



The Exploration of Service Quality Leadership for Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

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Abstract

This is a first study to explore service quality leadership within the South African private higher education (PHE) domain that emphasised the need for the development of a total quality service (TQS) framework for private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. To address the problem, the explorative study was based on a qualitative and quantitative research approach in terms of four measuring instruments, namely (1) a literature review on general PHEI leadership perspectives related to service quality; (2) leadership perspectives by means of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) assessment instrument; (3) an empirical study of service quality measured (by means of SERVQUAL) at a prominent South African PHEI; and (4) semi-structured interviews conducted with the leadership of PHEIs (fifteen principals – CEOs or top managers) from South African PHEIs. Besides the need for a TQS framework, the results indicated that service quality is a strategic performance indicator and a bigger priority for PHEIs than for public institutions. The leadership indicated a commitment to measure, manage and improve service quality on a holistic basis.

Résumé

Cet article est une première étude qui cherche à explorer le leadership sur la qualité de service dans le domaine de l'enseignement supérieur privé (PHE) sud-africain qui met l'accent sur la nécessité de développer un cadre de service de qualité totale (TQS) pour les établissements privés d'enseignement supérieur

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(PHEI) en Afrique du Sud. Pour examiner la question, l'étude exploratoire était basée sur une approche de recherche qualitative et quantitative au niveau de quatre instruments de mesure, notamment (1) une revue documentaire sur les perspectives générales de leadership de l'enseignement supérieur privé relatives à la qualité de service ; (2) les perspectives de leadership au moyen de l'inventaire des pratiques de leadership (LPI) les instruments d'évaluation; (3) une étude empirique de la qualité de service mesurée (au moyen de SERVQUAL) dans un établissement privé d'enseignement supérieur sud-africain réputé; et (4) des entretiens semi-structurés menés avec les dirigeants (quinze principaux – PDG ou hauts responsables) d'établissements privés d'enseignement supérieur sud-africains. En plus du besoin d'un cadre TQS, les résultats ont indiqué que la qualité de service est un indicateur de performance stratégique et une plus grande priorité pour les établissements privés d'enseignement supérieur que pour les établissements publics. Les dirigeants ont manifesté un engagement pour mesurer, gérer et améliorer la qualité de service sur une base holistique.

Introduction

Private 'universities' in South Africa may not be called universities and they are in the begging for government attention. This is due to a pre-dominant socialistic approach and underlying body of thought towards free education. Some even submit QA-reports to obtain acknowledgement of their intentions to be audited. One institute uses the 'purple cow' approach to indicate its holistic drive towards service leadership. It adopted the concept of 'remarkability' as introduced in Seth Godin's book titled Purple Cow and has managed to make it an essential part of the institute's philosophy. Students are not known by their student number but by their first name. The personal approach to student engagement includes personal contact, regular phone calls to students to check on their progress and compulsory 'student support' sessions where students' shadow match their profiles.

Remarkability or 'purple cows' in this context refers to 'being noticed'. Seth Godin states the reason it would shine among a crowd of perfectly competent, even undeniably excellent cows, is that it would be remarkable. Something remarkable is worth talking about, worth paying attention to. The institute rewards remarkable behaviour in terms of leading practice or excellent service through an innovative 'Purple Cow' peer reward system, where colleagues can reward each other according to an agreed set of criteria. One of the questions included in the criteria is: 'Would I make a remark about it?' – in other words, is it really that special? (Stoltz-Urban 2015).

The context of this study is the service science domain and specifically service leadership and service quality of PHEIs in South Africa. Hefley and

Murphy (2008) emphasise a wide range of technical, economic, managerial and organisational facets within the service science domain. They identify service excellence and service quality as the underlying themes. Even non-service industries will provide more services and will compete within these sectors by means of servitisation. Zenger (2013) reported on value creation in the Harvard Business Review as a bigger picture than conventional service quality to gain a competitive advantage. He challenges the strategists to see the topography of valuable configurations of capabilities, activities and resources, and to measure corporate theory by means of 'strategic sights', namely (1) foresight, (2) insight and (3) cross-sight. These 'sights' on service delivery organisations represent a novel perspective on adding value through new and improved services as opposed to merely maintaining a basic level of service quality.

