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From Service Quality to Loyalty: The Role of Satisfaction among International Students in South America

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ABSTRACT: *In higher education, the quality of service has been recognized as an essential element for achieving student satisfaction and loyalty. This study analyzed the influence of service quality on the satisfaction and loyalty of 140 international students from three South American universities in Peru, Colombia, and Chile from 26 countries. The SERVQUAL dimensions showed high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.816-0.892$), while Satisfaction ($\alpha=0.95$) and Loyalty ($\alpha=0.902$) demonstrated high reliability. The SEM with the DWLS estimator showed satisfactory fit indices (CFI=0.996; TLI=0.995; RMSEA=0.077). Thus, the results indicate that service quality had a positive and significant influence on Satisfaction ($\beta=0.679$; $R^2=0.461$), and this, in turn, influenced Loyalty ($\beta=0.889$; $R^2=0.859$). Similarly, service quality had a weak but statistically significant direct effect on loyalty ($\beta=0.055$; $p=0.036$) and a strong indirect effect mediated by satisfaction ($\beta=0.603$), confirming the relevance of satisfaction in the formation of institutional loyalty in internationalized contexts.*

Keywords: Higher Education; International Students; Service Quality; Internationalization; Loyalty; Satisfaction; SEM; Service Quality

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INTRODUCTION

Within the higher education framework and in the context of globalization, universities operate in an environment of constant change, where multiculturalism, migration, and global communication play challenging roles (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). In response to this, these institutions have chosen to use brand differentiation strategies (Pinar et al., 2020), such as internationalization, which has become a priority (Rios-Campos et al., 2022; Rosell et al., 2023). Its main activity is the attraction of international students (Fathi Vajargah et al., 2023; Healey, 2023), since it is a strategic means that innovates in education and improves the prestige of institutions (Becerra et al., 2024; Fathi Vajargah et al., 2023; Nigra, 2023) but also contributes to the educational, critical, and cultural enrichment of students (Curo & Pilloca, 2023; Guilindro Moreno et al., 2025; Healey, 2023; Nigra, 2023; Vasandani et al., 2026).

However, this strategy has led to a new level of competitiveness, where universities have seen the need to go beyond the conventional strategy, now focusing on improving the quality of the service, since it is key to achieving

satisfaction and increasing student loyalty and permanence (Ceballos et al., 2021; Curo & Pilloca, 2023; Heredia et al., 2020; Peña et al., 2024). This is mainly because they are in a context where comparing services is extremely simple (García et al., 2022).

In fact, there is an urgent need to develop university services for international students (Szabó et al., 2024), since growth is evident on a global scale; for example, by 2022, the number of international students reached approximately 6.9 million (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2024). By 2023, approximately 7.5 million international students had traveled around the world to access higher education, representing an increase of 40% compared with 2016, with 250 thousand students increasing each year (Mills, 2022), surpassing the prediction that by 2025, the number of international students enrolled will amount to 7.2 million (Fathi Vajargah et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, although it is a crucial issue that benefits higher education centers and encourages them to build a strong brand that attracts international students (Melean et al., 2024), few studies have examined international student satisfaction and loyalty from a service quality perspective, especially in the South American region, despite being a region where student mobility is growing rapidly (Xu et al., 2025). For this reason, this research seeks to analyze international students' perceptions of university service quality and its relationship with satisfaction and loyalty levels at three private universities in South America, thereby identifying the service factors they consider significant.

Internationalization in Higher Education

Despite being increasingly recognized, complex, and important (Rosyidah et al., 2020), internationalization still tends to be misunderstood, confusing it with the international reputation that universities acquire in terms of quality standards or with the brand recognition acquired globally, international accreditation, or agreements established with other countries (Knight, 2003). When it is practical, it is an intentional process that intertwines the intercultural, international, and global dimensions and integrates them into the purpose, functions, and delivery of university education (Knight, 2008) through strategies practiced by universities (Rosyidah et al., 2020), where the primary beneficiaries are students, staff, and society (Rosyidah et al., 2020; Wit et al., 2015).

However, universities also benefit from internationalization, since it provides them with the opportunity to recruit academic talent (Bound et al., 2021). It motivates them to adapt and respond effectively to social and educational changes to maintain and lead in the higher education market (Sharipov, 2020).

Academic mobility is among the most visible areas of internationalization (Rosell et al., 2023) because it contributes to cooperation between countries (Melean et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it is not the only most relevant factor, since it is also presented by international students who enter another country to study, international curricular content, and assistance in international cooperative programs (Healey, 2023; Sharipov, 2020), which makes it even more

advantageous, since there are several ways in which universities can choose to access this trend.

