SERVICE EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVES IN GHANAIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT: *Service experiences are not only defined in terms of human interactions (service providers, consumers/customers and co-consumers), but also the interaction between individuals and self-service technology, and various tangible elements within the service environment. It is argued that the outcome of such encounters impacts on student experiences of service quality in tertiary education. This study thus seeks to examine the relationships that exist between student experiences and service quality indicators using Gummesson's 4Q model of delivering quality. Empirical data gathered from 700 students of three private universities in Accra, Ghana was analyzed to assess the extent to which service quality indicators could influence students' experiences in these universities. The discussion in this paper is thus predominantly fieldwork-based, using a combination of primary and secondary sources to generate relevant data to analyze the relationship between service experience and student service quality indicators. The finding indicates a positive but insignificant relationship between student experiences and service quality indicators. Thus the finding suggests that service quality indicators such as input quality, process quality, interactive quality and outcome quality impact on service experiences during service encounter. The implications of this finding to the management of tertiary education in Ghana are discussed and suggestions for further research are made.*

KEYWORDS: Ghanaian Private Universities, Service Experience, Input Quality, Process Quality, Interactive Quality, Output Quality.

INTRODUCTION

In their study on foreign students' experience in Ghana, Akwensivie et al (2013) established that Ghana is an emerging destination for undergraduate foreign education particularly among African countries (93.3% of students pursuing undergraduate degrees from 38 different countries). As evident from the results there is a gradual increase in foreign students' enrolment in Ghana year on year. Whilst in Ghana foreign students face a lot of experiences and issues which are institutional experience and country experience. The institutional experience includes relationship with students (both fellow students and local students) in and outside campus, relationship with lecturers, availability of facilities on campus as well as accommodation, quality of programmes and teaching, relationship with administrative staff and their ability to respond to their complaints. Country experience includes hospitality of host nationals, country security, standard and cost of

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living, weather conditions, accommodation challenges and transportation difficulties. All these are called into question when foreign students are narrating their experience. Collectively they influence foreign students overall perception, attitude and behavioral intention towards the host country and their willingness to further their education in the host university or country.

In institutions of higher learning particularly universities service quality issues are becoming increasingly important (Gallifa and Batalle, 2010) and have attracted widespread interests among researchers (Hill, 1995; Rowley, 1996; Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Athiyaman, 1997; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; O'Neil and Palmer, 2001; Clewes, 2003; Gallifa, 2009; Gallifa and Batalle, 2009). Many of the published works in this area of study have concentrated on service quality issues (Hill, 1995; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Pereda et al., 2007; Zeshan, 2010). In recent times research efforts in this area seem to focus on students satisfaction (Munteanu et al., 2010), and students perception of service quality (Leng, 2010; Gallifa, 2010). However, it appears little efforts have been put in to investigate issues relating to students service quality experience in higher education (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Pereda et al., 2007). However, arguments in contemporary literature suggest that management of higher learning institutions should not only deliver services to meet social expectations but also to appreciate student perceptions drawn from their long term experience within an academic environment (Munteanu et al., 2010). It is therefore extremely important for universities operating in competitive markets to understand what students would value in their university experience (Pereda et al., 2007).This issue of understanding and managing service experience is even more important today than ever as Akwensivie et al (2013) has noted that Ghana is emerging as an attractive destination for neighboring countries.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The importance of services in marketing has been emphasized in literature (Converse, 1930 cited in Svensson, 2006). This realization has prompted a significant research interests in services marketing (Parasuraman et al. 1988) particularly in the area of service quality (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Grönroos, C. 1984; Asubonteng et al., 1996; Parasuraman, 1997). Research findings in contemporary times appear to suggest that service quality is crucial in strategic marketing and corporate planning (Zeithaml et al. 2004; Svensson, 2006). This perhaps explain the leading role of service quality in both marketing literature and service marketing literature (Jensen and Markland, 1996 cited in Lassar et al., 2000). It is explained in service marketing literature that knowledge and understanding in service marketing and service quality is of strategic importance to practitioners in various business endeavors (Palmer and Cole, 1995; Lassar et al., 2000). Contemporary research has established service quality as a fundamental feature in service marketing literature (Svesson, 2006). This appears to support reasons underpinning the increasing trends in service quality studies in various service disciplines - banking, education, healthcare and travel and tourism. Interestingly, Service quality in tertiary education has gained greater interests among researchers in recent times. Consequently many research efforts have been devoted to the development of service quality framework for both administrative and teaching functions of tertiary education (Hill, 1995; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Rowley, 1997; Martensen et al., 1999; Oldfield and Brenda, 2000; Joseph et al., 2005; Ullah, 2005; Hirvonen, 2007).