The notion that all operations are either producers (suppliers) of products or services is disappearing. According to Slack, Chambers and Johnston (2010) all operations are service providers although some produce products as part of serving their customers. The service provider (or manufacturer) depicts its character in terms of the chosen strategic performance objectives (e.g. service quality, cost effectiveness, speed, responsiveness and agility etc.). Service quality is generally of strategic importance to any type of service provider (e.g. a professional service provider, a mass service provider, service shops etc.) because it is at the core of the operation describing the nature of the business. All service industries can therefore be regarded as a service operation designed for and distinguished by the levels of service excellence. Harvard University is well known for its legacy of reflecting an excellent service culture, service operation and quality services rendered over decades. Service quality and the status of the institution are therefore intertwined.

It is increasingly evident that PHEIs in South Africa are playing a more prominent role in the HE landscape. Unfortunately, PHEIs obtain limited government cooperation and are not regarded as the primary source of the increasing capacity of the post-schooling system. With UNISA nearing 400,000 student registrations, the Minister of Higher Education and Training published a Government Notice on 7 July 2014 (No. 37811) (www.gpwonline.co.za) regarding the policy for the provision of distance education by South African universities, in the context of an integrated post-school system (policy in terms of section 3 of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997). It states that the current capacity and infrastructure in the public higher education (HE) sector cannot accommodate the required expansion and this is why open distance learning (ODL) is regarded as the primary solution to the required growth in the sector. This is another indication of the authorities' underestimation of the potential of South African PHEIs.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa accredits programmes offered by all HE institutions in South Africa according to strict preconditions and prerequisites. All HE institutions are subject to the same accreditation processes, but they are not treated equally in terms of recognition and subsidies. For the PHEIs to become the 'Harvards' of the world, with limited government support, their leadership needs to go the extra mile in terms of strengthening their core business by providing service excellence.

Quality has always been of great importance to academic institutions but has tended to rely mainly on academic integrity, culture and a sound reputation, as opposed to formal audits and evidence-based controlled quality assurance (QA). A reputable institution will manage its core business (service delivery) as a priority in terms of a strategic performance objective, regardless of its QA approach. This study reports on leadership, service quality leadership and the measurement of service quality in the educational sector and indicates why service quality is even more important for PHEIs than for public universities.

Problem Statement

The problem is the vulnerability of PHEIs in South Africa due to challenges related to sustainability, credibility and quality of South African tertiary education. PHEIs can play a more prominent role, but they do not receive government support, subsidy or recognition. The capacity of the PHEIs is therefore under-utilised. This adds additional pressure on the leadership of PHEIs and service quality leadership of PHEIs is a generic concern among stakeholders. These factors, student uproars, the paucity of literature and inaccurate perceptions contribute to the scope of the problem. The lack of understanding the perspectives of PHEI leadership related to service quality is eminent.

Purpose and Methodology

A qualitative and quantitative research approach was used to explore the problem. Figure 1 identifies the four specific sources (measures) that were used.

