APORTAL Vol 2 (1) 2018

TOWARDS AN ATTRACTIVE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE.

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ABSTRACT
This paper examined the determinants of service quality in universities in Zimbabwe with a view to understanding why the affluent choose to send their children to universities outside the country. This is despite the current effort to promote Zimbabwean brands through the Buy Zimbabwe Campaign. The study was further aimed at determining ways of making the Zimbabwean university education more attractive and competitive. For the study, the interpretivist paradigm which facilitates the understanding of the subjective world of human experience was used. In line with the interpretive paradigm, a qualitative research methodology, utilising a descriptive survey design was adopted to solicit the perceptions of service quality in universities. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants for the study, while in-depth interviews were employed in data collection. The subsequent collected data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings of the study indicated the existence of numerous dimensions to service quality in Zimbabwe such as infrastructure, programmes on offer, academic expertise, extracurricular activities, parents' level of education, prior results, university prestige and prominence of alumni, and the universities' assessment techniques. Findings also revealed that these factors have a substantial effect on service quality perceptions in university learning. The study concluded that service quality is indeed a critical component to students when selecting a university to attend. The study recommended that there is need for feedback on quality assessments as well as the adoption of integrity in recruitment of lecturers and admission of students.

Keywords: service quality, assessment, satisfaction, feedback, perception.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that universities have not conventionally been regarded as business organisations and probably will never be considered fully as such, they are increasingly operating in a business-like way (Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, and Seebaluck, 2016). Numerous aspects, including globalisation, reduced financing by government as well as the numerical increase in tertiary institutions, have compelled universities to assume apt strategies that enhance their competitive advantage (Quinn, Lemay, Larsen, and Johnson, 2009; Harvey and Williams, 2010; Halai, 2013). The growth of higher education has increased competition among universities globally and has drawn many universities in the world to continually focus on assessing their service quality in order to enhance student recruitment satisfaction and retention. Service quality has, therefore, been identified as a key attribute aimed at ensuring that universities have a competitive edge over others. In the light of this perspective, service quality is an idea based on what is referred to as the "quality gap" – the difference between what customers expect of a service and what they perceive about the service received (Campos, Dos Santos, and Castro, 2017).

In higher education settings, the student is viewed as the main customer. The scholars cited above, have added that the two variables on which service quality depends are the expected service and the service quality received. Universities have not been spared from adopting such views, hence they ought to focus on realising them. Within the purview of tertiary institutions, it means a marketing approach to examine students' perceptions of service quality may improve service functions, attract and retain students (Sultan and Wong, 2012). This is because when making an indeterminate and high-risk decision of selecting a university, students look for evidence of quality of services (Angell, Heffernan, and Megicks, 2008). To this end, Sultan and Wong (2012) conclude that discounting the nature and significance of service quality may not be expedient for universities in the higher education sector. For this study, therefore, an assessment of the perceptions of service quality in universities in Zimbabwe was made. This was done in an attempt to understand why Zimbabwean students are shunning local universities and going to learn abroad.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The nature of higher education in Zimbabwe is dominated by state universities founded and run by the

government. These universities are set up to promote access to higher education by everyone who has the minimum entry points. Enrolment and graduation of higher education students has increased in recent years due to the existence of these state universities (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011) and the knowledge base has also been enriched. However, questions have continued to be raised with regard the quality of the services offered by these institutions.

Research done prior to this study indicates that improving service quality within a higher education context is often mentioned as an internal goal, without any explicit references to what is meant by service quality in higher education. Discussing service quality without defining what it is, how it is perceived by students, what the antecedents and consequences of quality neglect/improvements are, and how it can be improved and enhanced is of little value (Sultan and Wong, 2012; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016; Campos et al., 2017). Consequently, for universities to remain competitive, it is significant that they enhance the quality of their services to the students. Perhaps the questions to be asked are:

i. What are the determinants of perceived service quality among universities in Zimbabwe?
ii. What drives some parents and students to shun Zimbabwean universities and opt to learn at universities outside the country?