Thus, internationalization is transforming the world of higher education, becoming an essential pillar for the development of the educational field, contributing to improving university quality and, primarily, ensuring the well-being of international students.

Mobile International Students and Their Context in Latin America

Although international students have been mentioned, there are several overlapping definitions of this term, the most important being that which includes students who have moved to a foreign country intending to further their education and obtain a higher-level degree, called mobile international students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). In general, this group has been in the country of study for between 1 and 7 years, depending on the duration of their professional career. It holds a student or nonresident visa (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, 2024).

By 2020, the number of international students had risen to more than 6.3 million, compared to 2 million in 2000, mainly from China, India, Vietnam, Germany, and the United States, and who enrolled primarily in the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia, Russia, Germany, Canada, China, and France (Mills, 2022).

While South America has ceased to be a merely broadcasting region to become an emerging destination for international students, in which there is a rapid expansion and diversification of higher education, which increased by up to 27% between 2010 and 2020 (Instituto Internacional de la UNESCO para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe, 2023), positioning Chile, Colombia, and Peru as complementary actors within the region.

On the one hand, Chile has consolidated as a South American country that is leading the transformation of internationalization in the region, whose foreign enrollments increased from 3200 in 2017 to 19000 in 2022 and to 22360 in 2024 (Basiri, 2025), representing a growth of 598.75% in seven years. Within the country, Colombians (3790), Peruvians (4980), and Venezuelans (5900) correspond to the 3 largest incoming flows (Basiri, 2025). Therefore, it received only 5,058 international students in 2020, in contrast to the 56,910 Colombians who decided to study outside the country, evidencing an imbalance between capacity and attraction (Instituto Internacional de la UNESCO para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe, 2023).

Peru complements the panorama, being that by 2022, it had 10,280 international students from Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, Japan, and Colombia (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, 2024). Despite these increasing volumes, Latin America and the Caribbean still export more students than they receive, as approximately 312,000 students migrate from the region each year, and only 38% stay within it. Colombia sends 8 times more students than it receives, and Chile almost 3 times more, positioning the Andean-Pacific space as

an emerging destination region (Instituto Internacional de la UNESCO para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe, 2019).

These figures evidence countries' desire to access international cooperation through education, as it directly impacts the development of opportunities. Although some areas have recently entered this process, it is undeniable that its evolution is positive and will continue to grow beneficially.

Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Loyalty in Higher Education

In the context of higher education, service quality, coupled with internationalization, has become the main factor in exceeding expectations and achieving satisfaction, as it fosters identification, trust, and commitment through effective care (Amzat et al., 2023; García et al., 2022; Jin & Lim, 2021). Satisfaction, on the other hand, is defined as a response that demonstrates satiety as a result of the perception that an attribute of the service offered is beneficial (Armstrong & Kotler, 2013). In this sense, students' expectations significantly shape their sense of belonging (Luo & Zhang, 2026); thus, the gaps between expectations and reality could generate a break in satisfaction.

In this context, recent research has shown that academic support and institutional resources significantly influence the satisfaction of international students, encouraging universities to optimize their integration services so that they comply with international standards (Ferreira & De-La-Cruz, 2019). Moreover, internationalization policies focused on equity should be adopted (Torres & Llontop, 2019), highlighting aspects such as personalized attention and academic support, since they are highly valued (Vásquez & Gálvez, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that quality does not depend solely on the final product but is perceived through other factors, such as the treatment of personnel and the efficient management of internal processes (Estela-Yomona et al., 2023; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021). From an educational and institutional perspective, universities seek to ensure both academic and administrative attention through continuous improvement strategies. It is recognized that the quality of service has a direct effect on customer perception, which in turn significantly influences an organization's reputation and sustainability (Carrillo et al., 2023). Thus, the quality of service not only responds to operational demand but also to strategic needs in a globalized environment.

Although satisfaction is a complex concept that is integrated into multiple dimensions, both rational and emotional, it is composed of three fundamental characteristics: service quality, product quality, and price (Zeithaml et al., 2010). Additionally, it has to do with the close relationship between perception and emotions experienced during the purchase process, which are compared with expectations (Sagbay et al., 2021), making students' academic lives feel increasingly hurried, unstable, and subject to external forces (Zhao, 2026).