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However it is important to appreciate that further penetration in this area of study should recognize education in general as a "pure" service (Lovelock et al., 2008) which is essentially intangible in nature. Existing service marketing literature has not failed to recognize the distinctive characteristics of services –intangibility, simultaneity, heterogeneity, perishability and lack of ownership (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2001, Zeithaml et al., 2006; Svensson, 2006). Studies into service characteristics suggest that services are produced, distributed and consumed simultaneously in an interactive process initiated by both the service provider and the service consumer (Svensson, 2006). Solomon et al., (1985) cited in Oldfield and Brenda (2000) described higher education as a "pure" service that requires a higher degree of personal interaction with the various service dimensions. Service marketing literature has identified these dimensions as the service process, people and physical environment (Bitner, 2003; Zeithaml et al., 2006; Svensson, 2006). Research works in service marketing have long established that these dimensions have a strong correlation with service quality and customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1993; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Lassar et al., 2000). Spreng and Mackoy, (1996) cited in Lassar et al., (2000) further establishes that service quality is an important determinant of customer satisfaction. As a pure service the production and consumption of tertiary education takes place simultaneously in an environment that requires continuous interactions between students and university employees, facilities and processes. The relationship between service encounters and customer satisfaction has been well emphasized in service marketing literature. Munteanu et al., (2010) explained this relationship indicating that customer satisfaction has a direct link to customer experiences. Empirical findings in academic research seem to suggest that customer (students) satisfaction is often established through the personal interactive experiences with co-consumers, employees, physical facilities, the service environment or the service process (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Svensson, 2006). In higher educational setting, students spend most of their time interacting with people (co-students, academic and non-academic staff), tangible elements in the physical environment (lecture theatres, teaching and learning materials and equipments, information technology infrastructure, library facilities) and academic processes (admission, lecture periods, examinations and quizzes). These represent tangible and intangible service cues which students interact and experience on campus and which form the basis for service quality evaluation. Invariably the perceived quality of such experiences impact significantly on the level of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1993; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996; Lassar et al., 2000). The finding of Oldfield and Brenda (2000) attests to the view that student experiences with the tangible and intangible service quality dimensions impact significantly on student satisfaction in higher education. In a recent study, Munteanu et al., (2010) explained that the totality of students' experiences with an educational institution provide marketing insight into student satisfaction. It is essential for tertiary institutions to understand educational elements that would influence the total educational experience of students. Contemporary views in literature suggest that institutions of higher education should not only focus on skills and capabilities of their graduates but should be mindful of the perceived quality of student experiences (Munteanu et al., 2010; Pereda et al., 2007). This suggestion has become extremely important because it is believed that the quality of service experience would help educational managers to be committed to continuous service improvements (Brochado, 2009).

Research Objective

This paper presents the survey results of university students with different backgrounds in the field of business studies. The survey items adapted from the works of Gummesson's 4Q (1993), Stromgren (2007) and Ullah (2005) were developed to investigate and understand what students of the sampled universities would value in their service quality experience.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the primary objective as stated above, the researches needed to provide answers to the following research questions;

Q1= what factors affect students' service experience Ghanaian private universities?

Q2=what is the magnitude and direction of this effect on the service experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities?

Q3=what is the overall effect of all the factors on the service experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities?