In developing an answer to these questions, universities are thus obligated to appraise the quality of their services so that they can make the requisite changes to advance their mandate and sustainability.

Given the above, the study identified and assessed the determinants of service quality in universities in Zimbabwe with a view to understanding why the affluent choose to send their children to universities outside the country. This is despite the current efforts to promote Zimbabwean brands through the Buy Zimbabwe Campaign. The investigation further aimed at determining ways of making the Zimbabwean university education more attractive and competitive.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the increase in the number of universities in Zimbabwe and the thrust of the Buy Zimbabwe Campaign, some students continue to shun Zimbabwean universities (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). This is linked to the student and parents' expectations and perceptions of the service quality in universities. Universities in the

country, seemingly, have not been able to offer higher education services that are of high quality, given that challenges on the quality of service provided persist; these then lead to customer dissatisfaction. Felix (2017) observed that global perceptions of service quality exert a strong influence on global perceptions of customer satisfaction within the institutions. Based on such a problem, the aim of this study was to assess the perceptions of service quality in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions (HEIs) with a view to offering suggestions to improve the competitiveness of Zimbabwean universities.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study hopes to establish reasons for choice of University by students and parents; the findings could hopefully assist universities to tailor-make their service quality in order to attract and retain students. This is important for the survival and sustenance of the universities in the face of stiff competition posed by the number of universities on the market and the introduction of online services.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study specifically seeks to achieve the following objectives, namely, to:

i. Identify the parents and students' perceptions of service quality in university education in Zimbabwe.
ii. assess the impact of service quality in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe; and
iii. examine the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction in HEIs in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by two theories, namely, SERVQUAL and Prospect Theory.

SERVQUAL MODEL

SERVQUAL (service quality) is a model that was established by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1988, 1991) that comprises five separate dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Parasuraman et al.'s (1988, pp. 30-31) SERVQUAL . . . offers an elementary frame through its expectations and perceptions format, encompassing statements for each of the five service-quality dimensions. According to Burböck (2012, p. 158) the SERVQAUL frame, when necessary, can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics of specific research needs of a particular organisation. Even though SERVQUAL receives substantial empirical support, some critics have difficulties with it. The critical analysis includes the ambiguous definition of expectation, the instability of the dimensions as well as the lack of

applicability across industries (Burböck, 2012, p. 158). This model was fundamental to this study's frame as it provided the necessary framework for the understanding of the impact of service quality on the perceptions of quality in university education in Zimbabwe. This is because it offers five distinct dimensions for understanding service quality which underlie the perceptions of quality in university education in Zimbabwe.

THE PROSPECT THEORY

In addition to the SERVQUAL model, the study was guided by the Prospect Theory by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). According to Kahneman and Tversky (1979), the prospect theory is a descriptive theory in which all of the alternatives an individual faces are reduced to a series of prospects that are evaluated independently of an S-shaped value function. Burböck (2012) shows that the value function of the prospect theory has three characteristics: reference point dependency; loss aversion; and diminishing sensitivity. According to Einhorn and Hogarth (1981), the loss aversion integrated into the prospect theory suggests that losses loom larger than gains. In the satisfaction context, a negative deviation from the reference point, expectations, should carry more weight in the overall-satisfaction judgment than equal amounts of positive outcomes on attribute performance. The diminishing sensitivity in the context of satisfaction means that, at high (low) levels of service quality, positive (negative) performance on a specific item should not affect satisfaction as dramatically as it does at lower levels of performance. For this study, the reference point is built by the expectations of the service quality offered by the universities. The theory was used to determine whether the relationship between service quality and university preference can be explained by the characteristics of the prospect theory.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Defining service quality

A service encounter involves the "dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider" (Ang et al., 2018, p. 225). On the other hand, the quality concept which is an established phenomenon in the management literature was first suggested by Juran (1974) and Deming and Edwards (1982). Yet, service quality is a comparatively contemporary notion popularised by Gronroos (1984) and Parasuraman et al. (1988). Chong and Ahmed (2014) are of the view that defining quality in the service sector is a considerably difficult task given that quality is a multi-faceted concept which can take up diverse meanings to different

persons. For this reason, Chong and Ahmed (2014, p. 38) opine that "it is therefore worth noting that service quality is fundamentally an experiential state of mind and made in reference to personal experiences or service encounters. "For Erbele et al. (2016, p. 1699), quality in services is the capacity of an experience in services or any other factor related to it, which may satisfy a need or a desire or solve a problem or provide benefits to someone. Service quality, therefore generally refers to individual perceptions about a service owing to the experiences they have encountered. Such a notion guided the study in assessing the perceptions of quality in university education in Zimbabwe.

