MANAGING THE QUALITY COMPONENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES

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Abstract:
Higher education is nothing but a set of services designed to meet the need of education. Global product - educational offer - is evaluated in its competitive environment in which it is formed and promotes, through the specific service quality benchmarks, resulting precisely from their main characteristics (e.g. intangibility, inseparability, perishability, variability). This paper aims to identify those components of the overall quality of educational services, in order to necessity to raise awareness of their knowledge and development of domain-specific quality standards and strategies for implementation, maintenance and continuous measurement of compliance with these standards.

Key words: quality, service quality, education services quality, quality management

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The Concept of Higher Education (HE)

According to Roland Barnett (1992) there are for predominant concept of higher education:

1. Higher education as a production of qualified human resources.
2. Higher education as training for a research career.
3. Higher education as an efficient management of teaching provision.
4. Higher education as a matter of extending life chances.

In addition to those stated by Barnett we would added a fifth concept:

5. Higher education as a product.

The first concept refers to higher education as a process in which the students are counted as *products* absorbed in the labor market. Thus, higher education and graduates as well, become an important resource and factor of business and industry development.

In view of the second concept, higher education prepares qualified scientist and researches who would continuously develop the frontiers of knowledge.

The third concept is based on the fact that teaching is the core of educational institution. Indeed, the higher education institution focuses on efficient management of teaching-learning provision by improving the quality of teaching.

Higher education as a matter of extending life chances is seen as an opportunity to participate in the development process of the individual, through a flexible and continuing education mode.

The last concept proposed by us, comes to bringing together all the constituent services of what higher education global service means. Higher education service as a product is actually made from a combination of services: primarily, related, and complementary. The service product is actually the offer of higher education which includes itself the elements of differentiation. These elements set the competitive advantage that the higher institution is based in the promotion process and maintenance on education market.

In conclusion, higher education services could be defined as coherent set of human and material resources that together compose the service product - the service offer - designed to satisfy in superior and quality conditions the need for education, knowledge, professional training, and human formation.

Basic Characteristics of Higher Education Services

Higher education (HE) services are activities performed by the provider, unlike physical products they cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard or smelt before they are consumed. Since, services are not tangibles, they do not have features that appeal to the customers senses, their evaluation, unlike goods, is not really possible before actual purchase and consumption. The marketer of service cannot rely on product-based clues that the buyer generally employs in alternative evaluation prior to purchase. So, as a result of this, the educational services are not precisely known to the customer before they take them. The service provider has to follow certain things to improve the confidence of the client – the provider can try to increase the tangibility of services.

HE services are typically produced and consumed simultaneously. Incase of physical goods, they are manufactured into products, distributed through multiple resellers, and consumed later. But, incase of HE services, it cannot be separated from the service provider. Thus, the service provider would become a part of a service. For example: Professor teaches and the student listens and assimilates. The presence of professor is essential to provide the educational service. The educational services cannot be produced now for consumption at a later stage or time. This produces a new dimension to service marketing and management as well. The physical presence of student is essential in the most tips of educational services.

Inseparability of production and consumption increases the importance of the quality in services. Therefore, service marketers not only need to develop task-related, technical competence of service personnel, but also, require a great input of skilled personnel to improve their marketing, management and interpersonal skills.

HE services are deeds, performance or act, whose consumption take place simultaneously; they tend to perish in the absence of consumption. Hence, educational services cannot be stored. The services go waste if they are not consumed simultaneously i.e. value of service exists at the point when it is required.

The perishable character of educational services adds to the service marketers and managers problems. The inability of service sector to regulate supply with the changes in demand; poses many quality management problems. On the other hand, a course scheduled to be heard today can not be heard tomorrow. A student does not attend a course will not be able to benefit for another date that teacher performance

HE services have a certain degree of variability, as they depend on the service provider, and where and when they are provided. HE service managers face a problem in standardizing their educational service, as it varies with experienced hand, students, time and institution. HE service buyers are aware of this variability. So, the universities should make an effort to deliver high and consistent quality in their educational service; and this is attained by selecting good and qualified personnel for rendering the educational service.

The above characteristics are generally referred to in many texts as being what makes educational services management so different. However, this assumption should be queried on a number of grounds. Like all sweeping generalizations, generalizations concerning services management do not always represent the full picture. Consider the question of tangibility.

The Concept and Dimensions of Quality in Higher Education

The starting point will be surly the definition of the quality and accordingly its definition in higher education. In the context of quality, there are abundant definitions; however, still some individuals are looking for a unique definition, which can cover different perspectives.