Conceptual Framework
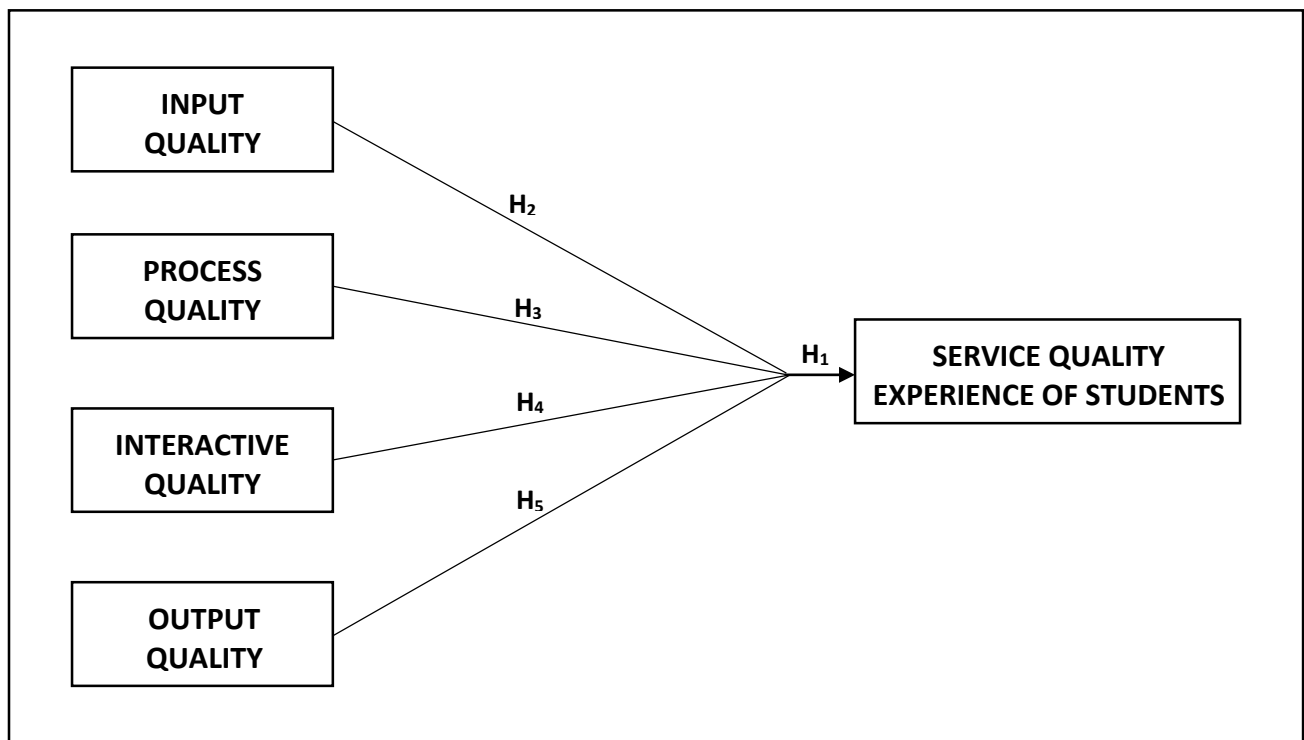
Variables

Dependent Variable; Service experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities

Independent Variables; Input Quality, Process Quality, Interactive Quality and Output Quality

Hypothesis

H_0=There is no relationship between input quality, process quality, interactive quality, output quality and service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities.

H_1= There is relationship between input quality, process quality, interactive quality, output quality and service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities.

H_2=There is an impact of input quality on service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities

H_3= There is an impact of process quality on service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities

H_4= There is an impact of interactive quality on service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities

H_5= There is an impact of output quality on service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities

Research Design

This study is designed to evaluate students' service quality experiences in three private business schools in Ghana. The item scales were adopted and modified from the Gummesson's 4Q model of service delivery, the survey items of Stromgren (2007) and Ullah (2005). Survey research approach was used to investigate and find answers to the research questions. The study used cross-sectional survey technique and conveniently sampled 700 students from three (3) private business schools in Greater Accra region. Semi-structured questionnaire was developed and administered by the researchers to collect the required data in line with the suggestion by Akwensivie et al (2013), that words, phrases or sentences used in questionnaire must be pre-tested on representatives of the sample population to ensure that the intended respondents and the researcher(s) have a common understanding and meaning of the words, phrases or sentences use in the right context since there could be other meanings attached to words, phrases or sentences aside the generally acceptable meaning The questionnaire included opened and closed end questions developed around four service quality indicators namely input quality, output quality, process quality and interactive quality. We arrived at the sample size of 700 using Tabachnick and Ffidell (2001) proposed formula for computing the sample size required for a multiple regression analysis, where $N \geq 50+8m$ where (m) is the number of predictive variables. In this study m=4 (Input Quality, Process Quality, Interactive Quality and Output Quality). As per the formula, a

minimum of 82 response was acceptable but to ensure more generalization of the findings we chose a sample size of 700 far beyond the acceptable minimum of 82.

The survey items adapted from the works of Gummesson's 4Q (1993), Stromgren (2007) and Ullah (2005) were developed to investigate and understand what students of the sampled universities would value in their service quality experience. Students response were taken on a five-point Likert scale rated between 5 (strongly agree) and 1 (strongly disagree). Out of a total of 700 distributed questionnaires, 500 representing a response rate of 71% were retrieved from respondents. In terms of data processing and transformation this study employed a computerized software system the SPSS version 12.0 for windows in coding and entering raw data. For the purpose of this study the researchers decided on a Cronbach Coefficient alpha value of 0.5 and above to determine how reliable and consistent the scales used to measure students' experiences are. The value of the Cronbach's alpha value was found to be 0.497 approximately the 0.5 level adopted for this study. This shows a strong consistency between the items measuring the students' experience of Service Quality.