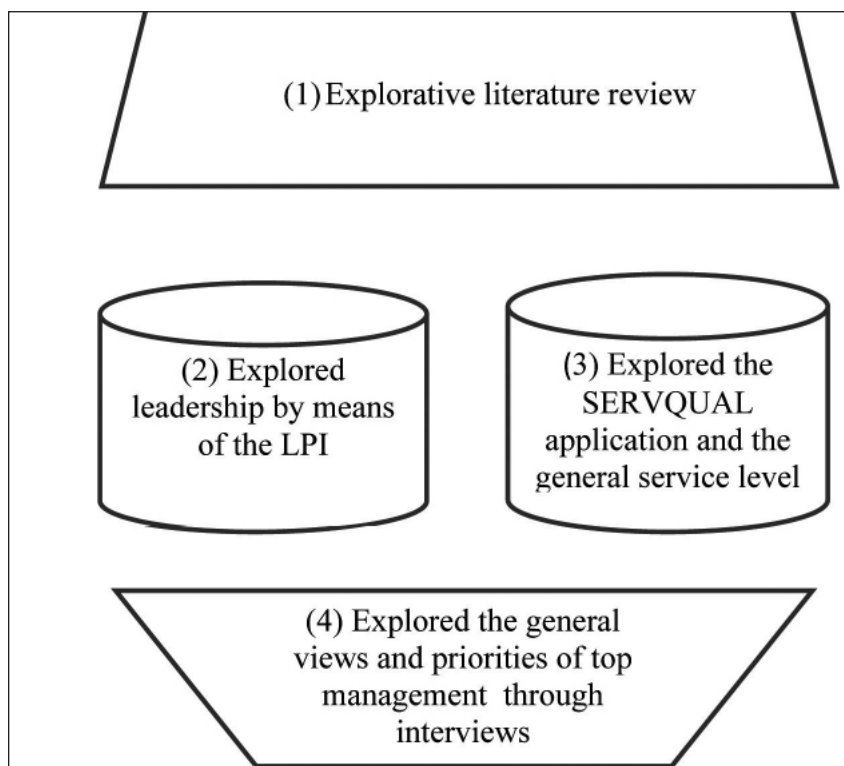


Figure 1: Summary of the explorative study

1. The exploration by means of a literature review on service quality leadership for PHEIs;
2. The exploration of the impact of leadership practices on service quality at a PHEI with five campuses in South Africa by means of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) assessment instrument;
3. The exploration of core service quality dimensions at a PHEI as measured by the SERVQUAL instrument;
4. The exploration of service quality leadership of PHEIs by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen principals (CEOs or top managers) of South African PHEIs offering degree qualifications.

Results

Exploration by Means of a Literature Review on Service Quality Leadership for PHEIs

Service Quality is a Strategic Priority for PHEI Leadership

Svensson (2006), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Carrilat, Jaramillo and Mulki (2007), Dimitriadis and Stevens (2008) and Yee, Yeung and Cheng (2008) are well-known authors on service quality. Most of these authors agree that the better an organisation can satisfy its customers' needs and the more it can build up a loyal customer base, the better it will be able to differentiate itself from its competition. The strategic importance of service quality for PHEIs is stressed by Khan, Ahmed and Nawaz (2011), who report on the insignificant relationship between tangible dimensions and university student satisfaction, and the significant relationship between service quality dimensions (such as assurance, empathy and reliability) and satisfaction. They show that there is a positive relationship between satisfaction and students' motivation and willingness to put more effort into their work.

The Broad Context of Service Quality Leadership

Service quality leadership of PHEIs is not diluted to a few dimensions. A dimensional approach to service quality should be used when a specific aspect of service quality requires attention. In the world's growing service industries, there is a greater focus on how effective providers respond to the service needs of the markets. PHEIs are measured against new offerings, agility and 'servitisation'. Any service provider's core business (and identity) will always be related to multiple service quality dimensions at all levels such as external interaction between corporates, market interaction and internal interaction.

The term 'corporate university' (Waks 2002:278) assists with the perspective of the broad identity and sustainability of PHEIs. Their entire identity and offering involved more than mere provision of education when one distinguishes between types of corporate universities (e.g. the University of Phoenix is known as a for-profit innovative corporation). The University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, Scotland) is the UK's Entrepreneurial University of the Year benchmarked against service quality offered in terms of research partnerships and university–industry interaction. When HE institutions are regarded as a social institution with the focus on HE as an industry, then the quality goals become broad and diffuse in terms of citizenship, human respect and the inculcation of moral and aesthetic values (Persell and Wenglinsky 2004).

Service quality leadership is a challenge for any enterprise, but is of particular concern (more important) for PHEIs because of its broad definition and the increasingly competitive, hostile and highly regulated environment in which they have to function. In this environment, these institutions must function, survive and compete, not only with one another, but also with public HE institutions. Owing to increasing competition in this field, PHEIs need to find new ways to compete if they wish to survive in this dynamic environment. Furthermore, PHEIs might focus on service quality excellence at a strategic level, but without a service management framework. This also indicates a need to develop a total quality service (TQS) framework to manage, measure and improve service quality on a continuous and sustainable basis.

Conceptualising service quality in HE implies that the concept is fully understood in the context of the knowledge economy in the broader service economy. Service quality (or TQS) in all HE institutions should therefore also be viewed in terms of a holistic comprehensive methodology that incorporates total quality management (TQM) principles for improving service quality, achieving internal and external customer satisfaction and exceeding customer expectations. Jain, Sinha and Sahney (2011) refer to a multi-dimensional model for the conceptualisation of service quality. Service quality therefore has many dimensions, but at the same time says a great deal about the collective status (quality and integrity) of a PHEI.

