



## QUALITY IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS FROM PUBLIC AND PRIVATELY-OWNED INSTITUTIONS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper was designed to capture the views of students on what they understand by quality in universities, as the definition of quality is centred on customer satisfaction. This study aims to define what quality is in Nigerian universities from the stakeholders', or students' points of view, through the use of various literature, so as to understand what students perceive as quality and to address their major expectations. The paper argues that, if students are not classified or recognised as customers in the Nigerian university context, then the students need to explain how they define quality for the research to know how they perceive quality. The study sampled the opinions of students at both private and public institution using a questionnaire. The study has revealed that quality means different things to different people and that the ways in which individuals view quality in terms of private and public education are different. The study concluded that, in the Nigerian University System, quality management is paramount in achieving and producing quality students who can perform outstandingly in today's competitive corporate environment.*

### **Introduction**

In the last few decades it has been argued that the world has witnessed integration of economies as a result of multiple factors, including the deregulation of world capital markets, market liberalisation and, most importantly, the explosion of worldwide telecommunications. This has, in turn, created an intensively competitive and dynamic environment, which creates often conflicting pressures on organisations to rapidly adapt and respond to changing scenarios. However, while competition has become more intense, resources have become scarcer. Organisations that employ public funds, such as Educational Institutions, are no exception, as they need to demonstrate sufficient value in return for the resources employed

(Pounder & Coleman, 2002). As a result, governments in many countries have initiated different measures to accommodate these changes through the establishment of different policies. Similarly, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) elaborated that measures, such as policies or quality initiatives introduced by many governments to regulate standards and improve efficiency, are indications of the desperate need to bring about fundamental improvements in the management of the quality of universities. However, despite the vast amount of literature on the topic of 'quality', there is very little agreement on the fundamental precepts that underpin quality in the university sector. Most studies on quality focus on students' levels of satisfaction, while the students' views about what quality means have not been adequately examined. It is now necessary to validate the assumptions of what quality means to students who are directly involved or affected by the process of university education. Therefore, this study explores the empirical findings by involving students in two similar departments, in two different universities, to investigate what quality management means to them.

### **Problem Statement**

Saad and Siha (2000) argued that quality is recognised as a fundamental issue in management theory and practice, while there is considerable variation in how it is perceived by different stakeholders and the ensuing implications for organisational performance. To capture the scope of this study, education is defined as a service, and services are described as activities or processes that are differentiated from physical goods by virtue of four essential characteristics, namely intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption, as identified by Wright and O'Neill (2002). A particular feature of services is that they are behavioural rather than physical entities. This is mainly relevant to higher education, which is often described as a process of transformation involving the analytical and critical development of the student (Harvey, 2009). Furthermore, higher education requires a highly intrinsic and non-physical product that is the result of complex multidimensional service delivery, post-purchase knowledge and an assemblage of tangible and intangible offerings (Wright & O'Neill, 2002), all of which involve the faculties (staff), students, employers of graduates and the community, hence making it extremely hard to assess. The quality of the multidimensional educational experience is influenced by a myriad of factors and variables, at the end of which the student achieves a profile of knowledge and skills, which the world in general will perceive as the quality of the educational provision (Yorke, 1999).

Although quality in universities might be subject to many definitions focusing on its educational provision, the measurement and evaluation of such quality are subject to many different

interpretations. A fundamental issue in quality management is the lack of consensus in defining quality, although most people seem to believe they can intuitively recognise quality when they encounter it. The ambiguity arises as people perceive quality differently, making it an elusive concept to define (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Sahney et al. (2006) argued that quality is a vigorous idea, which employs an emotional and moral influence that makes it difficult to link it to any one particular meaning. Furthermore, the emphasis in the literature on quality is predominantly product-orientated, while service quality has received considerably less attention (Heyneman, 2006). This is unfortunate, as service quality in particular is a multifaceted construct and there is a lack of consensus on the various facets of service quality and their interrelationships (Hung et al., 2003). The main difference between product and service quality is the fact that, unlike with products, customers do not evaluate service solely on the outcome, but consider the process of offering the service as fundamental (Hill et al., 2003), which also makes it more difficult for the customer to evaluate service quality. In another review by Edvardsson (2005), he highlights the influence of emotions on customers' perceptions of quality and the importance of knowing the positive and negative drivers of customer emotions, as customers may respond in various ways.

