Local and International Students' Perception on service Quality – A case study on a South African University

Dr Vannie Naidoo

(University of KwaZulu-Natal, Westville Campus, Durban)

Prof Samuel N.A Mensah

(Harold Pupkewitz Graduate School of Business, Polytechnic of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia)

Abstract

The quality question has now been thrust to the fore in the academic market because students and their sponsors more rigorously shop around for quality of programmes and of modes of delivery. Universities, especially those that thrive on intake of foreign students, must therefore accommodate this trend in their academic and support services. This paper conceptualises service quality within a university environment, teases out the economics of service quality, and determines if there are differences in the way local and international students at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal perceive quality of academic and support services, using the SERVQUAL model for data collection and the Mann-Whitney test. Data was collected from a sample of 380 students drawn from all five campuses of the University. The Mann-Whitney test results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the Gap scores between local and international students on service quality at the 95% level; that expectations of foreign students on services provided by the international office were not met; and that students ranked the University's services as "poor". The management of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal should therefore seriously consider the strategies recommended here for improvements in quality of academic and support services and in the institution's ranking inside and outside South Africa.

1.   Introduction

The competition to attract international students requires that South African universities give serious attention to the quality of, among others, their academic and support services – because the evidence suggests that these students and/or their sponsors now put considerable weight on quality in higher education institutions before making a choice. The ready availability of information makes it easy for students and sponsors to compare universities. The importance of international students in particular lies in the significant injections of external funds (fees and living expenses) into the South African economy and their multiplier effects. This injection of foreign funds is particularly important during periods of recession when the levels of international capital flows for business generally decline. This paper is based on a quality survey conducted at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, a top-ranking South African university. The quality gaps between local and international

students on quality of academic and support services and on the internal and external ranking of the University will be identified and their significance in attracting international students discussed.

2. Conceptualising quality within tertiary institutions

Universities in South Africa are no longer only catering to the need of local students; they are now actively competing to attract foreign students who are a source of income for both universities and the country. Because international students and their sponsors now demand quality, institutions within South Africa need to develop and use service quality indicators for self-evaluation. This will require taking the views of students into account and having proper systems and personnel in place to implement and deliver quality service. However, there are problems with developing performance indicators within tertiary education, especially since such indicators tend to become measures of activity rather than true measures of the quality of educational services (Souter, 1996: 72).

Theorists have suggested various constructs of service quality within tertiary institutions. Naidoo (2011: 526) developed the following constructs that could, together, capture the essence of service quality within a tertiary institution:
- Quality in terms of well skilled academic staff;
- Quality of programme offerings and their value and relevance to the labour market;
- Quality in terms of good facilities, equipment and lecture and recreational venues;
- Quality in terms of good administration staff who are efficient in administration and student affairs;
- Quality in terms of safety of students on campus;
- Quality in terms of research output.
- Quality in terms of scholarships and funding facilities available to students;

The constructs listed above together become the basis for two more constructs:
- Ranking of a University within a country; and
- Global recognition or international ranking of a University and its commitment to international student enrolments.

These constructs, in their totality, give a good indication of the quality of service provided by a university.

3. Factors that constrain the quality of university service

Yeo (2008: 153) suggested a number of ways in which tertiary institutions may fall short of improving service standards. Ignorance of what customers expect or want could impede the delivery of quality services. Universities' statutes and regulations tend to make them rigid and so they do not readily adjust to cater to the shifting needs of their customers (i.e. students). Courses and programmes are not always labour market relevant in terms of content and teaching approaches because while the demand side of the labour market and the supply side of the economy change continuously to keep pace with improvement in technology, curriculum and teaching methods on the human-resource-development side are reviewed and changed only periodically. As a result of this discord, learning processes and academic rigour may be out of tune with the world of work, and academic service will lack quality. Another factor identified by Yeo (2008: 153-154) that may contribute to poor service quality in tertiary institutions is the inadequacy of the service quality standards put in place by university management. Tertiary institutions in South Africa are constantly under pressure to increase enrolments to remain financially sustainable. The quality implication of this becomes obvious when positions of academic staff members who depart are frozen to cut cost, while enrolments and class sizes are pushed upwards to increase income. The

concomitant increase in student-lecturer ratios decreases individual attention given to students inside and outside class, increases the time taken to give feedbacks on students' work, and reduces students' learning, the main indicator of service quality. Institutions also face difficulties in identifying appropriate specifications that would meet students' expectations in terms of content, delivery methods, and practical applications, hence the role of market research in improving service quality. In view of these reasons, grades in academic transcripts can no longer be taken as indicators of good academic service; evaluation of service performance should go beyond these tangible forms (Yeo, 2008: 153).

