

## SERVICE QUALITY – CASES OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS EXPLORED

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### Abstract

The South African higher education landscape has changed significantly. PHEIs (private higher education institutions) play a more important role although they are not yet fully acknowledged as higher education “universities”. This may be a strategic incentive for service quality excellence. It seems if the market responds well to PHEIs, because they complement the higher educational need and cater for unique niche markets. The article reports on the level and importance of service quality in three cases of South African PHEIs with the focus on primary service quality dimensions. The purpose of the study was to explore the strategic importance of service quality at PHEIs per se, its general service quality status and their endeavours to manage (measure and improve) service quality. The investigation followed a mixed method approach and applied interviews, observation and questionnaire surveys (using the SERVQUAL instrument). Case research has consistently been of the most powerful research methods in operations and quality management, particularly in contributing to the paucity of literature and the development of new theory and/or new hypotheses. Besides the paucity of literature, the results indicate that service quality at the PHEIs is a high strategic priority and may be a higher priority than service quality at public universities (a hypothesis for further investigation).

**Keywords:** SERVQUAL, Quality Assurance, Service Quality, Service Quality Dimensions, Private Higher Education, Competitive Advantage

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### 1. Introduction

Service quality is the single qualifier or disqualifier for most organisations in service industries. Wang, Lo and Yang (2004) point out that customer-perceived service quality is one of the most important success factors of sustained competitive advantage for both manufacturers and service providers. Higher education is certainly one of these, and this is especially the case for private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The higher education landscape (both public and private) has changed substantially over the last decade. Customer service and service quality are driving forces in the business community and higher education institutions tussle for the competitive advantage in terms of high service quality.

Recent conflict during student registrations in South Africa drew the attention to service quality at both public and private higher education institutions. Capacity constraints and poor registration

management seem to be the main causes of all the bad publicity. Many argue that academic capacity decreased following the mergers between several higher education institutions from 2004 onward. Some of the reasons given for this state of affairs are disruptions caused by the inadequate management of the project(s), the resignation of academic staff and the employment of inexperienced young academics. In addition, some institutions had to continue with programmes without any permanent staff, while new programme qualification mixes (PQMs) had to be designed, approved, developed and implemented.

Another major cause of the capacity problem is that students still prefer public universities above private institutions. If all higher education institutions go through the same credibility and accreditation processes, why are they not all recognised as (and named) “universities” by the Department of Education? If the government were to allow this (in a controlled way) student numbers will

increase and existing academic capacity at PHEIs will be utilised. The problem remains and service quality is under tremendous pressure at public universities. The research on which this article is based focuses on service quality in higher education, with specific reference to PHEIs because of the perception (hypothesis) that service quality is higher at these institutions.

A good reputation and academic integrity are no longer enough, and higher corporate governance standards spur new quality initiatives as quality assurance in higher education becomes standard practice. For example, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education has recently scrapped all distance education programmes provided by both private and public institutions in the country. This directive was issued to industry stakeholders on 26 August 2010 by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency. This caught many PHEIs off guard. Aside from locally owned PHEIs providing distance learning education, some foreign institutions such as the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the Open University UK had entered the market. It is not clear whether the directive would also be applicable to these foreign institutions. Quality and service quality are the main concerns and the measurement of service quality is regarded by many to be more important than auditing the quality assurance systems.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa registers (accredits) PHEIs under strict preconditions and prerequisites. This is necessary to maintain the well-known high standards of universities in South Africa and to eliminate the potential fly-by-night organisations who seek to compete with the government. Some PHEIs did harm the market and the entire quality assurance drive on the part of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the CHE is commendable. The perception about PHEIs is therefore not very positive, although some of these institutions do have a proud reputation and impressive alumni. This article reports on the findings from an exploratory mixed method study on three cases of PHEIs (with different niche markets), providing a new perspective on their competitive advantages, such as service quality.

The article commences with a literature review on service quality, which is followed by the research methodology, findings, and conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The measurement of service quality

The literature presents a number of service quality measurement models, each of which attempts to capture and annotate service quality. The GAP model is based on several types of gaps such as the “delivery

gap” exemplifying the difference between the actual service provided by the employee of the organisation and the specifications set by management. The RATER model, designed by Zeithaml (1990), offers a complementary analysis of the perception gap. Gržinić (2007) mentions a framework for the development of an internal service quality measure referred to as INSQPLUS. Another example is the Grönroos Perceived Service (GPS) quality model. This article elaborates on the SERVQUAL instrument, which was also empirically tested as a research method to measure service quality in one PHEI case (see the section on research methodology).

The challenge lies in identifying the model which most effectively ascertains the core definition of service quality, which is ultimately determined by the customers. Educators might regard measuring customer satisfaction (service quality) at an educational establishment as one of the most important but also greatest challenges of the quality movement. Service quality measurement is an area of growing interest to researchers and managers. It is also an area characterised by debate concerning the need for measuring customer expectations and how they should be measured. Many regard this as the single most important measure for a quality educational establishment (such as a PHEI).

