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# Understanding MBA service quality in postgraduates' own terms: An exploratory analysis of top-of-the mind definition

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The growing internationalisation of Higher Institutions of Education and the proliferation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) have increased the competitive challenge facing local public universities and MBA programs. Service quality is the key challenge facing local universities to compete at international level. To achieve service quality however, managers of Higher Institutions of Education and/or MBA programs have to understand the service quality perceptions of students and set service quality standards and strategies that meet these quality perceptions.
Most studies assessing service quality of MBA programs and/or of the education sector have utilised SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and HEdPERF models. Although these models offer reliability they are limited in providing practical understanding of service quality in specific contexts. This study replicated the Top-of-mind expression technique that uses unaided free expressions of respondents to investigate MBA service quality criteria of 31 MBA postgraduates of a public university. The analysis discovered two new MBA service quality criteria and that includes management of the MBA program and image which are not conceptualised for measurement in existing service quality models. The results further confirmed other service quality dimensions of MBA programs; syllabus, lecturing quality, reliability of program, academic facilities and outcomes. The results designate that using the Top-of-mind technique which involves analysing free top-of-mind expressions of respondents can identify key service criteria in specific contexts. The specific terms may offer very useful insights for managers and practitioners to formulate specific strategies to improve attractiveness and competitiveness of the service provided and in this case, MBA programs.

**Key words:** Service quality, MBA, service quality measurement.

## INTRODUCTION

Service Quality (SQ) is the most researched area in services marketing (Fisk et al., 1993) and this is due to growth in importance of the services sector across the globe (Bateson, 1989; De Sarbo et al., 1994; Henkoff, 1994; Koepp, 1987).

However, despite all the studies, there is no commonly accepted definition of SQ. SQ is best defined by the consumer of a product or service. It is understood however, that quality implies the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears its ability to satisfy implied or stated needs of consumers. Lewis and Booms (1983) define SQ as a measure of how well a service delivered matches the customers' expectations. This definition has been used by various empirical re-searchers including Lewis and Mitchell (1990) and Asubonteng et al. (1996) and this study also adopts this understanding of SQ for its purposes.

There is a broad consensus in literature that SQ is an

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attitude of overall judgement about service superiority. This judgement elicits from comparing performance perceptions with expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988) or comparing performance with some ideal standards (Teas, 1993) or from perceptions of performance alone (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). SQ has therefore been oriented as focusing on meeting customer's needs and requirements, screening if the services delivered match with the expectations of customers about the service (Lewis et al., 1994) and in High Institutions of Education (HIE) that means screening if the education and services delivered match with the expectations of students about the education and services received.

Models for conceptualising SQ developed by various empirical researchers reveal that SQ is a multi-dimensional concept (Gronroos, 1982; 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Rust and Oliver, 1994); however, the models do not generally agree on the nature or context of the dimensions of SQ (Brady and Cronin, 2001). The concept of SQ has nonetheless been widely adopted in industry and commerce and in Higher HIE where several methods and models have since been used for its measurement with SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. (1988) being the most popular (Brown et al., 1998; Guolla, 1999; Khan et al., 2007; Marsh, 1987, 1991; Owalia and Aspinwall, 1997).

The measuring of SQ has become so important in HIE and MBA programs in particular because of the growing internationalisation of HIE. Students have access to regional and international universities and MBA programs and are aware of the quality of programs provided at regional and international level. SQ of HIE plays a predominant role in the process of selecting the institute for future study among students (Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Louw et al., 2001; Sahney et al., 2004) as a result local and public universities now compete with the standards set by other educational institutions of the world. HIE therefore should be interested in knowing the quality perceived of their MBA programs by students since they are the immediate or direct customers.

## Research problem and objective

HIE conceptualises and measures their SQ or the quality of their MBA programs by adopting the common measurement models as done in previous studies (Brown et al., 1998; Guolla, 1999; Khan et al., 2007; Marsh, 1987, 1991; Owalia and Aspinwall, 1997). However, for effective measurement of SQ the attributes to the dimensions adopted must be relevant and perceived as important criteria by the students or other key stakeholders to the MBA programs under assessment. The challenge therefore is to determine the relevance and importance of the attributes and dimensions in existing models to measure service quality in specific context.

The University of Malawi through the Faculty of Commerce offers an Executive MBA program and since its inception in 2004 no major studies have been conducted on the program's service quality or its postgraduates' perceptions of the quality of the program or indeed their criteria for selecting a quality MBA program. Although there have been concerns on the level of service quality of the MBA program offered, to improve quality of service, the education providers must first understand the quality attributes their prospective or enrolled students embrace since quality may be perceived differently between and among students (Owalia and Aspinwall, 1997).

The purpose of this research therefore is to review the current measurement methods of MBA SQ and present results of the qualitative study that investigated SQ of MBA programs in the postgraduates' own terms using Top-of-the mind definition.