The quest for financial sustainability could also make universities promise beyond their capacity to deliver. When institutions oversell their services through exaggerated promises that misrepresent their actual potential and academic readiness, sponsors and students are given expectations that will not be realised. The services of a university will then be evaluated against the promises and will be found to be wanting, and this will tarnish the image of the university. Yeo (2008: 153) noted that one of the most common problematic strategies that adversely affect students' perceptions of service quality is the excessive promotion of facilities and support services, ranging from "hardware" (technology) to "software" (people) when these promises cannot all be met completely.

Students and their sponsors may also sum up the expected service quality of a university in terms of "pre-purchase" and "post-purchase" values. Bennett et al (2003: 141) identified factors that contribute to these pre-purchase and post-purchase values of universities. Pre-purchase value variables that students/sponsors may consider before making the decision to study at an institution would include the reputation of the university; the quality of its staff; the library, computer and internet access; industry links; cost; location and distance from home; availability of the desired degree (e.g. Masters of Electronic Commerce); length of course; opportunities for socialising (i.e. whether some friends are in the same institution); social clubs; and social life. Post-purchase value variables that would be considered may include knowledge gained; the quality of staff; cost; quality of the student body and opportunities for motivation and friendships; social clubs; and social life. The conclusions of Bennett et al (2003: 141) confirm Shanker's (2002: 571) report that a survey conducted among management students at Indian universities revealed that students chose institutions on the basis of the reputation of the university; the number of applicants for the course; past success rates for placement; faculty expertise; the breadth of specialisation offered; infrastructural facilities; and fees.

The literature also reveals a shift that is being noticed in the way lecturers perceive their students – not just as persons who must be taught, but more so now as "clients" or "customers" of an educational product which must be given to them in a dignified and acceptable manner. an unfolding situation that is changing the way academics view students and the quality of academic service rendered to them. Scot et al (2004: 9 -10) report a shift that is being noticed in the way lecturers perceive their students – not just as persons who must be taught, but more so now as "clients" or "customers" of an educational product which must be given to them in a dignified and acceptable manner. So lecturers must now work with students in a way that ensures that learning takes place; this is the basis of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Ambrose, 2010; Kadhila, 2012). In this unfolding situation, the lecturer is a facilitator of learning, not the sole custodian of knowledge; but one of several resources available to the student. This shift is traumatising those academics who are still struggling to conceptualize and make sense of the implications of the change in student-lecturer relationships, as the shift suggests that they should become "partners in learning". While this juggling is going on, the quality of academic service to students is being compromised.

Another important consideration regarding the quality of tertiary institutions is the role of support staff services to students. Support services facilitate learning by distributing tasks and experiences in several possible ways: administration services help students manage their non-academic responsibilities; social services help them increase their network via student clubs and events; and psychological services provide counselling and coaching (Zemke and Schaff, 2003: 7-8). Support services are an extension of student experiences and serve as a platform for personal growth and development. Clark and Rasay (1990) and Yeo (2009: 62-76) both reported that high achieving university students made extensive use of support services. Evidently, attention to support services contributes to improving the service quality of universities.

The tangibles peculiar to educational services are also an important consideration in the service quality of universities. These could relate to the material things used to assist in the service delivery process. According to Yeo (2009: 65), the wider spaces of learning and social interaction, including facilities such as laboratories, libraries, computer laboratories, sports halls and grounds, healthcare centres, and cafeterias, contribute to the service quality of any institution. Tangibles such as physical facilities, equipment and the professional appearance of staff are critical to providing a total educational experience. According to the UKZN 2010 Annual Report (UKZN Annual Report, 2010 and UKZN Audit Portfolio Report, 2008) tangibles can be grouped into:

Facilities - space for students, namely, adequate lecture venues; good acoustics; lighting and venues that have well equipped visual aids like laptops; data projectors; and overhead projectors.

Safety and Security - adequate security should be provided at all campuses to ensure student and staff safety at all times against crime such as theft; rape; car-jacking: theft from cars; and robberies.

Location of campus - the campuses should have adequate transport in place for students who need to travel between campuses or use buses to travel to and from the University. Another issue in terms of location is students having easy access via foot to libraries, student union offices and lecture venues and sports facilities.