The SERVQUAL instrument was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988. It involves the use of fundamental service dimensions (e.g. concerning student services) that are queried and surveyed using the SERVQUAL methodology. A review of the literature indicates that SERVQUAL, although an “older” instrument, remains a reliable measurement for service quality. Carrillat, Jaramillo and Mulki (2007) confirm this by stating that SERVQUAL and SERVPERF are equally reliable instruments in assessing service quality. Baxter (2004) indicates that SERVQUAL is also extremely valuable in an environment where the focus is on income, business needs and value for money. Barnes (2007) agrees with this view and provides evidence that SERVQUAL is a tried and tested instrument that has been successfully applied in various service industries and that its strengths more than outweigh its weaknesses.

Foster (2010) sees the value of SERVQUAL in its ability to identify several “gaps” in service delivery. Examples of these gaps are:

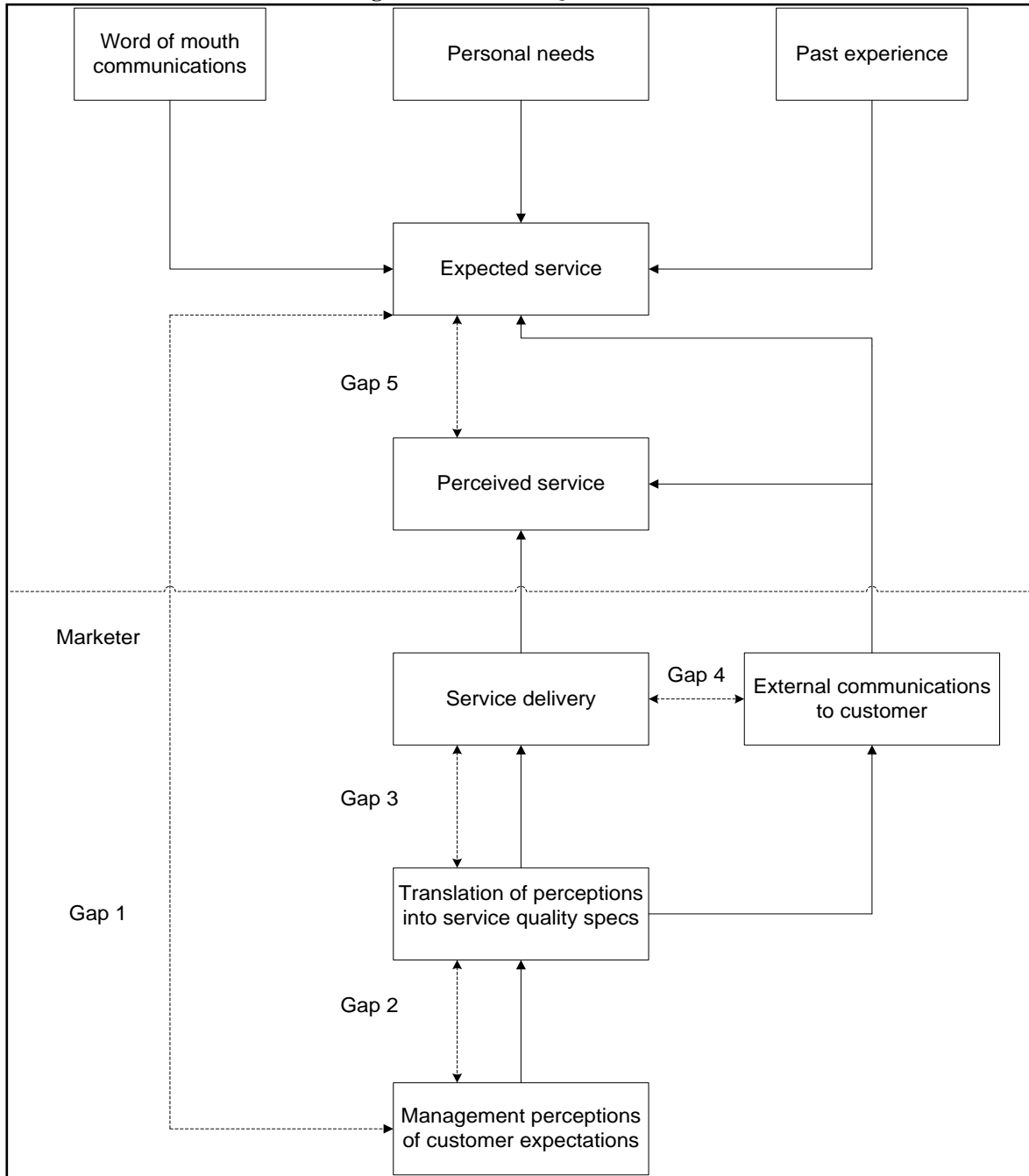
- the gap between service quality specifications and the service that is actually provided
- the gap between customer expectations and management’s perception of these expectations
- the gap between management’s perception of customer needs and the specifications that management develops to meet customer expectations.

Foster (2010), who lists a number of advantages of using the SERVQUAL instrument, indicates that it is accepted as a standard for assessing different dimensions of service quality and that it has been

shown to be valid for a number of service institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the basic measurement process of the SERVQUAL instrument in terms of the two

primary parts, namely customer expectations and customer perceptions.