The objective of the study was to explore MBA SQ using the Top-of-the mind definition among postgraduates from a public university in Malawi and to compare against the dimensions and attributes in common measurement models of MBA SQ and then inform management of the MBA program on what constitutes quality on the local MBA program. The study analysed SQ attributes that MBA postgraduates from the University of Malawi consider as important criteria to call an MBA program a quality program.

The research is therefore relevant to Service Quality, MBA, and Service Quality Measurement.

## Measuring service quality

Service quality (SQ) is a multi-dimension and multi-attribute concept (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Gronroos, 1984; Haywood-Farmer, 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Rust and Oliver, 1994) which has drawn much debate on its conceptualisation and measurement (Bolton and Drew, 1991; Carman, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Several studies have focused on investigating the interrelationships between SQ, customer satisfaction (CS) and customer loyalty (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Woodside et al., 1989). SQ has been identified as an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Anderson and Fornell, 1994)

These studies have highlighted the importance of SQ in influencing consumer behaviours such as increased purchase, brand loyalty, great willingness to recommend and reduction in customers' complaints which all increase retention rates of customers (Bitner, 1990; Danaher, 1997; Headley and Miller, 1993; Levesque and Mc Dougall, 1996; Magi and Julander, 1996).

In order for a firm to compete successfully it must understand customers' perceptions of quality and the way quality is influenced. Customer perceptions have been defined as beliefs about experienced service (Sachdev
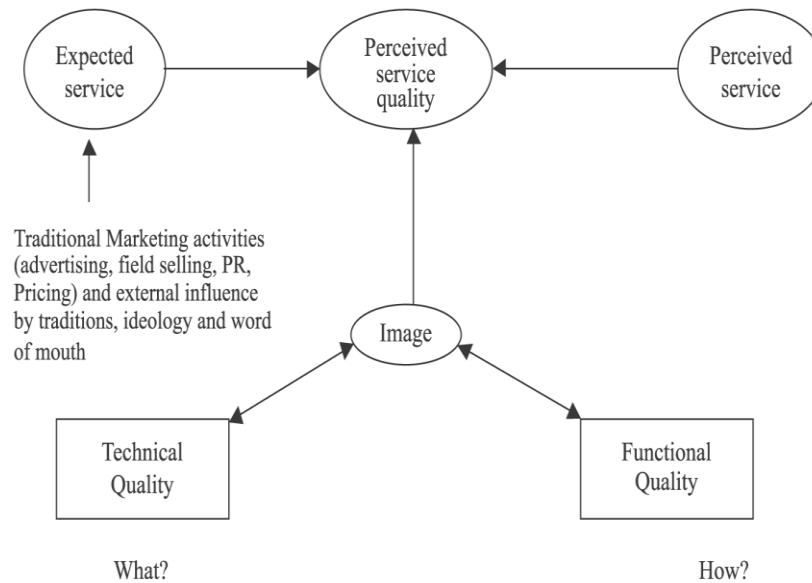
**Source:** Grönroos (1984)

**Figure 1.** Technical and Functional Quality Model.  Adapted From: Nitin Seth et al (2004).

and Verma, 2004) and expectations are treated as beliefs about service having desired attributes (Parasuraman et al, 1985) and that expectations are used as a standard for service evaluation. To manage SQ requires a firm to match the expected service and the perceived service so that customer satisfaction is achieved (Parasuraman et al, 1985). Several models have been developed and used to conceptualise and measure SQ.

Nitin Seth et al. (2004) provide a review of nineteen SQ models of the many models used to conceptualise and measure SQ i.e. Technical and Functional Quality Model (Gronroos, 1984); GAP Model (Parasuraman et al, 1985); Attribute Service Quality Model (Haywood-Farmer, 1988); Synthesised Model of Service Quality (Brogowicz et al, 1990); Performance Only Model (Cronin and Taylor, 1992); Ideal Value Model of Service Quality (Mattson, 1992); Evaluated Performance and Normed Quality Model (Teas, 1993); IT Alignment Model (Berkley and Gupta, 1993); Attribute and Overall affect Model (Dabholkar et al., 1996); Model of Perceived Service Quality and Satisfaction (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996); PCP Attribute Model (Philip and Hazlett, 1997); Retail Service Quality and Perceived Value Model (Sweeney et al, 1997); Service Quality Customer Value and Customer Satisfaction Model (Oh, 1999); Antecedents and Mediator Model (Dabholkar et al., 2000) and Internal Service Quality Model (Frost and Kumar, 2000).

This paper highlights a few SQ models that have been frequently used in conceptualising and in measuring SQ in general and in HIE in particular that are of relevant interest to this study.