PARENTS AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN UNIVERSITIES

Service quality of a university is generally assessed by using student perception (Sumaedi, Bakti, and Metasari, 2012), an aspect which is critical to this study's framework. The basis of such a premise is that students at universities are the key customers. While several studies have been conducted in relation to perceptions on service quality in universities, these have been conducted within the context of developed countries such as the United States of America (USA) (Ham and Hayduk, 2003; Joseph, Yakhou, and Stone, 2005), UK (Hill, 1995; Cuthbert, 1996; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Russell, 2005), Australia (Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Athiyaman, 1997), Canada (Le Blanc and Nguyen, 1997) and New Zealand (Kao, 2007). At the same time, those that have been conducted in developing countries have been done outside Africa and Zimbabwe, for example, Indonesia (Sumaedi et al., 2012), Malaysia (Chong and Ahmed, 2014; Shekarchizadeh, 2011), Brazil (Eberle, Milan, and Dorion, 2016; Campos et al., 2017). In Zimbabwe, studies on student perceptions of service quality have been very limited with only a few studies conducted (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). Such an observation, therefore, gives credibility to this study.

Pragmatically, previous research shows that students with different cultures have different views of university service quality (Lagrossen, Seyyed-Hashemi, and Leitner, 2004; Kao, 2007). In these studies, both parents and students reflected that culture played a significant role in shaping their perceptions of service quality. Additionally, in the study by Sumaedi et al. (2012), it emerged that in the service sector, perceived service quality is also affected by personal or socio-demographic characteristics of customers. Hence, there is a likelihood that

student perceived service quality is also affected by students' socio- demographic characteristics. Regrettably, research discussions on the relationship between student socio-demographic characteristics and student perceived quality in the university context are limited, particularly in Zimbabwe.

What is apparent from the numerous discussions on student perceived service quality in universities is that it is an intangible notion. This is because numerous researchers' attempts at identifying measures of the concept have yielded diverse dimensions. Several researchers have suggested different concepts and acknowledged that there are two kinds of student perceived service quality, which are academic dimensions and non-academic dimensions. Academic dimensions consist of reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, knowledge and communication, while non-academic dimensions consist of tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, knowledge, and system (Sumaedi et al., 2012). In the study by Sumaedi et al. (2012), they found that students and parents had seven perceived service quality dimensions which they considered important, that is, curriculum, facilities, contact personnel, social activities, education counselors, assessment, and instruction medium. For them, the perceived service quality dimensions contributing most towards overall perceived service quality of a state university were facilities. Furthermore, the research also showed that university students from a different study period had a different perceived quality level on the social activities dimension, while university students of a different gender had a different perceived quality level on two dimensions, namely, social activities and facilities.

In another study by Chong and Ahmed (2014), it became clear that students' service quality experiences could be understood as a multi-faceted phenomenon with students expressing context-dependent service expectations and outcomes. The phenomenological study by Chong and Ahmed (2014) found that students ascribed meaning to their university service quality experience according to the perceived quality of academic services, administrative services and general services. Further, premised on broad views conveyed during the phenomenological interviews, students were inclined to view themselves as learners, specifically in the academic setting. The "learner" role, according to Chong and Ahmed, (2014), is associated with the desire to gain new knowledge, to

receive feedback for improvement and to be exposed to stimulating learning methods.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND SERVICE QUALITY

Universities have become increasingly involved in defining service quality and measuring customer satisfaction in ways that are familiar to service marketing specialists (Pereda, Airey, and Bennett, 2007). This triggered the present research considering that, with the rapid changes and development in every aspect of the world in recent years, most universities profess a commitment to the processes of change as they are confronted with formidable challenges. Globalisation, the advancement and convergence of information and communication technology (ICT), diversification of funding sources of higher education, and social and environmental issues are among the major challenges that universities have to address (Neely and Tucker, 2010). Internationalisation of curricula and the advances in e-learning and e-teaching impose great pressure on universities to achieve a breakthrough in the traditional contents and forms of educational delivery (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). In this regard, it is pertinent to know how service quality conditions in a university heighten or enhance student satisfaction.