Some of these definitions are as fallow:

- "The degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills the requirements, needs or expectations those are stated, generally implied or obligatory" (ISO 9000:2000).
- "The lack of quality is the losses a product imparts to the society from the time the product is shipped" (Genichi Taguchi).
- "Quality should be aimed at the needs of the customer, present and future" (Edwards Deming).
- "Fitness for use" (Joseph Juran).

Campbell and Rozsnayi (2002, pp. 19–20), have defined the concept of quality of higher education in several ways related to industry:

- **Quality as excellence:** this definition is considered to be the traditional academic view that holds as its goal to be the best.
- **Quality as zero errors:** this is defined most easily in mass industry in which product specifications can be established in detail, and standardized measurements of uniform products can show conformity to them. As the products of higher education, the graduates, are not expected to be identical, this view is not always considered to be applicable in higher education.
- **Quality as fitness** for purposes: this approach requires that the product or service has conformity with customer needs, requirements, or desires.
- **Quality as transformation:** this concept focuses firmly on the learners: the better the higher education institution, the more it achieves the goal of empowering students with specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to live and work in the knowledge society.
- **Quality as threshold:** defining a threshold for quality means to set certain norms and criteria. Any institution that reaches these norms and criteria is deemed to be of quality.
- **Quality as value for money:** The notion of accountability is central to this definition of quality with accountability being based on the need for restraint in public expenditure.
- **Quality as enhancement or improvement:** This concept emphasizes the pursuit of continuous improvement and is predicated on the notion that achieving quality is central to the academic ethos and that it is academics themselves who know best what quality is at any point in time.

However, quality systems adapted from business and industry operations need to be reoriented, and reinstalled for higher education conditions to turn the focus from the management-based to the education-based practices, according to Mizikaci (2006 pp. 37-53).

In this circumstance, Tribus (1994, pp. 37-40) believes that we must keep in mind some differences between education and businesses, which some of them are as follows:

- The school is not a factory.
- The student is not a "product".
- The education of the student is the product.
- Successful completion of the product requires the student to participate as a worker, co managing the learning process.

Even if some consider that higher education become a service industry (Brent D. Ruben 1995 p. 3) which include more than education services, the concept of quality in higher education approach will include the following aspects:

- Academic Quality: Instruction, Research, Service/Outreach
- Administrative Quality: Processes, System, Procedure, Information Flows
- Relationship Quality: Relations with public/customer and another, Interpersonal sensitivity and skill, Cooperation and collaboration, Service orientation.
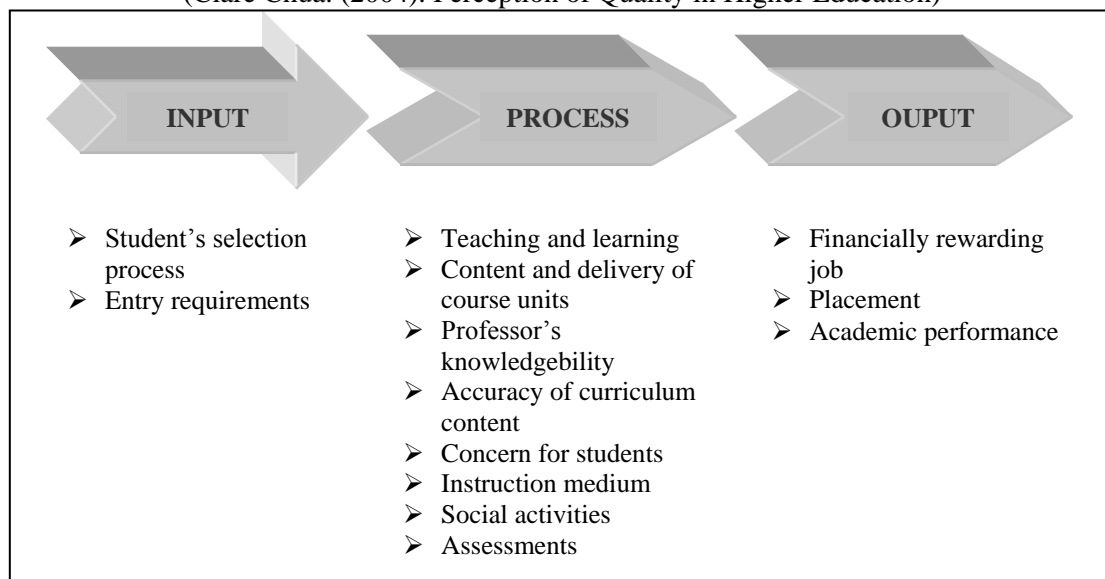
Ensuring these qualitative aspects will form the global quality of service as a product. More, in higher education services quality assurance we should start from the service quality dimensions, which are:

- Reliability - in the context of quality dimension for services means the fitness to operation, which is including the accuracy of information and procedures and commitment to what you have pledged.
- Credibility. The main concern of credibility is the capability of relying on suppliers.
- Access and availability. Access is related to facilities for making contact with the suppliers and availability of suppliers.
- Communication points out to be in touch with the customer in an explicable manner.
- Responsiveness refers to being interested in assisting the customer.
- Courtesy refers to the fact that how suppliers behave to their customers.
- Empathy, insists on understanding the customer's condition.
- Tangibles refer to the appearance of equipment and physical environment of service execution.

