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ASSESSMENT OF THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY: A CASE OF LATVIA

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Abstract. One of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is good governance and sustainable cities and communities. Sustainable development goals in public administration are relevant worldwide and can only be achieved through collective efforts by using scientific insights. The sustainability of the quality of public administrative services is one of the key objectives in improving the functioning of public administration in Latvia and worldwide. The present study aimed to assess the sustainability of the quality of administrative services provided by public administration institutions in Latvia, comparing its results with a similar study conducted in 2017–2018. The study was based on four public administration institutions and their branches in Latvia. It relied on a sample of public service customers from the largest cities in Latvia – Riga, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Ventspils, and Valmiera. A total of 130 randomly selected customers of public administration institutions participated in the study; they filled out SERVQUAL questionnaires before and after their visit to the institution. The survey questionnaires were collected in 2022–2023. The customer sampling can be characterised as random and administratively territorial, ensuring proportional representation across planning regions. The service quality assessment model – SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) – and SPSS software (22.0) were used for data collection and analysis. Improving the sustainability of the quality of administrative services in Latvia can significantly contribute to enhancing the quality of life in society, achieving its strategic goals, and refining the operations of public administration institutions, thereby improving the economic environment.

Keywords: public administration; public services; sustainability of public service quality

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1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. This resolution outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at achieving sustainable global development. The SDGs are balanced across three dimensions: economy, social aspects, and the environment. One of these goals focuses on good administration and sustainable cities and communities (UN 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in public administration are relevant worldwide and can only be achieved through collective efforts using scientific findings. For a country aiming to achieve higher development indicators, collaboration with research institutions is essential to help attain global objectives that

are relevant to society as a whole and future generations, such as the sustainability of public services, accessibility to educational opportunities, and healthcare availability (AlShehail et al., 2022; Sigurjonsson et al., 2024).

To agree on the most effective methods for achieving these goals, leaders of public institutions and policymakers should draw on the expertise of scientists and researchers. Ensuring the sustainability of the quality of public administrative services is one of the key objectives in improving public administration in Latvia and globally (Zikhali et al., 2023; Shava & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023).

This article aims to provide insight into assessing the sustainability of administrative service quality in public sector institutions in Latvia, comparing the obtained data with the previous studies. Improving the sustainability of administrative service quality in Latvia can significantly contribute to enhancing the quality of life in society, achieving its strategic goals, optimising the operations of public administration institutions and municipalities, and improving the economic environment.

2. Theoretical Aspects of the Research

Determining a set of sustainable development indicators that is appropriate for the real situation in public administration is a challenging task. To address this issue, it is essential to understand which indicators are the most important and how they impact sustainable development goals. At the same time, the number of representative indicators should be as small as possible.

To systematically analyse the sustainable development of public administration, six key subsystems are to be considered:

- Individual development of society members (civil liberties and human rights, social justice, individual independence and the right to self-determination, health, the right to work, social inclusion and participation in social life, the role determined by gender or social affiliation, level of material welfare, qualification, specialisation, adult education, age, family planning prospects);
- The social system of a society (the population's birth and mortality rates, ethnic composition, distribution of income and class structure, social groups and organisations, social security, healthcare, age-related benefits);
- Political administration (quality of government and public administration, national funds and taxation policy, political participation and the level of democracy, human rights policy, population and immigration policy, legal system, crime control, international cooperation policy, technology development policy);
- Infrastructure (ratio of between urban and rural areas, transport infrastructure and the distribution of industrial enterprises, supply systems (electricity, water, food, manufactured goods, services), waste disposal, healthcare services, communications and media, educational and professional opportunities, science (scientific research));
- Economic system (production and consumption, payment instruments, entrepreneurship and trade, labour force and unemployment rate, income, market);
- Resources and environment (natural environment, natural resources, ecosystems, biological species, depletion of non-renewable resources, regeneration of renewable resources, waste recycling, environmental pollution, environmental degradation).