Satisfaction subsequently occurs when the emotional outcome is positive, whereas dissatisfaction occurs when it is negative (Prabowo et al., 2024). Strategically, providing user satisfaction represents a competitive advantage, as it motivates them to become loyal consumers and active promoters of the service

(Martínez & Almeida, 2023). In the academic field, this notion is expanded to serve as an indicator of well-being, considering success beyond school performance and integrating the personal and emotional dimensions of the student (Tomás & Gutiérrez, 2019).

With respect to the context of loyalty in higher education institutions, it is considered a crucial identifier of an organization's success (Todea et al., 2022). It is essential for achieving a systematic view of interrelationships (Dewi et al., 2021), guaranteeing the survival and success of higher education institutions, especially within an intensely competitive framework and with high levels of financial uncertainty (Tariq et al., 2020).

To inspire greater student loyalty, universities must establish solid relationships with their students, considering their obligations and the institution's own responsibilities through reasonable behavior and the fulfillment of promises (Todea et al., 2022). Consequently, this ensures that university membership is strengthened and that high-quality international education is promoted through an inclusive environment (Luo & Zhang, 2026).

Research in this area has shown that although the image of the destination and costs strongly influence service quality (Thoo et al., 2022), perceptions of quality are the most influential (Phonthanukitithaworn et al., 2022). In addition, three forms of loyalty have been identified: toward the institution, toward the international experience, and in the absence of loyalty (Kéri & Hetesi, 2022), with factors related to the quality of the relationship influencing students' commitment to their studies and their loyalty (Snijders et al., 2022). Therefore, the provision of high-quality services should be oriented toward student satisfaction, as this will foster students' loyalty to the institution (Borishade et al., 2021).

However, regional evidence from Latin America concentrates on different links in the quality-satisfaction-loyalty chain. On the one hand, Peru documents through SERVQUAL that academic support, personalized attention, support in English, and empathy are direct predictors of satisfaction, whereas bureaucracy and social isolation are its main detractors (Ferreira & De-La-Cruz, 2019; Torres & Llontop, 2019; Vásquez & Gálvez, 2020). Colombia provides the only explicit record of the satisfaction-loyalty transition by reporting that the tangible elements, assurance (teaching quality), and empathy of the university climate produce the intention of international students to extend their stay at the institution, with the main source of dissatisfaction being tuition costs (Hernández & Ortega, 2019). In Chile, on the other hand, failures are shown in the Reliability and Responsiveness dimensions of the system on scholarships, visa deadlines, and institutional segregation, eroding permanence, with a probability of access that is 6.9% lower for international students than for nationals (Riedemann et al., 2023; Zelada et al., 2025).

Taken together, the results of this research indicate that Peru provides quantitative measures of SERVQUAL associated with satisfaction, Colombia provides qualitative evidence of the satisfaction-loyalty transition, and Chile discloses a diagnosis of systematic failures in reliability and responsiveness that condition permanence. Even so, no study in the South American region has yet

integrated the three constructs into a structural model, a void that this article seeks to fill.

Hypotheses

As has been shown, the quality of service, satisfaction, and loyalty of international students are highly important issues, and their understanding provides them with a competitive advantage for higher education institutions. This allows them to define the institutional actions that will improve the academic and personal experience of this significant group. However, the research carried out thus far stands out within international contexts outside the South American context, evidencing a representative gap in the research area, as it promotes the generalization of information. For this reason, the influence of perceived service quality on the satisfaction and loyalty of international students from three internationalized private universities in South America should be analyzed, providing contextualized evidence and allowing higher education centers to improve the experience of international students, as proven through the following hypotheses:

- H₁: Service quality positively influences satisfaction.
- H₂: Satisfaction positively and significantly influences the loyalty of international students.
- H₃: Service quality positively and significantly influences the loyalty of international students through satisfaction.

METHOD

This approach involves a quantitative research study in which data were collected and examined using quantitative methods (Jiménez et al., 2022). In this article, the relationships between variables, data, and results are analyzed so that the existing pattern is understandable and its nature is correlational (Lord, 1973). In addition, because the objective of the research is to define causalities, a structural equation model has been used to evaluate both the measurement and the structural model to determine influences; hence, the study points to a model of causal relationships (Yin & Huang, 2021).

The data were collected at a specific point in time, which qualifies the research as cross-sectional (Huaire, 2019). The research methodology design is nonexperimental, as it is based on an empirical, systematic search for information, with independent variables that are not manipulable and for which no direct intervention has been taken, since their manifestations have already occurred (Kerlinger, 2002).

