*Review Article*

# UNIVERSITY  EDUCATION  AS A SERVICE: ISSUES OF QUALITY

**Emma  Darkoa  Aikins[1], Akua  Ahyia  Adu-Oppong[1], Goddana  Mensima  Darko[1]**
[1]College of Technology Education, University of Education, Winneba

Correspondence should be addressed to **Emma  Darkoa Aikins**

## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to assess the service quality of university education from the perspective of the immediate beneficiaries of the service. Students as the immediate beneficiaries of university education have key expectations of what constitutes quality in the context of universities as service organisations. Within that framework, this study examined the claims of other researchers on issues of quality in university education. The issues reviewed revolved around the concept of quality, university education in the global context, quality in service delivery, university education as a service, quality assurance practices in university education and the parameters for measuring quality. The study also examined studies on quality within the context of Ghanaian public universities and students perception of service quality.

Available studies reviewed showed that quality in university education has been defined and measured with insignificant regard for students' concept of quality. Most of the studies reviewed conceptualise quality in university education in terms of meeting the standards and requirements set by the accreditation authorities. The studies showed that students' opinion about the quality of services provided by universities which in the end determines the employability and socioeconomic fitness of graduates for the world of work is ignored. This paper therefore examines the issues of quality from a multi-stakeholder concept and brings attention to the key variables on which quality in university education should revolve.

**KEYWORDS:**  University, Education, Service Quality, Students.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality of service in tertiary educational institutions is one key issue which is receiving great attention in most parts of the world. This is probably as a result of the increasingly high expectations from the products of tertiary institutions by industry and society in general. With increasing number of tertiary education providers, there is no doubt that competition for reputation and goodwill among tertiary institutions is becoming keen. Thus, to stand out among the crowd and enjoy the goodwill of students, employers and society at large, tertiary education providers would need to focus more closely on handling their students as customers in an exchange relationship who seek value for money. This means that tertiary institutions would need to continually rebrand their curricular and services to the satisfaction of students  through continuous appraisal of industry and

students' needs and the delivery of services that satisfy those needs.

For a long time, it appears that higher education (HE) institutions have preferred to focus on their internal academic needs rather than viewing students as their main customers. This attitude seems to have served them well as long as the demand for tertiary education was greater than the supply. In the last two decades, more and more universities and colleges have been established by private entities and individuals to answer the demand for higher education (Sharabi, 2013). Applicants who can afford are therefore willing to study out of their countries in order to acquire quality training.

By implication, the modern paradigm for a need-focused quality tertiary education requires a sound governance model  which  conceptualizes  the university as a service

1

organisation, students as clients and society as consumers of their services. This in turn calls for clarification of the responsibilities of service providers and continuous appraisal and improvement of service delivery. All of these need to be underscored by the need to create value for students, employers and society at large.

## THE CONCEPT OF SERVICE

Gronroos (1994) defined a service as an activity or series of activities of more or less intangible nature that normally, not necessarily, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solution to customer problems. This definition suggests that service delivery anchors on the interaction between the service provider and the consumer. Since the interaction seeks to provide solutions to customer needs, it means that the people providing the service, the physical environment in which the service is provided and the process by which the service is delivered are key determinants of the impressions created for the consumers.

According to Gronroos (1994), since the production, distribution and consumption of services take place simultaneously in a process, the benefits derived from the service by the consumer are often measured in terms of the extent to which the service meets the actual and perceived needs of the consumer in relation to the cost incurred by the consumer to access the service. Gronroos adds further that the consumer's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a service depends on the efficiency and speed of the delivery process, the outlook and attitude of the service provider and the degree to which the physical facilities supporting the service delivery are capable of assuring the consumer of satisfaction. Thus in tertiary education settings, the concept suggests that the key parameters by which students rate tertiary education are systems, structure and process of tuition delivery, the providers of the tuition and the facilities supporting the provision of tuition. It is the availability and appropriate mix of these elements that determine the quality of tertiary education from the service perspective.

In light of the varied alternatives, students are becoming more and more assertive and critical and consequently it is becoming necessary for higher education (HE) institutions to address the issues of quality from the perspective of students and society at large (Mizikaci, 2006). Since both students and employers are looking for added value, HE institutes have to deliver quality that is geared towards the needs and expectations of students and employers (Smith, Smith and Clarke, 2007).

