

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Quality public services dimensions model as a basis for better customer satisfaction management

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**In the paper, the importance of quality public services dimensions for achieving higher customer satisfaction is presented and explored on the example of Slovenian administrative units. Purpose of the research was to identify which quality dimensions are the most relevant for quality service delivery in Slovene administrative units in order to contribute to strengthening their customer satisfaction management. Survey questionnaire was developed to gather the research data and as the research methodology, structural equation modeling was used. Based on the research data from 402 respondents and the analysis conducted, the standardized model of the administrative procedure quality estimation was developed. The results prove that two latent variables - procedures and employees - exert the greatest influence on the general assesment of administrative procedure quality. Also other findings and conclusions are presented and discussed in the paper and some areas for further research and investigation are indicated.**

**Key words:** Quality, public services, dimensions, structural equation modelling, customer satisfaction.

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays and especially due to economic crisis governments are functioning in new and different conditions, balancing their operations between daily adjustments of their performance and the structural changes needed. Public management is becoming a public good and the ways how public services are being provided is increasingly coming to the attention of the public. Which are the factors that influence and contribute the most to the level of satisfaction of citizens – customers with administrative and/or public services has been one of important questions for public administrations since the raise of the demands of the citizens – taxpayers for efficient and quality public administrations and public services even before the crisis. Indeed, quality public service delivery has been in focus of practitioners and the researchers for at least three decades, included in different concepts such as

new public management, good governance or as a part of the right to good administration (Žurga, 2009). Assuring a homogenous level of efficiency and quality of public services is also in the heart of the concept of common European administrative space as well as of different international co-operations (Nicolaidis, 2003). Quality is usually defined as the level with which a system, component or a process fulfils specific demands, needs or expectations of a customer. Defining the quality as a level to which the customer's needs are satisfied equals the definition of effectiveness. Efficiency as an internal measure for effectiveness could meanwhile be defined as the thriftiness in using the resources of an organisation in securing a given level of client satisfaction. It is obvious that the concepts of quality, effectiveness, efficiency and economy are closely interconnected.

However, when speaking of quality public service delivery customer orientation is in the focus: meeting customers' needs and consecutively, achieving customers' satisfaction. Several authors argue that the

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word 'customer' is neither the only nor the most convenient one to describe different relations between individuals and the state (EUPAN, 2008). Oosting (2003) believes that a narrow concept of a 'customer' does not adequately describe the position of an individual, who does not enjoy the freedom of a customer on the market. However, over the years the attitude between the state and its citizens has changed considerably, with Pusić (1995) stating that the attitude of the citizens towards the government and its administration is no longer that of a serf. Citizens enter into different relationships with the state and public sector organizations, namely as voters, producers, consumers, users, patients, clients, etc. Every role is specifically regulated and in every role the citizens have available the legislative means for enforcing or maintaining their interests related to limitations, encroachments and other abuses of their rights.

Different relations between the state and customers of the administration according to Shand and Arnberg (1996) are:

- 1) Beneficiary: for example, unemployment benefits. The recipient receives financial benefits on which he is dependent and entitled; the service holds a monopoly.
- 2) Consumer: for example, home care. The user can usually choose between various public and private performers, but remains highly dependent on the service. The service is carried out on a personalized basis.
- 3) Producer and consumer: for example, parents, who are actively involved in the functioning of schools, attended by their children and thus perform two roles: consumers of services (children attend schools) and producers (parents take part in creating the school's conditions, activities, etc);
- 4) User for example, public parks. The user has no choice regarding the service, but is also not dependent on it. The service is not personalised.
- 5) Buyer, the client buys a service (post, telecommunication, transport, etc) and pays for it. The service provider usually holds monopoly and the level of dependence is usually high
- 6) Taxpayer, customers have clear obligations towards the tax administration, but expect a certain level of service or help that would aid them in carrying out their duties.
- 7) Regulated subject: for example, security, environment regulations. The customer is subject to inspection that holds extensive powers over his functioning. The customer has legally defined obligations, but expects suitable and prompt activities by the regulator.