Participants and Ethical Considerations

The information presented in this research was collected through a virtual questionnaire aimed at international students from three private universities in

South America: Universidad Peruana Unión, Centro Universitario Adventista de Colombia, and Universidad Adventista de Chile. The entire process was carried out in accordance with the established ethical standards of the study centers, with the respective ethics committees' approval.

The instrument was disseminated to 150 selected international students via a random sample, with participation voluntary and anonymous, under the coordination of the researchers with the areas of international cooperation in charge, using the students' email addresses and contact numbers. The collection lasted 1 month, from October to November 2025, and 93% of the questionnaires were collected, with $N = 140$ international students.

Instruments and Methods

With respect to the instrument used to collect data on the service quality variable, the one developed by Srivastava & Beri (2017) was applied: a scale based on the SERVQUAL service quality measurement model adapted to measure the satisfaction of international students in the context of higher education. The instrument consists of 21 items assigned to five dimensions: tangibility, 5 items; trust, to which four items correspond; safety, which covers four items; responsiveness, to which five items belong; and, finally, empathy, to which the remaining three items correspond.

With respect to the measurement scale, the model uses a seven-point Likert scale, with all the questions phrased as affirmations. Measured from 1 to 7, each category corresponds to a category: Totally Disagree (TD), Disagree (D), Partially Disagree (PD), Neither Agree nor Disagree (NAND), Partially Agree (PA), Agree (A), or Totally Agree (TA). The development of the instrument is based on the collection of data from 338 international students from five universities in India, whose validation is carried out through expert judgment, an exploratory factor analysis ($KMO = 0.872$), and a confirmatory factor analysis. The results of the composite reliability and average variance extracted were above the recommended range, with convergent ($CR > 0.7$; $AVE > 0.05$) and discriminant ($AVE > CR$) validity applied for the five dimensions (Srivastava & Beri, 2017).

First, information on the satisfaction and loyalty variables was collected; the questions were extracted from the HESQUAL instrument developed by (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). The items of the satisfaction variable were adapted by the authors of (Brady et al., 2002) and were ultimately made up of six Likert questions from one (very low) to five (very high). Second, the loyalty dimension was adapted from the research of Zeithaml et al. (2010) and is composed of four questions measured on a five-point Likert scale, where one is very unlikely, and five is very likely. The study was based on data collected from 501 advanced and postgraduate students at universities in Mauritius, which were validated using structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS v20. The validity of the construct consisted of the phases of initial adjustment and refinement, resulting in good and reliable adjustment ($X^2/df = 1.96$; $CFI = 0.93$; $TLI = 0.92$; $RMSEA = 0.04$) and significant convergent validity ($CR > 0.7$;

AVE>0.5) and discrimination (AVE>CR); this finding defines the reliability by means of a higher-than-average Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$).

For the collection of sociodemographic information, an initial section on the characteristics of the population was added, which consisted of 11 items aimed at collecting data concerning age, sex, country of origin, marital status, professional school, faculty, university, cycle studied, occupation, domicile, and time of residence. This information has enabled a deeper interpretation of the study's results. Notably, the final questionnaire was translated into Spanish by a professional in the field and validated by three experts, resulting in an excellent assessment of its structure and increased reliability.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained through the surveys were recorded and processed using Microsoft Excel LTSC Professional Plus 2021, which was considered the preferred option for the initial phases of data processing due to its ease of use and automated calculations and statistical processes (Pérez, 2006). Moreover, the statistical analysis was carried out using RStudio Desktop V. 2025.09.2+418, a highly reliable software platform owing to its comprehensive range of tools (Parra et al., 2023). Thus, the evaluation of the research model presented in Figure 1 was carried out through covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) using the DWLS estimator (polychoric correlations), which is suitable for ordinal data from Likert scales, and the lavaan package of RStudio, which ensures the evaluation of both the measurement model and the structural model (Intimayta-Escalante et al., 2025).