Satisfaction of customers has been heightened by the changes in the funding sources of higher education triggered by the decrease in government funding over the years (Felix, 2017). Another prominent trigger from an international perspective is that higher education confronts dual pressures – of rapid growth in participation from a broadened socio-economic mix of students, and of an increasingly severe financial stringency (Moses, 2007). This is notwithstanding challenges of finance that create barriers in the development of higher education infrastructure, academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This, in turn, has a huge bearing on the generation and implementation of customer satisfaction strategies. It, therefore, is important to interrogate practices in state universities' contexts to find the extent to which the prevailing conditions contribute to customer satisfaction.

SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sultan and Wong (2012) observed that improving service quality within a higher education setting is often cited as an internal goal, without any clear references to what is meant by service quality in higher education. In the world of cutthroat

competition, an organization needs some competitive advantage to sustain itself. Thus, as shown by (Dong, Sivakumar, Evans, and Zou,2015), research in services' marketing has consistently identified customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction as the two most important service outcomes. Achieving a high level of service quality and customer satisfaction can lead to crucial consumer behavioural outcomes such as increased repeat purchases, less consumer complaint behavior, higher switching cost and positive word of mouth (Ang, Liou, and Wei, 2018). Nevertheless, there are complexities in managing universities, from a marketing point of view, because the concept of 'customer' has not been clearly defined in the higher education sector. In this regard, Schreiner (2009, p. 1) observes that, "Unlike other service industries, which hold satisfaction as a goal in itself, colleges and universities typically perceive satisfaction as means to an end. Higher education tends to care about student satisfaction because of its potential impact on student recruitment efforts, motivation, retention and fundraising."

However, over the years in several parts of the world, the subject of service quality and student satisfaction in post-secondary education has received increasing attention. This is reflective of the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in the recent education reform and the demand for the sector to respond to the trend of globalisation and to meet the ever-changing expectations of the respective communities in their development into knowledge-based societies (Law, 2010). In this regard, over the past few years, there has been a significant growth in service quality initiatives and customer satisfaction strategies aimed at improving service delivery and increasing customer satisfaction levels at institutional, national, regional and global levels.

Teeroovengadum et al., (2016), outline that within the service quality literature, one of the most accepted and widely used instruments for measuring service quality is the SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, (1988). In the same vein, Narang (2012, p. 359) argues that the SERVQUAL scale and its adaptations have been widely used in various services such as "banking, retail, wholesale, health, education". SERVQUAL has been cited extensively and although it is not flawless and has been criticized by many, its contribution to our understanding of service quality remains significant (Shekarchizadeh, Rasli, and Hon-Tat, 2011). For this reason, Shekarchizadeh et

al., (2011), observe that based on the SERVQUAL paradigm of disconfirmation, the gap between "expected" and "perceived" service quality will determine the customer's overall service evaluation.

Other scholars, such as Chong and Ahmed (2014), have offered to make use of the University Service Quality Model (USQ). The phenomenological findings of their study suggested that USQ is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is complex in nature and qualitative evidence underscores the relevance of existing theories which posit that perceived quality is derived from the confirmation/disconfirmation of students' expectations. Overall, the findings of their study suggested that students' service quality experiences could be understood as a multi-faceted phenomenon with students expressing context-dependent service expectations and outcomes. The complex nature of USQ evaluation inevitably poses challenges to the university service providers in service quality management (Chong and Ahmed, 2014).

ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY IN UNIVERSITIES

As in other service sectors, the interest in the measurement of quality in higher education has been heightened. Numerous authors have shown that the assessment of service quality in institutions for higher learning has generally been framed from an institutional perspective (Chong and Ahmed, 2014; Narang, 2012). Given that education is an experience, its efficacy can be measured by evaluating its effect on users (students) (Petruzzellis, D'Uggento, and Romanazzi, 2006). Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that students are not the sole stakeholders of universities as there are others that include staff, employers, government, alumni, society and parents; these stakeholders all have their own perceptions of service quality and assessment mechanisms. In this regard, Teeroovengadum et al. (2016) argue that, notwithstanding the difficulties involved in choosing the customer of higher education as discussed earlier, in studies aiming at assessing quality in higher education, most researchers opt to regard students as the main customer of higher education provision and focus solely on their views while measuring quality. Little and Williams (2010) add weight to this argument noting that the stress on students' perceptions of quality has also taken root in the policy making arena.

Practical studies carried out on the subject of service quality in universities have epitomised the fundamental dimensions underlying the same

(Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). One of the prominent dimensions that have been noted in numerous studies has hinged around the significance of teaching and learning. To this extent, Narang (2012) established that among the dimensions of service quality, aspects including academic and personality development were deemed as being the most prominent. "Although, for all the factors the scores were negative, much effort was needed on the issue of personal development which seems to be an area neglected by the institutions. The findings reveal that higher education institutions need to focus on developing the all-round personalities of students…" (Narang, 2012, p. 359).

Perhaps a significant view noted by Narang (2012) reflects the existent misalignment between the industry needs and academic knowledge offered by the universities. This is corroborated by Wang (2012) whose study revealed outcome quality as one of the major dimensions encompassing two sub-dimensions: Personal Development and Academic Development. Other studies indicated that students placed greater value on the capability of the lecturer to smoothen the progress of their transformation via excellent communication, subject knowledge, enthusiasm among others, at the same time enabling them to participate fully in the learning process (Hill, 2003).

The intrinsic characteristics of the services provided by HEIs are dynamic, unlike the characteristics of the quality of fixed goods, like building infrastructure that essentially remains static (Campos et al., 2017). Such characteristics point towards the most significant dimensions that contribute to high quality in higher education. Perhaps this prompted Subramanian (2017:172) to argue that "…unlike other services, higher education services are long term and continuous, where cognitive participation of students is essential and the needs of the students are fulfilled by different service providers."

As highlighted by Teeroovengadum et al. (2016), the dimensions considered as the most important by students would be those that universities should prioritise. At least seven dynamics were identified to be key to the assessment of quality. In this regard, Eberle et al., (2016), assert that when it comes to quality, several authors have contributed to the original dimensions which reflect the challenges of quality performances perceived established for service providers. They further provide for the technical dimension, which concerns the quality of the results desired by a customer, more specifically, about what a

customer receives through his/her interactions with an organization. It is relevant to mention that the functional dimension of quality is related to the functions of a service provider and to the customer perceptions of the provided service (Eberle et al., 2016). Although a reasonable general correspondence was noted, many differences were found as well, which led Lagrossen et al. (2004, p. 68) to stress the "value of developing specific quality dimensions to facilitate the understanding of the particular situation at hand."

THE BUY ZIMBABWE CAMPAIGN

At this juncture, it is imperative to briefly discuss the Buy Zimbabwe Campaign. The campaign is one of the economic policies that were launched by the Government in 2005 in a bid to resuscitate the performances of the Zimbabwean companies through promoting consumption and spearheading production of locally produced products (Ndlovu, Mafumbate, Mafuka, and Brena, 2016). This was initiated in line with the belief that a 'buy local' campaign, kindles entrepreneurship knowledge and augments the efficient use of a country's resources as well as promotes the growth of the economy, creation of employment while obliging local brands to stand against competition (Davila, 2003).

According to the RBZ (2005), the conceptual framework for the Zimbabwean miracle, Buy Zimbabwean Campaign, is envisaged to create a platform for economic turnaround based on the realignment of consumption patterns with the economy's productive capacities. At the same time, the thrust of this initiative, is not to discourage international trade through restrictive barriers, but is aimed at instilling national pride and a sense of ownership that transforms consumer preferences in favour of their own brands (RBZ, 2005). This is an attempt to plug foreign currency drainage.