Although, the different relations between citizens and the state are regulated measuring customer satisfaction is of a crucial importance. Achieved satisfaction level with a certain public service has become a strong mean of communication – externally and internally. In respect to external communication, satisfaction level achieved is

used to communicate the organizational customer orientation achievements and activities that organization had performed within these efforts not only to the direct users of their services but to all relevant or interested stakeholders. From the internal point of view, measuring customer satisfaction represents bases for further quality raising activities of an organization especially when connected to more precise definition and argumentation of the areas for improvement.

It is therefore, not a coincidence that customer orientation and measuring customer satisfaction is in core of quality management activities of practically all public administrations and individual public administration organization. However, quality that customers perceive in respect to the service consumed is always pendant on the expectations they have had before. If the expectations were low then the perceived quality is usually high(er). The real challenge for the organization occurs when the expectations of its customers are high what consequently leads into planned and deliberate endeavours to satisfy the customers and in finding the right balance between service delivery, management of expectations and perception management (Žurga, 2007; EUPAN, 2008) what together define the customer satisfaction management. It is important to emphasise that customer satisfaction management is seen as one of possible answers to re-establishing trust into governments, also through providing more choice, democracy and transparency by interactions with their citizens – customers (EUPAN, 2008).

Several approaches and models for measuring customer satisfaction have been developed and exercised. Well established model for testing satisfaction of customers is for example the Servqual model known since the mid 1980s. It is oriented towards identifying five gaps between how the quality has been perceived and the initial expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988):

- Gap 1. Between customers' expectations and management perception of these expectations.
- Gap 2. Between management perceptions and service specifications .
- Gap 3. Between service specifications and service delivery .
- Gap 4. Between service delivery and the ways how it is communicated externally.
- Gap 5. Between expected and perceived quality of service.

Although, states and their administrations (whereas at national, regional or local level) approach to testing satisfaction of their customers with the quality of public services in different ways (EUPAN, 2008) many of these approaches are based on the difference between the expected and perceived quality. Rational for this kind of approach is in identifying the areas for further quality improvements and not only in measuring the level of

satisfaction. In Slovenia, methodology for testing customer satisfaction in administrative units (AU) was developed already in 2000, and was based on the Servqual model. First, it was offered by a ministry in charge for public administration as a methodological tool for those administrative units which decided to implement quality management system according to the ISO 9000 quality standards. After the Government adopted the Decree on the manners of operations of public administration bodies with customers in which – among others – also the obligation for testing customers' satisfaction was set, this methodology is in use practically in all administrative units. After the testing period in 2001, the methodology has been used on regular yearly bases since 2002.

According to the methodology, result of the customer survey is a thorough report which is basically oriented on identification of the gap between how customers see the service they have just consumed in the relation with their expectations they had before that (gap 5); several characteristics and dimensions of quality are tested on the sample. Until 2006 when the methodology was simplified the results of the sample were used with the 95% likelihood for the whole population – possible customers of the administrative unit.

Five quality dimensions are tested in respect to satisfaction of AU's customers with the services they had consumed: physical dimension, responsiveness, credibility, fulfilment of promises, and empathy. Additionally, five dimensions of customers' satisfaction in respect to the AU employees are tested, namely how are the employees tidy, fair, attentive, professional and kind. Although, all these dimensions are measured and compared for all administrative units since 2003, it has never been tested by the ministry which of those quality dimensions are at most relevant for quality public service delivery. Instead, administrative units use the results of yearly customers satisfaction testing as an input into further quality improvements, as an indispensable part of PDCA cycles within their quality management systems or integrated quality models (Dežela, 2010; Volčanjek and Hadžimulič, 2007; Preskar, Bajuk and Orehek, 2009).

