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Contextual Factors Influencing Service Quality in Technological Universities in Nigeria

Dr. Ibrahim Danjuma

Senior Lecturer, Department of Management Technology,
Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria

Faiza Abubakar Bawuro

Lecturer, Department of Management Technology,
Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria

Mary Augustine Vassumu

Lecturer, Department of Management Technology,
Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria

Abstract:

Over the years, the issue of service quality has gained prominence in services industry, including higher education. Service quality has to do with the ability of service providers to meet or exceed the expectations of customers. From the higher education perspective, customers can be external, such as students and internal such as employees. Students are considered as primary customers, whose perceptions of service quality influence satisfaction, attachment and human capital development. Technological universities have roles to play in developing knowledge capital for sustainable economic growth and development. This article examined service quality issues in technological universities in Nigeria, and how they impact towards transition from resource-based economy to knowledge-based economy. In addition, issues related to overview of the higher education sector in general and the technological universities in particular; the roles of technological universities towards human capital development and the contextual factors influencing service quality in technological universities were examined in this article. Suggestions for improving service quality aimed at branding and positioning the technological universities to gain competitive advantage was offered.

Keywords: Service quality, technological universities, Nigeria, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Because of the increasing debate on service quality issues in universities, the subject has gained special place in the minds of key stakeholders of the higher education industry (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2010: 251). In the extant literature, discussions on service quality in higher education industry covering different regions can be found in studies by Chua, (2004) in Australia; Oliveira-Brachado and Marques,(2007); Pareda et al.(2007) and Telford and Masson,(2005) in United Kingdom; Srikantham and Dalrymple,(2003); Voss et al.(2007) and Kwan and Ng, (1999) in China and Hong Kong; Abouchdid and Nasser,(2002) in Lebanon; Cloete and Bunting,(2000), De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2010) in South Africa.

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2. Service Quality in Higher Education

There has been a lot of emphasis by consumers on organisations' service quality (Parasuraman *et al.* 1985), which made the service quality issues gained ground in service marketing literature in general and the extant literature on higher education in particular (Tan and Kek, 2004; Telford and Masson, 2005; Smith *et al.* 2007). The constructs of quality as conceptualised in the extant literature was based on perceived quality (Fitri *et al.* 2008). Perceived quality, according to Zeithaml *et al.* (1987) and Zammuto *et al.* (1996) can be looked as the customers' opinions about how an organisation fares, in terms of its service quality. Similarly Parasuraman *et al.* (1994:43) concluded that "consumer perceptions of service quality result from comparing expectations prior to receiving the service, and their actual experience of the service". Perceived service quality is seen as something that is different from satisfaction, which comes from customers' comparison of prior expectations of what services to receive and their perceptions of what has been received (Rowley, 1996).

The higher education sector exhibits all the characteristics of service provider: (1) products/services in higher education institutions are intangible and varied. (2) production and consumption would occur at the same time and (3) students, who are primary customers, participate in delivery process (Cuthbert, 1996). Therefore, Cuthbert (1996) posits that service quality is directly applicable to higher education. He concluded that as a result of concerns from other stakeholders such as society, parents, governments and employers, higher education institutions are now focusing more attention on service quality issues, in order to survive the competition in higher education market place.

2.1. Service Quality and Satisfaction in Higher Education

Reviewing theories on satisfaction, will identify three elements are common: (1) type of responses (i.e. cognitive or emotional); (2) whether the response concerns a particular focus (for example expectations and consumption experience); and (3) the time in which customers feel satisfied (Giese and Cote, 2000). However, there are divergent views on the definitions of satisfaction. Some scholars consider students as customers in higher education (Chadwick and Ward, 1987; Christenses and Philbrick, 1993, Franklin and Shemwell, (1995) and thus, uses the disconfirmation theory to measure antecedents of satisfaction – that is satisfaction as a function of the magnitude and disposition of the disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is a function of a person's initial expectations (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Powers and Valentine, 2008, Henning- Thureau, 2001 Brady and Robertson, 2001).

Cronin and Taylor (1992), noted that service quality has been essential in determining degree of customer satisfaction.. As such, establishing the nature of degree of relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been a topical issue addressed by researchers, and it has significant and strategic concern. Overall, perceived service quality is an antecedent to satisfaction, and as such, a proper understanding of the antecedents and determinants of customer satisfaction may result in high value for service organisations, including higher education, in a competitive environment (Lassar *et al.* 2000).