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Service quality in university education cannot be discussed without reference to globalization and its implication for higher education. Since universities are often considered the pinnacle of knowledge where knowledge is created, shared, disseminated and applied in all fields of human endeavour for the growth of society, it is important that universities around the globe provide a standard of training and service that enables products from different geographical locations to operate effectively beyond the confines of their country (Meyer, Bushney and Ukpere, 2011)

In view of global trends and the increasing expectations on universities to provide solutions to societal needs, a lot of universities are repositioning themselves through the development and operationalisation of strategies to meet the needs of students, global labour markets and society at large. According to McBurnie and Ziguras (2011), the key requirements for global competitiveness are the quality of staff, students, curricula, facilities, technology and pedagogy. Other variables cited for global competitiveness include effectiveness of knowledge dissemination, development of globally-oriented research agenda, synchronization of graduate programmes with industry needs, effectiveness of institutional linkage arrangements, grading systems and opportunities for learning across borders (Meyer et.al., 2011).

## QUALITY IN SERVICE DELIVERY

In the service industry, quality is often defined from the customers' perspective in terms of the ability of a service to satisfy the consumer. Mukherjee (2006) defines quality as the fitness of a service for its intended purpose. According to Mukherjee, a service is of good quality if it is able to satisfy the purpose for which the service is provided. In this definition, the measure of quality is the opinion of beneficiaries of the service on the extent to which the service meets their needs. Parasuraman, Zeitbhml and Berry (1985) as cited in Vasileiadis (2010, p.22) lists certain features of quality service that are worth considering. Among those relevant to tertiary education as a service are reliability, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility and understanding.

In the view of these authors, consumers experience consistency in their expectations when a service is of good quality. They argue further that the service providers are seen by consumers to have the requisite skills to deliver the service and the readiness to offer the service promptly to the satisfaction of the varied and unique needs of their customers. This certainly requires that service providers respect their customers and put up consistent effort at understanding their needs. Above all, consumers of quality services perceive the service providers are honest, trustworthy, ethical and approachable.

When applied to tertiary education, such elements of services are expected to characterize students' experiences of the structures, infrastructure, processes and systems by which universities offer tertiary education. It is also worth noting that in the midst of global competitiveness and technological changes, the quality standards of a service keeps changing with time. Hence for universities to continue to enrich students' experiences and turn out products whose employability reflects quality training, Pedler (1989) as cited in Vasileiadis (2010, p.21) recommends organisational learning and change as the most effective and efficient approach to assuring quality. Perhaps the learning and change expected of tertiary education providers in Africa have rather been slow with respect to conceptualisation of tertiary education as a service.

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AS A SERVICE

According to Lusch and Wu (2012), higher education comes under the service sector of any economy alongside professions like accounting, healthcare, transport, insurance and several other public and private service enterprises. Ideally, such service providers count their success, efficiency and productivity based on the experiences and level of satisfaction of their clients. Hence, with higher education, the measure of quality, productivity and efficiency should be the experiences of students which ought to be ascertained through feedback from the students who are the primary beneficiaries of the service.

Unfortunately, Lusch and Wu note that most universities around the world concentrate more on producing credit hours and degrees at the expense of enriching students' experiences and enhancing their employability. Instead of treating the student as a client that deserves customer care and support to facilitate their acquisition of values, skills and knowledge, a lot of tertiary educational institutions seem to convey nothing beyond the ideology of working hard to earn a degree by fulfilling credit hour requirements (Boyd, 2012).

Beside the age-long tradition of instructional delivery that has witnessed little or no integration of customer service practices, the other support services such as clerical office duties, administrative management, student affairs, career guidance, accommodation services,among others, all show little evidence of customer care in the way they provide their services. Moreover, since the value of training received by students depends on the systems, structures and processes within the university influencing their experiences, it is about time that universities develop a service mind-set, synchronise the various services they offer to students as a composite whole and adopt a customer relationship management approach to assessment and improvement of their services using feedback from students as their clients.

In the view of Emery, Kramer and Tian (2001), students may not be excited about the routine drills of rigorous study in the short run, but in the long run, they are likely to appreciate the quality education that prepared them for the world of work and integration into society. Against the general consensus that tertiary education as a service should aim at employability, life-long learning, societal integration and career development, it behooves on universities, the responsibility to ensure that the education they provide equips students for economic growth and development.

## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Quality assurance is the planned and systematic activities implemented to fulfill the quality requirements for a product or service (Gardner, 2012). In Higher Education, it is defined by White-Hunt (2007) as the totality of the systems, procedures, resources, structures and information channeled into maintaining and improving the quality and standards of teaching, scholarship, research, students' learning experiences and their capacity for professional growth and development. According to Materu (2007), quality assurance in Higher Education has become necessary owing to increased demand for tertiary education and the huge

financial capital pumped into tertiary education by governments and corporate bodies. Materu also cites the need for accountability, reforms, new methods of service delivery, rapid obsolescence of knowledge and the need for harmonization of qualification and awards as other factors driving institutionalization of quality assurance.