However, although administrative units have the defined basic territory of their operation and together cover all the Slovene territory they are also in a kind of competitive relation. They are not competitors in the classical meaning as they do not have to compete on the market and are entirely financed through the budget yet "compete" through their results. Especially in the quality management area they enter into different quality and excellence schemes. Those AU entering into more demanding quality management schemes are therefore interested also in more sophisticated quality management tools and techniques that would additionally support their quality public services provision. From that perspective the question which quality dimensions are influencing and contributing more to the overall customer satisfaction level could be not only relevant but of a competitive

importance.

Let us have a closer look to this. The five quality dimensions tested for administrative units – physical dimension, responsiveness, credibility, fulfilment of promises, and empathy – are the same as of the Servqual model. In fact, original quality dimensions of the Servqual model, so called 'determinants of service quality' were ten (access, communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, tangibles – physical dimension, and understanding the customer) and were reduced to five later as some of them were closely related (EUPAN, 2008). However, another model that was developed for the banks included as many as eighteen quality dimensions – quality determinants: access, aesthetics, attentiveness / helpfulness, availability, care, cleanliness / tidiness, comfort, commitment, competence, courtesy, flexibility, friendliness, functionality, integrity, reliability, responsiveness, and security (EUPAN, 2008). It is evident that the question which quality dimensions are the most important for customers' perception of the service quality does not have one unique answer. The answers may be connected to different sectors or to different target groups – types of customers. The literature offers quite some examples in this respect (EUPAN, 2008; Parrado and Löffler, 2010, conference proceedings of national and European quality conferences in public administration, etc) yet not a uniform answer that would fit also for administrative units in the Republic of Slovenia. Therefore, the basic purpose of the research conducted was to identify which quality dimensions are the most relevant for quality service delivery in Slovene administrative units in order to contribute to strengthening their customer satisfaction management.

## RESEARCH METHODS

For the purpose of our research, we have decided to use one of the multivariate statistical methods, namely, structural equation modeling (SEM), which is regarded in research as a quantitative method that is often used when we want to represent and measure more complex connections between variables and empirical data, as it combines factor analysis and path analysis. Structural equation modeling is a method for specifying, estimating and evaluating models of linear relationship within a set of observed variables in terms of a usually smaller number of unobserved variables (Shah and Goldstein, 2006). The most important reason for deciding to use the SEM method is the possibility of a simultaneous consideration of both measuring and predicting about the selected phenomenon, presented with the path diagram – the model of latent variables which offers, according to Kelloway (1998: 2-3), an estimation of a predictive relationship among »pure« latent variables that are not contaminated by measurement error. The chosen method has enabled us to create a model with which we aim to show the connections and relationships among latent variables (dimensions of quality) and the general estimation of the quality of administrative procedures.

For the purpose of research, we have prepared a survey questionnaire, which contained three sets of survey questions. The first set of questions consisted of 25 statements, connected to

**Table 1.** Respondents' demographic structure.

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
18-27	98	24.38
28-37	120	29.85
38-47	107	26.61
48-57	62	15.42
58-	15	3.74
Total	402	100.00
<b>Educational level</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
Primary school	28	6.96
Specialized school	51	12.69
Secondary school	152	37.81
Vocational college	44	10.95
Higher education	120	29.85
Postgraduate education	7	1.74
Total	402	100.00
<b>Status</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
Retired persons	12	2.98
Sole proprietors	6	1.5
Unemployed persons	13	3.23
Students	64	15.92
Employed persons	307	76.37
Total	402	100.00

executing services at administrative units, that is, administrative procedures and all services related to them. Responses were provided in the form of a 5-level Likert scale, where value 1 meant »I totally disagree«, and value 5 stood for »I totally agree«. Beside the numerical scale, we have accompanied each statement not just with providing a numerical estimation but also with a possibility that the respondents to the questionnaire cannot provide a reply to the statement because of being unable to articulate their opinion regarding it or to the scale offered. The second set contained a general estimation of administrative procedure quality. The respondents could assess their personal satisfaction with administrative procedures using values from 1 to 5, where 1 denoted a negative evaluation, and 5 meant »excellent«. The third set of questions concerned the respondents' demographic data.