Data Analysis

In order to evaluate the experiences of students, f-test was employed while ANOVA was used to determine the variation between service quality indicators.

Table 1: ANOVA for Service Quality Experiences of Students in three universities in Ghana

		Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	df	f-value	Sig.
Service Quality Experiences of Business Students in Three Universities	Between Groups	1744060	581353.3	3	4.806708	0.014252
	Within Groups	1935140	120946	16		
	Total	3679200		19		

*p<0.05

The ANOVA statistical tool was used to test the statistical significance difference between the quality indicators that could influence student experiences in the sampled universities. The data presented in Table 1 above suggest that there is no significant difference between the mean scores at 5% significance level. This appears to suggest that service quality experiences between and among students in the sampled institutions are similar. In other words, all service quality indicators would have almost equal impact on students' service experiences.

To further ascertain the significance of the variations between variables and to determine the effect of the four service quality indicators on service experiences, descriptive statistics and post-hoc test analysis with Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) were conducted. The means and the mean differences are displayed in tables 2.1 and 2.2 below.

Table 2.1: Table showing the Descriptive statistics of the Service Quality Indicators

Service Quality Indicators	Average	std Deviation
Input Quality	300	157.1623365
Process Quality	700	386.7977508
Interactive Quality	504	169.7939928
Outcome Quality	1100	529.7570198

Source: Survey Data, 2013

The mean statistics displayed in table 2.1 shows that the output quality variable scored higher on the average than input, process, and interactive qualities. This appears to suggest that elements defining output quality impact significantly on students' experiences of quality service. Process and interactive qualities were ranked second and third respectively in terms of the mean average computed. However, input quality was least ranked among the other quality indicators.

This suggests that students in the sampled institutions perceive elements defining output quality as the most important determinants of service experiences among the other determinants. Other quality determinants which are highly recognized by students include process and interactive qualities. However the data in table 2.1 appears to suggest that students do not actually attach significant importance to elements which define input quality when it comes to measuring their experience.

The data in table 2.1 indicate significant differences in the means of the four (4) service quality indicators. Hence post hoc analysis was conducted to determine the extent of variation among the service quality indicators. The statistics presented in the Fisher's LSD table (i.e. table 2.2), shows that at 5% significance level, the absolute mean differences between service quality indicators revealed that apart from two pairs (input quality – outcome quality; interactive and outcome qualities) majority of the pairs show that there is no significant differences between the means. This suggests that students' opinion in relation to service quality indicators appear to be the same in all the sampled universities.

Table 2.2: LSD Table showing the Mean variations of service quality indicators on students experiences of service quality

Service Quality Indicators (I)	Service Quality Indicators (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	LSD
Input Quality	Process Quality	-400	521.3353291
Input Quality	Interactive Quality	-204	521.3353291
Input Quality	Outcome Quality	-800*	521.3353291
Process Quality	Interactive Quality	196	521.3353291
Process Quality	Outcome Quality	-400	521.3353291
Interactive Quality	Outcome Quality	-596*	521.3353291

 Source: Survey Data, 2013

The findings in this study are in line with contemporary research findings in both developing and developed countries such as Pakistan (Zeshan, 2010), UK (Pereda et al., 2007; Oldfield and Baron, 2000), Romania (Munteanu et al., 2010), Portugal (Brochado, 2009), Greece (Tsinidou, 2010), and U.S.A (Leng, 2010).

On the basis of the statistical analysis above, certain conclusions have been drawn. That;

1. H_0 is rejected as all the variables have a relationship with the service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities
2. H_1 is accepted because all the variables have a relationship on the service quality experience of students' in Ghanaian private universities
3. The findings thus establish that although output quality exert the greatest quality influence on students' experiences, the other service quality indicators namely process, interactive and input qualities also impact on students' service quality experiences but their level of significance varies. It can therefore be said that students' are more affected by the output qualities of their institutions in terms of how they are designed to train and develop their psychomotor and cognitive skills in a way that will not only achieve good grades but will fit into society and contribute meaningfully to industrial and socio-economic development of the country.

DISCUSSION

Service experience is an important dimension of evaluating service quality in tertiary institutions. In view of their significance private universities may seek to improve on the quality of service experiences by emphasizing on how to develop the tangible and intangible aspects of service

delivery. Essentially the study identified three important findings in relation to the things students consider most important in their service experiences.

