

GAP ANALYSIS MODEL IN SERVICE QUALITY: A REVIEW ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education is a valuable tool for societal development. The quality of educational service at the tertiary level is therefore of a higher perceptual factor to the students, parents, sponsors, government, employers of labour, and other stakeholders. The concept of service quality serves as a determinant of private university performance and a basis for competitive edge. The study explored the gap analysis model of service quality by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) in order to propose a framework for private universities educational service on how to understand stakeholders' expectations and perception in terms of the quality of service they render and in effect satisfy them. The evaluation of the gap analysis model in relation to the existing quality of educational service offered by the private universities in Nigeria indicated areas of gaps with service quality implications. The study therefore proposed a conceptual framework of service quality that integrates all stakeholders' needs and recommended further empirical validations of the proposed model.

Keywords: *Gap Analysis, Service Quality. Private Universities, Nigeria.*

Introduction

University education is regarded as a valuable tool for human capital development, an engine for socio-economic and political development and innovation in the existence of any geographical entity and is particularly needed to address the problems of underdevelopment (Idumange&Nanighe, 2006). Adeogun, Subair and Osifila (2009) indicated that Nigeria as a country recognize teaching and research at the higher education level as a major avenue for the development of higher level workforce for both managerial and technological purposes which informed the approval of private universities. Fadipe (2000) also agreed that the need for university education in Nigeria arose out of the critical manpower need for national development programmes after independence. Consequently, the establishment of universities started with University College, Ibadan as the first university in Nigeria in 1948 and subsequently the first private university Igbenedion University, Okada in 1999.

The number of universities licensed to offer service at the higher educational level has since increased. Latest statistics show that there are 40 federal universities, 40 state universities and 61 private universities making a total of 141 universities in Nigeria (nuc.edu.ng, 2015). Although, Adeogun, Subair and Osifila (2009) hinted that the first initiative for the ownership of a private university was by Basil NnnanaNkaegbu with the establishment of Tandem University at Owerri in 1980 which however was laced with a lot of legal controversies. Tandem University presently does not exist on the list of licensed universities by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria.

Private university educational service is an arrangement whereby universities are owned by individuals, institutions, or groups other than government and they therefore depend on funding from tuition, investments and private donors without recourse to taxpayers money (Idumange& Major, 2006).

In marketing literature, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) suggested that "service quality is the customers' expectations of service and their perceptions of the service received". Specifically, their thesis of service quality within the SERVQUAL instrumentation significantly opined that service quality is defined in relation to customer expectations of excellent service as offered by a particular firm within its industry and perception is the evaluation of that particular service offered.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985) therefore expounded the discourse of the gap between customer expectations and perception of service quality by illustrating this as a consequence of some defined gaps which include Knowledge gap, Design Gap, Performance Gap, Communications Gap, and the fifth gap representing the overall outcome of the gaps. The present study examined these gaps in order to propose a

framework for the theoretical and empirical evaluation of quality service in university educational service particularly in Nigeria, with the following specific objectives:

- i. To review the gap analysis model in order to identify the salient impacts on private universities educational service quality in Nigeria.
- ii. To propose an operational model for the marketing of private universities educational services in order to help them satisfy their customers and stakeholders and to gain competitive advantage.

Literature Review

Concept of Service Quality

Service quality is conceived along the activities carried out by a business organization involving the actions of employees and other facilities that enhance the rendition of service offering to meet customers' expectations. Service has unique characteristics such as intangibility, variability, inseparability and perishability that create a perception by the customer on the type of quality the service has when a customer encounters the service.

Service quality has been viewed from the dimensions of delivery known as "outcome quality" or "technical quality" and the process that leads the customer to the outcome known as the "process quality" (Grönroos, 1983; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Furthermore, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, (1985) added that service quality is the direction and degree of discrepancy between customer expectation and perception such that where perception is higher than expectation the service is deemed to be of high quality and vice versa.

In trying to determine the specific dimensions of service quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) delineated service from ten dimensions to five dimensions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). This gave rise to the renowned service quality dimensions (SERVQUAL) with five constructs of service quality, namely: assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangibles, which are considered as generic and consistent across different types of services. However, their claim of consistency and number of factors has been debated (Buttle, 1996; Carman, 1990). The SERVQUAL is criticized to have been over-generalised, inconsistent with other services such as business services and as such should be recommended as the starting point of service quality measures rather than an immediate and complete service quality tool (Carman, 1990; Woo & Ennew, 2005).