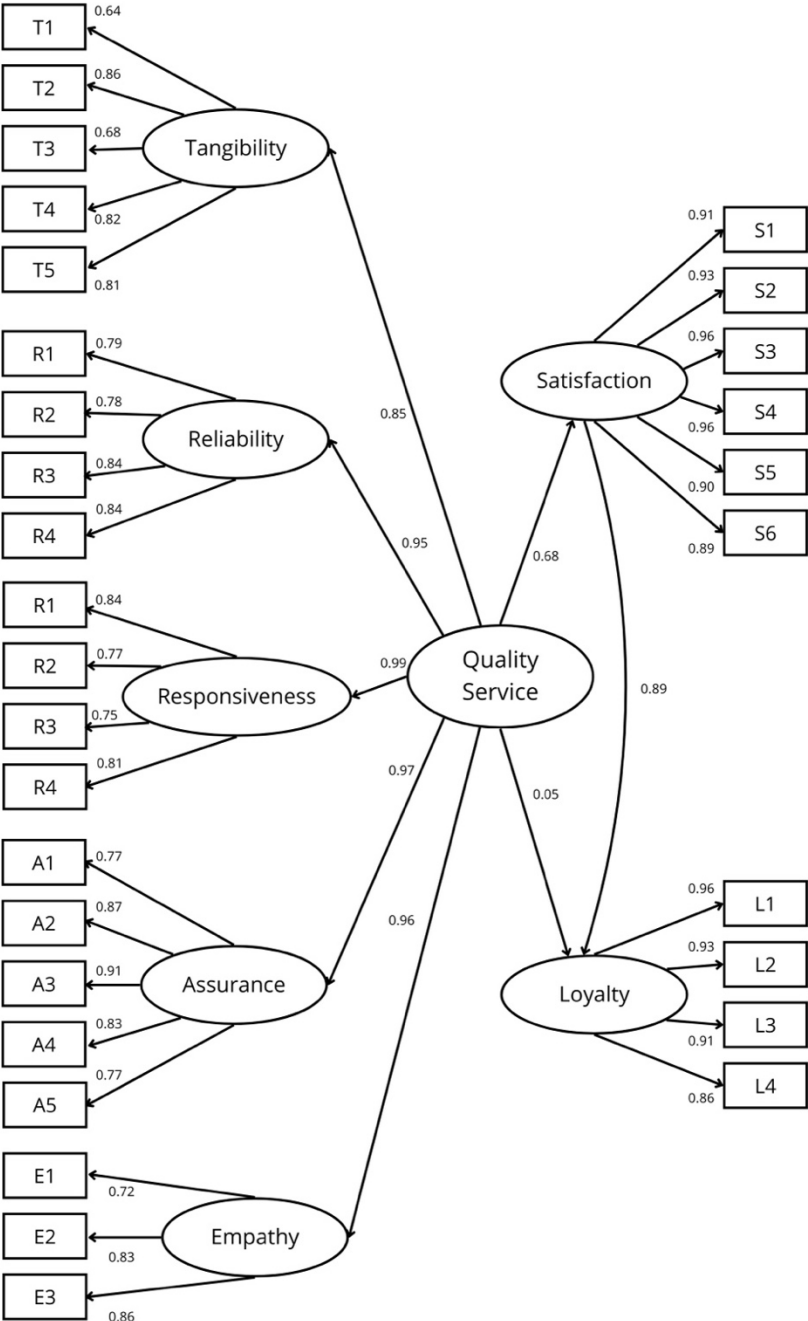


Figure 1: Measurement and structural model (second-order SEM) with standardized coefficients

RESULTS

Survey Findings

To identify behavior patterns, a frequency analysis of sociodemographic data was carried out (Vo et al., 2023), through which the final sample, which was made up of 140 international students belonging to three South American universities, UPeU (42.85%), UNACH (37.15%), and UNAC (20%), was characterized, as shown in Table 1. Among the total participants considered, 50.7% were women. In comparison, 49.3% were men, 37.9% of whom had pursued careers in health and welfare, while the other minority groups studied engineering and design (20%), human development and communication (16.4%), and theological training (17.1%).

With respect to the academic cycle, the greatest number of students are in the second year, corresponding to the first year (22.1%), and in the fourth year, corresponding to the second year (20%). Of the total sample, 65.7% are dedicated to study, while 34.3% work and study; in addition, 65.7% reside outside the university campus. The participants were from 26 countries, with Ecuador (18.6%), Venezuela (17.9%), Colombia (12.9%), Brazil (10.7%), and Bolivia (10%) among the top five. Most are single (90.7%) and have resided in the host country for more than four years (50.7%).

To evaluate internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was applied to all the constructs, yielding values greater than 0.8, indicating very good internal consistency. Among these results, the consistency of satisfaction (0.950), loyalty (0.902), and assurance (0.892) stands out, indicating that the items measure the model's constructs homogeneously (Zakariya, 2022).