Each received questionnaire was checked, coded and prepared for computer processing. Among software tools designed specifically for the SEM method - applications such as AMOS, CALIS, EQS, LISREL, LISCOMP and SEPATH - we have opted to use the software package AMOS for analysing the research data.

The research was carried out in the time period extending between 1st February and 30th May 2011. The sample population was constituted of randomly selected inhabitants of the Goriška and Kopraska regions. It included 402 users, who had consumed the services at administrative units in the last 12 months and who correctly filled in the questionnaire. Incompletely filled-in questionnaires had been previously excluded from research, and the same holds for those respondents who had not used the aforementioned services in the last 12 months, as this represented the preliminary condition for our research. Among 402 participants in the questionnaire, 229 were women (56.96%) and 173 were men (43.04%). The majority of respondents (29.85%) belonged to the age group between 28 and 37 year-olds, while the smallest number

of them belonged to above the age of 58 (3.74%). The respondents' educational level shows that most of them had finished secondary school education, namely 50.50%, while the fewest had postgraduate education. Most respondents were employed, that is, 76.37%. The structure of respondents is shown in Table 1.

## RESULTS ANALYSIS

The gathered questionnaire data were analysed with the software application AMOS. First we had to specify a model, that is, create a conceptual model, and on its basis we formed the final model, presenting the path diagram of the latent variables' influence on the general estimation of administrative procedures. The final stage of analysis presents testing (or authenticating) the final model with general indicators of goodness-of-fit. The conceptualization (specification) of the model means establishing latent variables and their interrelationships that are relevant for further analysis.

For each of the latent variables, we had to establish a set of suitable indicators that would determine them. We have done that already by choosing and structuring the questionnaire so that each set of statements represented one latent variable, described by different statements. The selection of a specific set of latent variables and their indicators is based on studying relevant literature, previous research by other authors,

**Table 2.** Specification of latent variables and their indicators.

Latent variable	Selected indicators
Employees	Emp1 = The employees of administrative units (AU) are willing to assist the customer Emp2 = The employees are professional Emp3 = The employees intercede individually for the customer Emp4 = I trust the employees of the AU Emp5 = The employees show a proper regard for the customer
Information	Inf1 = The information we need is accessible Inf2 = The information is presented in an expert and intelligible way Inf3 = The information is communicated in a short time period Inf4 = I am given all the information that I need
Accessibility	Acc1 = The accessibility to the AU is good Acc2 = Office hours are organized appropriately Acc3 = The waiting time for an available clerk is short Acc4 = All affairs and procedures can be solved on one spot
Interior	Int1 = The premises and furnishings of the AU look pleasant Int2 = The waiting room is tidy and pleasant/comfortable Int3 = The waiting customer is well taken care of (water, numbers etc)
Procedures	Pro1 = Administrative procedures are carried out in accordance with the given promises Pro2 = The administrative procedures of the AU are user-oriented Pro3 = In recent years, the user orientation of the AU has increased Pro4 = Administrative procedures are concluded in the shortest possible time Pro5 = Administrative procedures are intelligible
Price	Pri1 = The price of administrative procedures is accessible to everyone Pri2 = The price of administrative procedures is too high Pri3 = The price of a particular administrative administrative procedure is consistent with its complexity

professional familiarity with the field as well as experience. Thus we have included altogether six latent variables into the conceptual model, into the set of statements about the administrative procedure quality (Table 2). In addition, we have collected demographic data such as gender, age, education and status.

The conceptual model of the estimation of administrative procedure quality was created as a network of mutual relations among latent variables and their indicators, and is shown in Figure 1. It was created on the assumption that the estimation of quality is affected by the employees of administrative units, the information that they are able to provide, the accessibility and interior of administrative units, the manner and time of providing administrative procedures, as well as their price.