These six subsystems can be grouped into three larger subsystems: the social system, the economic system, and the environmental management. Specific indicators can characterise the functioning of each subsystem. It is the systemic approach that can be used when selecting indicators for sustainable development in public administration and assessing its sustainability.

The sustainability of public administration can be assessed by using various parameters. The authors have identified the indicators crucial for assessing the sustainability of public administration development in accordance with the sustainable development indicators recommended by the UN (2015). All the indicators are grouped into subsystems: economic, financial, social, and environmental.

The following indicators are proposed for characterising the sustainability of the development of the economic subsystem of public administration: the quality of public administration, the volume index of industrial

production, the share of unprofitable enterprises, the volume of investments, the unemployment rate, and the inflation rate. A decline in the quality of public administration and a decrease in investment activity can be considered signals of a deterioration in the economic sustainability of public administration. Therefore, the quality of public administration and the index of investment volume could be used as indicators that describe the sustainability of the economic subsystem of public administration.

The sustainability of the financial subsystem is determined by the following indicators: the volume of budget revenues as a percentage compared to the previous year at reference prices; the share of taxes allocated to municipal budgets in total tax revenues; the debt-to-capital ratio; and the ratio of municipal debt servicing expenses to budget expenses. The indicator “volume of budget revenues, % compared to the previous year at reference prices” reflects the share of budget revenues in comparison to the previous year, which allows for the assessment of changes in revenue.

Significant parameters of the sustainability of societal development are indicators that reflect the trends in social processes, the well-being of the population, demographic indicators, and crime rates; they form the social subsystem. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a universal indicator used to analyse the socio-economic situation in individual countries and globally. The use of this index was promoted by the publication of unified socio-demographic statistics. The Human Development Index consists of three components that characterise human development: life expectancy, education, and per capita income.

In implementing the concept of sustainable development, and with the escalation of environmental issues worldwide, the impact of public administration activities on the environment becomes an important indicator of its sustainability. The impact of these activities on the environment can be assessed by the economic damage caused to the environment. The economic damage caused by environmental pollution is an assessment of the harm caused by such pollution. This economic damage increases proportionally with the volume of harmful substances entering the natural environment (in the form of wastewater, emissions, waste) and depends on their toxicity.

The mentioned groups of indicators can be used to analyse the activities of both the public and the private sectors in the environmental, social, and economic spheres (Ball et al., 2009). In the past decade, there has been increasing attention in the scientific literature to the assessment of the sustainability of public administration. The most studied topics include sustainability indicators, public administration organisations' accountability, and the transparency of their operations (Van Dyk 2011; Sánchez et al., 2013; Lynch & Mosbah 2017). However, it appears that the research on the sustainability of the public sector significantly lags behind the research on the private sector in this respect (Dumay et al., 2010; Farneti, Guthrie, 2009; Domingues et al., 2017). It is assumed that it is important to assess the impact of the public sector on the environment and its economic and social contributions. This area of the public sector performance assessment is still in its early stages and remains underdeveloped. Although the public sector has begun to engage more in sustainability assessments by publishing reports and sustainability indicators, this research theme is still in its infancy (Domingues et al., 2017).

Many scholars also examine such aspects as the main drivers of corporate sustainability in the public sector and the levels at which the sustainability of the public sector is measured. Many of these measurement systems have been developed for specific areas or institutional contexts of the public sector (Lundberg, 2013; Ramos et al., 2021). Based on these systems, three measurement methods have been mainly used in public sector research to assess the performance in the environmental and sustainability areas. These include sustainability indicators (Mapar et al., 2017), sustainability reports (Farneti & Guthrie, 2009; Montecalvo et al., 2018; Navarro-Galera et al., 2014), and environmental indicators (Myhre et al., 2013; Alpenberg et al., 2019).