In this regard, the campaign is intended to permit market reclamation from imports by local brands in products and services. The campaign, therefore, proposes the belligerent marketing of home-grown products and services that are also aimed at creating a sense of patriotism, nationhood and belonging among locals thereby creating confidence of the locals in their own economy. This campaign, however, has not been aggressively adopted in the higher education sector in the country as there continues to be a host of students enrolling in foreign universities, despite the existence of the Buy Zimbabwe Campaign. In the light of such arguments, Petruzzellis et al. (2006) state that educational systems

are becoming services for people in which global and local levels combine, thus a standardised offer is modified by local specificities. While this is the case, Zimbabwean universities seem to have failed to develop local specificities that reflect best quality in the teaching and learning processes in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

In the endeavour to achieve the objectives of the study, the interpretivist paradigm which facilitated the understanding of the subjective world of human experience was used. In line with the interpretive paradigm, the qualitative research methodology was adopted. According to Scott and Garner (2013), the qualitative research methodology is a strategy of inquiry that is characterised by non-quantifiable written and documented observable data, meaning that such a study is difficult to replicate, few cases are chosen though many variables are studied and the conclusions cannot be deduced from statistical inference. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of service quality in higher education from the perspective of key informants and students who were selected through purposive sampling and data collected through in-depth interviews. The population of the study comprised students currently enrolled in Zimbabwean universities, and those enrolled in universities outside Zimbabwe, alumni from foreign universities as well as parents of both locally enrolled students and those enrolled in foreign universities. For the study, it was approximated that a sample of, at least, 25 participants was adequate. The sample was comprised of 10 parents and 15 students. The subsequent data were analysed using thematic analysis and presented through the same procedure.

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in line with the objectives of the study mentioned in the earlier sections of the paper.

Objective 1: Identify the parents- and students' perceptions of quality in University education in Zimbabwe.

The findings of the study indicated the existence of numerous dimensions to service quality in the country. Findings also revealed that these factors have a substantial effect on service quality perceptions in university learning. A major finding of the study showed that both parents and students perceive the absence of adequate infrastructure and resources as a deterrent factor from enrolling in Zimbabwean universities, since many were perceived to be wanting in international outlook. Such infrastructure includes accommodation, access to internet services, problems of access to water,

electricity and reliable transport. Infrastructure and resources are key to facilitating the teaching and learning in the universities. One of the key informants interviewed from Rhodes University stated:

> *...the majority of universities in Zimbabwe have limited accommodation and this has led students, coming from other areas other than major cities where the universities are located, to seek alternative accommodation. These universities don't have any arrangement with accommodation providers. It is left to the student to look for accommodation elsewhere.*

A parent whose child is at the University of Pretoria in South Africa concurred:

> *I sent my child to a South African university because in this country the universities do not seem to have enough accommodation. Second year students have to look for their own accommodation. I did not want that hassle where I would have my kid looking for lodgings elsewhere where there is no supervision. This would also add on to existing expenses. I did not want to go through that so I opted for a university where once I pay fees, I'm done.*

An additional dimension of service quality that leads to the preference of foreign universities over Zimbabwean universities is linked to the programmes on offer. In the interviews, it emerged that the universities in Zimbabwe have limited programmes and places that do not tally with the aspirations and goals of students. For instance, the University of Zimbabwe, the oldest and most sought after, does not have some programmes and requires students with points as high as fifteen despite limited places. Therefore, those students who aspire to study those programmes are left with no choice but to enrol in foreign universities that offer those programmes while accepting lower points for admission.