Thus, the normality of the sample was evaluated using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, with $n > 50$ and p values < 0.05 for the dimensions of Tangibility, Empathy, Satisfaction, and Loyalty, and p values > 0.05 for the dimensions of Reliability, Responsiveness, and Assurance, indicating abnormal distributions. Notably, the survey is ordinal because the Likert scales used do not have equal intervals; thus, it was necessary to apply the Spearman correlation matrix (Martirosyan et al., 2019), which revealed strong and significant correlations between the dimensions of SERVQUAL ($p = 0.63\text{--}0.81$), indicating internal coherence between the perceptions of quality of service. However, satisfaction was moderately to strongly correlated ($p = 0.47\text{--}0.68$), and loyalty was strongly associated with satisfaction ($p = 0.84$) and with the quality construct ($p = 0.43\text{--}0.59$).

Table 1: Sociodemographic Data of the Sample (N=140)

Variable	Category	N	%
Sex	Female	71	50.7%
	Male	69	49.3%
Study Area	Engineering and Design	28	20.0%
	Business and Innovation	11	7.9%
	Human Development and Communication	23	16.4%
	Health and Wellness	53	37.9%
	Theological Formation	24	17.1%
	I	5	3.6%
	II	31	22.1%
	III	5	3.6%
	IV	28	20.0%
	V	3	2.1%
Academic Cycle	VI	23	16.4%
	VII	6	4.3%
	VIII	24	17.1%
	X	11	7.9%
	XI	1	0.7%
	XII	3	2.1%
	Ecuador	26	18.6%
	Venezuela	25	17.9%
	Brazil	15	10.7%
	Colombia	18	12.9%
Country of Origin	Bolivia	14	10.0%
	Panama	7	5.0%
	An additional 20 others	35	25.0%
	UPeU	60	42.9%
	UNACH	52	37.1%
University	UNAC	28	20.0%
	Single	127	90.7%
	Married	13	9.3%
Marital Status	Less than 1 year	22	15.7%
	1 year	8	5.7%
	2 years	18	12.9%
	3 years	21	15.0%
Residence Time	Over 4 years	71	50.7%
	Study	92	65.7%
	Study and work	48	34.3%
	External	92	65.7%
Principal Activity	University resident	48	34.3%

Assessment of the Measurement Models

Prior to conducting the factor analysis, a global Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test was subsequently applied for a sample check, yielding an excellent value (KMO=0.92), as well as an MSA>0.80 for all the items presented, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. The results of Bartlett's sphericity test were significant ($X^2 = 4142.46$, $df = 465$, and $p < 0.001$), confirming that the data are suitable for factor analysis since there are significant relationships between the items (Moslehpour et al., 2020).

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out through principal axis factoring (PAF) and oblimin rotation, considering the correlated nature of the constructs according to the SERVQUAL model (Srivastava & Beri, 2017) and the satisfaction and loyalty dimensions of the HESQUAL model (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). Factorial loads were adequate in all dimensions: Tangibility (0.41–0.85), Reliability (0.47–0.75), Responsiveness (0.37–0.49), Assurance (0.31–0.76), Empathy (0.45–0.70), Satisfaction (0.72–0.88), and Loyalty (0.75–0.83). Hence, the seven-factor model showed a clear and consistent structure with the theoretical framework. Its adjustment was acceptable (RMSR=0.03; TLI=0.875; RMSEA=0.082), explaining 73% of the total variance and confirming the proposed theoretical structure.

At the time of performing the AFC, collinearity anomalies were detected in the initial first-order structure because the correlations were greater than 0.95 between the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, as indicated by the theory. This makes it impossible to obtain a defined positive covariance matrix, making it necessary to apply a bifactorial and second-order AFC, modeling the items as ordinals and using the DWLS estimator (Fitriyati & Wijaya, 2022).

The second-order model, in which the SERVQUAL dimensions were loaded as a single global factor within the quality of service, showed satisfaction ($\lambda = 0.90$ – 0.96) and loyalty ($\lambda = 0.86$ – 0.96) as first-order factors, with general adjustment suitable for the model (CFI=0.996; TLI=0.995; RMSEA=0.077), supporting the relevance of the defined hierarchical structure.

However, the convergent validity of the constructs demonstrated an average variance extracted and a composite reliability that was higher than the average for all the constructs, highlighting the satisfaction dimension (AVE=0.864; CR=0.0974) and loyalty (AVE=0.836; CR=0.953), indicating a highly cohesive structure (Lloret-Segura et al., 2014). Similarly, the second-order factor of service quality reached excellent values (AVE=0.892; CR=0.976), demonstrating that the five dimensions of SERVQUAL solidly and consistently represent the general construct.