The analysis of the research literature testifies to the fact that currently, there are no unified global standards or guidelines for determining the sustainability of the public sector. It should be concluded that sustainability indicators in the public sector encompass performance related to environmental activities, natural resource conservation, emission levels, employment aspects, occupational health and safety, community relations, and the involvement of stakeholders (Adams et al., 2014).

There is no unified understanding or definition of terms such as "sustainable development" and "sustainability" in the public sector. Still, they are mainly provided by authors based on the specific characteristics of the industry. This is the most common approach for assessing the sustainability and environmental performance of the public sector (Moreno-Pires & Fidélis, 2012; Schlör et al., 2013; Mapar et al., 2017). In this context, the environment is the primary area of interest, and 50% of authors choose it as a criterion for measuring sustainable activities (Niemann & Hoppe 2018; Mapar et al., 2017; Alpenberg et al., 2019). However, these indicators are mostly created by the authors themselves, using surveys with short yes/no questions (Alpenberg et al., 2019; Mapar et al., 2017), interviews with key report preparers, or content analysis. Authors analyse sustainability using sustainability reports and integrated reports (Park et al., 2021).

Thus far, EU member states have played a leading role in assessing the sustainability of the public sector (Niemann & Hoppe, 2018). In EU countries, legislation is being introduced to address sustainability assessment issues; for example, the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (EU 2014), which amends Directive 2013/34/EU regarding the disclosure of non-financial information (environment, social responsibility, human rights, anti-corruption) and other international standards. One of the latest packages is the proposal for the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (EU 2022), which the European Commission amended in 2022 to expand the scope of the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (EU 2014) in sustainability reporting standards in the areas of environment, social issues, and administration.

In recent years, public authorities have expanded their knowledge about the quality of sustainable services, and sustainability has been adopted as a policy goal and integrated into their service functions and processes. However, there is a limited understanding of how to measure the results related to environmental sustainability (Park et al., 2021). The authors propose determining the sustainability of public services by monitoring the quality of administrative services, using the SERVQUAL service quality assessment model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) for data analysis.

Analysing the scientific literature, the authors have summarised the above-mentioned groups of sustainability indicators in the table below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Indicators for Assessing the Sustainability of Public Administration

Economic Subsystem	Financial Subsystem	Social Subsystem	Ecological Subsystem
Inflation rate %	Volume of budget revenues, % compared to the previous year at reference prices	The ratio between the subsistence minimum and the average wage	Intensity of production waste, % compared to the previous year
Unemployment rate, %	Percentage of regulated taxes allocated to local budgets, %	Natural population growth (decline) per 1,000 people.	Environmental impact assessment
Index of investment volume compared to the previous year (%)	The ratio of borrowed capital to budget revenues, %	Life expectancy index	Manufacturing resource productivity, %
The share of unprofitable enterprises, %	The ratio of municipal debt servicing expenses to budget expenditures, %	Crime rate, number of crimes per 1,000 people.	
Volume index of industrial production, %.			

Source: created by the authors, based on Vazhenina, 2010

3. Research Methodology

The study assessed the sustainability of the quality of administrative services provided by Latvian public administrative institutions in 2022-2023, comparing the results with the research conducted in 2017-2018.

The study was based on four public administration institutions and their branches in Latvia. It relied on a sample of public service customers from the largest cities in Latvia – Riga, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Ventspils, and

Valmiera. The study involved 130 randomly selected customers of public administrative institutions who completed SERVQUAL questionnaires before and after visiting the institutions. The survey questionnaires were collected in 2022-2023. The customer sampling can be described as random and administratively territorial, ensuring proportional representation across the planning regions. The service quality assessment model – SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al. 1988) – and SPSS software (22.0) were used for data collection and analysis. The survey was conducted at the public service delivery locations. The respondents were introduced to the content and aim of the survey. Anonymity was guaranteed to the respondents before they provided any data. Ethical and legal principles were adhered to in the study to ensure that the personal rights of the research participants were not violated. The questionnaire was developed based on the information elicited from scientific literature sources.