Service Quality Gaps and Business Performance

The gap between the consumer and the marketer or seller of a service that affects business performance can be identified in two broad gaps of service expectations and service perception. Consequently, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, (1985) modeled the gaps into two major parts; the upper part represents the consumer's part while the lower part represents the marketer's part. The total dimensions of the inherent gaps depicted five gaps, which in order of occurrence are the knowledge gap, the design gap, performance gap, communications gap and lastly, the gap that sums up all the variations in the foregoing gaps and "*represents the difference between consumer's expectations and the perceived service*" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

Service business performance depends on high and unique service quality, which will determine the level of customer patronage and attraction to the service organization. It is therefore important that a business organization commits efforts to bridge the gaps that can divide service expectations and perceptions apart. Dhanalakshmi, Rajini, Kanimozhi (undated) indicated that in the face of competition for market share, firms are becoming increasingly concerned with customer satisfaction and loyalty and as such more focus is put both on how a service is rendered (the process) and how the service delivered (outcome). This has also resulted in a series of business strategies such as horizontal business processes, information sharing, process flexibility, employee empowerment, quick response service, customization and relationship marketing (Dhanalakshmi, Rajini, Kanimozhi, undated). Haywood-Farmer (1988) identified service quality gaps along three service attributes which when achieved by any business can meet customer satisfaction and perception of high quality service namely; physical facilities and processes, people's behavior, and professional judgment.

Service Quality in the Educational Market

The marketplace is increasingly becoming dominated by perception especially from branding attributes, attributable to product and service quality. Cronin and Taylor (1992) indicated that service quality is a direct and unique underlying factor in the consumer purchase decision process. Therefore in relation to the higher education service, such as the university, the concept of service quality lies in the management's

ability to the overall changes in culture and climate with regards to specific areas like decision-making systems, operating systems, and human resource practices (Mosadeghard, 2006). This study therefore views this very important due to the increasing expectations from Higher Educational Institution (HEIs) to extend their primary role of teaching and research to community service, partnership and stakeholders' concerns (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2007).

An empirical examination of service quality in a business school by Leblanc and Nguyen (1997) indicated that seven factors influence student evaluations of service quality and in descending order of importance and these factors include "reputation, administrative personnel, faculty, curriculum, responsiveness, physical evidence and access to facilities". Tam (2007) observed that the education market experienced various changes with the advent of competition between the HEIs in both national and international levels.

It would be suggested that private universities will buy into the ongoing paradigm of service quality in order to gain competitive advantage. However, Cheng and Tam (1997) have suggested that the term "education quality" is a rather vague and controversial concept and Pounder (1999) equally argued that quality is a "notoriously ambiguous term". In spite of these arguments, the need to devise a measure of service quality for business performance remains paramount and continuous with service providers relying on service quality measures such as the SERVQUAL (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998), the importance-performance analysis (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph, (1999) and the balanced scorecard (Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, Broadbent, 2003).

Service Quality in University Educational Service in Nigeria

The role of the university is clearly stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) to include "national development, proper societal values, intellectual capability, scholarship, community service and national unity" (Ajayi&Ekundayo, 2008). In view of this, the university educational service should ideally place emphasis on teaching, research and community service. In addition, the university should provide the ground for entrepreneurship skills development and sound character for pupils seeking education in a bid to producing well rounded graduates. This is in addition to the expectations of service quality, which Ehiamentor (2005) argued that with regard to private universities in particular, the National Universities Commission (NUC) is to ensure that the required "*standards laid down*" are adhered to and maintained, "*quality administration*" is not compromised, and the ultimate goal should not be mainly for profit thereby undermining the primary purpose for the licenses. Consequently, the quality of educational service according to Haywood-Farmer (1988) should be of a high contact and intense interaction attributes to meet the expected service quality.