Healthcare - the University has an obligation to provide health care services such as free student counselling and medical services to students and staff on each campus.

Cafeterias - since students spend most of their time at campus, the food prepared and provided by the cafeterias should be of good quality and affordable.

The wider spaces of learning and social interaction, including facilities such as laboratories, libraries, computers, sports and healthcare centres as well as cafeterias therefore contribute to the total service quality of an institution.

Yeo (2009: 66) argued that it is essential to promote the right mind set amongst staff, i.e. being student-centred rather than merely task-driven. This suggests the need for a customer-oriented approach, rather than rules and regulations. In the case of UKZN, investigating the quality perceptions of academic and support staff would add to a wider understanding of the quality dimensions and relationships that occur within the service delivery process. Possible challenges facing staff in conforming with the paradigm shift relating to "quality" within tertiary institutions will also come to the fore.

In the case of this top ranking university, identifying the gaps in the service delivery process will provide valuable insight into improving overall service quality within a tertiary institution environment. Hoffman and Bateman (2006: 356) argue that firms that excel in service quality do so

by avoiding potential quality gaps in their delivery systems. Numerous managerial, marketing and operational factors influence the size of each of these gaps.

According to Naidoo (2011: 528), marketing programs should be developed around the concept of quality within the service offering. Student satisfaction with tertiary institutions can be improved if staff is motivated, educated and trained to deliver quality services. Yeo (2009: 66) argues that the strategic deployment and training of staff would be required to ensure that service standards are maintained at an optimal level. Quality improvements in the form of customer care initiatives can also be introduced at tertiary institutions. For a tertiary institution to market itself it first needs to tap into issues of service quality and how these impact on students' levels of customer satisfaction. Baron and Harris (1995: 167) reiterate this argument, stating that issues of service quality and customer satisfaction lie at the heart of service marketing and management and that both are seen as desirable outputs of any service strategy.

As has been noted, there is a paucity of research on service quality within tertiary institutions in South Africa as compared with European countries. No broad study has been undertaken in South Africa that canvassed students, academics and support staff's perceptions and expectations of quality within tertiary institutions. Sotar and McNeil (1996) measured service quality in a tertiary institution in Australia. Mathew and Joseph (1997) conducted research on service quality at their university in New Zealand. However, both these studies were restricted to student perceptions. Studies conducted by Yeo (2009: 62 - 76) at Singapore University revealed that the quality of educational services is not limited to the experience of the classroom. Since research on service quality within tertiary institutions only gained momentum in the late 1990s, knowledge about quality within tertiary institutions is very recent.

The importance of service quality to an organization cannot be underestimated as it lies at the very core of an organization's marketing and management strategy. Student satisfaction regarding their learning experience is crucial to an institution's popularity and competitive edge over other institutions. Students become the mouthpiece of institutions as they appear in promotional materials to increase experiential visibility and institutional solidarity. In this instance, they serve as customers endorsing the product and the service quality offered by the institutions they represent.

4. Economic implications of service quality in tertiary education

Financial sustainability of a university depends to a large extent on student numbers, among others, as indicated above. Most of the important factors are linked to the quality of service that the university is perceived to be giving to students – especially the extent to which the service has prepared previous students to find work or start viable businesses. The economic undertones here, especially from the perspective of students, are easy to pinpoint – education, and especially tertiary education, like migration, is an investment in human capital formation that requires heavy financial outlays with expectations of future income flows (Sahota, 1968; Sjaastad, 1962). The quality of service delivered by a university is what guarantees this expectation.

The quality of service that produces students in demand at tertiary education institutions requires good quality research and consultancy and a stream of publications in peer-review journals. Such publications usually bring in funding from government and private-sector agencies and businesses. Thus the research component of good quality service delivery by a university is good for the institution's financial sustainability, for the income of academic staff and, ultimately, for improvements in aggregate demand and economic growth (Fourie and Burger, 2009: 46 - 58).

The antithesis of the statements above also applies: poor service quality at tertiary institutions results in students who do not have labour-market skills – at best, they will have to be retrained to

be employable, increasing the social cost of training, and reducing efficiency and national welfare; at worst, they remain unemployed for a long time or even unemployable and never find work that requires the training they are supposed to have acquired at the tertiary level. van Broekhuizen (2013) has speculated that the heterogeneity in the quality of higher education in South Africa may contribute to different labour market outcomes. Hence the need for policy and funding programmes to even out the quality of service delivery across tertiary institutions in South Africa and in the region.