The formation of the conceptual model is followed by checking the redundancy of any of its presumed elements, which is carried out with the help of correlation matrices. The verification of a conceptual model in SEM

has the advantage of testing simultaneously all the presupposed relationships between the model's variables; it is necessary so that we can check whether the model represents the observed data well before we proceed to interpret various interconnections (Byrne, 1998). The testing of our model has revealed that we can wholly exclude from it the latent variables Accessibility and Interior, as well as some of the indicators of the variable procedures (statements Pro3 and 5), and the variable price (statements Pri1 and 3). Due to the model's acceptability and the more sensible interpretation, we had to include into the model some demographic data, such as respondents' age and status. The variable Information had to be fixed previously, due to the model's estimated parameters (statements Inf1, 2, 3 and 4), in order for us to continue with evaluating the model.

Figure 2 shows the final standardized model. The most important advantage of the standardized model lies in the more comprehensible interpretation of relationships among the model's variables. It is evident from the

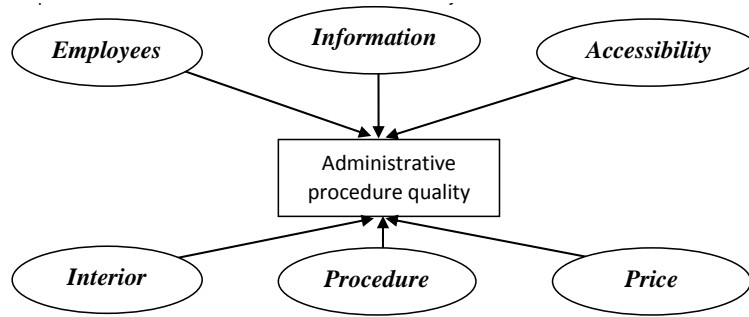


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the administrative procedure quality estimation.

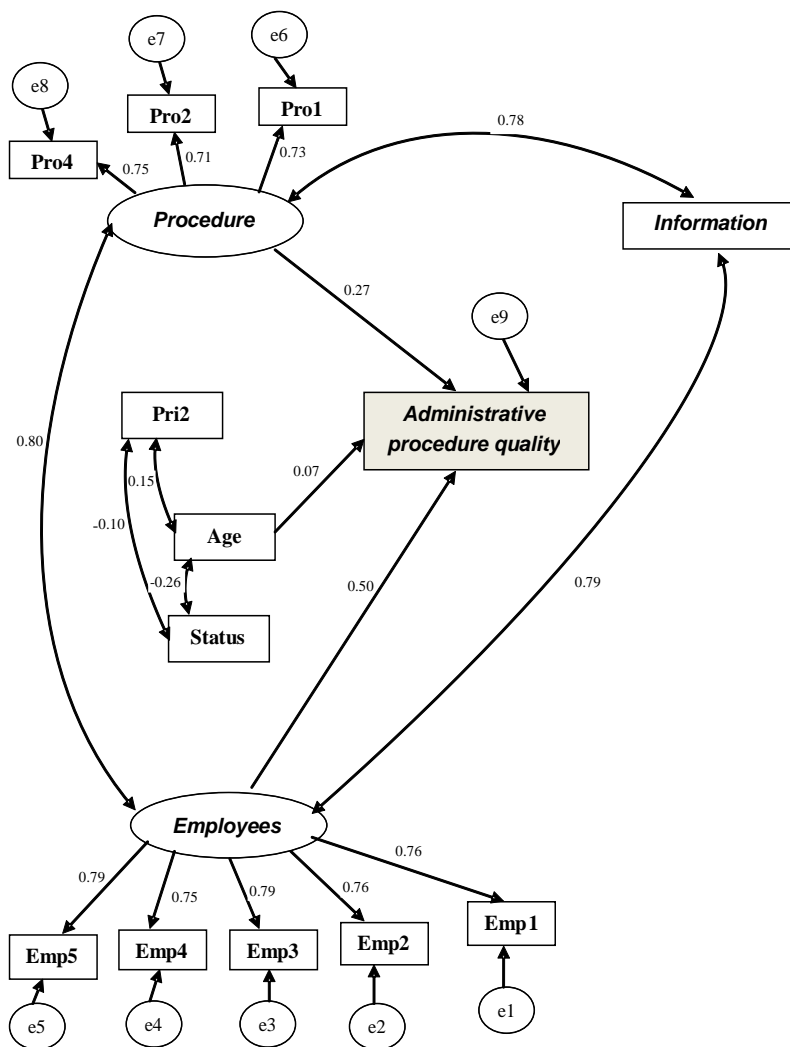


Figure 2. Standardized model of the administrative procedure quality estimation.