According to Akpotu and Akpochofo (2009), the inability of government to adequately fund universities up to the level of demand necessitated the licensing of private universities in order to obviate government's monopoly. Akpotu and Akpochofo (2009) also added that the action is in line with government's priority recognition of the importance of university education, which is for the interest of the general public. However, with the upsurge in the establishment and licensing of private universities in Nigeria currently put at 61 (NUC, 2015), Adeniyi (2015) observed that the core interest of some of the investors has been noted to be pecuniary motivated than a commitment to quality university education and quality output of graduates. This has given room to competitive tendencies and *creating questionable gaps* of whether or not universities are providing a qualitative educational service in the overall interest of all stakeholders. Similarly, Adelabu and Akinwumi (2008) argued that service quality is one of the challenges of quality university education in Nigeria.

The implications of service quality is inherent in the characteristics of service and its marketing elements such as intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability which according to Leblanc and Nguyen (1997) makes service an elusive construct. Consequently, these special elements of service have made the explanation of service quality as it relates to services marketing for customer satisfaction a subsisting challenge (Babakus&Boller, 1992). Thus, the effort of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985) has been lauded as a significant step to the measurement of service quality (Leblanc & Nguyen, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

Gap Analysis Model

The theoretical implication of the service quality gaps was originally proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985). According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985), service quality is a measure of the consumer's comparison of expected service with perceived service rendition outcomes. Five identified gaps by the service quality model show the various differences or gaps associated with ascertaining quality service in the transaction between the seller and the buyer.

According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) the conceptual model of service quality shows the gaps in the dimensions of service expectations and perception as shown in Figure 1 below.