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Tangibility	0.856	0.876	0.590
Reliability	0.861	0.885	0.659
Responsiveness	0.839	0.872	0.631
Assurance	0.892	0.918	0.693
Empathy	0.816	0.848	0.651
Satisfaction	0.950	0.974	0.864
Loyalty	0.902	0.953	0.836
Service Quality	-	0.976	0.892

With respect to discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker criterion revealed that only the satisfaction dimension is relevant. In contrast, the SERVQUAL dimensions and the second-order factor were more strongly correlated than their respective AVEs were. In addition, the HTMT index confirmed such behavior, where the reliability-reliability (0.928), reliability-responsiveness (0.972), and response-assurance capacity (0.965) constructs exceeded the measurement threshold. This again demonstrates that the dimensions of SERVQUAL tend to behave as a highly correlated set, which justifies their integration into a second-order factor.

Assessment of the Structural Model (SEM)

With respect to the structural model (SEM), service quality had a positive and significant effect on satisfaction ($\beta=0.679$; $p<0.001$), which, in turn, strongly and significantly influenced student loyalty ($\beta=0.889$; $p<0.001$). However, the direct effect of quality on loyalty was weak but statistically significant ($\beta=0.055$; $p=0.036$), whereas the indirect effect mediated by satisfaction was high and significant ($\beta=0.603$; $p<0.001$), indicating a strong partial mediation pattern.

Table 3: Structural Model Results

Structural relationship	β (ext.)	p value	Result
Quality-Satisfaction	0.679	<.001	Significant
Satisfaction-Loyalty (b)	0.889	<.001	Significant
Quality -Loyalty (c')	0.055	.036	Significant but weak
Effect	β	p value	
Indirect (a x b)	0.603	<.001	
Total	0.658	<.001	
Variable	R^2	Interpretation	
Satisfaction	0.461	Quality explains 46.1%	
Loyalty	0.859	Satisfaction + quality explain 85.9%	

Thus, the explanatory power of the model is high, as service quality explained 46.1% of the variance in satisfaction ($R^2=0.461$), and satisfaction, together with quality, explained 85.9% of the variance in loyalty ($R^2=0.859$).

Therefore, the results confirm the following hypotheses:

- H₁: Service quality positively influences satisfaction.
- H₂: Satisfaction positively and significantly influences the loyalty of international students.
- H₃: Service quality positively and significantly influences the loyalty of international students through satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Service quality in higher education is key to understanding the experience of international students, who face both academic and cultural adaptation challenges. In this sense, the study focused on how the different dimensions of the SERVQUAL model affect satisfaction and loyalty in private universities in South America. The results indicated that the relational dimensions, in particular, responsiveness, reliability, and assurance, have a significant effect on the overall evaluation of the service, which coincides with findings from previous studies.

As Kökalan et al. (2022) noted, students tend to prioritize human interactions over physical aspects, and this pattern was confirmed in our research.

Thus, the confirmatory factor analysis provided a good fit to the multidimensional structure of SERVQUAL, indicating that international students perceive service quality holistically. The high correlations between the dimensions (ρ between .63 and .81) reveal that students do not evaluate the service separately but rather form a unified perception on the basis of consistency and personalized attention; thus, infrastructure plays a secondary role over relational dimensions.

In addition, the findings highlight the critical importance of soft dimensions in addressing the challenges faced by displaced students. In terms of the responsiveness and empathy dimensions, our results contrast with those reported by Wei & Guangrui (2022) during the pandemic, in which the “service and help” dimension received the lowest scores because of ineffective communication. In this study, these dimensions showed high factor loadings (0.72), indicating that, for students in Peru, Chile, and Colombia, personalized attention and staff interest are decisive, which is highly relevant, since positive contact is the most memorable aspect of the university, and negative contact could be associated with inadequate institutional support (Logli, 2026), directly affecting satisfaction and loyalty.

These results are also in agreement with those of Stankovska et al. (2024), who reported that responsiveness and soft dimensions elicited the highest

perceptions, whereas tangibility elicited the lowest. This finding reinforces the idea that the physical elements of the service act as hygienic factors, as suggested in recent literature on the student experience. In addition, the stronger correlation among satisfaction, safety, and empathy reported by Stankovska et al. (2024) supports the notion that relational factors carry greater weight in the overall evaluation of the service than tangible factors do, a finding reflected in the results of this study.

Finally, the findings corroborate those reported by (Alamirew, 2024) in the African university context, where responsiveness and safety were also identified as key determinants of student satisfaction. This cross-cultural consistency suggests that relational dimensions constitute a defining feature of the international student's experience and that it extends beyond institutional physical resources.