Figure 1. The SERVQUAL instrument



Source: Foster, 2010:165

The instrument can be used on a wider spectrum of South African universities (including PHEIs), considering that a rigorous analysis has demonstrated the usefulness of the approach in gathering students' perceptions (Dirkse van Schalkwyk, 2011). SERVQUAL was also tested (and service quality gaps were identified) at two colleges of one of the three PHEI cases discussed in this article (with reference to the results of the exploratory study).

## 2.2 Service quality research

An overview of the literature shows a wide spectrum of related research on service quality. However, screening the recent publications does not reveal much such research among PHEIs or public universities. This may indicate the need to further this research on the topic within higher education institutions (possibly ideal topics for prospective master's or doctoral students). Service quality research is being done in various typical service industries

such as the airline industry (Fodness & Murray, 2007; Rhoades & Waguespack, 2008), the hotel industry (Wilkins, Merrilees & Herington, 2007), call centres (Robinson & Morley, 2006; Bharadwaj & Roggeveen, 2008) and the health-care industry (Arasli, Ekiz & Katircioglu, 2008). Research on general service quality includes work from Svensson (2006), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Di Mascio (2007), Yap and Sweeney (2007), Carillat et al., (2008), Dimitriadis and Stevens (2008) and Yee, Yeung and Cheng (2008).

### **2.3 Quality assurance in higher education**

Quality assurance (QA) is steadily becoming an integral part of higher education. It was a novelty in education a few decades ago, with the emphasis falling on quality assurance systems and procedures. The field of quality assurance and accountability is far from new as it has been present for decades, although accountability may mean something different now than it did in the past. Quality has always been of great importance to academic institutions, but it relied much on academic integrity, culture and a good reputation. The current emphasis on QA systems and external quality system audits sometimes leads to window dressing. By contrast, several universities (e.g. the Consortium of Northern German Universities) strive for the development and usage of internal quality instruments which measure quality independently and fairly.

A culture of quality surely influences and enforces the quality of teaching, but it is an optimistic conclusion for those universities with a relatively lower level of intellectual staff competence, scientific achievements and material resources (classrooms, library, equipment, software). It is also true that a low level of these resources does not necessarily mean that the teaching will be worse. Outcomes also depend on how the resources are used and this is crucially influenced by the culture (shared values) of the academic community. An overemphasis on the influence of a culture of quality on the quality of teaching may be a reason for concern to those institutions that rely on this only. The same applies to those underestimating the importance of a culture of quality, because they may neglect the factor that triggers the potential.

A quality higher education institution (HEI) will manage service quality as a priority, regardless of its QA approach. Service quality can therefore be a summative overall measure of how good the university or PHEI is. The focus of this article is therefore not on operational quality (process quality, resources quality and infrastructural quality), but on output quality in terms of strategic service quality and generic service quality dimensions such as empathy, trust (assurance), responsiveness and reliability.

### **2.4 Service quality as strategic priority in higher education**

Khan, Ahmed and Nawaz (2011) report that while there is an insignificant relationship between tangible dimensions and student satisfaction, there is a significant relationship between service quality dimensions (such as assurance, empathy and reliability) and satisfaction. These authors also state that satisfaction has a positive relationship with students' motivation and willingness to put more effort into their work.

Most authors regard service quality as an investment that is required to stay competitive in the global market. The service sector has gained much economic importance over the past few decades. This sector may account for as much as 60 per cent of the value added in certain economies and meeting customer expectations is the single focus area of management in the service sector. Service quality in higher education can be defined as meeting and exceeding the students' and related stakeholders' perceptions and expectations by rendering a continuous (sustained) educational service package with tangible and intangible elements that conform to predetermined requirements for effective teaching and learning.

Voon (2006) refers to an increase in the sophistication and internationalisation of the labour market, lecturers, researchers, students and competitive education programmes and emphasises the importance and competitive advantages of service quality. Khoshafian (2007) contends that service quality is always associated with the reliability and performance of the service. O'Neill and Palmer (in Voss, Gruber & Szmigin, 2007) describe service quality in higher education as the difference between what a student expects to receive and his or her perceptions of actual delivery. The emphasis is particularly on the measurement and improvement of service quality, because the reasons for maintaining service excellence in higher education are many, including the increase in PHEIs entering the market.

## **3. Problem statement**

Service quality will remain a strategic priority for any higher education institution and the recent problems at many public universities put the focus on the general status and service quality status of PHEIs as legitimate providers of higher education. Although the perception exists that many PHEIs are not up to standard, many are becoming significant role players in the tertiary education sector in South Africa. It also seems that service quality levels are higher at these institutions, although they have other unique challenges. They may be more expensive and some may not have reputable academic staff members (professors, doctors as lecturers). It may also be that they neglect their research mission. PHEIs are in the

service industry and service quality is inherent to their core business. One way to get closer to the truth is to measure their service quality status as an indicator of their credibility and sustainability. By doing so, one will not be able to answer all the questions, but one will certainly be able to determine much about their credibility as “universities”. The research problem is therefore related to the quality of PHEIs as measured by their service quality status.