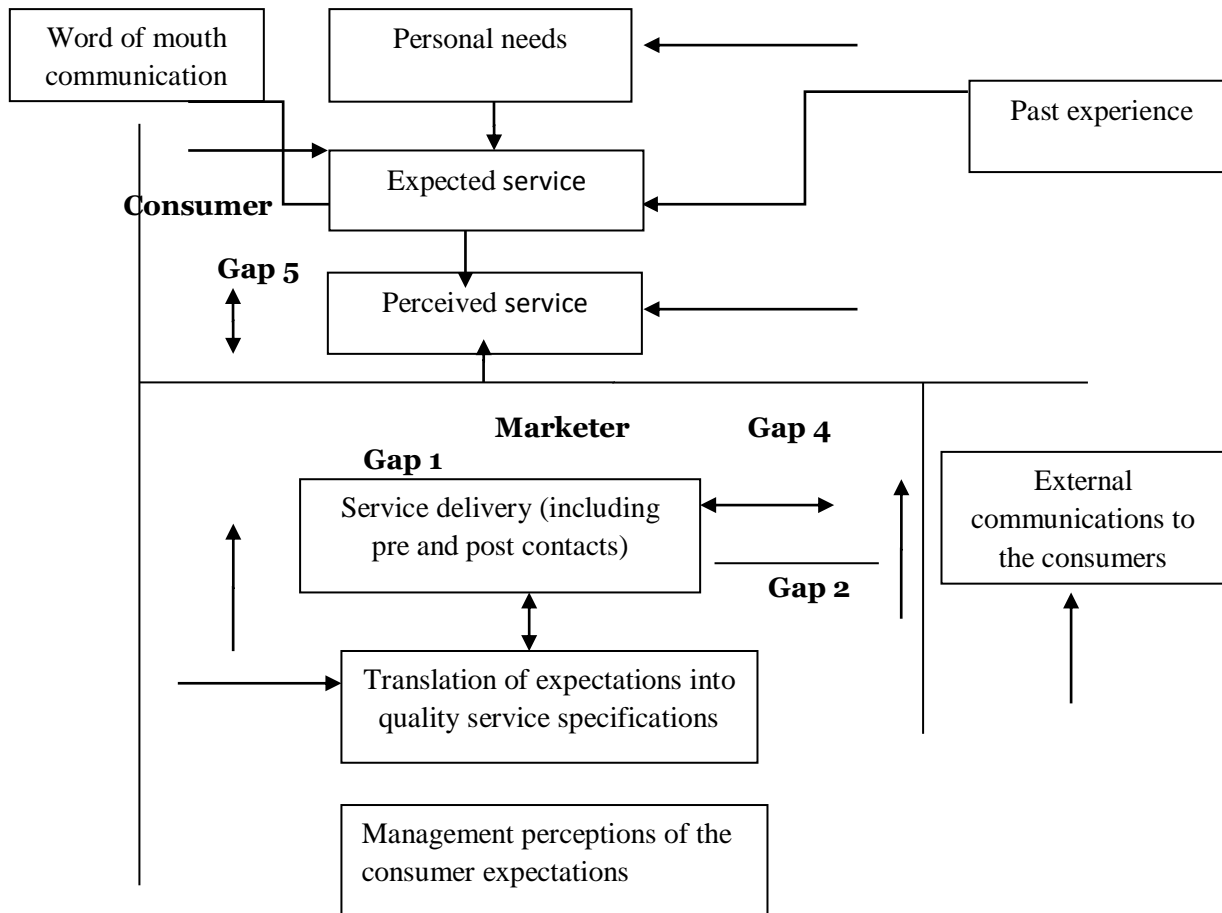


Figure 1. Model of Service Quality

Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985).

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, (1985) stated that the model is divided into two major parts; the upper part represents the consumer's part while the lower part represents the marketer's part. The gaps on the service marketer's side are GAP I, GAP 2, GAP 3, and GAP 4. These are the gaps revealed by the original model of service quality gaps from interviews of service marketing executives (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985). The five gaps in order of occurrence are the knowledge gap, the design gap, performance gap, communications gap and lastly, the gap that sums up all the variations in the foregoing gaps and "represents the difference between consumer's expectations and the perceived service".

The model depicts that Gap 5 is subject to consumer perception, which according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) indicated that consumers' rating of the quality level of service will most likely be affected by the context of their prior expectations of the actual service rendition thus their proposition of the hypothesis that: "The quality that a consumer perceives in a service is a function of the magnitude and direction of the gap between expected service and perceived service."

Conceptual Framework for Private University Educational Service Quality

A proposed framework, which could serve as the educational service quality model (eduSERVQUAL) for private universities, is inferred from the gap analysis model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985). In the present study, the two bipolar sides are the stakeholders' side and the marketer's side.

Stakeholders Side

The university as an entity has stakeholders with varied and common interests and which are hinged on the expected quality of educational service rendered by the university. Gross and Godwin (2005) identified the higher institution stakeholders to include students, faculty and administrators (the immediate stakeholders), and others such as the alumni, the parent body/association, the immediate community, the general public and the employers of labour. According to Gross and Godwin (2005), the university should recognize these interests within the "stakeholders' theory" by conducting routinely a Business Stakeholder Analysis (BSA) aimed at integrating the different stakeholders interests in decision making.

Service quality concept for the private university can be richly applied to address stakeholders' interests along with the BSA whereby students are regarded as "customers" and need to fulfill their experiences and their satisfaction become paramount. This is because, according to Gross and Godwin (2005), even "well-educated but miserable students may transfer to another institution, taking their tuition dollars with them, and where the dissatisfied students stay and graduate, they will not feel institutional allegiance or loyalty, and prospective gift-giving will evaporate". In view of these, marketing strategies are required to achieve success and competitive edge such as the conduct of students and stakeholders satisfaction survey, stakeholders relationship marketing, product rebranding and redesign, and the training and retraining of departmental staff who are directly involved with student matters in order for them to be more "consumer friendly" (Gross & Godwin, 2005).

Bjorkquist (2009) argued that the participation of external stakeholders in boards and council meetings is pertinent to the university service quality, which according to Pierson (2000) encourages "path dependence and self-reinforcement" and is a feature of both welfare and entrepreneurial organizations. The stakeholder approach is intended to treat all stakeholders equally on the basis of the extent to which the matter or problem affects them and this is supported in literature with the argument for political systems to establish arrangements for consultation and involvement in order to aid effective policy implementation (Weaver & Rockman, 1993).

The Marketer's Side

The marketer's side depicts the position of the private university or the service provider. The services provided by the service provider along with other tangible and intangible "touchpoints" creates the perception for the customer in view of his/her expectations. In effect, service quality is the onus of the service provider and this involves the major "gaps". The dimensions of service quality gaps and the concomitant evaluative criteria according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985) include reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer and tangibles. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) these ten criteria or evaluative dimensions are basic and relevant regardless of the service. The ten criteria have however evolved into the standardized SERVQUAL model of five evaluative constructs, which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1988).

