

Managerial issues associated with service quality – the case of the University of KwaZulu Natal

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Abstract. The University of KwaZulu- Natal (UKZN) is a South African university that has established itself as a well recognized institution of tertiary learning and quality research. To compete in a very competitive arena, the university has to set itself apart from others. UKZN can do so quiet strategically by providing high quality services that can serve as a competitive advantage. In this study, a quality survey was conducted on students at UKZN, to determine their level of customer satisfaction. This paper aims to highlight the managerial issues associated with service quality. The results emanating from the study would help provide management of the university with suitable recommendations to enhance the service experience provided to its students.

Keywords: service quality, competitive advantage.

1. Introduction

A university is a service organization that has at its disposal various management tools that can help it create a competitive advantage. One such tool is instilling ‘quality’ within all its structures. However, to fine tune ‘quality’ as a competitive advantage, management has to take into account the issues associated with quality that can positively or negatively impact on its viability and continued strategic strength within the institution. There are various managerial issues associated with service quality. For this paper, the researcher will pay particular attention to, developing a culture of service quality, ethics, identifying and building strategically important stakeholder relationships, developing a customer relationship management system and developing and maintaining a performance management system.

2. Conceptualising Quality

When conceptualizing ‘quality’, there are various views and debates surrounding this abstract concept.

Some of the views are discussed briefly below.

“Quality is a consumer-generated comparative judgment, since individuals have no implicit sense of quality unless a standard of comparison is provided,” (Oliver, 1997:163). Quality is “the extent in which the service, the service process and the service organization can satisfy the expectations of the user” (Kasper, van Helsdingen, & de Vries, 1999:188). Batesman (1992:494) adds to the debate on service quality by stating that service quality offers a way of achieving success among competing services.

According to Naidoo (2011:4) quality dimensions within a tertiary institution refers to quality in terms of well skilled academic staff; quality of program offering and its value and relevance to the labour market; quality in terms of good facilities, equipment, lecture and recreational venues; quality in terms of good administration staff who are efficient in administration and dealing with student affairs; quality in terms of safety of the students at campus; quality in terms of research output; quality in terms of scholarships and funding facilities available to students within the campus; ranking of the university within the country; global recognition of the university and the universities commitment to international student enrolments.

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3. Management issues associated with quality

When observing the various management issues associated with service quality within UKZN, the following key issues were raised and are highlighted below.

From the onset, within any well established service organization such as UKZN, management needs to emphasize on developing a culture of service quality. Metters et al (2006: 196) argues that companies who regularly deliver quality services usually have a corporate culture that encourages and supports quality throughout the company. Starting at the very top and moving down through the ranks to the newest employee, these companies not only “talk the talk” but also enthusiastically “walk the walk” together as a team. Metters et al (2006:196-199) comments that companies that provide not just good services but outstanding services have H.E.A.R.T in their corporate culture. They live and breathe the philosophy of:

- Hire the right people - Hire the right people and treat them with respect. Analysis of successful service companies show cultures that value each employee. Quality cultures recognize that you must hire the best people you can find who already support your corporate values and then train them for the skills you need. Find people with the right spirit, are other people oriented, are outgoing, and work hard.
- Educate and train them well - A common theme at companies with a quality culture is an excellent ongoing training program. New hires are immediately immersed in the company’s culture, learn its value, and become a valued team member.
- Allow them to fix anything - Quality culture requires the empowerment of employees to do whatever is required to create a satisfactory customer service experience.
- Recognize and reward them regularly - Rewards are a key element in developing a quality culture, both on an individual and team basis. Set up recognition programs for people and teams. Most such recognition should be more symbolic than material. It should reward behaviors and actions that support the culture values of “we’re all in this together” or open communication or process improvement and so on.
- Tell them everything, every day.

The above philosophy can also be adopted by UKZN, in its quest to enhance a culture of service quality.

Ethics is another important management consideration. Honesty, conflict of interest, discrimination by age, sex or race, bribery, whistle-blowing, accuracy of books and records, privacy of employee records, misuse of company assets, corporate governance issues, issues in negotiation, employee discipline, mergers and acquisitions, drug and alcohol abuse and intelligence gathering are ethical issues that the university management encounter.

Apart from students and its employees it is important to note that a university is an organization that needs to identify and build strategically important stakeholder relationships. These relationships should be built on honesty, trust and integrity. Honesty, trust, integrity are all factors that relate directly to the image and reputation of a university. The reputation and image of a university is thus important service quality variables that makes a university unique and worth working with and studying at, and under no circumstances should its integrity be compromised. Brink et al (2004:136) indicates that it is crucial for an organization to understand the values and expectations of each stakeholder group in order to determine their willingness either to help or hinder the organization in striving towards its vision. Positive matching of the needs and objectives of the stakeholders and the organization is therefore required for a lasting relationship.

Developing a customer relationship management system (CRM System) that can track complaints and give an indication of the quality perception of its’ students is another important management consideration that can impact on the quality aspect of the service provided by UKZN. If the university has a good customer relationship management system in place then this department can collect data on students that can help management identify problems in the delivery process, loyalty, satisfaction, complaints and compliments received.

Return on Quality (ROQ) is another crucial managerial concern associated with service quality. Management of UKZN invest a lot of time and money in getting the service quality equation right. According to Kasper et al (2006:201-202) the pursuit of quality service will bring with it happy and loyal

customers. These customers in return will spend a greater share of wallet, carry reputation far and wide through word of mouth and keep coming back.

People within the organization drive quality. A Performance management system is another valuable management tool that can be used to improve quality performance and enhance productivity within the organization. Performance evaluation at university level should focus on common themes like individual development, management training, human resources planning, standards of performance, career progression, opinion surveys and fair treatment.