Primarily, quality management in the services sector was seen as improving internal processes without considering the impact or interrelationships between the processes and the ultimate customers (Harvey & Green, 1993). Eventually, the focus shifted to the consumer and, now, most definitions of service quality are customer focused (Hung et al., 2003), so that if consumers' expectations are met, service quality is considered to be satisfactory (Iacovidou et al., 2009).

### **Related Studies**

Perceptions of service quality are, therefore, based on the difference between consumer expectations of the performance of the service and their assessment of the actual experience of the service. The perceived importance of critical service elements to customers, and their subsequent satisfaction with these service elements, are the criteria for evaluating service quality, as suggested by Hung et al. (2003). Furthermore, in support of this argument, Wright and O'Neill (2002) have identified five dimensions or service elements for evaluating general service quality, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Wright and O'Neill expressed that failure to meet customer expectations on any of these dimensions can result in a satisfaction gap.

In order to have clearly defined systems for quality management, it is crucial to have a clear assertion of what exactly is meant by quality (Doherty, 2008). A main contention in defining quality is whether quality is a desired state, as put forth traditionally, or whether it is a process,

a view which considers the dynamic nature of the industry, market needs and stakeholders' expectations (Saad & Siha, 2000). There are various definitions of quality, reflecting different approaches to quality management and taking into account different aspects and perspectives of quality. For example, quality has been associated with offering distinctive or special products or services from a user-orientated perspective. Accordingly, ISO 8042 describes quality as the integrity of the features and characteristics of a product or service that help to satisfy a particular stakeholder's needs (Yorke, 1999). Although this view of product or service quality focuses on the particular needs of users, conflicts might arise in prioritising different needs and wants, and in evaluating how they are met.

Other related definitions of quality also include that the goods or services are fit for purpose, conform to requirements or specifications and achieve excellence (Sahney et al., 2004). Later approaches relate quality as concepts for whole organisations in developing the capacity to continually learn and implement customer wants (Harvey, 2005). The emphasis is on quality as a total organisation-wide effort, whereby it should be a way of life that influences the attitudes and behaviour of everyone involved in the whole process. Quality is thus perceived to be a state of mind and not confined to mere processes or procedures. When applied to the context of universities, the industry-based quality concepts present significant limitations and, as with other services, are inconclusive (Cheng & Tam, 1997). There is a long-standing debate about the appropriateness of re-defining industrial or business concepts to make them relevant to higher education, which is perceived as public goods (Campell & Rozsnyani, 2002). There is also a tendency to criticise the emergence of market-led approaches to quality in universities, which is held responsible for the increasing emphasis on consumer orientation (Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004). Furthermore, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) noted that definitions of quality are stakeholder relative. They expressed that stakeholders' perception mapped the different definitions with the contradictory main concern and the perspectives of each stakeholder and suggested that the consistency and conformity definitions might be associated with academics and administrators, the value for money and excellence definitions would be more relevant to students, sponsors and funding bodies, while the fitness for purpose definition would be of more relevance to employers.

Most of the definitions have been criticised for different limitations. The 'consistency in process' definition is criticised on the grounds that it is an insufficient, although necessary, goal of quality management, leading to sterile and bureaucratic processes that stifle creativity and innovation (Doherty, 1997). The 'efficiency' definition considers that, when evaluating the process of achieving desired outcomes, one must also consider the extent to which the desired outcomes are achieved, or their effectiveness, and the efficiency of converting the input into output. However, measuring efficiency and effectiveness can be difficult in universities as many