The Need for Service Quality Excellence

Hofmeyer and Lee (2002:79) describe three factors responsible for the growth in PHE in South Africa as 'more', 'better' and 'different' products associated with private goods. High service quality levels (and new creative service quality dimensions such as remarkability) are of utmost importance because education has always been evaluated in several terms such as its practical value and a sense of dignity to human beings, because in many parts of the world university education is highly revered and treasured because of its exclusivity (De Jager and Gbadamosi 2010). A study by De Jager and Gbadamosi (2010) highlights the relationship between service quality and HE performance indicators and the study indicates the critical importance of transformation of HE, demanding creativity and innovation in service quality at various levels.

The Leadership of PHEIs must Regard Education as a Private and Public Good

Ruth (2002) reports on the debate about private HE's particular relationship with 'the public good' – the wellbeing of the polity. It is postulated that education is neither a public nor a private good, but a social good, with

particular consequences. The underlying philosophies of public and private HE institutions will therefore not change the need for both. There will be differences in mission, strategy and core offerings, but the performance of its core service delivery systems and service quality may become the main distinguishing feature between public universities and PHEIs. Ruth (2002) specifically emphasises a business opportunity in terms of the importance of service quality in the responsiveness of PHEI institutions to market forces by developing a strong consumer orientation towards treating students like customers and being more responsive to their needs.

The private for-profit colleges have successfully attracted students because they offer degrees in curricula that are in high demand among employers and students (especially applied business, computer science and technology), promote hands-on learning, have a customer service orientation, offer courses at convenient times, operate all year round and emphasise job placement.

Service Quality Leadership in Terms of Corporate Responsiveness

It is the mission of a university to be nationally responsive and globally competitive. Although some institutions, such as PHEIs, do not pursue the elusive goal of becoming research-intensive universities (owing to a lack of academic capacity and government subsidies), they should position themselves to produce quality qualifications and graduates with vocational and applied skills. Private institutions can overcome institutional boundaries more easily and should therefore be more responsive to society's needs.

The rise of private HE is mainly the result of the decline in the public HE sector. This collective and institutional response to the market and international trends has given rise to a new service industry to be reckoned with. This new industry will have a different view on and approach to service quality. This industry can now provide the skills needed for the economy of the twenty-first century, while public education institutions are slowly being 'privatised' as public funds shrink and universities are therefore forced to find alternative sources to support them. The major strategic edge of PHEIs has been their effective response to the market, society and the economy in terms of corporate responsiveness. Public HEIs are slow to respond to the immediate demands of the market because these demands would presumably require a substantial reallocation of national resources (Ramachandran, Chong and Ismail 2011).

Service Quality Leadership in Terms of Corporate Innovation

The highest level of institutional responsiveness can lead to corporate innovation. Public universities may have the edge in terms of government support, but PHEIs can adopt the 'triple-helix approach' (Ferreira and

Steenkamp 2015) more easily by seeking partnerships with government and industry as entrepreneurial universities. PHEIs should therefore walk the extra mile by seeking creative ways to strengthen their edge (or to overcome weaknesses) through university–industry interaction, corporate innovation and institutional entrepreneurship.

Large Student Numbers Indicate the Need for Service Quality

Quantity is usually the greatest threat to quality. The surge of PHEIs should be seen against the backdrop of the growing demand in flexible, post-secondary education, especially for market-related short courses and distance education (International Education Association of South Africa 2007). There are currently eighty-seven PHEIs registered with the DHET in South Africa, and thirty-one provisionally registered private providers. South Africa thus appears to have by far the largest number of registered PHEIs in Africa, with this sector still growing. According to SAQA (South Africa 2013), between March 2009 and March 2013, twenty-five new PHEIs were registered in South Africa. In its current form, the white paper proposes a single unified system for post-school education comprising twenty-six public universities, fifty technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and others (renaming PHEIs as TVET colleges is also being considered).

Leadership challenges facing all HE institutions

Since the 1990s, the service economy of HE worldwide has undergone substantial changes. These include an increase in the size and diversity of the student population, a greater demand for quality by all the stakeholders involved, more responsibility for research and teaching and greater emphasis on efficient and effective management. In a study on HE in fifteen Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, Macgregor (2009) identified twenty leadership challenges facing HE institutions (including PHE institutions) relating to service quality. Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013:286) elaborate as follows on three challenges:

1. the influence of the school system on tertiary education and the admission of first-year students to tertiary education;
2. the diverse purpose of HE, management of tertiary institutions, improvement of pass and graduation rates, the changing roles of academics and international students enrolled at South African tertiary institutions and the rationale for establishing more universities in South Africa;
3. distance education as a means of widening and facilitating access for more South African students.