## Technical and functional quality model (Gronroos, 1984)

Gronroos (1984) conceptualises SQ on three dimensions. First the technical quality i.e. the quality of what the customer actually receives as a result of interaction with the service organisation which forms the basis of his/her evaluative judgement of service performance. Secondly, the functional quality dimension which relates to how a customer gets the technical outcome and lastly the image that a firm builds up mainly by the technical and functional service quality including other factors such as public relations and pricing as depicted in Figure 1.
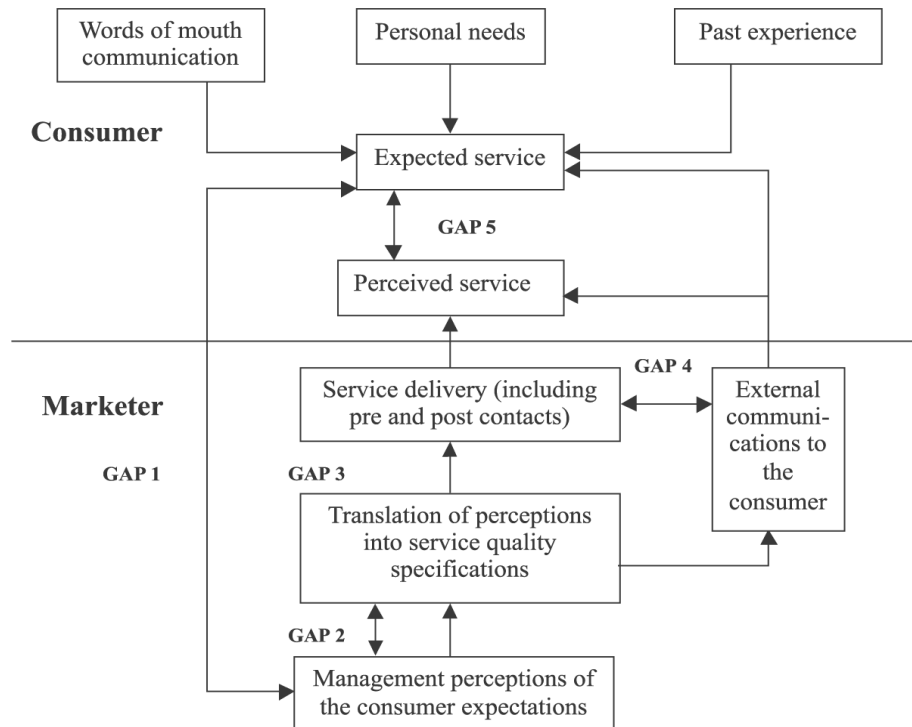
## GAP Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985)

Parasuraman et al. (1985) conceptualise SQ as a function of the differences between expectations and performance along the quality dimensions (Nitin Seth et al., 2004). The model is based on gaps analysis in the conceptualisation and delivery of the service. The researchers (Parasuraman et al., 1985) visualised the existence of the service gaps in their model of SQ (Figure 2).

In this model:

Gap 1 is the difference between customers' expectations and management's perceptions of customers' expectations, that is not knowing precisely what customers expect.

Gap 2 is the difference between management's

**Source:** Parasuraman *et al*. (1985)

**Figure 2.** GAP Model. Adapted from: Seth et al. (2004).

perceptions of customers' expectations and the service quality specifications (SQS) drawn to guide the service delivery that is improper service quality standards.

Gap 3 is the difference between service quality specifications (SQS) and the actual service delivered to the customer that is the service quality gap.

Gap 4 is the difference between the service delivery and the external communication to the customer about the service delivered that is matching service delivery and promises.

Gap 5 is the difference between customers' expectations of the service and their perceptions of the service delivered. This last gap forms perceptions of the SQ in the customer that is SQ becomes a function of perceptions and expectations.

The gaps analysis provides a disconfirmation process where the customer (dis)confirms received service against expected service to form evaluative judgement of SQ and his/her satisfaction with it. It is based on this gap analysis model that Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed a SQ measurement scale called SERVQUAL. SERVQUAL identifies five dimensions of service quality i.e. reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, assurance and empathy with a total of 22 service quality (SQ) measurement attributes.