#### 4. Purpose and methodology

The purpose of this study was to address the problem with reference to the problem statement. The specific purpose was to explore service quality and to:

- explore the strategic importance of service quality at PHEIs;
- explore the general service quality status of PHEIs;
- measure specific service quality dimensions in two cases; and
- explore the willingness of PHEIs to improve and measure service quality by means of the SERVQUAL instrument (as a research methodology to measure service gaps).

Case research is very effective and powerful, but also time-consuming. It requires skilled interviewers and care must be taken to draw conclusions from a limited set of cases, although internal validity can increase through triangulation. The fast-changing business world calls for case research by focusing on a limited number of cases. Cooper and Schindler (2011) assist researchers with business research methods because of the importance of business intelligence. The business world is likely to change more in the next 10 years than it has in the last 50. PHEIs are non-government-assisted businesses and they are in a totally different situation than public universities. “Business research” is defined and regarded as different (Cooper & Schindler, 2011:4) in terms of performance (e.g. service delivery) and what strategies and tactics capture the highest return on investment (ROI). Business research is certainly applicable at PHEIs and PHEIs will certainly also change drastically over the next 10 years. This article provides a summation of data and general information.

The primary challenge of this type of research is to find gatekeepers of different information sources and the research requires limited inference or conclusion drawing (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The research was exploratory (therefore work in progress) and did not commit to a singular paradigmatic research practice, nor did it attempt to generalise results through external validity. The purpose was to address the research problem (find potential solutions or answers) and to generate one or more hypotheses.

A mixed method approach is, therefore, ideal in case research. Both quantitative and qualitative

methods were used in three case studies (qualitative research) and a questionnaire survey (quantitative research) was conducted in two of the cases. Mixed methods (with some epistemological differences from different research paradigms) were therefore used to increase the breadth and depth of insight and understanding to address the research problem. The researchers also selected this approach due to overemphasis on quantitative methods. This research was not only inductive (to test service quality), but also deductive (to develop and enrich theory). Cooper and Endacott (2007) refer to generic qualitative research; in this study phenomenology and action research were applicable. The phenomenon was explored in depth by this personal survey. The following principles were applied:

- A focused case study approach provides the opportunity to repeat the measure (repeat questions, repeat visits and obtain the same or similar feedback from multiple sources) to test reliability.

- The same scale (the observers conducting the personal survey) was used to measure dimensions or cases consistently. This improved validity because the scale (or the measuring instrument) knew what to look for (ensuring that the construct it claimed to be measuring was measured).

- Triangulation was used to overcome the potential weaknesses of intended content validity based on face value. Face validity can be weak unless the subjectivity is addressed. Experts may still be subjective in their opinions, but this can be overcome by quantitative methods (which were applied in one case study).

- Multiple service quality dimensions (and related dimensions) were identified and measured to represent the domain of the construct. The respective cases provided opportunities to clarify make sure and dig deeper. This is the strength of triangulation by means of mixed methods.

- The three well-established PHEIs (A, B and C) can be described according to their student markets: (1) PHEI A is called a “college” and is well known for project management teaching and learning programmes; (2) PHEI B is called an “institute”, and is a large JSE-listed institution known for a wide variety of programmes; (3) PHEI C is called a “foundation” and is known for medical and health-related teaching and learning programmes. The results are summarised and presented in the same sequence (A, B and C) in the next section. Although the status of the research is exploratory (work in progress), the preliminary results show some strong indicators.

#### 4.1 Summary of methods

The specific description of the measuring instruments and sources of information in each case (PHEIs A, B and C) are summarised as follows:

**Table 1.** Summary of methods

PHEI	Interviews with the CEO and senior personnel	Personal survey and campus visit(s)	Regular discussions, observations and meetings spread over a year	Published documents and statements	Empirical student survey (quantitative study)
A	√	√	X	√	√
B	√	√	√	√	√
C	√	√	√	√	X

The selected cases were based on their similarities (e.g. mission, vision, PHEI status, business management students and location). Although similar measuring instruments (for triangulation purposes) were selected in terms of the researcher's perspective, each case would still be unique and different in relation to what they would allow as far as confidentiality and depth of the study were concerned. The purpose of the study was to explore and internal validity per case was more important than the apparent similarities of the results between the cases.

## 5. Results and findings

A summary of the combined results of the three cases (obtained by a variety of qualitative methods) is provided in this section.

The three cases showed the general quality (and related) characteristics as highlighted below:

1. All three cases regard service quality as a strategic priority in terms of a competitive edge for credibility and sustainability.

2. They emphasise quality of reputation, quality of systems and their specialisation in products that serve specific niche markets. They are flexible and relatively independent (they do not receive government subsidies). Income is generated via sponsors, donors and student registrations. They are all highly profit-centred. One PHEI is a certified ISO 9001 institution.

3. Service delivery is regarded as the core business of their operations system. They fully understand the value of a loyal customer and the benefits of a higher throughput and the word-of-mouth following from student satisfaction (through all the service quality dimensions).