The leadership of PHEIs will be more challenging owing to factors relating to competition and the lack of government support. Many PHEIs will not survive without exemplary leadership. According to Foster (2013), leadership is based on service quality and a process in which followers are influenced (serviced) by a leader in order to achieve goals. Yelder and Codling (2004) assert that leadership in service delivery has become increasingly uncertain. Serviceability influences the way in which work is performed and how people are managed and interact. The focus of many effective leaders is on transformation and moulding followers to be better off.

The Exploration of the Impact of Exemplary Leadership Practices on Service Quality at a PHEI

By observing the variety of degree offerings of PHEIs it becomes clear that some PHEIs in South Africa outperform public universities in terms of academic excellence and the quality of their degree and post-graduate degree offerings. One such a provider uses such a grading (conducted by the PMR survey) in its marketing campaign as the 'number one private MBA in South Africa'. Another example is students preferring a particular PHEI in Pretoria for its variety of project management programmes.

Cases like these demand exemplary leadership and Dirkse van Schalkwyk (2011) investigated the impact of leadership practices on service quality at a PHEI (with five campuses) in South Africa. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) assessment instrument was applied for the leadership survey. Two LPI questionnaires (the LPI self and the LPI observer) were used to collect data on the leadership practices of the campus principals. The leaders, in this instance, the campus principals, completed the LPI self (n = 5). This instrument required the leaders to rate themselves on the frequency with which they thought they engaged in each of the thirty behaviours (items), on a rating scale from one to ten. Seven staff members (selected by the leader) as well as the leader's manager completed the LPI observer (n = 40) questionnaire, rating their leader on the frequency with which they thought the principals engaged in each of the thirty behaviours (items), also on a rating scale from one to ten. Computerised scoring software, which is part of the LPI assessment tool, produced results on a number of dimensions, including comparisons by the respondent category, rankings by frequency and variances between self and observer scores. Table 1 below provides the LPI data summary of the leadership survey conducted on the five delivery sites of the PHEI.

Table 1: LPI data summary

	Campus 1	Campus 2	Campus 3	Campus 4	Campus 5	Five practices mean scores
The five practices of exemplary leadership						
Model the way	47.10	47.20	43.20	39.40	36.60	42.7
Inspire a shared vision	51.50	46.60	39.50	41.40	36.00	43
Challenge the process	47.20	45.80	44.50	38.90	33.20	41.92
Enable others to act	46.00	46.60	48.90	35.20	31.50	41.64
Encourage the heart	47.40	50.00	45.50	37.50	29.90	42.06
LPI score	47.84	47.24	44.32	38.48	33.44	

Source: Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2011: 224

Table 1 indicates the LPI mean scores for each campus and the mean scores for the five practices. In terms of the LPI mean scores, Campus 1 had the highest score of 47.84, indicating that the leader (principal) of Campus 1 engaged in the five practices of exemplary leadership fairly often. By comparison, the lack of leadership on Campus 5 was prominent, with an LPI score of 33.44.

There was little variation in terms of the mean scores for the five practices. The leadership practice, 'Enable others to act', had the lowest score, with a mean of 41.64. This indicates that the leaders of the five campuses engaged the least in this practice. By contrast, the practice, 'Inspire a shared vision', had the highest score of 43, indicating that on average, leaders engaged in this practice more frequently.

The SERVQUAL instrument was also used to measure the level of service quality on each campus. In Figure 2, the SERVQUAL scores are plotted against the LPI scores. For all the campuses, the LPI score correlates with the SERVQUAL score. In other words, where the campus principal received a high LPI score, the campus also received a high SERVQUAL score. The converse was also true. Where the campus principal received a low LPI rating, the campus also received a low SERVQUAL score.