The gap analysis model provides very effective measures for analyzing the quality of educational service especially for private universities. This is important because private universities do not depend on government (Idumange & Nanighe, 2006) but source and apply funds from tuition, investments and private donors.

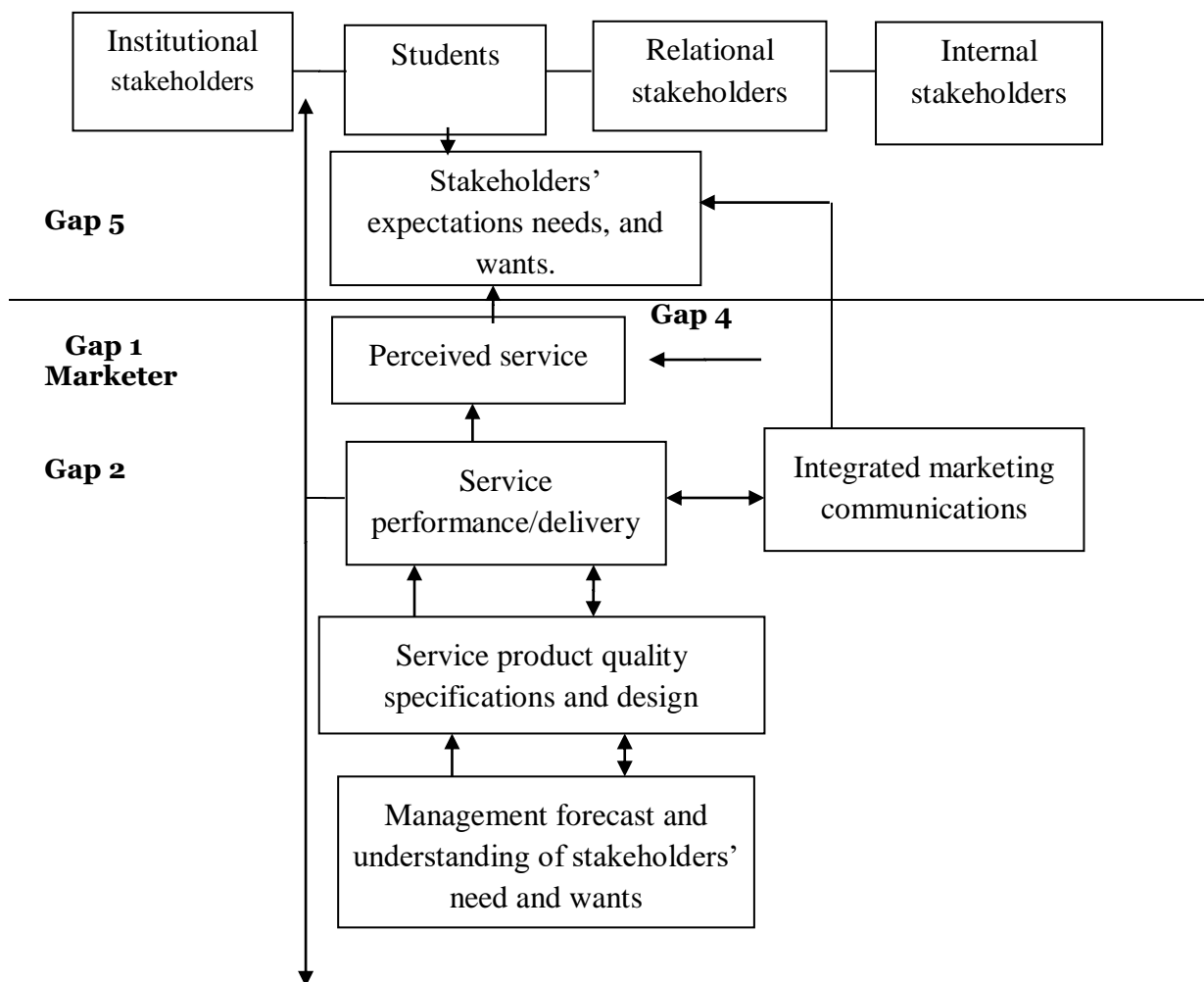
Stakeholders' Organisational Orientation

Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as any individual or group of individuals affected by the company or able to impact on the achievement of the organization's objectives. According to Mainardes, Alves, and Raposo, (2010), "this is the concept underpinning Stakeholder Theory" since the theory takes into considerations what is due to all stakeholders apart from the primary stakeholders. In addition, Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno (2007), hinted that the legitimacy of higher education to society is increasingly being evaluated by the level and quality of its commitment to its community of stakeholders of which Benneworth and Arbo (2006) argued that the consequence is the likely demand for a new orientation to issues relating to corporate governance, social responsibility and a highly professional management and a paradigm shift in the university business modeling and strategy. In view of this, Lam and Pang (2003) argued that the university management should be burdened with the responsibility of clearly defining their stakeholders in terms of their "needs and their respective importance". In view of this Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) attempted to enunciate the "Stakeholder Salience Theory" which specifies various stakeholders in terms of "power" (ability to access coercive means of utilitarian

impact), “legitimacy” (where their actions or participation are needed), and “urgency” (where their needs require immediate attention) with further classification as latent, expectant, and definitive stakeholders viewed in terms of how many of either power, legitimacy and urgency attributes they may possess at any given time.

The commitment to stakeholders’ needs created a demand on the part of the universities in terms of management and marketing as the their mission became expanded beyond teaching and research to include services to the community, which of course entails partnerships to be established with their surrounding communities and stakeholders (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, (2007). These requirements, according to Mainardes, Alves, and Raposo, (2010), created difficulties for university managers in developing these strategies in line with the demands of contemporary society.

Stakeholders’ needs and wants can only be easily satisfied if they are identified and prioritized. Accordingly, Bryson (2004) suggested systematic approaches for effectively identifying stakeholders based on the findings of previous works, which include stakeholder analysis, power versus interest chart, participation planning matrix, and power bases management diagrams.



Source: Adapted from Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985).

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Educational Service Quality (eduSERVQUAL) for Private Universities

Results and Discussion

As shown in Figure 2 above, the proposed conceptual model of educational service quality (eduSERVQUAL) for private universities comprises of two major parts (the consumer part and the marketer part). The institutional stakeholders include the regulatory body such as the National University Commission (NUC), ministry of education, and other non-governmental and international affiliated educational agencies such as the UNESCO. The students are regarded as the primary consumers of the products; the relational stakeholders are the alumni, the parent body/association, immediate community and the general public and the internal stakeholders are the faculty members and the administrators.

From the marketer’s perspective, the first gap exists as the management forecast and understanding of stakeholders’ needs and wants. This refers to the knowledge gap, which according to Nitin, Deshmukh, and

Vrat (2005), refers to “the difference between consumers’ expectation and management’s perceptions of those expectations: implying not knowing what consumers expect”. Effective selling requires knowledge areas. These areas include knowledge about the product, knowledge about the consumer, knowledge about the company, and knowledge about the competitor. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) “the knowledge about goods quality is inadequate to conceptualize service quality rather, characteristics of service product such as intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability should be considered for a better measure of service quality”. This is because lack of knowledge about the customer invariably implies the demise of the market as knowledge factor reveals the characteristics of the product and the market (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) as well as makes it easier for management to suggest how to influence consumers evaluation areas in the desired strategic direction (Gronroos, 1982).

The expectations of the consumers can be met by adopting certain educational service quality standards as suggested by Mgbekem (2004) and cited by Idumange and Major (2006). These include 1. effective teaching which results in high performance by students 2. adequate quantity and quality of resources 3. provision of adequate teachers and learning materials, 4. stability in the application of teachers, 5. conducive environment for teaching and learning, 6. effective supervision, monitoring & evaluation, 7. adequate financing of educators, 8. well equipped school library, 9. effective management (Idumange & Major, 2006).

The second stage on the marketer’s side is the design gap. This gap according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) represents “the difference between management’s perceptions of consumer’s expectations and service quality specifications”. Nitin, Deshmukh, and Vrat (2005) equally stated that this gap refers to management’s emplacement of specified service-quality standards and products suitable to meet customer satisfaction. However, expectations are based on perception, which makes the management susceptible to the intangible characteristics of service hinged on performances rather than objects. This according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) makes the precise product specifications concerning uniform quality to be rarely set by individual private university. Moreover, “consistency of behavior from service personnel or uniform quality is also difficult to assure. In order to meet customer expectation and achieve customer satisfaction, specified service quality standards are suggested to fill the design gap in areas which include time-table design, course curriculum design, and school calendar design.