A law student at a South African university and on internship in Zimbabwe said:

> *I wanted to do law at the UZ or the Great Zimbabwe University but could not get a place because they wanted 15 points and I had 11 points. I applied to several South African universities and was offered places. I had to make a choice of which university to attend. I don't understand why universities at home have to pitch the points so high for one to get into these programmes.*

From the study, it further surfaced that an underlying reason for the preference of universities abroad is linked to the quality of academic expertise in Zimbabwean universities. While Zimbabwe boasts of a literacy rate of over ninety percent (Zim Stats 2014), the majority of lecturers do not exhibit such literacy in the teaching and learning process in higher education. A key informant stated that such an aspect stems

from the low remuneration of university lecturers which leads to low morale. Linked to the above finding, it also emerged that the most skilled personnel are going abroad to seek employment, hence, affecting the quality of university teaching.

The findings indicated that some parents and students in Zimbabwe do not perceive Zimbabwean universities as prestigious. From the findings, such universities as Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard were identified as being some of the most prestigious in the world. An alumni interviewed posited:

> *I enrolled at Cambridge largely because it is one of the most prominent universities in the world. If you want prestige, such universities are where you would enrol.*

Other participants interviewed noted that enrolling with foreign universities heightens one's chances of employment both locally and abroad and, as such, they would prefer to learn in universities outside Zimbabwe. In any case, any university in developed countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia, and South Africa is perceived to be more prestigious than any of the best universities in the country. These perceptions might apply to fellow countries in the SADC Region where home-grown graduates are considered less exposed to international culture than their counterparts.

From the study, it emerged that universities in Zimbabwe have poor marketing strategies and customer care in their service delivery. This is against the backdrop that the nature of global competition has heightened the levels of competition among universities. One interviewee said that prospective students find it difficult to acquire information about the programmes on offer and their requirements on the websites of the universities. This was confirmed by slow or even non-responses to applications for admission to the country's universities. The participant said:

> *I applied online for a place to do PhD at one university in Zimbabwe. There was no response at all. I followed up with telephone calls, but to no avail. I eventually resorted to doing my PhD with UNISA. I'm in my second year now. I really wanted to do the programme locally…*

The universities' admission and assessment techniques also emerged as one of the determinants of service quality in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. In the Zimbabwean universities, it was argued that the admission and assessment techniques utilised had loopholes for corruption. Prospective students really deserving places at the universities were

denied such opportunities because of unethical admission and flagrant violation of laid down criteria. Corruption had further impacted on students' assessment leading some employers to doubt the credibility of qualifications and the quality of students churned out by these universities.

The study findings further showed that social factors, such as the family's educational history, gave rise to perceptions that foreign universities are of greater quality when compared to local universities. In the interviews, it emerged that parents that learnt in foreign universities often wanted their children to also learn abroad. Other social factors noted in the study encompassed competition stemming from the parents' social class and peer pressure. Those that were affluent in society preferred their children to enrol in foreign universities which give them a sense of prestige. Furthermore, given their social relations, there was peer pressure among the affluent to send their children to foreign universities.

The absence of wide-ranging extracurricular activities at local universities was also highlighted as affecting service quality perceptions. It was argued that, save for a few universities, the large number of universities in Zimbabwe had limited extra-curricular activities and related infrastructure for such activities. Activities such as swimming, tennis, cricket and hockey were identified as lacking, both in terms of existence and infrastructure. The said activities were perceived to give a university some international flair.

It also surfaced that Zimbabwean universities offered fewer scholarships as compared to foreign universities. In the interviews it was outlined that the majority of students learning outside Zimbabwe are doing so using scholarships awarded to them through bilateral arrangements, donor funding and acculturation. A professor with the Zimbabwe Open University interviewed said:

> *In many instances, we have former colonisers sponsoring education to perpetuate their interests in the former colony.*

Other issues that emerged from the study related to diplomats who had no choice but to have their children enrolled in foreign universities in countries within which they would be placed. One participant was very passionate about the politicisation of higher education institutions where the head of state is the chancellor of state universities. He said:

> *I don't like a situation where party politics are infused into educational systems of the country. I wouldn't want myself or my child*

> *to be capped by a political chancellor. I do not think that is right. I sent my child outside Zimbabwe where she will be capped by an academic chancellor.*

In the light of this objective, it was clear that there were indeed numerous dimensions underlying the parents' and students' perceptions of service quality. The findings affirmed the views from literature where it was shown by Sumaedi et al. (2012) that there are seven perceived service quality dimensions considered important to university students, namely, curriculum, facilities, contact personnel, social activities, education counselors, assessment, and instruction medium. The perceived service quality dimension contributing most towards overall perceived service quality of a state university is facilities.