The SERVQUAL questionnaire consisted of two parts. Each part contained 22 statements about service quality, which were grouped into a set of five-dimension criteria. The customers were asked to assess each statement by using a 5-point scale.

Part A – showed the customer's expectations regarding the service quality, as well as the importance of various quality criteria to the customer.

Part B – showed the customer's assessment of the service received.

In both parts of the questionnaire, the object to be assessed was the service quality as a set of five quality dimensions, consisting of 22 criteria, which were:

- Dimension 1 – Tangibles (appearance and physical components);
- Dimension 2 – Reliability (trustworthiness / accurate performance);
- Dimension 3 – Responsiveness (courteousness and helpfulness);
- Dimension 4 – Assurance (attention, reliability);
- Dimension 5 – Empathy (convenient service delivery, good communication, and customer understanding).

Based on the difference between the expected and perceived service, an overall service quality indicator was calculated.

4. Research Results and Discussion

The study assessed the sustainability of the quality of administrative services provided by Latvian public administration institutions in 2022-2023, comparing it to the study conducted in 2017-2018. The results of the 2022-2023 study were then analysed and compared to the results of the study carried out in 2017-2018. The statistical analysis revealed the following results.

The mean of service expected by customers is 4.79. In comparison with the 2017-2018 research data, it can be concluded that the level of customer expectations has increased. The expectation level has risen in specific dimensions as well. It has notably increased in dimensions such as empathy, assurance, and tangibles (see Figure 1).

Customers have rated reliability, assurance, and responsiveness as the most important dimensions in the quality of administrative services in the Latvian public sector in 2022-2023.

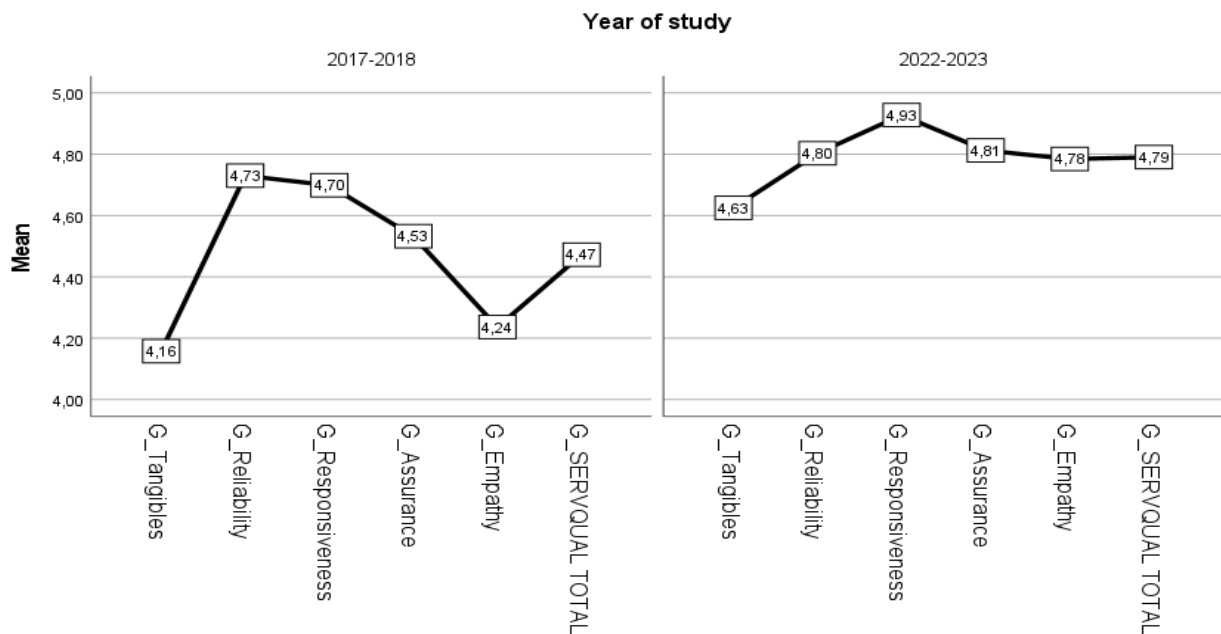


Figure 1. Comparison of the assessment of service expected by customers between 2017-2018 and 2022-2023.