4. Findings

A structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 380 students at all five campuses of UKZN namely, Edgewood campus, Nelson Mandela Medical School campus, Howard campus, Pietermaritzburg (PMB) campus and Westville campus. The students were randomly chosen. A response rate of 100% was achieved. The sample size was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) tables on sample size for a given population. According to Cavana et al (2002:278), for a population of 40000 the sample size would be 380 respondents. The questionnaire was adapted from the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al.

The results of the findings indicated that student perceptions on quality were lower than their expectations therefore the mean Gap Scores were negative. The table 1 below shows the comparison of quality GAP scores between the different campuses.

Table 1 : Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistic between campuses for students

	Student		
	a Kruskal Wallis Test		
	b Grouping Variable: Campus		
	Chi-Square	df	P
Tangibles GAP score (P-E)	10.173	4	.038*
Reliability GAP score (P-E)	15.899	4	.003*
Responsiveness GAP score (P-E)	17.186	4	.002*
Empathy GAP score (P-E)	12.979	4	.011*
Assurance GAP score (P-E)	14.293	4	.006*
Overall GAP score (P-E)	17.301	4	.002*

When comparing the Gap scores amongst the students within the different campuses the results indicated that there were statistically significant difference in the Gap scores amongst the students at the different campuses at UKZN, at the 95% level as ($p < 0.05$).

The Perceptions were lower than the Expectations therefore the mean Gap scores were negative. This implies that students were very dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by UKZN. However when comparing the Gap scores between the students at the various campuses of UKZN there was varied views on how they viewed the quality of the poor services offered by the university.

The results indicated that students were very dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by UKZN. Students at the Medical school campus indicated the lowest levels of customer satisfaction and poor quality services in terms of Empathy ($m = -0.4500$), Assurance ($m = -0.5056$) and Tangibles ($m = -0.5157$), followed by the students at PMB campus who indicated the highest dissatisfaction with the Reliability ($m = -0.7487$) and lastly students at the Edgewood campus denoted the lowest levels of customer satisfaction within the Responsiveness ($m = -0.8590$) aspect of service quality.

5. Recommendations

To improve quality of services within its campuses, management and staff at UKZN, should embrace a corporate culture that has at its core the concept of 'quality'. Management and staff should pride themselves to serving the university with pride and confidence and approaching students and other key role players in the tertiary sector with helpfulness and integrity. In order to develop a culture of quality, management should

hire the right people, educate and train their staff well, recognize and reward staff regularly and lastly tell staff everything.

Since managers and their respective staff are drivers of positive quality culture it is important that the way staff perceive quality also be taken into account. Scheider et al (2004: 100) suggests that if employees perceive that they are rewarded for delivering quality services and when management devotes time, energy, and resources to service quality and when employees receive the training they require to effectively deal with diverse customers, then a positive service climate is more likely to be the theme attached to these experiences.

Management and staff at UKZN should foster a relationship with its' various stakeholders based on honesty, trust and integrity. All these factors would have a direct bearing on the overall image and reputation of a university.

Since large amounts of money is invested into developing quality service experiences, all this is done to make students and stakeholders happy and in so doing ensure the continued loyalty of student patronage each year as well as continued donor sponsorships and contributions respectively.

UKZN should have a good CRM system with the necessary technology at its advantage to gather current information on its students. It should also have a blog where students can log in their complaints, queries and suggestions.

In the case of UKZN the issue of kickbacks made to staff by students who want to gain entrance to university or kickbacks made to management by suppliers who want to gain tenders to do work at the university are some very real issues faced by management. Plagiarism in academia is also another sensitive ethical issue that many universities are dealing with. Honesty, conflict of interest, discrimination by age, sex or race, bribery, whistle-blowing, accuracy of books and records, privacy of employee records, misuse of company assets, corporate governance issues, issues in negotiation, employee discipline, mergers and acquisitions, drug and alcohol abuse and intelligence gathering are ethical issues that the university management encounter. In the case of a university, if ethical misconduct occurs due to one of the above encounters this would affect the image and reputation of the university. If the image and reputation of the university is in disrepute then this would affect the way students and other key role-players within the tertiary sector perceive service quality in that university structure.

6. Concluding Remarks

Concluding remarks on the research findings were as follows:

The largest Gap scores for Tangibles were at the Medical School campus. This could be due to the Medical School campus having poor and visually unappealing servicescapes including buildings, interior, exterior, furniture, equipment and laboratories.

PMB campus students indicated the highest Gap scores for Reliability. This could be the result of staff not understanding student needs and wants though market research. In addition, there may poor systems and procedures in place that are not delivering reliable and consistent services to students.

Edgewood campus students indicated the highest Gap scores for Responsiveness. At this campus, it is possible that staffs are poorly trained and not responding when necessary to student queries. Further, there could be no procedure manuals to help staff respond to questions, complaints and requests, resulting in students having to wait for a long time to receive assistance from staff.

Assurance Gap scores were highest for Medical campus students. This could be due to students having poor trust and confidence in the abilities of contact personnel.

Gap scores for Empathy were highest at the Medical school campus. It is possible that students are being made to feel unimportant by contact staff.

The conclusions reached by the study was that students at UKZN have very negative perceptions towards the five quality dimensions, of reliability, empathy, assurance, responsiveness and tangibles. The university has to spend more time and money in training its staff to provide better quality services to its students. Secondly, more money should be spent to enhance the buildings, venues, computer facilities and laboratories

at the university. By conducting quality surveys management can take an active role in identifying factors that impact on quality and steer its staff towards providing better services to students. By enhancing the service quality, this can create a competitive advantage for UKZN and thus attract more students to our programmes.

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