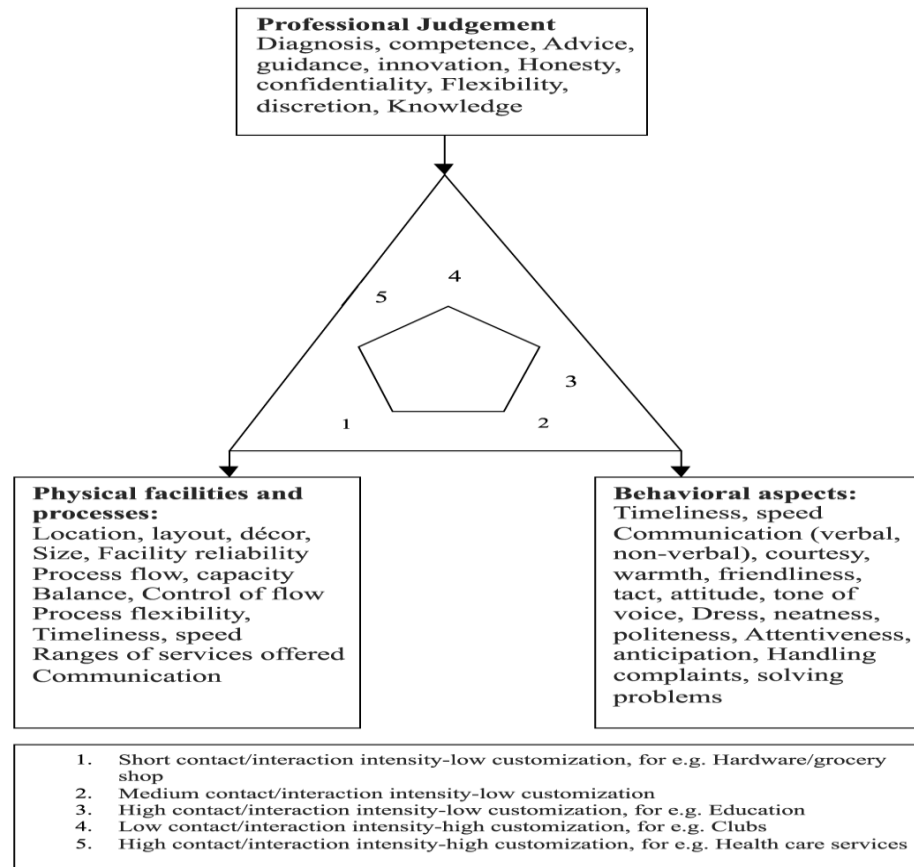SERVQUAL model has been widely used in SQ and customer satisfaction studies across industries (Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2002; Andaleeb and Basu, 1994; Angur et al., 1999; Asubonteng et al., 1996; Babakus and Boller, 1992; Boulding et al., 1993; Brown and Swartz, 1989; Ennew et al., 1993; Yavas et al., 2004).

However, Buttle (1996) found serious concerns with the number of dimensions in SERVQUAL as well as their consistency when applied in different contexts while Woo and Ennew (2005) found that in business service markets, the dimensions were completely different. Carman (1990) then warned that SERVQUAL provides a start for items development and that all items within the SQ dimensions need to have validity and reliability checks before commercial application. Therefore the five dimensions should only be used as a starting point rather than a tool that can be immediately used in the field.

Despite the concerns by various researchers about SERVQUAL it is still identified as appropriate for use in service organisations (Davis, 1994; Mc Cormack, 1994) and is identified as an appropriate SQ measurement tool in marketing text books (Boone and Kurtz, 1995; Lamb et al., 1995; Pride and Ferrell, 1996; Zeithmal and Bitner, 1996).

**Performance only (Cronin and Taylor, 1992)**

The Performance Only Model by Cronin and Taylor

**Professional Judgement**
Diagnosis, competence, Advice, guidance, innovation, Honesty, confidentiality, Flexibility, discretion, Knowledge

5    4

3

1    2

**Physical facilities and processes:**
Location, layout, décor, Size, Facility reliability Process flow, capacity Balance, Control of flow Process flexibility, Timeliness, speed Ranges of services offered Communication

**Behavioral aspects:**
Timeliness, speed Communication (verbal, non-verbal), courtesy, warmth, friendliness, tact, attitude, tone of voice, Dress, neatness, politeness, Attentiveness, anticipation, Handling complaints, solving problems

1.  Short contact/interaction intensity-low customization, for e.g. Hardware/grocery shop
2.  Medium contact/interaction intensity-low customization
3.  High contact/interaction intensity-low customization, for e.g. Education
4.  Low contact/interaction intensity-high customization, for e.g. Clubs
5.  High contact/interaction intensity-high customization, for e.g. Health care services