Nevertheless, the quality dimension, which is taken into consideration in higher education, is the service quality. In fact, in the context of quality of higher education we must keep in mind that students are not the products and the education is the product, and the quality of services, which HEIs provide for their students to improve their knowledge and education, are playing the vital role in higher education (Bergman and Klefsjö, 2003).

A proper approach to the theme is education as a system, thus the quality assurance mechanisms will target all components of this system.

Figure 1 - Education System as an Input-Process-Output framework
(Clare Chua. (2004). Perception of Quality in Higher Education)

INPUT	PROCESS	OUPUT
➢ Student's selection process ➢ Entry requirements	➢ Teaching and learning ➢ Content and delivery of course units ➢ Professor's knowledgebility ➢ Accuracy of curriculum content ➢ Concern for students ➢ Instruction medium ➢ Social activities ➢ Assessments	➢ Financially rewarding job ➢ Placement ➢ Academic performance

Extending the coverage of educational components that may compose a global product and global quality, we can address to Sanjaya Mishra's (2007) viewpoint of what we needs to consider about quality of teaching, programmers and institutions:

- Competition
- Customer satisfaction
- Maintaining standards
- Accountability
- Improve employ moral and motivation
- Credibility, prestige and status
- Image and visibility.

In conclusion we can say that higher education service approach is made from core service (provision of specific knowledge through teaching) to consider higher education as an industry. As more we extend the service level approaching, quality aspects are becoming more numerous and complex. Important in this case will raise awareness of all moments and phases of service provision that could decisively influence the perception and customer satisfaction. In this sense comes quality management which follows precisely the issues outlined above.

Managing Quality in Higher Education

Quality management includes all the activities that managers carry out in an effort to implement their quality policy. These activities include quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement.

Managing quality in HE has proved to be a difficult and challenging task. The literature suggests that there are two main reasons for this.

First, 'quality' has different meanings for different stakeholders. Within HE there are both internal and external stakeholders who are likely to have different or even contradictory definitions of quality. As a result of the difficulty in defining quality, its management has unsurprisingly proved to be disputed. Traditionally, external stakeholders have been concerned with quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance refers to the 'planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality' (Borhan and Ziarati, 2002:914).

The focus on quality for external stakeholders is driven by these agendas and focuses predominantly on the measurement of procedures and the extent to which they result in appropriate levels of quality (Jackson, 1996). This requires HEIs to demonstrate responsible actions in their professional practices and accountability in the results they achieve with the resources used (Jackson, 1998:46). Elton (1992) refers to these as the quality 'As' – accountability, audit and assessment – and suggests that they are concerned with the control of quality and the people who control quality. Particular mechanisms for assurance, such as accreditation and quality audits, are usually imposed by government and other external bodies (McKay and Kember, 1999). Harvey (2005:264) suggests that accountability underpins these processes but under the banner of 'efficiency and effectiveness'.

Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) suggest that HEIs are now also required to become learning organizations, where internal stakeholders also interpret and assess the quality of HE provision. The emphasis for internal stakeholders is not only on quality assurance, but also on quality enhancement which aims for an overall increase in the actual quality of teaching and learning, often through more innovative practices (McKay and Kember, 1999).

Elton (1992) suggests that quality enhancement focuses on quality 'Es': empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise and excellence. Quality enhancement initiatives tend to be less clearly defined and are often more diverse than quality assurance

initiatives (McKay and Kember, 1999). In HE, mechanisms adopted by internal stakeholders are likely to include self-evaluation practices and student feedback. As students are viewed as an integral part of the learning process (Wiklund *et al.,* 2003), this type of evaluation tends to be more formative in nature and therefore more likely to lead to continual quality improvement efforts. Furthermore, the involvement of internal stakeholders often results in a culture of quality management being embedded within programmes.

The second reason why quality is difficult to manage in HE is due to the complicated nature of the educational product. Education has been viewed as a system or 'a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system' (Deming, 1993:98). The system consists of inputs, transformation processes and outputs. Sahney *et al.* (2004) advise that in education there are human, physical and financial resource inputs that undergo processes including teaching, learning, research, administration and knowledge transformation. The quality of teaching and learning therefore becomes central in a systems perspective. Ramsden (1992) advises that high quality teaching is fundamentally about high quality learning, which is context-related, uncertain and continuously improvable. Martens and Prosser (1998) add that high quality learning must focus on the development of meaning as characterized by deep learning approaches, rather than on reproduction. However, Yorke (1999) cautions that high quality teaching does not always result in high quality learning or vice versa.