First, the finding of this study indicates that students' experiences are informed by a range of service quality variables. In line with existing literature this study establishes that students' experiences in private universities are influenced by input, output, interactive and process qualities. Thus input, output, interactive and process qualities provide the basis for understanding and measuring students' experiences in Ghanaian private universities. Second, students' experiences are multifaceted and includes academic and non-academic aspects; tangible and intangible dimensions of service delivery. Essentially the findings of this study confirmed the results of existing literature and defined the students' experience in terms of variables such as teaching-learning facilities (lecture theatres, library, projectors and screens, internet availability and accessibility), social interactions, grading and assessment, admissions procedures, curriculum, faculty, administrative staff, and the physical environment. Third, the degree of service experiences do not vary among private university students in Ghana regardless of the university attended. This explains reasons why private university students attach great importance to all service quality indicators irrespective of which private university they enroll in as depicted by the findings of this current study.

CONTRIBUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this study are in line with contemporary research findings in both developing and developed countries such as Pakistan (Zeshan, 2010), UK (Pereda et al., 2007; Oldfield and Baron, 2000), Romania (Munteanu et al., 2010), Portugal (Brochado, 2009), Greece (Tsinidou, 2010), and U.S.A (Leng, 2010); students in these countries believe that functional and technical dimensions of service quality are important considerations for evaluating students experiences at the tertiary level of education.

In view of the discussions above, managers of private universities in Ghana should reckon the importance of the four (4) service quality indicators namely input, output, interactive and process qualities and make conscious efforts to enhance them at all contact points if quality experience is to be delivered to private university students. Consequently, the following recommendations are outlined for managers of private universities considerations;

Output quality

The curriculum and course outlines should be planned essentially to train and develop students' psychomotor and cognitive skills in such a way that they will not only achieve good grades in school but will fit into society and contribute meaningfully to industrial and socio-economic development of the country

Process quality

This dimension has the potential to affect the flow of service delivery from the provider to the student. In this study process quality is defined by variables such as student admissions, lecture

periods, academic sessions, examination procedures, and release of results. In view of the importance of the process quality the following are recommended for managers' attention.

Management should ensure that;

1. Process related activities should be timely and fast
2. Self interactive technologies such as the internet and the worldwide web could be employed to facilitate students' admissions, communicate examination times and periods, lecture times and periods and the release of students' results.

Interactive quality

This dimension is desired to promote research interests among lecturers, enhance academic performance of students and to foster relationships among staff, students and staff and students. Hence management should;

1. Encourage inter-personal and inter-group socialization on campus through formation of departmental and faculty associations
2. Lecturers may adopt interactive method of teaching (presentations, case studies, questions and answers approach)
3. Contact staff (both academic and non-academic) should be trained and empowered to interact effectively among themselves and more importantly with students since they are the primary consumers of university products.
4. Interactive technology could be adopted to enhance the quality of interaction among staff, and students

Input quality

In view of the significance of this quality dimensions to students' experiences management should provide state of the art and innovative physical facilities capable of enhancing students' experiences throughout their university education.

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the chosen sample size was large enough to ensure the generalization of the results of this study, it must be emphasized that there are well over 50 private university colleges in Ghana spread all over the 10 regions of Ghana. Even in Accra (one of the ten regions in Ghana) alone where the study was conducted, the use of convenient sampling technique to select only three university colleges may have implications for the results in terms of the relative importance of the four dimensions of service quality experience of the students as depicted in the results of the study. Future researchers may consider expanding the sample size for the university colleges using other appropriate sampling techniques other than convenient approach as was used in this current study to eliminate possible biases that may arise from the researchers.

The current study was unable to establish key demographic variables like age distribution of the students, session of study, level of study and the students' nationality. We made a basic assumption

that all the students were Ghanaians. However considering the findings from previous study by Akwensivie et al (2013) that Ghana is an emerging destination for undergraduate foreign education particularly among African countries (93.3% of students pursuing undergraduate degrees from 38 different countries). As evident from the results of their study there is a gradual increase in foreign students' enrolment in Ghana year on year. This we belief could have significant implications for this current results. Nonetheless, these limitation do not take away the significant contribution of this current study to the managers of private universities in Ghana in terms of how relevant input quality, process quality, interactive quality and output quality impacts significantly on students' service experience.

Finally the current study has presented new research propositions which needs to be further investigated;

1. There is a significant relationship between output quality and students' experience of service quality
2. There is a significant relationship between process quality and students' experience of service quality
3. The relationship between output quality and students' experience of service quality is not significant
4. The relationship between input quality and students' experience of service quality is not significant.

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