4. Quality of product (programme offering) is emphasised, although the lecturing capacity is limited in terms of permanent staff with doctoral qualifications. This is a weakness in all the cases, although some utilise previously employed professors.

5. Research is emphasised and widely proclaimed, although published research output is limited.

6. A personal approach to teaching and learning is emphasised. The distance teaching mode of delivery is limited but increasingly offered as an

option. One PHEI is considering offering distance-based degrees in the near future.

7. The focus is on diplomas and degree qualifications. SLPs (short learning programme certificate qualifications) are not core business, but this approach is gradually becoming a new business priority.

8. Community service is embedded within their mission. One case in particular shows a surprisingly high portfolio of evidence of engagement in community service.

All these cases consider using SERVQUAL (as tested at two of these cases) in the future.

The next section summarises the results of the survey at each PHEI (A, B and C) in terms of the following:

1. General observation (related to service quality)
2. Service quality management
3. Measuring service quality
4. Results of the SERVQUAL survey (done at PHEI A and PHEI B only)

### 5.1 Brief summary of case: PHEI A

#### 5.1.1 General observation of the case

This provider (PHEI A) has adopted a general quality management strategy, but does not have a specific service quality strategy or system. It regards itself as a top provider of private graduate education in South Africa, and has established itself internationally as a leader in the field of project and programme management (the full spectrum of engineering, construction and corporate projects and programmes) in terms of the renowned internationally accepted project management body of knowledge (PMBOK). It has a high regard for quality leadership and quality of academic faculty. This particular PHEI regards itself as being ahead with strategy-centred leadership and views itself as a research institution "... continuously keeping abreast of cutting-edge paradigms and practices around the world, (with) academics regularly participating in world congresses, their papers and publications internationally acclaimed".

PHEI A describes itself as a business school catering for postgraduate qualifications. In addition to a few short learning programmes (SLPs), they offer

an advanced diploma, postgraduate diploma and master's degree in project management. Its PhD qualification is pending approval, making them one of the first PHEIs offering doctoral degrees. This PHEI believes in word-of-mouth following from product and service quality, as opposed to investing money in branding. Its credibility is vested in the academic staff, their programme offerings and the reputation of the business school.

### 5.1.2 Service quality management

Their strategic drive towards general excellence does not exclude service quality, but they do not have a specific service quality drive. The PHEI is a college and was also certified (by PricewaterhouseCoopers) as an ISO 9001 institution. The system is audited annually and the outcomes of the recent audits were exceptionally positive (some audits were 100% "clean"). The quality management system standard (ISO 9001) is not for service quality per se, but it has many characteristics benefitting service quality and embodies a culture of service quality. The main aim of this PHEI is to provide service excellence to their internal and external customers, and to measure the performance of delivery processes. Quality is uppermost in their minds to achieve stakeholder satisfaction and the quality of their learning programmes and services enjoys the highest priority. Incrementally improved technology is favoured, while human resources are constantly retrained to master innovations. They foster a unique way to empower their internal customers to be process owners and to be "masters of their own destinies". They believe in attaining self-satisfaction through satisfied students.

Their students and their employees are the focus of everything they do: they are focused on delivering improved learning programmes and services to their stakeholders on a continuous basis, and to deliver them better than any competitor locally or internationally. They regard the Department of Education, the Council on Higher Education, SAQA and their students' employers as their partners. Together they attempt to create and sustain mutually beneficial relationships to enhance the quality of learning programmes and services to their students.

One student (Liebenberg, pers.comm: 2012) provided the following feedback: "Their offerings are recognised by (as prerequisites for) several MBA qualifications (offered at other universities) and their own RPL (recognition of prior learning) is very efficient. They aim for a three-hour turn-around time

per enquiry and they use the balanced scorecard to measure the quality of the business. They are relatively expensive but do register hundreds of students per intake (currently 700 students per annum). The registration process has a short lead time and they should welcome any suggestion to improve service delivery."

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning their low staff turnover, and their unique way of empowering their staff, which is commendable. In addition, students do not need to make appointments for visits.

### 5.1.3 Measuring service quality

They do not measure service quality per se but support the SERVQUAL instrument in principle for future application.

### 5.1.4 Results of the SERVQUAL survey conducted at PHEI A

The primary purpose of this investigation was to obtain insight into the level of service quality delivery at this PHEI and to test the value of the SERVQUAL instrument for further applications. It was found that the utilisation of the measuring instrument can be extended to other higher education institutions. The usefulness of the measurement tool (research methodology) may therefore lead to more comprehensive studies.