of the important functional aspects are intangible and can vary considerably from one group of students to another and from one tutor to another. The 'fitness for purpose: conformity to predetermined objectives or standards' definition of quality is used extensively in business and has been quite popular in universities as well (Lomas, 2002). Watty (2005) found that the fitness for purpose definition of quality is the prevailing view of quality amongst accounting academics in Australia. The definition has a strong commercial orientation and assumes that if the product executes the aim for which it is intended its quality is assured. The starting point, therefore, is the purpose for which the product is intended, but this point is one for which the definition does not provide any guidance and assumes that any specification would be complete and without gaps. In reality, where the product or service is complex, such as universities, defining the purpose is no simple matter and any assumptions can weaken the product or outcome. This approach to quality is useful if the objectives, standards, specifications and indicators used for judging quality, as well as evaluating whether the prescribed objectives have been attained, are clear and accepted by all involved constituents (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Another view of fitness for purpose is that it can accommodate all other views of quality where, for example, the purpose may be identified as excellence, value for money or transformation (Watty, 2005).

Interestingly, very few of the definitions are really focused on the student, who is arguably the main customer in a university. The 'transformative' definition, by Harvey and Knight (1996), which focuses on enhancing the capabilities of participants and ultimately empowering them, is one exception. Becket and Brookes (2005) interpret transformation as the critical ability to assess and develop knowledge, and observe that this is more important to internal stakeholders. A distinctive characteristic of a university is that it is closely aligned with the concept of the 'learning society', which requires societies to transform themselves in order to prevent decline (Yorke, 1999). The ability to transform learners by enhancing their ability to think for themselves is seen as the highest level of achievement to which universities can aspire (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). This transformation involves cognitive transcendence and engagement with the meaning of the subject, which, in turn, requires an institutional transformation for learning, teaching for transformation and assessment for transformation. In fact, Harvey and Knight (1996) contended that the other characteristics of quality, including excellence and high standards, fitness for purpose and efficiency and effectiveness, are simply part of the view of quality as transformation. This definition integrates very well with the generally accepted tenet of service quality i.e. customers are active participants in the service delivery process, because, although there is considerable debate about students as customers, their transformation does require a very active and joint participation between the students and their university (Williams, 1993).

Another definition that focuses on students is provided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004, p. 1), which states that the “learning opportunities provided to students enables them to achieve their award”. This includes ensuring the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teaching, overall support structures, assessments and the learning opportunities provided to the students. One criticism of this definition is that it is too general to be readily implemented (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Cheng’s (1995) definition of educational quality in Cheng and Tam (1997) is more comprehensive, although still generic, and encompasses the whole process of education as well as the stakeholders. It states that educational quality is ‘the character of the set of elements in the input, process and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations’ (p. 23).

Closely linked to the issue of educational quality is the issue of standards, which is another term that is essentially subjective and can have different interpretations (Doherty, 1997). Yorke (1999) makes the distinction that, while quality is the totality of all the aspects that influence the students’ experiences, academic standards refer to the set of expectations about the students’ programme of study. Doherty (1997) refers to assessment or output standards i.e. the nature and levels of student attainment required. Lomas and Tomlinson (2000) emphasise that standards are measures of outcome that provide for clear and unambiguous judgments about whether the outcomes are satisfactory. The standards set for a programme of study are inevitably linked to the outcomes and ensure a certain level of knowledge and skills from graduates of that programme. A key characteristic of standards is that they are never static; however, Morley and Aynsley (2007) noted that standards imply standardisation or homogenization with tacit and explicit understandings of what constitutes desirable graduate qualifications and characteristics. Together with the increasing focus on student satisfaction and the classification of higher education, there has been increasing assertion of falling academic standards and grade inflation (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Lomas and Tomlinson, 2000). The evidence also indicates that, while students consider university primarily as a route to a career, they are indifferent as to whether high standards are maintained (Rolfe, 2002). Instead, it is being increasingly claimed that they now tend to shop around for the easiest courses with the highest grades (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002). However, others, such as Marsh and Roche (2000), refute these assertions as they find that students, in fact, do not positively rate lecturers who give them lighter workloads. They find that, although there is a positive correlation between the students’ evaluations of the teaching and the grades obtained by the students, this is mostly explained by the fact that the students perceive that they have learned more when they obtain good grades.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Closely linked to the concepts of quality and standards is the purpose of universities. Similar to the problem of defining quality, Doherty (1997) contends that it is impossible to arrive at a single identifiable purpose for any form of education as the needs of the different stakeholder, although overlapping in many respects, are also different. Generally, the objective of education may be considered to be the acquisition of knowledge and skills for both intrinsic and instrumental purposes (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Heyneman (2006) emphasises the role of private and public universities in enhancing societal cohesion and in ensuring that their graduates are able to satisfy the expectations of the labour market and provide value to the community in general. He suggests that the more a university exhibits good behaviour and professional standards, the more likely it is that its students will contribute to social capital that is tolerant, understands diversity and is willing to work towards a common good. Wals and Jickling (2002) contend that a university's role is to develop dynamic qualities in students that allow them to be critical and to work with a high degree of freedom and determination, at least in their professional lives. They argue that educators must seek more diversity of thought in order to ensure sustainability and meaningful learning that will enable students to cope with poorly defined situations and conflicting or diverging values and interests. Eagle and Brennan (2007, p. 49) suggest that the goal of a university is to develop graduates with the "ability to think critically and laterally, to solve problems creatively, to adapt to change, and to understand the social dynamics of the organisations in which they will work". If the objective of a university is to enable students to engage in effective actions in increasing uncertainty, quality systems have to identify those features that develop this characteristic in all of their programmes (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2002)