**Source:** Haywood-Farmer (1988)

**Figure 3.** Attribute Service Quality Model. Adapted from Seth et al. (2004).

(1992) is a SQ measurement model that followed on from the works of Parasuraman et al. (1988). Cronin and Taylor (1992) argued that SQ is a form of consumers' attitude and performance only measure of SQ is an enhanced means of measuring SQ that is performance only not the performance – expectations disconfirmation.
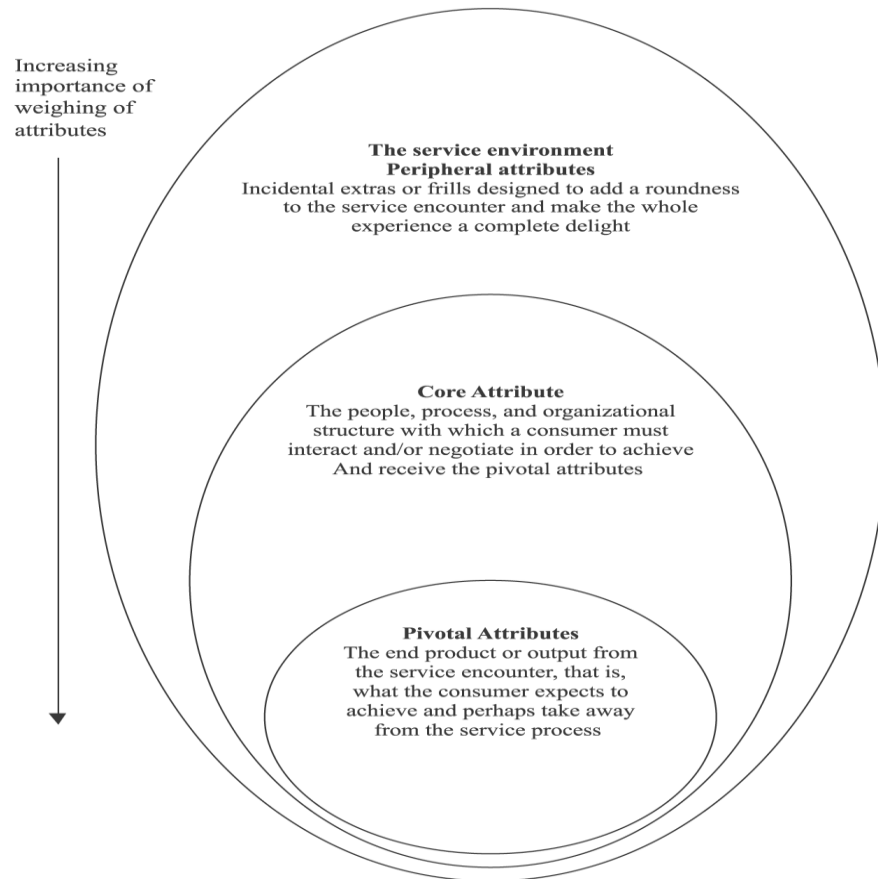
Cronin and Taylor (1992) use the multi-dimension and multi-attribute measurement scale called SERVPERF where SQ is evaluated by perceptions of performance only without expectations or important weights being used as a standard of comparison. Cronin and Taylor (1992) tested SERVPERF in four industries (banks, pest control, dry cleaning and fast food) and found it outperformed SERVQUAL. Several other studies agree that customers' assessment of continuously provided service may depend solely on performance (Bolton and Drew, 1991; Boulding et al., 1993; Gotlieb et al., 1994; Oliver, 1989; Quester et al., 1995) and that SERVPERF may have less bias than SERVQUAL in measuring service quality (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Llusar and Zornoza, 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1994; Quester et al., 1995). However, SERVQUAL remains the most used measurement model for SQ between the two (Brady et

al., 2002).

## Attribute Service Quality Model (Haywood-Farmer, 1988)

In their model of SQ, Haywood-Farmer (1988) separates the SQ attributes into three basic groups: the physical facilities and process, peoples' behaviour and professional judgement and each group consists of a number of attributes as presented in Figure 3.

Haywood-Farmer (1988) gives the understanding that an organisation achieves high quality if it meets customers' preferences and expectations consistently. As thoroughly explained by Nitin Seth et al. (2004), Haywood-Farmer (1988) try to map different types of service settings as per degree of contact and interaction, degree of labour intensity and degree of service customisation. That means for example organisations that have high contact/interaction intensity but low customisation e.g. education, are closer to behavioural aspects in the model. Therefore attention has to be placed on timeliness of service, communication, courtesy, friend-

Increasing importance of weighing of attributes

**The service environment**
**Peripheral attributes**
Incidental extras or frills designed to add a roundness
to the service encounter and make the whole
experience a complete delight

**Core Attribute**
The people, process, and organizational
structure with which a consumer must
interact and/or negotiate in order to achieve
And receive the pivotal attributes

**Pivotal Attributes**
The end product or output from
the service encounter, that is,
what the consumer expects to
achieve and perhaps take away
from the service process

**Source:** Philip and Hazlett (1997)

**Figure 4.** PCP Attribute Model. Adapted from Seth et al. (2004).

liness, attentiveness, complaints handling and problem solving.

## PCP Attribute Model (Philip and Hazlett, 1997)

The PCP attribute model by Philip and Hazlett (1997) proposes a hierarchical structure of SQ based on three main classes of attributes: Pivotal, Core and Peripheral (PCP). The model conceptualises that each service consists of these three overlapping areas where the majority of the dimensions and concepts used to define SQ lie as is depicted in Figure 4.

The pivotal attributes are located at the core of the service concept and are considered to be the single most determining influence on why customers decide to approach a particular organisation. These influence on customer satisfaction levels and are the end product or output from the service encounter in other words what the customer expects to achieve and receive.

The core attributes centres around the pivotal attributes and can be described as the amalgamation of the people,

processes and the service organisations structure through which customers must interact and/or negotiate to achieve/receive the pivotal attributes.

Whereas the peripheral attributes are the incidental extras or frills designed to add value to the service encounter and make the whole experience a complete delight to the customer. When a customer makes an evaluation of any service encounter, satisfaction is determined if pivotal attributes are achieved, but as the service is used more frequently the core and peripheral attributes begin to gain importance (Nitin Seth et al., 2004).

These models reviewed are important because they condense our understanding of SQ as being multi-dimensional in nature and depict several important dimensions in SQ delivery: tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988) or physical facilities in Haywood-Farmer (1988) or core attributes (Philip and Hazlett, 1997); and the peoples' behaviour (Haywood-Farmer, 1988; Philip and Hazlett, 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1988). However no SQ measurement methods conceptualise and measure all the dimensions of SQ.