A basic Likert-type scale of 7 was used at PHEI A (as well as two of the colleges of PHEI B – one of the larger colleges in Gauteng and the smaller campus in KwaZulu-Natal). Typical core service quality dimensions were measured and service quality dimensions related to tangibles are not included in this article. The following primary direct service quality dimensions were selected for the purposes of this exploratory investigation:

- Empathy
- Trust and assurance
- Reliability
- Responsiveness

A convenience sample of 20 students was obtained from PHEI A. The college assisted the researchers with this electronic survey with regard to accessibility and administration of the data. The students' perception of service delivery (P) versus their expected service score (E) was measured and the gap score is given as the difference between P and E. The data of the survey on PHEI A is provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Service quality dimensions: PHEI A**A. Service quality dimension: empathy**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students receive individual attention from administrative personnel.	20	-0.15	5.4	5.55
2. Lecturers provide individual attention to students.	20	-0.05	5.35	5.4
3. College staff know the needs of the students.	20	0.1	6.1	6
4. College staff have the students' best interest at heart.	20	0.3	6.25	5.95
5. College staff are easily accessible for students.	20	0.25	6.25	6
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>5.87</b>	<b>5.78</b>

**B. Service quality dimension: trust and assurance**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students can trust the personnel of the college.	20	0.2	6.4	6.2
2. Staff at the college inspire confidence.	20	0.2	6.35	6.15
3. College staff are polite.	20	0.3	6.4	6.1
4. Staff get adequate support from the college management to improve the performance of their services.	20	0	6.05	6.05
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0.175</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>6.125</b>

**C. Service quality dimension: reliability**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college keeps its promises (e.g. to do something at a certain time).	20	-0.75	5.9	6.65
2. Student problems are treated with sympathy and reassurance.	20	-0.25	5.95	6.2
3. The college is dependable and carries out the service right first time.	20	-0.35	5.95	6.3
4. The college provides services at the time it promises to do so.	20	-0.5	6	6.5
5. The college keeps its records (e.g. accounts, academic reports) accurately.	20	-0.25	6.45	6.7
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>-0.42</b>	<b>6.05</b>	<b>6.47</b>

**D. Service quality dimension: responsiveness**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college tells students when services will be performed.	20	-0.15	6.2	6.35
2. Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from college staff.	20	-0.2	6.2	6.4
3. Lecturers at the college are willing to assist students.	20	-0.15	6.15	6.3
4. College staff are not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly.	20	0.05	6.15	6.1
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>-0.1125</b>	<b>6.175</b>	<b>6.2875</b>

The service quality in terms of two of the selected quality dimensions was high. This can be seen in the low gaps between P and E. Expectations were outperformed in many cases:

- College staff were easily accessible for students (e.g. students could easily approach college staff with related to academic problems and queries) and received a positive score of 0.25.

- Trust and assurance – this dimension was the best at PHEI A. The college staff were polite – a positive score of 0.3. The overall average score for trust and assurance was a positive score of 0.175.

- Responsiveness – College staff were not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly (a positive score of 0.05).

In contrast to the positive gap scores for the dimensions of empathy and trust and assurance, it seems that their biggest concern was reliability with a negative gap score of -0.42. It is interesting to note that although PHEI A prided itself on service quality as part of their drive towards excellence, they seemed to fall short on both dimensions of reliability and responsiveness (negative scores of -0.42 and -0.1125 respectively). It also appears that the SERVQUAL



results may be less positive than the results obtained from the qualitative survey.

## 5.2 Brief summary of case: PHEI B

### 5.2.1 General observation of the case

The following case study is of a large private institution (named an institute) offering a range of full qualifications and SLPs via several sites organised into four teaching divisions. They are listed on the JSE with a bold mission to provide high-quality programmes that respond to the needs of the developing economy and they strive towards inculcating an entrepreneurial culture through education. They also strive towards contributing to the bodies of knowledge through research. They offer several SLPs (and are also considering offering them through distance learning) and degree programmes. One of their flagship degrees is the Bachelor of Arts honours degree specialising in communication management and creative brand communications.

### 5.2.2 Service quality management

This institution has a specific drive towards service quality. They will, for example, welcome postgraduate students who wish to conduct student surveys to identify gaps for improvement. Their primary strategy is service quality, although they place the focus on a broader, more extended view of quality – the quality of an educated, competent and transformed student. This can be seen in published website statements such as: “... providing education that results in a skill set that meets the needs of the economy is an investment that will enable individuals to weather this storm and poise themselves for

positions of leadership through this period of turbulence and when easier times return”. They regard it a mandate and responsibility to ensure that their students graduate with the skills, knowledge and values that will set them apart from others.

It is not uncommon for a PHEI to commit itself to the pursuit of excellence and to undertake that its quality and commitment to the student learning experience will continue to differentiate. This PHEI offers a surprisingly healthy social campus atmosphere (setting) and seems to be the closest to a typical public university.

### 5.2.3 Measuring service quality

They support the SERVQUAL instrument (also to be tested on their campuses in this study) and are considering investing more by means of more comprehensive SERVQUAL surveys. This indicates that they have (or will have) a specific service quality management system.