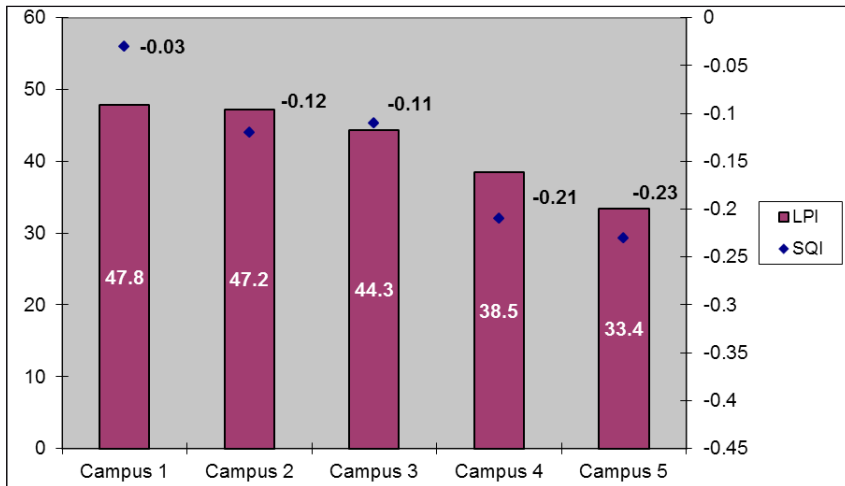


Figure 2: Leadership practices and service quality

Source: Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2011: 225

Figure 2 indicates that Campus 1 had the highest LPI and SQI scores. This was supported by the correlation coefficient calculated, which indicated a strong positive linear relationship between leadership practices and service quality. A review of the literature indicated that a limited amount of research had previously been conducted on this topic. The empirical findings collectively suggested that there is a strong positive linear relationship between leadership practices and service quality.

The Exploration of Core Service Quality Dimensions at a PHEI as Measured by the SERVQUAL Instrument

The use of the very best appropriately available measurement tool would help HE managers to assess the service quality rendered by their institutions, thus having the ability to use the results to improve the design of their service quality delivery systems (Oliveira-Brochado 2009). Most PHEI managers will admit they need metrics, but they will also admit not having it. This entire report indicates the multiple reasons for the importance of knowing the status of service quality in terms of multiple dimensions, but also as a measure of the wellbeing of the PHEI as a whole.

Gržinić (2007) refers to a framework for the development of an internal service quality measure referred to as INSQPLUS. The RATER model, designed by Zeithaml (2011) offers a complementary analysis of the perception gap. Another example is the Grönroos Perceived Service (GPS) quality model. According to Foster (2013) SERVQUAL is accepted

as a standard for assessing different dimensions of service quality and it has been shown to be valid for a number of service institutions. SERVQUAL (developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988) involves the use of fundamental service dimensions. Carrillat *et al.* (2007) state that SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (perceptions only scale) are equally reliable instruments for assessing service quality (as illustrated in the next section).

The measurement process of the SERVQUAL instrument is in terms of the two primary parts, namely customer expectations and customer perceptions. The GAP model is based on several types of gaps such as the 'delivery gap' exemplifying the difference between the actual service provided by the employee of the organisation and the specifications set by management. Foster (2013:141) illustrates several gaps measured by this instrument, namely:

- the gap between service quality specifications and the service that is actually provided
- the gap between customer expectations and management's perception of these expectations
- the gap between management's perception of customer needs and the specifications that management develops to meet customer expectations.

A random sample of respondents (students) was drawn. The respondents (students) evaluated service quality on a Likert scale from one to seven, in terms of their expectations and perceptions of the quality of service rendered at their campus. According to Saunders *et al.* (2007), in a Likert scale, the respondent is asked how strongly he or she agrees or disagrees with a statement. Likert scales usually consist of four-, five-, six- or seven-point scales. In this study, a seven-point scale was used. The adapted SERVQUAL instrument consists of eighteen items (eighteen items for the perception section and eighteen items for the expectation section) divided into four sections (the four dimensions of service quality), namely responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy.

The research population of the SERVQUAL survey consisted of students from one PHEI in Gauteng, Johannesburg. In order to optimise feedback, the participants had sufficient exposure to provide meaningful feedback on their expectations and perceptions of the quality of their student experience at the PHEI. First-year students (who had been enrolled at the PHEI for longer than six months) and second-year students participated. The questionnaires were distributed electronically to the campuses via an online survey system for students to complete. An agreement was reached with the institute's management regarding the completion of questionnaires. Once it had been completed, it was stored on the server at the campus for further analysis.