## **Methodology**

This research uses a quantitative approach to gather information and the questionnaire was adopted as the main research instrument for the study. The primary objective of this paper was to make a closer account of the students' knowledge of the quality service that they received. This paper focused on university students, whose views are considered fundamental to the objectives of a university. These students are considered as co-participants, co-producers and customers of the universities. Two universities, one public and one private, were selected using a purposive sampling method. The criteria for the selection were based on disciplinary balance. For the purpose of this study, the data was collected through a pre-designed questionnaire. The participants from the universities were randomly selected among the 300 and 400 level students in the same discipline. 300 and 400 level students are the two last level of in obtaining a first degree from social and management science faculty in Nigeria university respectively, this can be

classified as year two and three in UK for example. Although, it worth mentioning here that some first degree are for 5year in some universities in Nigeria but such institution were not included in this study. This is because the researchers felt that the 300 and 400 level students would have a better opinion of what quality management is since they have been in the university system for longer than their juniors.

The questionnaire was designed and administered to 200 participants, with 100 being administered to the private university students, 50 to 300 level students and 50 to 400 level students. A similar technique was adopted in the selection of the 100 students in the public university. The participants were selected for easy management of the data to be collected. 164 questionnaires were collected back and were analysed for the study. However, due to the nature of this paper, and its relative sensitivity as it deals with the ethical nature of institutions, the respondents were assured of their anonymity while answering the questions posed to them. In addition, because of the geographical location of the study, the questionnaires were administered personally.

## **Results and Discussion**

Due to the nature of the study, the findings were discussed based on the common terms identified by the student in both the public and private universities in Nigeria. When comparing the responses of the students in the public university to those of the students of the private university, the findings are as below:

- It was surprising to note that, in both institutions, the number of female students was double that of male students.
- 84.38% of our respondents from the public university fall between in the age range of 22 to 25 years old while, in the private university, the majority of the respondents (68%) are younger in age, and fall into the age range of 18 to 21 years old. It is interesting to find a few students (15.62%) who are younger, and in the same age range as the students from the private university while, in the private university, 32% are older, in the same age bracket of 22 to 25 years old as the students from the public university.
- In both universities, all of the respondents have spent at least 3 years in their institution. This helps the research to have very objective views and opinions on the subject matter, which is “Quality Management: A Fundamental Issue in Higher Education”.
- When the students were asked about how they could determine quality education through four major selections, which are grades received, education level of the lecturers, the way



and manner of the lectures being received and the size of the classes, or all of the above or none of the above. The responses from the students show that none of the students selected 'none of the above', which explains that the selected criteria are relevant. The respondents from the public university show 64% interest, compared with 72% from the private university, which shows that 'grades received', 'educational level of the lecturers', 'the way and manner of the lectures being received' and 'class size' will determine the quality of education. 12% of the public university students, compared with 8% from the private university, were of the view that the educational level of the lecturers will determine the quality of the education. None of the respondents from the public university picked that class size will determine quality. The majority of the students who took part in the study said that they are used to large class sizes and that if the institution does not have large classes then it means that it is not competent in delivering its programmes. Furthermore, 6% of the respondents from the private university consider class size as the important factor that determines quality.