### 5.2.4 Results of the SERVQUAL survey conducted at PHEI B

A high response rate of 336 (out of a possible 1 000 students) was obtained from the Gauteng campus. The KwaZulu-Natal campus also responded well (120 out of a possible 650 students). The college assisted the researchers with this electronic survey in terms of accessibility and administration of the data. The student’s perception of service delivery (P) versus his or her expected service score (E) was measured and the gap score is given as the difference between P and E. The data of the survey on the Gauteng campus is provided in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Service quality dimensions: PHEI B Gauteng campus

#### A. Service quality dimension: empathy

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students receive individual attention from administrative personnel.	336	-0.08	3.61	3.68
2. Lecturers provide individual attention to students.	336	-0.13	4.06	4.19
3. College staff know the needs of the students.	336	0.05	3.58	3.53
4. College staff have the students’ best interest at heart.	336	0.01	3.49	4.48
5. College staff are easily accessible for students.	336	-0.23	3.86	4.09
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>-0.08</b>	<b>3.72</b>	<b>3.80</b>

#### B. Service quality dimension: trust and assurance

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students can trust the personnel of the college.	336	-0.22	3.61	3.83
2. Staff at the college inspire confidence.	336	-0.02	3.86	3.88
3. College staff are polite.	336	-0.23	3.73	3.96
4. Staff get adequate support from the college management to improve the performance of their services.	336	-0.08	3.71	3.79
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>-0.14</b>	<b>3.73</b>	<b>3.86</b>

**C. Service quality dimension: reliability**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college keeps its promises (e.g. to do something at a certain time).	336	0.19	3.30	3.11
2. Student problems are treated with sympathy and reassurance.	336	0.02	3.46	3.44
3. The college is dependable and performs the service right first time.	336	0.05	3.43	3.39
4. The college provides services at the time it promises to do so.	336	0.18	3.33	3.15
5. The college keeps its records (e.g. accounts, academic reports) accurately.	336	-0.19	4.17	4.36
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>3.54</b>	<b>3.49</b>

**D. Service quality dimension: responsiveness**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college tells students when services will be performed.	336	-0.5	3.95	4.44
2. Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from college staff.	336	0.01	3.31	3.29
3. Lecturers at the college are willing to assist students.	336	-0.60	4.35	4.95
4. College staff are not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly.	336	-0.07	3.53	3.60
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>-0.22</b>	<b>3.73</b>	<b>3.95</b>

The service quality in terms of the selected quality dimensions is high. This can be seen in the low gaps between P and E. Expectations were outperformed in many cases:

- Speediness was an operational performance objective (e.g. students received fast, prompt service delivery from college staff) and obtained a positive score of 0.01.

- Reliability – this dimension was the best at this campus. The college provided services at the time it promised to do so – a positive score of 0.18. The overall average score for reliability is a positive score of 0.05.

- Empathy – College staff of this campus had the students' best interest at heart (a positive score of 0.01) and they seemed to know the needs of the students – a positive score of 0.05.

This report indicates the potential value for further utilisation of the measuring instrument. The instrument itself fosters reliability and eventual validity if the response rates are satisfactory, as in this case. The overall positive score (small service gap) obtained at PHEI B provides a preliminary study for other colleges at this institution and other institutions. The results of the second survey from the KwaZulu-Natal campus are given in Table 4 below.

**Table 4.** Service quality dimensions: PHEI B KwaZulu-Natal campus

**A. Service quality dimension: empathy**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students receive individual attention from administrative personnel.	120	-0.21	3.32	3.53
2. Lecturers provide individual attention to students.	120	-0.34	3.63	3.98
3. College staff know the needs of the students.	120	0.19	3.51	3.32
4. College staff have the students' best interest at heart.	120	0.02	3.39	3.37
5. College staff are easily accessible for students.	120	-0.59	3.32	3.91
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>-0.19</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>3.62</b>

**B. Service quality dimension: trust and assurance**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. Students can trust the personnel of the college.	120	-0.23	3.37	3.60
2. Staff at the college inspire confidence.	120	-0.19	3.48	3.67
3. College staff are polite.	120	-0.07	3.47	3.54
4. Staff get adequate support from the college management to improve the performance of their services.	120	-0.29	3.43	3.72
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>-0.19</b>	<b>3.44</b>	<b>3.63</b>

**C. Service quality dimension: reliability**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college keeps its promises (e.g. to do something at a certain time).	120	0.04	3.44	3.40
2. Student problems are treated with sympathy and reassurance.	120	-0.22	3.39	3.61
3. The college is dependable and performs the service right first time.	120	-0.15	3.35	3.50
4. The college provides services at the time it promises to do so.	120	-0.15	3.28	3.42
5. The college keeps its records (e.g. accounts, academic reports) accurately.	120	-0.44	3.84	4.28
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>-0.18</b>	<b>3.46</b>	<b>3.64</b>

**D. Service quality dimension: responsiveness**

Sub-dimension statement	n	Gap score	P	E
1. The college tells students when services will be performed.	120	-0.59	3.60	4.19
2. Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from college staff.	120	-0.06	3.48	3.55
3. Lecturers at the college are willing to assist students.	120	-0.95	3.87	4.82
4. College staff are not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly.	120	-0.11	3.34	3.45
<b>AVERAGE OF THIS SUB-DIMENSION:</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>-0.38</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>3.93</b>

The results show that the smaller KwaZulu-Natal campus of this PHEI has a lower level of service quality than the larger campus in Gauteng. Service quality should not be regarded as low or bad (as the negative scores are low), but it should be investigated why a smaller and more personal or manageable campus seems to deliver services at a lower level than the large campus. The biggest concern is their responsiveness, with a high negative score of -0.38 (e.g. lecturers at the college are not willing to assist students). The other concerns are related to empathy and reliability:

- Lecturers provide individual attention to students – a negative score of -0.34.
- College staff are easily accessible for students – a negative score of -0.59.
- The college keeps its records (e.g. accounts, academic reports) accurately – a negative score of -0.44.