Efforts at improving the quality of service provided by tertiary institutions are good for sustainability of institutions, for their staff, and for the economy. Institutions funded by states in the region should therefore be required to provide indications of measures taken to improve: the quality of teaching and learning; the quality of support services; and the quality and quantity of research and patents.

5. Methodology for Empirical Research

A quality survey was conducted on students at a top ranking South African university. The overall student population for the university was 40000. According to Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2002:278), for a student population of 40000 the sample size should be 380 student respondents. The sample size was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tables on the sample size for a given population. The students were randomly chosen to take part in the survey and convenience sampling technique was applied in the study. A response rate of 100% was achieved.

A structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 380 students at all five campuses of the university that was surveyed in this study.

The questionnaire was adapted from the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). Soutars and McNeil (1996: 75) indicate that there is merit in evaluating the performance of tertiary education institutions with a service marketing instrument such as the SERVQUAL Model. Hittman (1993: 77- 80) further suggests that the use of the SERVQUAL Model would seem rational as it not only evaluates the teaching component of a tertiary institution, but includes aspects of the total service environment experienced by the student. The researcher used the SERVQUAL Model for this study since this model encompassed the total service environment experienced by students and not just the teaching component.

The questionnaire was designed using closed- ended questions. A five- point LIKERT scale was used in the design of the questionnaire.

A major limitation of the study was that due to the use of the convenience sampling technique by the researcher the results of the study cannot be generalized to other universities. However, the results provided crucial information relevant to this university's marketing executive management and its staff, as it brought to light the university's quality gaps that were identified by students in the study.

Students were asked to rate the international office at the University – i.e. indicate their respective perceptions (P) and expectations (E) of the quality of services provided to international students by the University of KwaZulu Natal. Also, students had to indicate their respective perceptions (P) and expectations (E) of the internal and external ranking of the University of KwaZulu Natal.

The Mann-Whitney test is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the Gap scores on service quality between the local and international students of the University of KwaZulu Natal. This test is an alternative to the t-test which does not require any restrictions.

The study used the Cronbach's Alpha Co-efficient to measure reliability. According to Litwin (1995: 31), a reliability coefficient of less than 0.5 is considered unacceptable. If the measure falls between 0.5-0.6, it is regarded as significant, and if it is above 0.7, it is regarded as good. The Cronbach's Alpha for overall student perceptions was 0.974, representing a good significant level of internal reliability of the measuring instrument.

6. Results and Discussion

The hypothesis that is tested in this paper is: There is a statistically significant difference in the Gap scores amongst the local and international students of the University of KwaZulu Natal on service quality. The Mann-Whitney Test Statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Mann-Whitney Test Statistics between Local/International students

	Mann-Whitney U	Z	P
Tangibles GAP score (P-E)	2075.000	-.355	.722
Reliability GAP score (P-E)	1640.000	-1.519	.129
Responsiveness GAP score (P-E)	2183.000	-.067	.947
Empathy GAP score (P-E)	2202.000	-.016	.987
Assurance GAP score (P-E)	2137.000	-.190	.850
Overall GAP score (P-E)	2023.000	-.494	.621

The results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the Gap scores between local and international students at the 95% level ($p < 0.05$). There is therefore not enough evidence in support of the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant difference in the Gap scores amongst the local and international students of the University of KwaZulu Natal on service quality.

Students were asked their perceptions and expectations of the services provided by the International Office question that follows refers to student perceptions on ranking of the University both locally and internationally. The results and the discussions were as follows:

Students were asked to rate the international office at the University – i.e. indicate their respective perceptions (P) and expectations (E) of the quality of services provided to international students by the University of KwaZulu Natal. Also, students had to indicate their respective perceptions (P) and expectations (E) of the internal and external ranking of the University of KwaZulu Natal. The responses produced a large Gap score, indicating that international students had greater expectations towards the services provided by the international office staff than was delivered. This finding concurs with Harris and Paddy (2010: 7-8) who indicated that international students at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University were very dissatisfied with the University's international office because their expectations of service quality were not met. Harris and Paddy (2010: 11 - 12)

also argued that international students were within their rights in expecting high levels of service from tertiary institutions not only because they were paying customers, but also because their fees are so much higher than those of local students that they should be given quality service. Tertiary institutions should, therefore, instil a customer-responsive culture to ensure that their high fee-paying international students get their money's worth in services provided.   This is especially important in attracting international students, who have a multitude of choices when deciding where to study abroad.   However, satisfying the service expectations of international students is a daunting task that requires considerable market survey. As Bennett et al. (2002: 278) have pointed out, one of the difficulties with meeting customers' perception of what represents good service is that customers (and their perceptions) are all different. Therefore, setting a price for a service product that will be perceived by customers as 'good value/service for money' requires considerable research – that is, considerable market research is required in order for the University to determine the fee range for the service that international students will consider as 'good service for money'.