Source: Created by the authors based on Katelo I., Kokina I., Raševskis V. 2019, statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS 22.00, 2024.

The mean of the perceived service is 4.46. Compared to the data of the 2017-2018 study, the perceived service rating has increased across all quality dimensions. The lowest perceived service rating given by customers in public sector institutions in Latvia was for the quality dimension – tangibles – with an average score of 4.28, while the highest rating was for the reliability quality dimension, with an average score of 4.62 (see Figure 2).

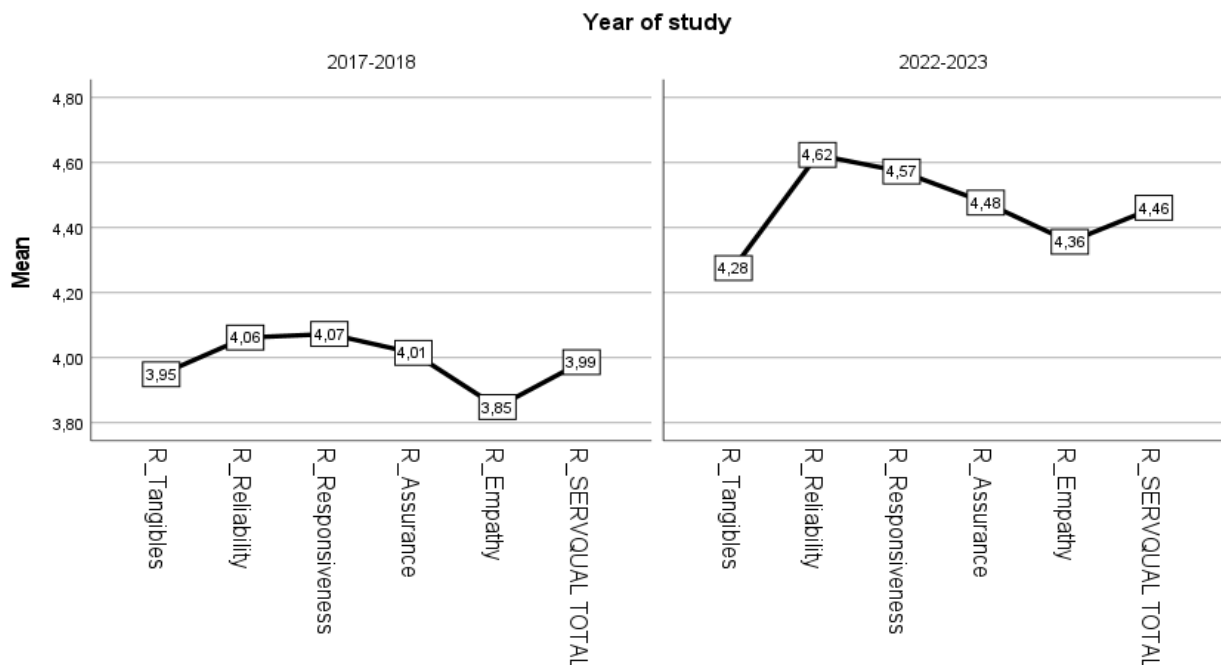


Figure 2. Comparison of the assessment of service perceived by customers between 2017-2018 and 2022-2023.

Source: Created by the authors, based on Katelo I., Kokina I., Raševskis V. 2019, statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS 22.00, 2024.