## Measuring service quality in HIE and MBA programs

Service quality (SQ) measurement in HIE has benefited from the use of some of the SQ models reviewed above. Of the most popular model to be used is the SERVQUAL (Chua, 2004; Ivancevich et al., 1997; Vanniarajan et al., 2011).

SERVQUAL is a multi-dimension and multi-attribute model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) as an instrument for measuring SQ. SERVQUAL posits five dimensions that include; (1) tangibles: the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel; (2) reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; (3) responsiveness: willingness to help customers and offering prompt service; (4) assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence and (5) empathy: caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers (Sachdev and Verma, 2004). These dimensions are operationalised through a multiple item scale into a research instrument for measuring SQ.

It is argued that although SERVQUAL items are inclusive enough to cover general SQ issues, they may not be specific enough to understand industry specific issues (Lee, 2011). Lee (2011) further observes that it is common to see only fractional differences in respondents' average responses to SERVQUAL item scales which make prioritisation of items in SQ improvement programmes difficult. Therefore blind use of the SERVQUAL instrument may limit the accuracy in understanding the most important SQ terms of customers in specific service and context.

Several other studies in HIE have utilised other models to measure service quality. Quality Function Deployment (QFD) is one popular approach for evaluating quality in HIE. QFD is a Total Quality Management (TQM) technique which can be applied for process and design improvement (Hwarng and Teo, 2001; Singh et al., 2008). QFD is used to visualise cause and effects relationships starting from the customer needs all the way down to the production process. According to Merican et al. (2009), QFD approach has been applied in schools and colleges in United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA) and Malaysia with reports documented of the benefits resulting from adopting TQM principles in various colleges and universities (Hwarng and Teo, 2001).

Then Firdaus (2005) developed the Higher Education Performance (HEdPERF) model as a new and more comprehensive, performance-based measuring instrument of SQ with the higher education sector. The model has five measurement dimensions: Non academic Aspects, Academic Aspects, Reputation, Access and Programme Issues with 41 measurement items which were empirically tested for unidimensionality, reliability and validity using both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Firdaus, 2005).

In further studies, Firdaus (2005) merged the HEdPERF and SERVPERF models to form an improved HEdPERF-SERVPERF model for measuring SQ in HIE. The resultant HEdPERF-SERVPERF scale identifies four dimensions as critical for measuring SQ in HIE and these include: (1) Non Academic Aspects – that contain variables that are essential to enable students fulfil their study obligations and relates to duties and responsibilities carried out by non-academic staff. (2) Academic Aspects-this factor represents the responsibilities of academics i.e. positive attitude, good communication skills, allowing sufficient consultation and being able to provide regular feedback to students. (3) Reliability Aspects – consists of items that put emphasis on the ability to provide the pledged service on time, accurately and dependably and (4) Empathy Aspect – relates to the provision of individualised and personalised attention to students with clear understanding of their specific and growing needs while keeping their best interest at heart (Firdaus, 2005).

Merican et al. (2009) developed an MBA Service Quality (MBA-SQ) model with five dimensions for measuring MBA quality. The five dimensions include Program quality, life quality, lecturing quality, facilities quality and outcome quality and have a total of 17 attributes (Table 1).

However, the model was developed based on data collected on a small and limited sample size of MBA students in Malaysia and has not been re-used extensively in literature.

The review of SQ models and MBA SQ models show great variations and similarities in the measurement of SQ in general and MBA SQ in specific. In these models tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988) would refer to physical facilities (Haywood-Farmer, 1988) and are the core attributes (Philip and Hazlett, 1997). Whereas the Academic aspects dimension (Firdaus, 2005) represents lecturing quality in Merican et al. (2009) which is the peoples' behaviour (Haywood-Farmer, 1988) or responsiveness, assurance and empathy in Parasuraman et al. (1988).

To sum up Walker (1990) suggested that the key determinants of SQ are service reliability, a quality environment and delivery systems that work together with good personal service (staff attitude, knowledge and skills). Gronroos (1990) proposed six criteria of perceived good SQ i.e. professionalism and skills, attitudes and behaviour, accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness, recovery, reputation and credibility while Albrecht and Zemke (1985) suggested care and concern, spontaneity, problem solving and recovery.

## Variations of service quality perceptions

The use in measurement models of perceptions of

**Table 1.** MBA-SQ measurement framework (Zailani et al., 2009).

| Zailani et al (2009) MBA-SQ Measurement Framework | |
|---|---|
| SQ1 | The School of Management offers the flexibility of program. |
| SQ2 | The MBA program has a variety of curriculum offered. |
| SQ3 | The MBA program has outlined and offered appropriate content to course. |
| SQ4 | The students are exposed to favourable social/emotional support facilities |
| SQ5 | The students are given the opportunity for a positive interpersonal relationship among the MBA community. |
| SQ6 | Lecturers in the school have well-versed knowledge. |
| SQ7 | Lecturers have all the experience needed in their subject matter. |
| SQ8 | Lecturers of the school have the ability to transmit enthusiasm for their subject. |
| SQ9 | Lecturers involved in the MBA program have stimulating and interesting teaching methodology. |
| SQ10 | The library facilities are readily available and accessible. |
| SQ11 | The computer facilities are readily available and accessible. |
| SQ12 | The laboratories are well equipped and accessible. |
| SQ13 | Student's lounge is available and accessible. |
| SQ14 | The sports facilities are readily available. |
| SQ15 | With the education and qualification received from the school, students have constructive placement opportunities. |
| SQ16 | Students are able to gain competencies with the education provided by the school. |
| SQ17 | The MBA program offers research/thesis quality that is competitive among other universities. |