- Another question that was asked of the students was what the three major determinants of quality education were that they could think of. The students were given the opportunity to think of their own determinants but, surprisingly, the students from both universities did not share a common view on any of the suggestions. While the students from the private university identified the environment, the teaching materials and the accommodation as major factors in relation to quality, the students from the public university identified teaching techniques, staff motivation and the lecture hall set up as major determinants of quality.
- The respondents were further asked what they understood by service quality. The respondents from the public university listed many things but, among the ones that kept on occurring, were good grades, no strikes, effective teaching styles, time management and a better approach to student life on campus. The respondents from the private university also mentioned 1:1 relationships with their tutors, a good library, a clean and neat environment, fewer rules and effective communication as what service quality means to them. They both shared a common view of some factors as to what makes a quality service, that is: type of service received, the way in which the service is delivered, the number of services received and the type of person who delivered the service.

- The respondents were asked to rate from 'strongly agreed' to 'strongly disagreed' on what they think will determine service quality in higher education, which are: one must consider the institution's environment, the services being provided and the quality of students being produced. 52% of the students from the public university strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 68% who strongly agreed from the private university. It was surprising that no students picked undecided, disagreed or strongly disagreed. This implies that the institution's environment, the services being provided and the quality of students being produced are important factors in determining quality by students.
- One student from the public university strongly disagreed with the statement that, in achieving good quality management in higher education, both the students and the staff must fully contribute their own quotas while, in the private university, 75% of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement. In a similar vein, 48% of the respondents also strongly agreed with the statement from the public university, while 22% agreed, 10% were undecided and 14% disagreed. The respondents from the private university showed that 25% agreed. It was evident in the respondents' responses that some students fail to take responsibility for their own learning. The students from the private university claimed that they were paying a lot of money for their tuition fees and that, therefore, they could not avoid getting involved in their learning. Likewise, the students from the private university showed their willingness to get involved and to contribute to their learning, while the students from the public university didn't care.
- 89% of the responses from the public university and 92% from the private university strongly agreed that quality management in higher education would result in the quality production of graduate students and would, in turn, improve the nation's economy. Surprisingly, 11% of the students from the public university and 8% from the private university agreed with the statement while no respondents from either of the universities disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Overall, quality management is better practiced in the private institutions than in the public institutions. This might be because, in private institutions, there is a greater number of challenges of efficient use of resources, demand for effectiveness, accountability, quality control and, most of all, performance appraisal of the service provider because they are also the

employees. This is not to say that there is no quality management in the public institutions, but that in private institutions is of a higher standard.

For the effective management of quality in education, the objectives of providing that education would have to be clearly understood, even if there is a range of objectives to fulfil. Stakeholders in the education sector may have contradictory priorities and expectations based on their different modes of interaction with the institution. The reality that there is no agreed definition of quality is taken as indicative of the problems inherent in deciding the appropriate measures for assessing quality. However, reliance on a single definition for quality can be a source of conflict and can result in communication problems. Indeed, it might be a futile exercise to seek a single best definition of quality as it is not a 'unitary concept' but must be defined in terms of 'qualities'.

Although quality will always be subject to varying interpretations, most of the definitions have various points of similarity between them, as noted in this study. Certainly, the complexity and multifaceted concept of quality in universities might not be best described by a single definition, and cannot be well measured by only one index. It would be productive to determine the views of different stakeholders when defining and evaluating quality so as to allow potentially different, but legitimate, views to be expressed. Meeting such expectations might, nevertheless, be particularly challenging.

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