Chapter 19
Service Quality Imperative for Quality Assurance in Higher Education:
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, quality is often looked at from an education perspective. This chapter will take another stance by analyzing and discussing service quality within tertiary education from a marketing perspective. The literature review put forward by various theorists argues that service marketing has evolved over time, as more research has been conducted on service quality and how it impacts on the customer/clients. Since tertiary education forms part of service marketing, this chapter aims to identify the quality variables attached to this service sector and illustrate how each quality variable affects the students and staff within the university environment. Service quality, if developed and implemented accordingly within a higher education institution, can become an important element that a university can use as a competitive advantage. This in turn can yield long-term benefits to the organisation.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape in higher education is continuously transforming. The concept of quality has become an important component that universities have to incorporate into those service offerings. Policy makers and management of Higher education institutions' have recognised that service quality from a marketing perspective can be a valuable tool that can assist a tertiary institution to become competitive in the higher education sector. To set itself apart in the tertiary education sector a university has to develop superior service excellence in its programs, curriculum, and its core service offerings to its students. Excellence in service quality can become a major competitive advantage that can attract international and local students to tertiary institutions programs and increase its long-term growth and sustainability

in the higher education sector for future generations to come. Tertiary institutions have a responsibility to be market driven. Monies have to be invested in understanding the needs and perceptions of its' diverse student population so that high levels of service quality can be provided in both academic and support services accordingly.

The following key areas would be discussed in detail in this chapter:

- Conceptualising service quality
- Reviewing service quality within tertiary institutions
- Services provided by a university.
- Approaches to managing service quality at University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)
- The way forward: recommendations to improving service quality within higher education

The discussion will begin with conceptualising service quality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on secondary data collection. The author gathered literature from various books and journal articles on various studies conducted on service quality that used the SERVQUAL model to test service quality within a university's services. The author also refers to her own study conducted on service quality at a South African university to expand on the debates on service quality in higher education. The uniqueness of this chapter is that it does not only look at the education discipline to explore the theme of quality of higher education, but also links new thinking on service quality in education that is attached to the marketing discipline. Currently as universities are become, more market orientated there is great justification in enlisting marketing tools like the SERVQUAL model to test the quality of the service offerings made by the university.

CONCEPTUALISING SERVICE QUALITY

An important phenomenon-taking place within the higher education sector is that universities all over the world are becoming more aware of the need for quality. The global financial crisis has placed a major strain on the world economies. University management worldwide have been tasked with coming up with more inventive ways to attract students into their programs as tertiary education is seen as a luxury than a necessity. According to studies conducted by Aldridge and Rowley (2001), Oldfield and Baron, (2000), measuring service quality within higher education is a global phenomenon. Sultan and Wong (2011) argue that service quality research in higher education sector is new, at least when compared with the commercial sector. Harvey and Williams (2010) adds that over the past decades quality of teaching and learning has become a major strategic issue in tertiary education systems across universities world-wide.

Mazzarol (1998) adds to the debate by arguing that education is a product that is both intangible and has characteristics that create special problems for marketing. According to Fisk et al. (2004), customers evaluate services differently from physical goods because services tend to be inherently low in search characteristics, but high in experience and credence characteristics. Search characteristics are attributes we can evaluate before a purchase, for example the colour of a car and its engine capacity. Kurtz and

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