performance which are subjective means that not all persons would perceive service quality (SQ) the same way. Perception of SQ would differ between persons due to different personal factors. Zhang et al. (2008) identified consistent results showing that service users from different countries and cultural backgrounds record different expectations and react differently to service encounters. Lewis (1991), Malhotra et al. (2005), Dash et al. (2009) and Ladhari et al. (2011) reported differences in perceived SQ across countries.

Malhotra et al. (2005) found differences in perception of SQ dimensions between developed and developing economies and noted that consumers of service in different countries may have different perceptions of what SQ is due to cultural and environmental differences (Lee, 2011). However, the same cultural and environmental influences may affect the zone of tolerance (ZOT) of SQ in customers.

Parasuraman et al. (1993) developed a conceptual model of Zone of Tolerance (ZOT) which is defined as the area between a customer's desired and adequate service expectations (Sachdev and Verma, 2004). This gives the notion that customers hold two types of expectations and these are the desired expectations, which are the wish for level of service performance; and the adequate expectations, which are the acceptable lower level of service performance (Sachdev and Verma, 2004; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Differences in ZOT add variations in service perceptions and expectations among customers and ZOT may be influenced by personal factors such as; age, culture, country of origin, education, profession etc.

According to Johnston (1995), one of the debates in

SQ literature concerns the identification of the determinants of SQ which is of concern to service management, academics and practitioners. Identification of determinants of SQ is necessary in order to be able to specify measure, control and improve customer perceived SQ (Johnston, 1995).

Therefore although many SQ measurement models agree on the multi-dimensionality and multi-itemised attributes (Berry et al., 1985) upon which SQ perceptions are based, specific attributes applicable in each dimension may vary due to personal factors as influenced by environmental factors. This implies that even in MBA programs not all postgraduates would perceive SQ in the same way. This then offers the gap for exploratory analyses of postgraduates' own criteria for SQ of MBA programs in specific contexts that can be used in assessing MBA SQ. This study therefore gets to understand postgraduates' specific criteria for MBA SQ in their own terms.

The following section describes the current investigation, the study methodology and discusses the findings of the research on important criteria for MBA SQ in postgraduates on terms generated using the 'top-of-the mind' technique. The section is followed by the conclusion, implications of the findings, its limitations and suggestion for future research in MBA SQ.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study replicates the study by Lee (2011) to explore top-of-the mind responses from postgraduates in identifying SQ of an MBA program. It is based on an advancing belief that unaided responses that are free from predetermined description of quality attributes

can help practitioners understand the SQ in the language of the customers (Lee, 2011) and that the free expressions can augment the current understanding of SQ in this case a postgraduate driven definition of MBA SQ.

Lee (2011) used the top-of-the mind responses to explore banks' SQ in customers' own terms and this study uses the same technique to explore SQ of MBA programs in postgraduates' own terms.

The study individuals comprised the postgraduates from a public university who attended an MBA program. The study group graduated from the program and therefore assumed to have formed MBA SQ perceptions based on the performance only or on a disconfirmed approach in the event of held expectations prior to undergoing the MBA program.

Having completed the MBA study, the postgraduates would have been satisfied or dissatisfied with their MBA service encounter and would have in the process formed personal perceptions of the important SQ criteria for an MBA program to be called a quality program.

A total of 56 postgraduates were asked to provide the three most important criteria for a quality MBA program in their own expressions. The questionnaires were sent to the respondents via e-mail and to increase the response rate, two rounds of reminders were sent to respondents within a week's interval where the questionnaires were sent again. A total of 31 postgraduates responded to the study representing a 55.4% response rate and constituting normal sample for statistical purposes in a qualitative study (Saunders et al., 2007).

### Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature and limited to the postgraduates of the public university in Malawi. There may be factors that would differentiate the study sample: culture, experience, exposure, tolerance levels of service quality (Johnston, 2005) etc to qualify for immediate transfer of the research results. The other limiting factor is the size of the study sample. The 31 postgraduates provided enough study Sample (Saunders et al., 2007) but it is very important to check the results on a wider and diverse population of MBA postgraduates.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the respondents were in management positions in industry and 77% of the respondents were male. According to top-of-mind concept (Lee, 2011) the respondents were limited to listing the three most important criteria for a quality MBA program in order to gauge their top-of-mind evoked set responses. All respondents provided three criteria for a quality MBA program in their own terms generating a total of 93 MBA SQ criteria responses.