Next**, s**tudents were asked for their respective perceptions (P) and expectations (E) of the ranking of the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa and abroad. The null hypothesis here was that students do not rank the University highly. The results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the Gap score at the 95% level ($p < 0.05$) – that is, students' expectations were not met. The hypothesis was therefore accepted. The large gap indicated that students ranked the University of KwaZulu Natal poorly. This could have been due to them perceiving that the University has a poor research output, lacks strength in its teaching programs and has a poor reputation in the country and abroad. The poor reputation could also be due to all the negative publicity the UKZN received in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2013 for students' demonstrations (toyi-toying) and closures, in-fighting in management, a fraudulently awarded PhD, etc.

7.   Strategic Recommendations to improve service quality within a university

Diversification strategy is achieved by focusing on both new markets and new services.
Within the tertiary institution sector it is important for management to develop segmentation strategies that focus on each unique segments service quality expectations. For example when promoting its services to local and internationals students, the degree requirements could be changed or modified to accommodate international students especially if they are on exchange programs.

Competitor intelligence is the second strategy that affects service quality. For any organization that wants to promote service quality within its delivery processes it needs to acquire relevant information about its competitors and how they are satisfying their customers. Looking at a competitors' market offering is crucial when obtaining competitor intelligence as this information can be used to better the service offerings and market promotion respectively.

Kasper et al. (2006: 204) comments that market research can identify those aspects of service quality where an organization is higher or lower than other competitors. Such research can provide useful strategic input when deciding upon long term investment or development plans.

The key issue is not to fall into a responsive strategic posture where an organization copies or replicates competitor activity. In service quality terms, it is better to base quality improvements upon close dialogue with customers.

Resources are the trade-off between human and technological resources and need to be considered when looking at service quality. Sometimes it is understandable to employ technology since it is a cheaper and more efficient option than employing people. To add, people have their own bias that

can filter into the service process that can compromise service quality during the actual service encounter. In this case it is more beneficial to use technology to eliminate such biases. Kasper et al. (2006: 204) argues that service quality is ultimately driven by people, specifically service personnel, and even the most carefully specified and managed services can fail where people are not fully involved in quality initiatives. Human resources management can provide incentives; good working conditions; good team management; and reliable technical support which can make considerable differences to service quality and customer satisfaction in the short term. Having committed well-trained and motivated staff reduces recruitment costs; reduces training costs; improves corporate knowledge; and builds stable customer relationships in the long term. However, the emergence of technological solutions to the service quality problem should not be overlooked.

Tertiary institutions can also closely look at introducing technology that can enhance overall quality within the service offering. Adequate training in using these new technologies should be introduced to help staff become more efficient in operating these new processes and technologies that can help in providing high quality services to students.

Another crucial strategic issue that affects service quality is competitive advantage. In view of the current financial crisis that has gripped the global economy, acquiring income from foreign sources is being slowly depleted worldwide. Governments have recognised that a way to acquire income from foreign sources is by attracting foreign students to study at our universities in South Africa. To do this, South African universities have to have a competitive edge. "Service quality" can be this competitive edge that attracts students to South African programmes. Since students from Europe, Asia, America and Africa have a wide range of universities to choose from in South Africa, the UKZN has to enhance and maintain a high level of service quality that can attract and retain international students to a wide range of its' program offerings, (Naidoo, 2011: 526 - 527).

8. Concluding Remarks

Service quality can be a source of competitive advantage that can increase student entrants and retention rates within a South African university. Since money is tight, economies all over the world are hard pressed for cash injections into their economies. To attract more capital into our countries economy is often not easy, therefore new more innovative ways need to come to the fore in acquiring more capital injections to sustain our troubled economies. South Africa too wants to attract students from abroad since they bring with them capital that can increase the countries overall GDP and GNP. To compete for international students however South African universities have to provide world class university education that has at its core high quality service offerings. This is the only way for a South African university to ensure it can attract international students to our university programs. The university that formed part of the study is one of the top 3 university's in SA. This ranking has helped this university build a brand synonymous with high quality research and teaching that continues to attract international students into our diverse university programs at our five campuses.

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