Objective 2: To assess the impact of service quality in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe

The findings of the study showed that service quality had a far greater impact in higher educational institutions in Zimbabwe than imagined. One former student from the University of Zimbabwe said:

> *I feel that universities in the country have been affected by the lack of service quality. The universities have had negative reputations for failing to offer service quality.*

Such sentiments were further noted by a parent stating that:

> *The reputation of the majority of universities in the country have lost the reputation they had in the past 15 years. I directly link this to the lack of service quality in the institutions.*

Another argument raised in relation to the impact of service quality in HEIs in Zimbabwe was that of enrolment. It was argued by one Professor from the Zimbabwe Open University that:

> *There has been a considerable upsurge in the number of students that are enrolling with foreign universities at the expense of those in the country. This has been linked to the lack of service quality in the country's universities.*

Related to this objective, it could be demonstrated that the study findings were well within the realms of the views from previous literature. For instance, Sultan and Wong (2012) observed that in the world of cutthroat competition, an organization needed some competitive advantage to sustain itself. In as far as the impact of service quality on HEIs was concerned, this study conformed to the findings of other, previous studies such as that conducted by Law (2010) who noted a significant increase in the study of the subject of service quality and student satisfaction in post-secondary education in the world. In this regard, over the past few

years, there has been a significant growth in service quality initiatives and customer satisfaction strategies aimed at improving service delivery and increasing customer satisfaction levels at institutional, national, regional and global levels so as to enhance institutional reputation and competitive advantage.

Objective 3: To examine the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction in HEIs in Zimbabwe

On this objective, the study results reflected a greater correlation between parents- and students' perceived service quality and students' satisfaction. All the dimensionsof service quality noted under objective one were shown to have a significantly positive effect on overall user satisfaction. A parent interviewed said:

> *There is a correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction. In Zimbabwe, this is hampered by the quality of academic expertise in Zimbabwean universities.*

Similar sentiments were expressed by one participant who said that:

> *Lecturers in the universities in Zimbabwe have no PhDs hence this impacts on the quality of tuition which affects the ability of such personnel to offer services that satisfy customers.*

Such views are against the evidence that Zimbabwe has one of the highest literacy rates in the world at over ninety percent (Zim Stats 2014). Thus, as shown by Dong, Sivakumar, Evans, and Zou (2015), research in services marketing has consistently identified customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction as the two most important service outcomes. Achieving a high level of service quality and customer satisfaction can lead to crucial consumer behavioral outcomes such as increased repeat purchase, less consumer complaint behaviour, higher switching cost and positive word of mouth (Ang, Liou, and Wei, 2018).

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the study concluded that service quality is indeed a critical component to students when selecting a university to attend. It was also concluded that there are numerous dimensions of higher education service quality in Zimbabwe, and that these dimensions can be categorised into administrative, physical environment quality, mind set and performance of academics, pedagogy and the existence of support facilities. In addition, the study concluded that social factors have an influence on the perceptions of quality in the higher education sector in Zimbabwe. The study findings, therefore, offer a basis for policy implications towards the continuous improvement of higher education service quality in Zimbabwean universities. There

is need for the crafting of policies that enhance service quality among universities in Zimbabwe. Such policies should relate to administrative procedures, infrastructure development, assessment and admission criteria, among others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that there be feedback on service quality assessments as well as the adoption of integrity in recruitment of lecturers and admission of students. It is recommended that Zimbabwean universities should train their staff in the administrative sphere with a view to equipping them with skills aimed at meeting the expectations of students. It is suggested that universities in Zimbabwe develop a service quality culture among staff and develop infrastructure that satisfy the students' and parents' expectations. This conscious effort would inevitably lead to a culture of internationalisation, a practice that the neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe could emulate.

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