Scholars have continuously argued on relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. While Bitner, (1990) and Parasuraman, *et al.* (1988) viewed that customer satisfaction is the consequences of service quality, some researchers maintained that it is the organisation's service quality that ensure customer satisfaction and future customer actions (Chia *et al.* 2008; Ott, 2008; Molinari *et al.* 2008). While some scholars believed that service quality leads to satisfaction (McDougall and Levesque, 1996, 2000; Negi, 2000), others argue that satisfaction leads to quality (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). However, Parasuraman *et al.* (1988:16) argued that service quality and satisfaction are not the same, and concluded that "satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality". Since customer satisfaction can be related to service quality, the two constructs cannot be viewed as single construct (Bitner, 1990). According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), what is being measured is attitude relating to the transaction situations experienced by the customer over a given period. In today's competitive academic environment, higher education institutions, particularly technological universities in Nigeria, need to understand their service quality performance in order to develop marketing strategies to attract and retain students. It should be noted that, what drives customer satisfaction are two-fold: (1) satisfaction with one or more of the service dimensions during usage and (2) total satisfaction derived by customers in the whole exchange process, i.e., before and after experiencing the service offers (Bitner *et al.* 2000). Therefore it implies that customers would get satisfaction with a specific dimension of a service, while perceived service quality is viewed as an overall opinions or feelings about the service provided (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988).

Also, Negi (2009) posits that total service quality is significantly associated with and contributes to overall customer satisfaction. According to Saravanan and Rao (2007), customer satisfaction depends on how organisations deliver their services to customers, and how the customers view and report their experiences after usage. (Cicerone *et al.* 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that customer satisfaction is derived from repeated transactions between service providers and customers, with the latter stating their experiences in the exchange process (Wicks and Roethlein, 2009).

2.1.1. Service Quality in Technological Universities

The issue of service quality in technological universities is important. They are distinguished from the conventional universities as a result of their specific purpose and contributions. Audu (2009) noted that technological universities are established to help produce technocrats for Nigeria's growth in terms of (1) engineering (2) research and development (3) production of knowledge workers to disseminate knowledge through teaching and research (4) innovations and (5) production of graduates with the requisite skills needed by industries. These would in turn, lead to rapid industrial development by providing manpower with technical, professional and managerial skills (Audu, 2009). Similarly Hayden *et al.* (1992) observed that technological universities are meant to provide: (1) human capital development, which includes production of scientists and engineers with leadership and entrepreneurial skills, and (2) scientific and technological knowledge development, incubation and dissemination through collaborative research and establishing linkages with industries and other centres of excellence nationally and internationally.

3. Roles of Higher Education in Human Capital Development

Good and flexible education system is essential for developing a knowledge economy. For a knowledge economy to be in place, the education system starts with basic education that provides the foundation for learning, which is followed by secondary and tertiary education that develops core competencies and skills, and encourages creative and critical thinking for innovation to thrive. Thus, availability of educational human resource pool in science and technology is *sine qua non* for k-economy, and hence, development. Investment in human capital is paramount for innovation and development. According to Shultz (1963)'s human capital theory, education and training are viewed as an „investment“ that yield social and private returns through increased knowledge and skills for

economic development and social progress. This has found support in Kefela (2010:161) who observed that “the economic argument in favour of knowledge-based education and training is linked to the perceived need of the global economy”. Therefore the import of this theory is that, economic growth and development are knowledge-driven and human capital dependent.

A study by Fong (2006) revealed that a number of developing countries have unveiled strategies for shifting to a k-economy as part of wider plans to achieve economic growth and development. For instance Malaysia and Nigeria have developed a somewhat similar vision plans: vision 2020. While Malaysia’s plan (vision 2020) is a 30-year plan to „push“ Malaysia to achieve a level at par with industrial nations in terms of economic performance and technological capability (Mustapha and Abdullah, 2000), Nigeria’s plan (vision 20:2020) was meant to place the country amongst the top 20 economies in the world by the year 2020 (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2010). With these various moves towards a k-economy, these countries are aiming to achieve sustainable gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates in the long run, with knowledge playing a dominant role in driving productivity and sustainable development.

There is a link between educational outputs and a country’s requirement for growth and development. In a study by Kim (2010), it was reported that, the most important economic development in recent years has been the rise of a new system for creating wealth, based no longer on muscle and machine, but on knowledge. Labour in an advanced economy no longer consists of working on “things,” but of people acting on information and information acting on people. In the information age of the present century, the real power of a nation is determined by its knowledge capacity, which is the amount of knowledge that its people possess, i.e. understanding, creativity, ingenuity and wisdom. Knowledge serves as a wealth and force multiplier (Toffler, 1991). The yardstick for measuring the knowledge capability of a nation within an information-based society is the education level of its people, upon which its economic and social development is based. It is imperative to have a paradigm shift in Nigeria’s educational system, particularly in the higher education sector. The state of infrastructure in the Universities needs to be overhauled; state-of-the-art facilities, equipment and laboratories should be in place to encourage R&D with a view of innovating for the economy.