If indeed universities are to take credit for the delivery of their mandate, their performance must be measured against the expectations of their stakeholders on what constitutes quality. It is therefore not surprising that since its introduction in the world of business, quality assurance principles have been adopted by higher educational institutions to assure stakeholders of quality in service delivery (Baryeh, 2009). In virtually every country, the practice of quality assurance in Higher Education has become mandatory as a matter of compliance to the standards of regulatory authorities and in the face of competition among universities.

For a university to enjoy the goodwill of students, employers, regulatory authorities and all of its stakeholders, it must uphold very high standards in its core business of knowledge creation and dissemination. In addition, it must ensure accountability to stakeholders as a prime priority through continuous peer review and improvement of systems, structures, procedures and the resources used to create and disseminate knowledge (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis and Fitsilis, 2010).

To different stakeholders, the evidence of quality assurance practice is varied, based on definitions of quality from each stakeholder's perspective. To regulatory authorities for example, the indicator of quality assurance is compliance to global standards. Similarly, employers use the on-the-job capabilities of the products of an institution as the key indicator of quality assurance practice. As a service institution with students as their immediate clients, it is appropriate to discuss quality assurance from the perspective of students. A lot of similarities and slight variations however exist in opinion about the criteria used by students to assess the practice of quality assurance in tertiary institutions.

## PARAMETERS OF QUALITY IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Tsinidou et al. (2010) provide seven deliverables from the students' point of view around which quality assurance in higher educational institutions should revolve. They are curriculum structure, content and relevance, career prospects, adequacy and appeal of infrastructure, accessibility and layout of institution, and the services offered by academic staff, administrative personnel and library personnel. Similarly, Beaumont (2012) provided the criteria used by students to evaluate quality assurance practice as the quality of teaching, academic staff, administrative staff, academic facilities and course structure. The others were career services, students' welfare, networking, institutional reputation and internal student feedback systems. In a related study to measure Higher Education Service quality in India, Annamdevula and Bellamkonda(2012) identified the criteria for quality assurance as teaching and course content, administrative

3

services, academic facilities, campus infrastructure, internationalization and support services.

The criteria stated so far are clear reflections of the five-fold universal criteria for measuring service quality - tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance (Tsinidou et al., 2010). In this context, the question worth considering is whether universities as service institutions actually operationalise their quality assurance systems with high premium on students' experiences against the backdrop of the universal criteria for measuring service quality in higher education. Though so much effort has been put into compliance with the quality standards of regulatory authorities (Materu, 2007), it is not certain that accountability to students and responsiveness to their needs have been given the due attention within the context of service quality deliverables. From the context of these shortfalls, recommendations have been made by Tsinidou et. al. (2010), Materu (2007) and Beaumont (2012), calling on tertiary educational institutions to adopt a need-based approach in the development and implementation of their quality assurance systems and programmes.

## GHANAIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND THE ISSUE OF QUALITY

Quality assurance of universityeducation in Ghana has since 1993 been monitored and supervised by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) (Baryeh, 2009). Though the NAB is fully discharging its mandate, one of which is the conduct of regular quality assurance audits on all tertiary institutions in Ghana (Asante, 2012), it appears that its focus is more on external quality assurance. This is because studies conducted by Materu (2007), Baryeh (2009) and Asante (2012) suggest that the accreditation authorities in Ghana and many other African countries pay more attention to institutional mission and purpose, academic programmes, staff quality, research and teaching. The other areas noted as the focus of audit by accreditation authorities include finance, physical infrastructure, information resources and students recruitment.

From the perspective of students as customers of higher education, available literature shows that students' voices are yet to be fully incorporated in the development and implementation of quality assurance systems (Materu, 2007). Within the context of the dimensions for measuring service quality (assurance, tangibleness, reliability, responsiveness and empathy), empathy with students and responsiveness to their needs are yet to be given the due attention by universities across Africa. This prompts the need for quality assurance practices that meet the students' needs and expectations; address quality issues based on feedback systems and improves processes and systems through collaboration with, and involvement of students.

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY

A study conducted on students' perception of service quality at Pentecost University College (PUC) in Ghana by Asante (2012) found out that among the service quality dimensions assessed, students were more particular about empathy, assurance and reliability of processes and procedures of service delivery. On empathy, majority of the students

believe that employees of the University pay less attention to understanding their needs.