Regardless of the type of quality approach - from internal or external perspective, the main service or global service - the organization's management should center on quality, based on the participation of all its members and aiming at long run success through customer satisfaction and benefits to all members of the organization and to society (ISO 8402, in Wiklund *et al.*, 2003:99).

In Table 1 are identified and defined different models that have been applied internationally in HEIs. The application of these models has yielded a number of benefits for HEIs. Certainly, there are a number of core requirements for their successful implementation and a number of limitations of the models themselves. The benefits identified are both tangible and intangible. In the first instance, the models are deemed to be relevant within the current competitive HE environment as they incorporate the perspective of students as customers. They also take into account the perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders (Navarro *et al.*, 2005).

Table 1 Quality management models

Model	Definition
Total Quality Management	A comprehensive management approach which requires contribution from all participants in the organization to work towards long-term benefits for those involved and society as a whole.
EFQM Excellence Model	Non-prescriptive framework that establishes nine criteria (divided between enablers and results), suitable for any organization to use to assess progress towards excellence.
Balanced scorecard	Performance/strategic management system which utilizes four measurement perspectives: financial; customer; internal process; and learning and growth.
Malcom Baldridged award	Based on a framework of performance excellence which can be used by organizations to improve performance. Seven categories of criteria: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; human resource focus; process management; and results.
ISO 9000 series	International standard for generic quality assurance systems. Concerned with continuous improvement through preventative action. Elements are customer quality and regulatory requirements, and efforts made to enhance customer satisfaction and achieve continuous improvement.
Business process re-engineering	System to enable redesign of business processes, systems and structures to achieve improved performance. This concerned with change in five components: strategy; processes; technology; organization; and culture.

SERVQUAL	Instrument designed to measure consumer perceptions and expectations regarding quality of service in five dimensions: reliability; tangibles; responsiveness; assurance and empathy; and to identify where gaps exist.

In order to achieve these benefits, a number of critical requirements must be met in the implementation of these models. Top-level commitment, a focus on customer delivery and medium or long term strategic objectives are required. Successful implementation also depends on effective leadership and sufficient levels of financial and human resources.

Increasing efforts have been made to develop quality management models specifically for HE that reflects the unique characteristics of HE and the importance of the student learning experience. These models are:

Table 2 - Quality management models for HE

Model for quality management in higher education Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002, 2003, 2004), Australia	**Internal audit** Becket and Brookes (2006), UK
Ecellence model Pries da Rosa et al. (2001,2003), Portugal	**Quality dimensions framework** Owlia and Aspinwall (1996), UK
Academic award model Badri and Abdulla (2004), UAE	**Program evaluation model** Mizikaci (2006), Romania
Model of assess quality of students experience and learning outcomes Tam (2002, 2008), Hong Kong	**Quality management framework** Grant et al. (2002, 2004), Widrick et al. (2002), USA
Multy-models of quality in education Cheng and Tam (1997) Hong Kong	**Subject quality assurance system** Martens and Prosser (1998), Australia
Performance measures for academic departments Al-Turki and Duffuaa (2003), Saudi Arabia	**ISO-based TQM model** Borahan and Ziarati (2002), Turkey
Internal audit Reid and Ashelby (2002), UK	**Five-phase TQM implementation model** Motwani and Kumar (1997), USA

These models recognize the need for centering on the student learning experience in quality management initiatives. As they have been developed specifically for HE, it is purported that they are more compatible with the primary role of education than the industry models. These tend to focus on particular components of HE provision such as rewards to academics, programme evaluation and the quality of the student experience.

Conclusion

A correct and efficient quality management requires the knowledge and identifies its components. Further, it is necessary to approach quality components in the concrete context of an activity whose quality will form. In our case this context is represented by services and the main characteristics of them will form the framework for definition, formulation, and management of quality. Two of the most important features of higher education services are core service immateriality and the role the human factor in service process.

Indeed, there must be a managerial approach of higher education services quality and a strategy in this sense. The concerns of specialists but also higher education institutions have materialized in the development of quality management models. These models do not watch nothing but satisfaction in superior condition, high quality, need for education and knowledge of individuals.

Because of the importance granted to the quality of higher education were established at the governmental level, organizations responsible with certification and

monitoring quality in higher education institutions. In addition, HEIs develop programs and internal quality evaluation strategies. These actions are permanent.

Efforts to ensure quality services are needed because of the fact that universities operate on a competitive marketplace. Competition takes place both in price as well as in the area of service quality. Educational products are characterized by quality and competitiveness.

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