A high response rate of 336 was obtained from the PHEI in Johannesburg. Regarding the accessibility and administration of the data, the PHEI assisted the researchers with this electronic survey. The student's perception of service delivery (P) versus his or her expected service score (E) was measured and the gap score given as the difference between P and E. The data for the survey on the Johannesburg campus are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Service quality dimensions of the PHEI in Johannesburg

A. Service quality dimension: empathy

Sub dimension statement	N	Gap score	P	E
1. Students receive individual attention from administrative personnel.	336	-0.08	3.61	3.68
2. Lecturers provide individual attention to students.	336	-0.13	4.06	4.19
3. College staff know the needs of the students.	336	0.05	3.58	3.53
4. College staff have the students' best interests at heart.	336	0.01	3.49	4.48
5. College staff are easily accessible for students.	336	-0.23	3.86	4.09
Average of this subdimension:	336	-0.08	3.72	3.80

B. Service quality dimension: trust and assurance

Sub dimension statement	N	Gap score	P	E
1. Students can trust the personnel of the college.	336	-0.22	3.61	3.83
2. Staff at the college inspire confidence.	336	-0.02	3.86	3.88
3. College staff are polite.	336	-0.23	3.73	3.96
4. Staff receive adequate support from the college management to improve the performance of their services.	336	-0.08	3.71	3.79
Average of this subdimension:	336	-0.14	3.73	3.86

C. Service quality dimension: reliability

Sub dimension statement	N	Gap score	P	E
1. The college keeps its promises (e.g. to do something at a certain time).	336	0.19	3.30	3.11
2. Student problems are treated with sympathy and reassurance.	336	0.02	3.46	3.44

3. The college is dependable and performs the service right the first time.	336	0.05	3.43	3.39
4. The college provides services at the time it promises to do so.	336	0.18	3.33	3.15
5. The college keeps its records (e.g. accounts, academic reports) accurately.	336	-0.19	4.17	4.36
Average of this subdimension:	336	0.05	3.54	3.49

D. Service quality dimension: responsiveness

Sub dimension statement	N	Gap score	P	E
1. The college tells students when services will be performed.	336	-0.5	3.95	4.44
2. Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from college staff.	336	0.01	3.31	3.29
3. Lecturers at the college are willing to assist students.	336	-0.60	4.35	4.95
4. College staff are not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly.	336	-0.07	3.53	3.60
Average of this subdimension:	336	-0.22	3.73	3.95

On average, the respondents' perceptions of this PHEI exceed their expectations by the furthest regarding their trust that the institute will deliver what it promises timeously, and slightly exceed their expectations regarding recognition of student's needs and the promptness of service delivery from the campus's personnel. On average, the respondents' expectations exceed their perceptions by the furthest regarding the lecturers' willingness to assist students, followed by the students being told when services will be rendered. The findings of the survey for the four service quality dimensions are:

- Empathy dimension

This PHEI is perceived to recognise the needs of the students and indeed have their best interests at heart. However, the personnel are perceived not to project this goodwill by performing below the expected level of service to students owing to the perceived inaccessibility of the personnel, lack of individual attention to students and perceived unwillingness to show empathy towards an individual student's needs.

- Trust and assurance dimension

The students' expectations of all aspects of assurance are higher than their perceptions of those aspects, with politeness and trusting the personnel at the bottom of the list.

- Reliability dimension

Analysis of the ‘reliability’ dimension indicates that the respondents’ perception of this PHEI exceeds their expectations with respect to all aspects of reliability except for the institute’s ability to keep accurate records.

- Responsiveness dimension

It would seem that the lecturers at this PHEI are not perceived to be willing to assist students as expected, that students are not informed when services will be rendered and that personnel are perceived to be too busy to respond promptly to the students’ requests.

The Exploration of Service Quality Leadership of PHEIs by Means of In-depth Semi-structured Interviews Conducted with Fifteen Principals

Data were collected through interviews conducted with fifteen CEO’s of PHEIs and a thematic analysis approach was followed (as proposed by Braun and Clarke 2006) to quantitatively analyse the data. Table 3 represents the phases of the thematic analysis process applied in this study.

Table 3: Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006:35

'A good thematic analysis can be quantified in terms of the rates of prevalence or incidents of each of the themes. Prevalence is the number of participants who say things relevant to a particular theme, and incidence is the frequency of occurrence of the theme throughout the dataset or the average number of times it occurs in each participant's data' (Howitt and Cramer 2014:386).