With processes and procedures, majority of students in the University were dissatisfied with how they are served by administrative personnel and how examination results are released in Pentecost University College. According to Baryeh (2009), the most common levels of higher education quality assurance is at the programme and whole institutional level. On the other hand, students value career prospects, that is, perspectives for professional career, opportunities for attending postgraduate programmes with scholarships, opportunities to continue studies abroad, availability of exchange programmes with other universities/institutes and institutional links with business (Tsinidou et al., 2010). Other criteria for quality which are highly cherished by students but are yet to be prioritized by university authorities include prompt and efficient feedback to students, availability of internship opportunities, prompt and efficient response to students queries, well maintained infrastructure and prompt supervision of students work (Asante, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The perception of students about service quality in university education is wide and varied. Their perception is tied to their expectation of what universities should offer in exchange for the fees they collect. Hence, they expect universities to address issues of quality based on students' experiences. In effect, they expect university quality assurance systems to utilize feedback from students as the main tool for quality improvement.

Strikingly, available information suggests that the needs of students have not been fully met as far as quality assurance practices are concerned. Whilst universities strive to attain compliance with the demands of regulatory authorities, mostly standardization of programmes and institutional structures for running the programmes, they pay less attention to the unique needs of students who are the primary consumers of their service.

Beside the core function of teaching and research, students expect universities to assess on regular basis, how students feel about the entire climate of the university, its facilities, its personnel, support services, technology and all other elements of the university as a service institution set up to facilitate students' acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and expertise. Unfortunately, universities in Ghana are yet to fully incorporate customer relationship management in their transactions with students.

## REFERENCES

[1]. Annamdevula, S. and Bellamkonda. R., S. (2012). Development of HiEdQUAL for Measuring Service Quality in Indian Higher Education Sector. International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology, 3(4), 412-416.
[2]. Asante A.K. (2012). Assessment of the service quality delivery in Tertiary Education – A case study of Pentecost University College, Ghana.
[3]. Baryeh, J. O. B. (2009). Higher Education Quality Assurance in Ghana: How the NAB is coping with the Balance between Improvement and Accountability.

4

Master's Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education, University of Oslo.

[4]. Beaumont, J. D. (2012). Service Quality in Higher Education: The Students Viewpoint. A Bachelor's Degree Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of Manchester.

[5]. Boyd, R.L. (2012). Customer Service in Higher Education: Finding a Middle Ground. The Mentor, An Academic Advisory Journal. Pennsylvania State University.

[6]. Emery, C., Kramer, T., and Tian, R. (2001). Customers vs. products: Adopting an effective approach to business students. *Quality Assurance in Education, 9*(2), 110–115. Retrieved 13th June, 2017 from http://www.bus.lsu.edu/accounting/faculty/crumbley/customersvsproducts.htm

[7]. Gardner, T. (2012). History of Thought in Quality Assurance. ManTech International Corporation. Retrieved 13th June, 2017 from https://asq.org.

[8]. Gronroos, C. (1994). From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing", Management Decision, Vol. 32 (2), pp.4 – 20.

[9]. Lusch,R. and Wu, C. (2012). A Service Science Perspective on Higher Education: Linking Service Productivity Theory and Higher Education Reform.

[10]. Materu, P. (2007). Higher Education Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa: Status, Challenges, Opportunities, and Promising Practices. Washington, D.C. World Bank

[11]. McBurnie, G. and Ziguras, C. (2011). Global Trends in Quality Assurance for Transnational Education.

[12]. Meyer, M., Bushney, M. and Upkere, W.I. (2011). The impact of globalisation on higher education: Achieving a balance between local and global needs and realities. *African Journal of Business Management,* 5(15), 6569-6578.

[13]. Mizikaci, F. (2006), "A systems approach to program evaluation model for quality in higher education", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 14(1), pp. 37-53

[14]. Mukherjee, P. N., (2006). Total Quality Management. Eastern Economy Edition. New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited

[15]. Parasuraman, A., Zeithmal, V.A. and Berry, L.L.(1985)."A conceptual model of service quality and its implications of future research", Journal of Marketing, Vol. 4, P.45-50. As cited in Vasileiadis (2010)

[16]. Sharabi, M. (2013). "Managing and improving service quality in higher education", International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences, Vol. 5(3), pp. 309 - 320

[17]. Smith, G., Smith, A. and Clarke, A. (2007) "Evaluating service quality in universities: a service department perspective", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 15(3), pp. 334-351.

[18]. Tsinidou, M.,Gerogiannis, V., Fitsilis P.(2010). Evaluation of the Factors that determine Quality in Higher Education: An Empirical Study. Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 18(3), 227-244.

[19]. Vasileiadis, I. V. (2010). Quality Assurance in Elementary Education. Master's Thesis submitted to the University of Macedonia. Retrieved October 5, 2016 from dspace.lib.uom.gr

[20]. White-Hunt, K. (2007). Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education and the Trend towards International Standardisation. Retrieved 13th June, 2017 from www.academia.edu.

5