standardized model, on the basis of standardized estimations of parameters, that two latent variables - procedures and employees - exert the greatest influence

on the general estimation of administrative procedure quality. The minimal influence on the general administrative procedure quality assessment is shown by

**Table 3.** Values of fit indices.

Fit index value	Referential value	Index value	Fit
Relative $\chi^2$	$0 \leq \chi^2 \leq 2$ good fit $2 < \chi^2 \leq 5$ acceptable fit	1.94	Good Fit
RMSEA	$0 \leq \text{RMSEA} \leq 0.05$ good fit $0.05 < \text{RMSEA} \leq 0.10$ acceptable fit	0.48	Good Fit
NFI	$0.80 \leq \text{NFI} \leq 0.90$ acceptable fit $0.90 < \text{NFI} \leq 1.00$ good fit	0.95	Good Fit
CFI	$0.80 \leq \text{CFI} \leq 0.90$ acceptable fit $0.90 < \text{CFI} \leq 1.00$ good fit	0.97	Good Fit
IFI	$0.80 \leq \text{IFI} \leq 0.90$ acceptable fit $0.90 < \text{IFI} \leq 1.00$ good fit	0.97	Good Fit
RFI	$0.80 \leq \text{RFI} \leq 0.90$ acceptable fit $0.90 < \text{RFI} \leq 1.00$ good fit	0.93	Good Fit
PNFI	$0.50 \leq \text{PNFI} \leq 1.00$ good fit	0.64	Good Fit

the indicators age in relation to the user's status and the administrative procedure's price. In the end, we tested the final model with the help of the indicators of goodness-of-fit. The existing literature recommends assessing the model on the basis of several indicators (Hair et al., 1998; Schumacker and Lomax, 1996; Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000). We have assessed the model with recourse to the following indices: relative chi-square, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), relative fit index (RFI) and parsimonious normed fit index (PNFI), which are those most commonly recommended for assessing the model (Hair et al., 1998; Kline, 1998; McDonald and Ho, 2002; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Streiner, 2006; Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Schumacker and Lomax, 1996; Kelloway, 1998; Williams and McGuire, 2005; Greenfield et al., 2007). The values of fit indices are listed in Table 3.

On the basis of the calculated values of the model's fit index, we have established that the selected model fits the available empirical data well, since their values correspond to the recommended referential values. On the basis of the measured fit indices we can claim that the suggested model is appropriate.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the final model, which suits the calculated fit indices, we have found that two latent variables have the strongest influence on users' assessment of the

services (procedures) at administrative units. It is evident from the model and the calculated standardized estimations of parameters between variables that the service quality estimation is influenced mostly by the variable employees, since its value equals 0.5, which means that the employees of administrative units represent the most significant factor in perceiving the quality of administrative services. The employees (or their work, to be more precise) are determined mostly by attributes such as willingness to assist customers, professional attitude at work, individualized treatment of customers, a proper regard toward customers, and also the trust that employees elicit from customers (users of the administrative unit's service). The second most important factor in administrative service quality estimation is procedures, or the manner and time of executing administrative procedures. Their strongest attributes turned out to be user-orientation and their carrying out administrative procedures in accordance with the given promises and in the shortest possible time.