**5.3 Brief summary of case: PHEI C****5.3.1 General observation of the case**

This institution is called a “foundation” and has been well established for more than 10 years. They have sound relations with government and they understand the political scenario in South Africa. They receive substantial donations from other countries due to their good reputation and AIDS prevention and treatment programmes. They have trained more than 10 000 medical doctors in managerial skills. They offer a full range of full qualifications and SLPs via their head office in Pretoria. They focus on medical and health-related programmes, with a simple vision “to build a better society through education and development”. The mission of this PHEI is to ensure the availability

of skilled professionals, allied workers and managers who will be able to deliver a service to the public that is affordable, evidence based and congruent with international best practice. They do not distinguish between quality management and their integrated approach to general excellence.

**5.3.2 Service quality management**

With their general “excellence approach” they do not have a specific service quality drive, but strive towards an integrated quality approach as part of their value system and the empowerment of people in general. They support BEE and have a culturally diverse organisation. Consideration for the rights of individuals and groups is integral to the organisation and they honour the personal beliefs of their clients, their staff and their service beneficiaries. Their humane approach has service quality as a priority and is holistic, to include the entire society. They (PHEI C) have a strong focus on community engagement. All their activities are dedicated to serving the best interests of society, although their current focus is public health priorities and the promotion of optimal health care which edifies and serves the basic needs of people in terms of respect and dignity.

They concentrate on training and development by providing a comprehensive curriculum of development courses in management and professional skills that are customised to the needs of managers and practitioners. Educational products are offered through exhibitions, formal qualifications, SLPs, in-house courses and conferences. They also regard themselves as a research institution which promotes action research, clinical research and research on educational practice.

They emphasise community engagement with reference to their portfolio of evidence of their work towards the development of grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their involvement in medical treatment and care, and the development of institutional capacity within the public sector.

### 5.3.3 Measuring service quality

This PHEI does not measure service quality, but they are positive about the possibilities of utilising the SERVQUAL instrument in the near future.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

PHEIs seem to have a definite future in Africa, although the challenges are many. Service quality seems to be one of the highest strategic priorities and it seems as though the quality of service delivery is higher than that in public universities (this is a hypothesis that needs further investigation). They serve a specific niche market and purpose, posing a limited threat to public universities. These institutions are more flexible and they are independent (private institutions do not receive government subsidies). PHEIs are highly profit-centred and income is generated via sponsors, donors and student registrations.

Quality of product (programme offering) is emphasised, although the lecturing (faculty) capacity seems to be limited as far as permanent staff with doctoral qualifications is concerned. Research is emphasised and widely proclaimed, although the published research output seems to be limited. Distance teaching mode of delivery is limited, but is increasingly offered as an option. SLPs (short learning programmes) are not core business, but they are becoming a growing new business priority. Community service is embedded within their mission, and one case shows a surprisingly large portfolio of evidence of engagement in the community in the form of medical and health assistance programmes.

PHEIs seem to welcome the extended use of such a survey to improve their reputation as credible higher education players in the South African education landscape. The information obtained from the three PHEI cases indicates their hunger to obtain more competitive advantages. Public universities also strive for service quality excellence, but they do not seem to be as driven as the PHEIs. All the cases showed willingness to measure service quality by means of instruments such as SERVQUAL. Consequently, the instrument was tested on campuses of two of the three PHEI's. It seems to provide valuable information for PHEI management. Service quality in terms of the selected quality dimensions was high overall, with low gaps between P and E. One campus seemed to be responsive (students receive fast, prompt service delivery from college

staff and a positive score of 0.01 was recorded) and reliable (with an overall positive score of 0.05). In this case the college provides services at the time it promises to do so (a positive score of 0.18). The SERVQUAL instrument also indicated that empathy measured positively (the college has the student's best interest at heart, with a positive score of 0.01; and it seems to know the needs of the students, with a positive score of 0.05).

This article indicated the potential for further utilisation of the measuring instrument. In itself, the instrument fosters reliability and eventual validity if the response rates are satisfactory, as they were in this case (33%). The overall positive findings (small service gap) at PHEI B serve as a preliminary study for themselves, but also for other colleges at other institutions.

It is recommended that a more in-depth study (at a doctoral level) be undertaken among the five leading PHEIs in South Africa. Such a study could focus on all aspects of service quality dimensions in terms of a model for TQS (total quality service). This study will, among others, also determine if the level of service quality at PHEIs is in fact higher than that at public universities (the hypothesis).

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