The third gap is the service “**Performance gap**” which is reflected in the attributes of the actual product. The actual product is delivered at the point of performance more so that service is basically regarded as an act and performance (Kotler & Keller, 2007). The consumer usually gets to first experience the service performed at the service encounter where the contact is made with the service personnel. In view of this, Shostack (1985) defined the service encounter “as a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with the service”. Similarly, Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) indicated that teaching service which, is an example of a labour intensive service, exhibits its quality during the period the service is delivered or performed.

A critical variable of performance is reliability, which has been confirmed in service quality studies as the most important factor that consumers perceive in the consumption of a service (Wang & Yang, 2004; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; & Ndubisi, 2004). Performance is therefore a key factor to the overall evaluation of service quality as service is rather performed and performance-based measures often fare better than other measures of service quality (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994).

Areas of perceived performance gaps to be cursory about notably at the delivery stage of the service include reflection and interaction which will enable students to understand and solve problems (Paladino, 2008). Paladino (2008) also suggested the following performance attributes such as “innovation, rigour, collaborative learning environment, case studies, application-oriented tutorials and assessment”. Others include “invitation of industry-based guest speakers, feedback, multimedia technologies, such as video clips of advertisements, implementation of web-based tools for all courses, quality of teaching committee, open-door policy and provision of audio-stream lectures” (Paladino, 2008). In line with Paladino (2008) suggestions, to adequately fill the performance gap and ensure effective delivery of teaching service quality, suggested inputs areas by students in the delivery process will include asking questions, making contribution, complaints about lack of comprehension and explanations to the lecturer or instructor and the related service personnel on the students’ predicaments.

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) indicated that in labour intensive services such as teaching services, quality can be measured better during the period of service delivery and the university may have less managerial control over the standard of expected quality as the consumer’s participation affects the process of effective delivery (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

The fourth gap in the gap analysis model known as the “communication gap” refers to the variance in service delivery and what was communicated to consumers about the service or as Nitin, Deshmukh, and Vrat (2005) put it whether promises match delivery? Firms do promote their offerings by communicating the benefits of the service using a set of integrated marketing communication tools and private universities do communicate a number of their unique selling propositions through various media.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) hinted that when purchasing services consumer evaluation is limited as fewer tangible cues exist compared to goods and consequently in most cases, tangible evidence is limited to the service provider's items such as “physical facilities, equipment, and personnel”.

Private universities do communicate tangible elements such as the library, cafeteria, hostel apartments, quality of lecturers and other service encounter items. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) suggested that “in the absence of tangible evidence on which to evaluate quality, consumers must depend on other cues such as the price”. This is evidenced from the perspective of the private universities as perceived service quality has always being inferred and anticipated in the price communications of the private universities education offerings. Communication channels according to Rogers (2003) also help buyers to create and share information about the product.

The fifth gap represents the overall gap analysis outcome as it accumulates all the other four gaps and describes the difference between customer’s expectations and perceived service quality as delivered of which the size and magnitude of the four gaps it accumulates determine management’s strategy for effective service quality (Nitin, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005) and by extension overall stakeholders’ satisfaction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the gap analysis model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) for service quality in relation to stakeholders conceptualized within the private university educational service. In view of the marketing perspective to stakeholders needs and satisfaction, stakeholders needs and wants are to be according to the degree to which they possess power, legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) with further classification as latent, expectant, and definitive stakeholders.

In order to further examined the concept of service quality within the perspective of the private university for better service for stakeholders satisfaction most especially as the education market is experiencing various changes due to competition between higher education institutions (HEI) at national or international markets (Tam, 2007) the study suggests a test of the validity of the conceptual model of educational service quality (eduSERVQUAL) as proposed in Figure 2.0 above by conducting empirical studies using multivariate analysis methods, factor analysis to identify the salient needs and wants of the stakeholders, and analysis of variance to show the perception of service quality between the private and public Universities.

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