate the UFRGS administrative employees to improve their performance at the University.

Thesis

Title: [Assessing administrative service quality in higher education institutions: development of an attribute-based framework \(HEADSQUAL\) in a Brazilian University](#) (thesis in Portuguese)

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Program: Graduate Studies in Industrial Engineering

Scientific article

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