Each interview was transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. The personal survey was conducted among the CEOs and principals of six PHEIs within fifteen campuses across South Africa. The participants were selected through purposive selection.

The campuses are situated in Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Namibia. Seven of these participants were male and eight were female. All the interviews were used in the study.

During validation interviews experts and stakeholders were included and these were two professors and one associate professor from the University of South Africa. One professor is a National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated researcher specialising in business management research while the other professor is an expert in quality and service quality management. The associate professor is an expert in qualitative research. The other validation included a director from one of the leading PHEI groups in South Africa. In addition, the first interview was used to pilot the data collection method.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The total interview time was 631.53 minutes. The average length of each interview was forty-two minutes. Logistically, it was a challenge to meet all the participants face to face within a given timeframe. Travelling had to be coordinated between Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Namibia. All interviews were conducted between August and November 2014. No major challenges were experienced during the interviews. All the participants had generally the same level of education (masters or PhD) and the ability to express themselves. It also seemed as if all the participants were familiar with the area of study. Moreover, all the participants welcomed the study and verbalised that the research will add to the long-term sustainability of their businesses.

A descriptive method of open coding was applied in the data analysis process. To ensure trustworthiness an independent expert was involved. Consensus was also reached in terms of themes and categories. Tesch's descriptive method of open coding presents 'a way of working' with textual data. This eight-step method engaged the researcher in a systematic process of data analysis (Visagie and Maritz 2013:13–14).

The perceptions of service quality and service quality dimensions as identified by CEOs is presented in Table 4 below. The central storyline that emerged reveals that management is in tune with the measuring and

improvement of the quality of services offered on their campuses. However, they seem to be negatively inclined towards the current systems implemented to improve overall quality.

Table 4: Service quality dimensions as identified by CEO's

Number	Sub-category / "Dimension"	Incidence (frequency of occurrence)
1	Cost and profit	43
2	Quality teaching	41
3	Managing expectations	38
4	Technology	37
5	Student support	36
6	Customer centred approach	33
7	Subsidies	33
8	Lack of experts and senior academics	32
9	Communication	29
10	Servicescape	29
11	Personal attention	29
12	Quality learning experience	25
13	Internal customer [including staff training]	25
14	Repeat business	24
15	Culture	23
16	Reputation	23
17	Leadership	21
18	Operations management	21
19	Employability	19
20	Partnerships	18

Conclusion

The article introduced HE in terms of the service science domain and specifically service quality leadership of PHEIs. Service delivery organisations represent a novel perspective on adding value through new and improved services such as remarkability (with reference to the 'purple cow') as opposed to merely maintaining a basic level of service quality. The unique challenges of PHEIs in terms of the underestimation of their potential demand unique leadership interventions, service remarkability and the development of a total quality service (TQS) framework to increase the capacity of service excellence.

The problem was thoroughly explored by different means. A literature review highlighted several generic HE challenges and specific challenges of PHEIs. The review focused on the strategic priority of service quality, the need for service quality excellence, service quality in terms of corporate responsiveness (and corporate innovation), confirming the importance of service quality leadership for PHEIs.

Secondly, the problem was explored by elaborating on the importance of service quality leadership by investigating the impact of leadership practices on service quality at a PHEI with five campuses by means of the LPI and SQI scores that indicated a strong positive linear relationship between leadership practices and service quality. The problem was then explored by the online SERVQUAL questionnaire indicating high service quality of a prominent PHEI in Johannesburg that may be used as a hypothesis (service quality is higher at PHEIs) for further studies. The respondents' perceptions of this PHEI exceed their expectations by the furthest regarding their trust that the institute will deliver what it promises timeously. Other specific service quality dimensions were also positive and the study also confirmed the value of the SERVQUAL instrument.

Finally, the problem was explored by in-depth interviews with leadership (fifteen CEOs/principals) that confirmed the need for a TQS framework for PHEIs. Although the central storyline reveals that management is very motivated and in tune with the measuring and improvement of the service quality dimensions, they were negatively inclined towards the current systems, mechanisms and available frameworks (models) implemented to improve overall quality. The entire study indicates the need for a comprehensive study (e.g. at doctoral level) for the development of a TQS framework for PHEIs in South Africa.

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