By calculating the difference between the values of the perceived service and the expected service, we obtained the average quality of administrative service delivery, which was rated negatively across all quality dimensions. The lowest-rated aspects of administrative service quality were in the dimensions of tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The least negative quality assessment was observed only in the reliability dimension. However, it is worth noting that the average quality of administrative service delivery in 2022-2023 was rated higher than in 2017-2018 (see Fig. 3).

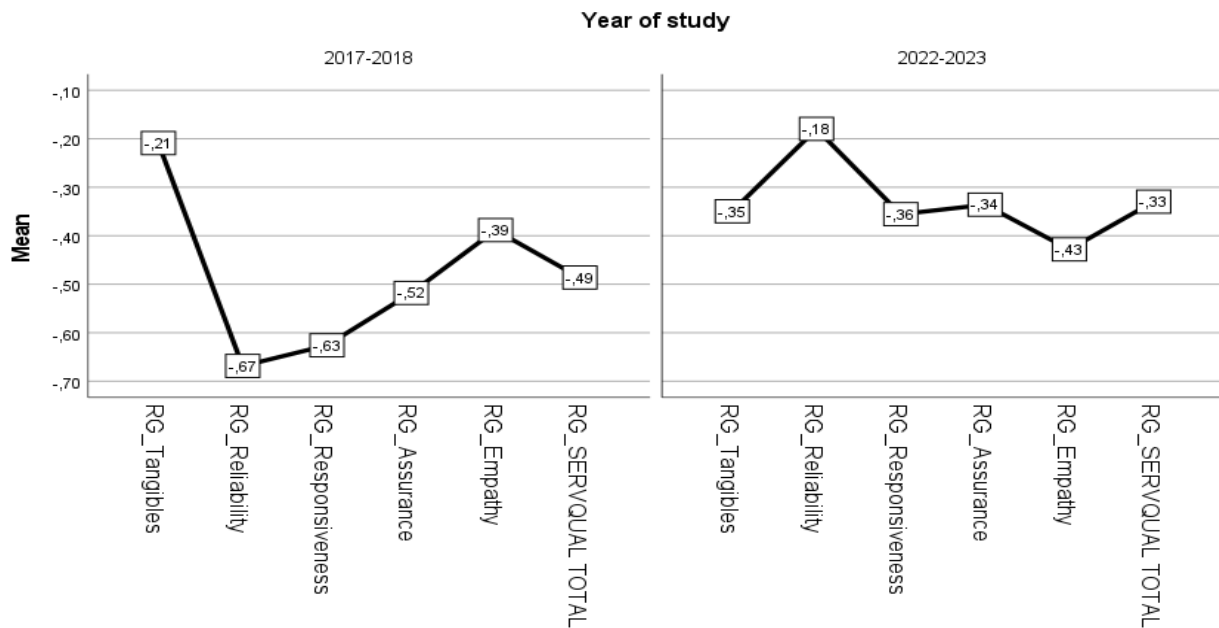


Figure 3. Comparison of the difference between the perceived service assessment and the expected service assessment (P-E) in 2017-2018 and 2023-2024. Quality of administrative services.

Source: created by the author, based on Katelo I., Kokina I., Raščevskis V. 2019, statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS 22.00, 2024

Analysing the customer survey results from the public institutions considered, it has been observed that the quality of administrative services provided by the State Revenue Service (SRS) was rated the most positively (-0.02). Compared to the administrative service quality assessment of 2017-2018, the quality of services provided by SRS has improved in all quality dimensions.

The quality of provided administrative services has slightly improved in the State Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) (-0.25 b.) and the State Employment Agency (SEA) (-0.32 b.).