Education is a critical force that generates technological progress of a nation. As noted by Daggash (2008), educational training that generates human capital is responsible for the differences in labour productivity and the overall differences in technological attainment between developed and developing countries. Human capital created from a functional educational system is a source of economic growth and development of economies such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore, which were hitherto at par with Nigeria. Their unprecedented rate of growth and development could be attributed to the huge investments in education, particularly in adaptive science and technology. As such, education and skilled human capital are the most critical and valuable assets for attaining national aspirations.

4. Concerns on Service Quality in Nigerian Universities

Unlike in the past, Nigerian university system has, recently, been dominated by concerns from major stakeholders: students, employees and the society (Okebukola, 2002). The concerns are not unconnected with levels of service quality and expectations from the system’s customers (Okebukola, 2003). Okebukola (2006); Adesoji and Abiodun (2010) found that poor funding, inadequate and poor facilities, shortage of adequate and qualified academic staff, disproportionate class size and few financial support to students in technological universities in Nigeria, constitutes major areas of concern. Also, Kazeem and Ige (2010) reported that one major issue that has consequences on service quality in Nigerian universities is the inadequate number and quality of teachers. According to Omoregie (2008: 5) such concerns for Nigerian universities are paramount, because “university education is the nation’s hope for national development and there is the growing importance of trans-border education provided by globalisation and massive education”.

5. Contextual Factors

Parasuraman et al. (1985) argued that when service quality is high, it will lead to customer satisfaction. This argument has found support in a study by Saravana and Rao (2007) and Lee et al. (2000) who acknowledged that customer satisfaction depends on level of service quality of organizations. Fen and Lian (2005) found that both service quality and customer satisfaction have a positive effect on customers’ repurchase intentions, thus leading to loyalty. Similarly, a study by Magi and Julander (2009) showed a positive relationship between perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and attachment. Thus customer satisfaction results from high perceived service quality and this makes customers loyal.

Within the higher education setting and technology-based universities in particular, the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction can be explained based on some contextual factors as in figure 3. Technological universities that offer state-of-the-art equipment, boast of renowned and competent academics, provide financial aids in terms of scholarship and grants and differentiate through research focus and strength may not only satisfy its customers, but also contribute to developing human capital that will transform the nation into a knowledge economy with a view of attaining sustainable development.

5.1. Facilities and Equipment

Availability of adequate facilities and equipment are vital for technological universities to fulfill their service delivery in terms of effective teaching, learning and research. The specialized nature of technological universities means that adequate classrooms, seminar rooms, laboratories, workshops and well-equipped libraries are critical tangibles that would affect their service quality perception. In Nigerian higher education context, these facilities and equipment are inadequate, and mostly obsolete (Donwa, 2006). Some of the major problems affecting service delivery in technological universities in Nigeria are inadequate classrooms, semi-functional workshops and laboratories. As such, students, especially postgraduate students tend to switch to other conventional and foreign

universities where these facilities are comparatively better. The net effects are negative service quality perceptions and unfavourable word-of-mouth recommendations to future students.

Effective deployment and utilization of ICT facilities is another challenge to technology-based universities in Nigeria. The ICT facilities are inadequate, computers are few and investment on ICT is at a minimum. Where the ICT facilities are in place, the universities are unable to maintain them. The high cost of bandwidth, especially dedicated bandwidth to improve internet connection speed is high, which the universities, due to poor funding, cannot afford to contend with. In this era of technology-driven services, these problems tend to elicit negative disconfirmation for students as far as satisfaction is concerned.

Therefore, technology-based universities in Nigeria need to invest in ICT to ensure students' satisfaction. The satisfaction would make them remain attached to the universities and make referrals to others. But this is predicated on the increased funding from Government as well as the universities' ability to generate more revenues for their services. If current students are satisfied, then they would become loyal repeat consumers who may want to come back for future studies, or engage in any other relationship such as alumni activities, giving financial assistance and endowments to the universities.

5.2. Research and Development

Research and development (R & D) is a major way to sustain the development paradigm of a nation. Nigeria's government inability to invest in R&D has stalled its economic development potentials for many years. Research and Development has multiplier effects on economic growth and inflows. Nigeria has lost several opportunities to net in research grants worth several millions of dollars in various areas such as science and technology, economics and engineering. But due to lack of cohesive government policy on education, the country has not tapped into this window of opportunity

Research strength is an important parameter that would differentiate technological universities from others. As supported by Ikharehon (2007), the amount and volume of research carried out by technological universities is what will distinguish them from other types of higher education institutions. However, this still depends on the availability, adequacy and condition of the aforementioned facilities and equipment. For instance, the current situations in these universities in terms of library facilities are inadequate collections, few current journals and limited subscription to online databases. All these are factors of negative disconfirmation, which leads to negative service quality perception. Improvements in providing these critical facilities are necessary for building a strong research focused universities that would contribute towards human capital development for sustainable economic development.