Together, these findings reinforce the idea that the quality of service perceived by international students depends mainly on soft dimensions. Moreover, their satisfaction and loyalty are built from personalized interactions, clear communication, and the reliability of administrative and academic staff (Alamirew, 2024; Kökalan et al., 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024; Wei & Guangrui, 2022).

Practical Implications

These results suggest that universities in South America focus their efforts on strengthening the relational dimensions of service quality, as these are the factors that most influence student satisfaction and loyalty. As already highlighted by Stankovska et al. (2024), students especially value responsiveness and personalized treatment, suggesting the need to implement more agile and coherent institutional processes, since these processes prepare students for professional leadership and commitment (Logli, 2026).

Comprehensive support services that address academic, health, personal well-being, and employability needs are important throughout the student life cycle (Vasandani et al., 2026). It is proposed to establish formal protocols for student attention and support that guarantee quick responses, clear information, and continuous accompaniment. These recommendations align with the ideas of Kökalan et al. (2022) and Wei & Guangrui (2022), who underscore the importance of effective communication and personal support as key factors in quality perception. In addition, this strategy could reinforce the Assurance component, which, in both this study and that of (Alamirew, 2024), was identified as one of the most influential pillars in international students' satisfaction.

Similarly, since the results indicate that service quality directly affects student loyalty, institutions can leverage this by using educational marketing strategies based on positive experiences. For example, testimonials, international recommendation programs, and content that highlight the quality of their relational services should also consider institutional support, relationships with peers, and active participation on campuses (Bista et al., 2026). This conclusion

is consistent with the evidence presented by Alamirew (2024) on the relationship between student satisfaction and retention in higher education.

Finally, universities are advised to implement continuing education programs for their staff that focus on improving skills in intercultural communication, empathy, and problem-solving. This type of institutional reinforcement aligns with the conclusions of (Kökalan et al., 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024), who emphasize that human interactions are the most determining factor in the overall evaluation of the service.

Finally, the results emphasize the need for higher education institutions to strengthen the relational aspects of their value proposition, since these are crucial for the satisfaction, loyalty, and general perception of academic service (Alamirew, 2024; Kökalan et al., 2022; Stankovska et al., 2024; Wei & Guangrui, 2022). The objective of evaluating value is to ensure that all the components that make up the educational service provide value from the perspective of the student, since this contributes to achieving a higher level of satisfaction (Di Maria, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The quality of service is important and decisive. Once students feel that they receive a consistent, reliable, and transparent service, they feel satisfied, and this satisfaction becomes the main reason for developing loyalty. That is, the quality of service directly influences loyalty mainly through satisfaction. This means that international students are not loyal only because of infrastructure or material resources but because of how they feel cared for, oriented, and accompanied during their university experience.

Notably, international students comprehensively interpret quality. However, given the greater importance given to the dimensions related to the service, including empathy, responsiveness, assurance, and reliability, since they are elements linked to human treatment and institutional support, especially in contexts of international mobility, international students especially value close interaction and availability to contribute to their needs.

Therefore, this research confirms that strengthening international students' experience requires universities to prioritize practices focused on personalized attention, continuous accompaniment, and effective communication, and to provide space for feedback. Service quality is a fundamental axis for building lasting relationships with students; it goes beyond the internationalized study process and involves improving university management in multicultural environments.

Strengths and Limitations

The findings of this study underscore the strength of structural equation modeling (SEM) in providing a holistic view of perceived quality and validate its accuracy for research in internationalized higher education contexts. This research provides significant evidence for the theory of student loyalty and the quality of university services, suggesting that strengthening relational dimensions, such as

empathy and responsiveness, is decisive for increasing satisfaction and retaining international students.

However, the results must be interpreted carefully because of certain methodological restrictions. First, the study was based on a small sample ($n=140$), which could limit the generalizability of the findings to larger student populations. Similarly, the data were collected exclusively from three private universities in South America that share a specific corporate identity; thus, the inferences may not be extrapolated to public or secular institutions. In addition, the cross-sectional design used prevents us from understanding how these dimensions evolve. Finally, although the SERVQUAL-based model demonstrated statistical validity, HESQUAL (Higher Education Service Quality) is recognized as a more precise tool because of its sectoral specificity. However, given the region's cultural and structural particularities, the need to design and validate an instrument specifically adapted to the South American context is evident. Therefore, future lines of research should not only expand the sample size and diversify the institutional profile but also advance the development of specific scales for the Latin American context that allow a deeper, contextually grounded understanding of university life outside the country of origin.

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