An important dimension of administrative units' services that does not directly affect the assessment itself is information. What we can gather from the model is that information is linked to both variables, that is, employees as well as procedures. This means that users perceive information as an important element of employees' work as well as administrative procedures themselves. We can infer from this that information, in addition to employees and the manner of executing procedures, represents one of the key components of administrative units' service; what counts to users is its accessibility, intelligibility and

the staff's expertise, as well as the consistency of information and the time of its transmission.

Furthermore, the model implies that the assessment of the procedure is also affected by the variable age of the service's user (even though this influence is weak), which leads us to assume that older users of administrative units' services give better scores.

On the basis of research, that is, constructing the final model of the administrative procedure quality assessment, we have also established that the estimation of administrative procedures is not affected by the latent variables Accessibility and Interior of administrative units, or price. The users of administrative services thus, do not consider these factors when assessing administrative procedures. We can interpret this result as indicating that the use of administrative units' services is actually obligatory, or that it becomes relevant when users need to avail themselves of these services, regardless of the services' price, accessibility, or the interior of the administrative unit.

We can conclude from the research results that the use of administrative procedures represents, the viewpoint of the customer, an obligatory task. Although, we can regard administrative procedures as every adult citizen's obligation, employees can make these procedures much more easy with a professional approach, a proper regard for the customer and a willingness to provide assistance, with an individualized treatment of every customer and the trust their attitude can inspire. In addition, the use of administrative units' services can be greatly facilitated by customer-oriented procedures that are designed to save customers' time. Last but not least, accessible, intelligible, consistent and timely information also seems to play a crucial role in the efficient execution of administrative procedures.

The research was carried out in two regions of Slovenia, which does not allow us to generalize our findings to the services at every Slovenian administrative unit. Nevertheless, we can assert with certainty that employees and the manner of executing administrative procedures are by far the most important constituents of the perception of administrative units' service quality. The mentioned limitation to two distinct geographic regions and the results of our analysis thus stimulate us to continue research in the wider range of Slovenia.

## NOTES

1. There are 58 administrative units in Slovenia, together covering all the territory, and performing state functions at a local level. Administrative units are very close to the citizens – majority of contacts between citizens and the state are being realized through them. It is therefore not a coincidence that AU represents the most developed part of Slovene state administration in respect to quality of their services. Almost all AU (57 out of 58) have developed their quality management systems (QMS);

over half of them have developed their QMS according to the ISO 9000 quality standards, and a great majority of them (over 50) use or have used common assessment framework (CAF) as a quality management tool for continuous improvement, and over 20 AU were involved in EFQM related projects – be it through pilot projects or within the official competition process for national quality award.

2. Decree on the manners of operations of public administration bodies with customers was in 2005 substituted by the *Decree on administrative operations*.

3. Fourteen administrative units (AU) were included in the pilot testing of customer satisfaction measurement methodology: AU Ajdovščina, AU Cerknica, AU Črnomelj, AU Dravograd, AU Idrija, AU Ljutomer, AU Logatec, AU Maribor, AU Murska Sobota, AU Ormož, AU Ptuj, AU Slovenska Bistrica, AU Slovenske Konjice and AU Zagorje ob Savi.

4. By abolishing the territorial jurisdiction as bases for consuming administrative services such as issuing personal documents etc., population – potential customers of one AU is now the entire population of the state.

5. The questionnaire for AU customers is included as an example in the European Primer on Customer Satisfaction Management (2008: 50, 96-97).

6. Comparisons for the years 2003 to 2010 are available at the website of the Ministry of public administration: [http://www.mju.gov.si/si/delovna\\_podrocja/kakovost\\_v\\_javnih\\_upravi/zadovoljstvo\\_strank\\_in\\_zaposlenih/](http://www.mju.gov.si/si/delovna_podrocja/kakovost_v_javnih_upravi/zadovoljstvo_strank_in_zaposlenih/) (June 21, 2011). Relation between expected and perceived quality is indicated according to the traffic lights principle: green colour means that perceived quality was higher as expected; red colour indicates that the expectations were higher as the perceived quality, and yellow colour shows that the perceived quality complies with the expectations.

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