5.3. Responsive Faculty

Availability and quality of academic staff are important tangible factor that impact on the perception of service quality in higher education setting (Oni and Abiodun, 2010). In the context of technological universities in Nigeria, two fundamental problems exist that adversely affects service quality. These are: shortage of academic staff, especially in critical areas of science and technology and engineering and low number of faculty with PhD. As observed by Bienenstock (2006) these problems are caused by inability to recruit and retain quality academic staff, brain drain to overseas countries, better salaries in the private sector that increases staff turn-over rate and the low turn-over of postgraduate students. These problems are mutually inclusive. While the low turn-over of postgraduate students may be linked to the shortage of qualified staff with PhDs, unresponsiveness and lack of personalized care (empathy) seems to also contribute to disenchantment by students.

Therefore strengthening postgraduate training, especially through sponsorship schemes to reputable universities abroad and better incentives to academic staff are measures that would help solve the aforementioned problem. The effect would be the turn out of high quality faculty devoted to teaching and research. Research intensive nature of technological universities requires that faculty should have proven research and mentoring capabilities, especially for the benefits of graduate students. Faculty's knowledge and expertise in their subject area are tools of attraction and attachment to universities. As such, students' perception can be influenced by building scholarly strength and exploring new fields of studies such as bioinformatics, biomedical engineering, and biotechnology. These types of courses have the potentials of attracting attachment from students.

5.3.1. Visionary Leadership

Visionary and committed leadership are important antecedents for universities to provide quality services to its various customers (Yizengaw, 2003). The complexity of university system is such that requires both administrators and faculty to provide intellectual leadership that would positively impact both students and the national economy. Leadership of Universities needs to have administrative and political capability that would guide their institutions to greater intellectual strength. To attract quality faculty and students, the leadership in universities must strive towards pursuing ideas in a free and encouraging environment.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

It has been observed that state-of-the-art teaching facilities required to provide efficient services to produce competent human resource adequate for innovation, comparable to what obtains in other developed (e.g. Singapore) and developing countries (e.g. Malaysia and Indonesia) are not in place in technological universities in Nigeria (Sanni et al. 2000). Similarly, decayed infrastructure for teaching/learning activities, productive research and development, and the low morale of academic and support staff lead to poor academic quality. Also incentives for academic staff are poor. This has led to brain drain of qualified Nigerian scientists and engineering faculty to other countries. The implication is that, technological universities in Nigeria are left with unmotivated and less qualified teaching faculty who are perceived as rendering poor and unsatisfactory service to customers in the university sector, thereby

attracting less loyalty. Improved facilities for teaching/learning, research and salaries in universities have the capacity to not only check brain drain to foreign universities and the private sector where the payment is better, but also enhance service quality.

The issue of autonomy for universities in Nigeria is a matter that is unclear. This needs to be clarified and resolved, as it is crucial in repositioning the technological universities to face the challenges of the knowledge economy and internationalisation. Increased autonomy for the universities will lead to more financial and administrative leverage. This will give them opportunities to freely engage in knowledge production that would generate technological human capital for economic development. Granting full autonomy to universities and their councils would address the oft-repeated interferences from politicians who control Government, and allow the universities concentrate on their scholastic pursuit and role towards inventions and innovations. An established scholarship scheme especially at the postgraduate level may tend to provide positive word-of-mouth referrals to others, thus enhancing the service quality perceptions of students positively. Government need to establish student scholarship/loan schemes for students of technology-based universities to enable them pay fees, since studies at these technological universities are expensive compared to conventional universities.

Nigeria's vision plan (vision 20:2020) is generally aimed at placing the country amongst the top 20 industrialised economies in the world by the year 2020. This aspiration was made on the realization of Nigeria's abundant human and material resources, which places it in good position to achieve economic growth and development. However, the country's higher educational sector which produced top quality graduates in the 1970s; 1980s and 1990s is in shambles. The resultant effect is low ranking in terms of human development. The UNDP's Human Development Reports (2009, 2010) have consistently shown that Nigeria is still amongst the countries in the lower (158th and 142th positions respectively) bottom of human development as compared to emerging economies such as South Africa, Malaysia, Chile and Egypt. What it means is that, Nigeria is far behind in human capital development, and this calls for concerted efforts towards transforming the economy from its present state of decay (Daggash, 2008) to a knowledge-based economy if the vision 20:2020 goals are to be realised. These are arduous tasks which require technological universities to take the lead

One critical success factor is massive investment in higher education with emphasis on science and technology, with a view of competing in the fast changing global economy. To realise the vision 20:2020 objectives, Nigeria must act, with seriousness, on overhauling its higher education sector, the National Innovation Systems and ICT infrastructure and at the same time building robust and high quality economic and institutional frameworks that would support human capital development, with a view of becoming knowledge-based economy, that can compete effectively in the globalised world.

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