

ABSTRACT

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“Thinking is not the same as knowing”. Changes in consumers’ quality appraisals of public services in Finland in 2002–2003.



This study is based on two surveys assigned by the Ministry of Finance for the development of a quality barometer for public services, namely on a preliminary study conducted jointly by the National Consumer Research Centre and Statistics Finland in 2002, and a follow-up study by Taloustutkimus Oy in 2003. The study focuses on the development of the contents of the public services quality barometer and a comparison of the empirical research results. There is also a complementary section which forms part of the Ministry’s work plan for productivity and examines the utilisation of the quality barometer and its potential for measuring public services productivity. The aim is to find out

whether any changes have occurred in the quality of public services from 2002 to 2003 by comparing the results of the preliminary and follow-up studies.

Public services refer to services produced or purchased and paid for by the municipalities and the state. The seven target services for the development of the quality barometer were selected discretionarily to represent very different types of public services: day-care centre, comprehensive school, library, health care centre, police, tax office and main roads. The quality of each service is described by five main criteria which were measured by separate indicators. These criteria are: availability/accessibility, material factors, expertise, interaction and customer rights. The chosen parameters are service quality as experienced by users and determined by the average of the individual indicators, overall grading, and service quality as perceived by potential customers who had not used the service during the study period. The quality indicators and interview questionnaire were appraised and tested by the Survey Laboratory of Statistics Finland.

The services are examined from the citizens’ perspective, based on their experiences, views and perceptions of public services. The study materials were collected by telephone interviews (CATI) and represent the entire population. Service quality was evaluated on a school grading scale of 4 to 10. At the level of the whole study data, there had been only small changes in service quality during the two years studied (2002–2003) according to those citizens who had used public services. The averages of both the overall grading and the quality indicators were close to each other in both study periods. On the other hand, perceived service quality was worse at both time points than were the experiences of those who had actually used the services. The only exception here were the main roads, whose actual quality was evaluated to be clearly lower by road users than their perceived quality. There was wider variation in the perceived quality estimates than in the barometer values (averages of indicators) and the overall gradings. Thus, in follow-up it is worthwhile to take into consideration the potential influence of the media, public opinion, etc., on the perceptions of those who themselves have not used the services.

A nationwide interview gives a good general picture of public service quality and, if repeated regularly, also indicates the development trend (barometer). An analysis of the individual indicators points out the specific development needs. In interpreting the results, attention should be paid to changes between and within individual indicators, which may offset one another in the averages. The effect of the key background variables on individual indicators and their calculated averages must also be taken into account. The service quality barometer and the grades given to the individual indicators illustrate the practice of customer-oriented service production and the public service culture in general.

The public service quality barometer can be utilised with certain reservations to monitor the productivity of public services.

Keywords: services, public services, citizens, quality, perceptions, development, barometer