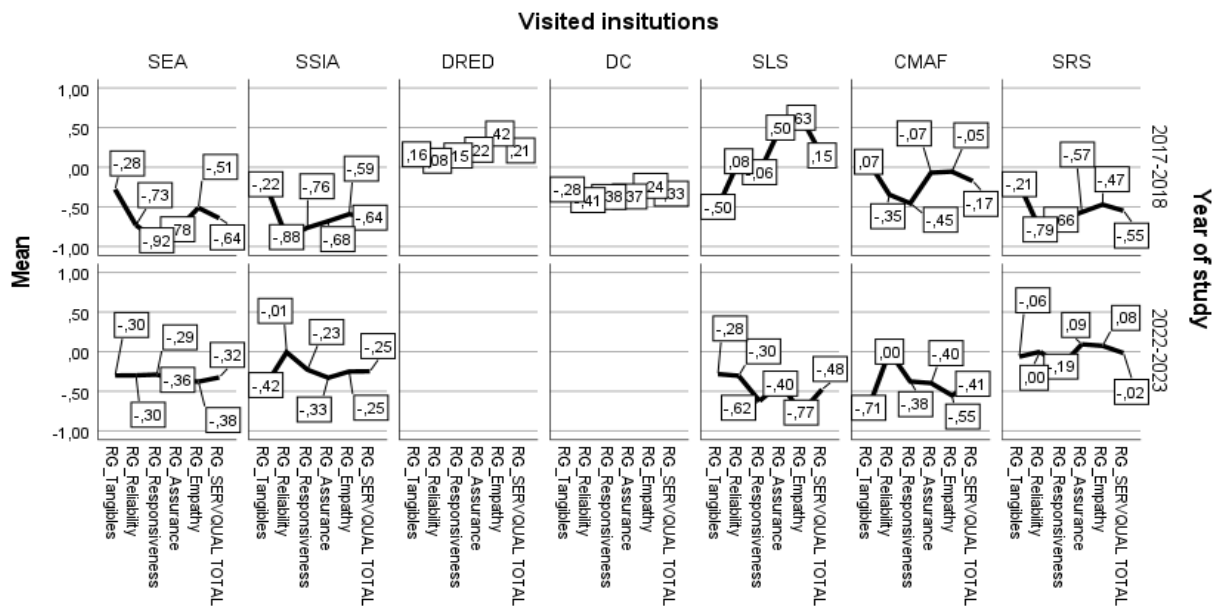


Figure 4. Assessment of administrative service quality in Latvia in 2017-2018 and 2022-2023, across the public institutions considered.

Source: Created by the authors, based on Katelo I., Kokina I., Raščevskis V. 2019, statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS 22.00, 2024.

The most negative assessment was given by the customers of the State Land Service (SLS) (-0.48). Compared to the administrative service quality assessment of 2017-2018, the quality of services provided by SLS has slightly declined in all quality dimensions (see Fig. 4 above).

Conclusions

The study found that customers consider the most important factors in the quality of services provided by public administration institutions to be service reliability, assurance and responsiveness of employees.

In the quality of administrative services in Latvia's public sector, the most important quality dimensions that need improvement are empathy, responsiveness, assurance, and tangibles.

The most positive assessment of the quality of administrative services was given by the customers of the State Revenue Service (SRS) (-0.02), while the most negative assessment was given by the customers of the State Land Service (SLS) (-0.48).

Assessing the sustainability of the quality of administrative services provided by Latvian public administrative institutions in 2022-2023, compared to the study conducted in 2017-2018, it has been found that the quality of administrative services has remained at the existing level, it has not significantly deteriorated, and has improved slightly. Therefore, over the past five years, the sustainability of the quality of administrative services provided by Latvia's public administrative institutions has been maintained.

The Sustainable Development Goals in public administration are relevant worldwide and can only be achieved through collective efforts and scientific insights. In pursuit of higher development indicators, the state must collaborate with research institutions to help attain global objectives that are significant for society as a whole and future generations, such as the sustainability of public services. The authors propose that the sustainability of public services is determined by monitoring the quality of administrative services, employing the SERVQUAL model for service quality assessment (Parasuraman et al., 1988) for data analysis.

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