The content of the responses was analysed using content analysis techniques and the data were categorised into labelled themes. The analysis was carried out by three statisticians and the results are summarised in Table 2.

The results from the study highlight seven themes of MBA SQ criteria that include the syllabus, quality of

lecturing, reliability of program, management of the program, academic facilities, outcomes and image.

Reliability of the program comes first with 35% of respondents mentioning the certainty of time frame for completing and graduating from the program as being key criteria for MBA SQ. Students want an MBA program where they enrol and graduate within the stipulated time frame. Currently, many students do not finish the program on time as they get stuck with the thesis and fail to graduate. Others are stuck with the thesis indefinitely which dents the quality of the program. This finding concurs with Walker's (1990) suggestion that service reliability is one key determinant of SQ. The MBA program requires a reliable time frame for starting and finishing.

The course content of the syllabus is second with 32% of respondents' mention and is followed by teaching/ learning methods with 23%. Lecturer qualifications and the relevance of course content to industry and learners needs have mentioned from 19% of respondents. This is followed by organisations of the MBA program and academic resources availability and access with 16% of respondents mentioning. There are several other criteria that include the reputation of the HIE, the lecturers' experience, updated syllabus, thesis supervision, the length of the program, the learning environment and career prospects which have all been considered as criteria for MBA SQ in postgraduates own terms.

These findings augur well with the dimensions in the SQ measurement models. Reliability of the MBA program being the ability to offer the stipulated program dependably and on time is covered in SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and HEdPERF-SERVPERF (Firdaus, 2005). The syllabus is covered by HEdPERF-SERVPERF (Firdaus, 2005) under Academic issues and in Merican et al. (2009) MBA SQ model. Issues covered in lecturing quality tie up with HEdPERF-SERVPERF (academic issues) (Firdaus, 2005), people's behaviour in Attribute SQ Model (Heywood-Farmer, 1988); MBA SQ Model (Merican et al., 2009) and assurance and responsiveness in SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988). (Academic) Facilities as a dimension of SQ are presented in Cronin and Taylor (1990), Gronroos (1984), Haywood-Farmer (1988), Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Merican et al. (2009). Outcome dimension is covered by Gronroos (1984) and Merican et al. (2009); and lastly the image is covered by Gronroos (1984).

The MBA program needs to focus and deliver in these areas to be perceived a quality program. Management of the MBA program is required to conduct program and syllabus reviews to update course content in line with changing industry needs. Delivery approaches and methods have to befit the executive category with lecturers that are well qualified and have practical professional experience at the top level. The programs have to be well managed and have adequate academic

**Table 2.** Study analysis results.

| MBA SQ criteria | No. of responses | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Syllabus | 27 | |
| Course content | 10 | 32 |
| Course relevance to industry and learners needs | 6 | 19 |
| Up to date syllabus | 3 | 10 |
| Comparable with international universities | 1 | 3 |
| Challenging | 1 | 3 |
| Limited number of courses | 1 | 3 |
| | | |
| Quality of Lecturing | 22 | |
| Teaching / Learning methods | 7 | 23 |
| Lecturer qualifications | 6 | 19 |
| Lecturer experience | 4 | 13 |
| Thesis supervision | 3 | 10 |
| Lecturer commitment | 2 | 6 |
| | | |
| Reliability of Program | 14 | |
| Certainty of program time frame | 11 | 35 |
| Length of program | 3 | 10 |
| Management of Program | 12 | |
| Organisation of program | 5 | 16 |
| Communication | 2 | 6 |
| Admission standards | 1 | 3 |
| Convenience of class time | 2 | 6 |
| Program access | 1 | 3 |
| Fees management | 1 | 3 |
| | | |
| Academic Facilities | 8 | |
| Resources availability and access | 5 | 16 |
| Learning environment | 3 | 10 |
| Outcome | 5 | |
| Career prospects | 3 | 10 |
| Standard of thesis | 2 | 6 |
| | | |
| Image | 5 | |
| Reputation | 4 | 13 |
| Accreditation | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 93 | |

resources and facilities to enable conducive learning for top level professionals.

MBA SQ Model (Merican et al., 2009) is the closest model to the study findings with dimensions and criteria for measuring MBA SQ that is syllabus, lecturing quality, facilities and outcomes. The quality of life dimension (Merican et al., 2009) may not have featured in the context of the study respondents because all postgraduates are non residential executives and their perception of quality of life (Merican et al., 2009) in the university in relation to MBA study could not have been perceived.

The highlights of the study results show that the SERVQUAL model cover SQ measurement issues but is not ideal for measurement of SQ of MBA programs in specific contexts. For example, the tangibles dimension in SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al, 1988) cover the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel in the service encounter whereas the study findings on academic facilities criteria focus on the availability and access to the MBA resources and the facilities in the learning environment. So here the focus is on availability, access and ambience (decor) of learning environments in which management of HIE can focus on to deliver SQ to MBA students.

The study findings further introduce two new dimensions of SQ not covered by the previous models that postgraduates in the study consider important criteria for MBA SQ that is management of the MBA program and the image of the HIE.

In this study management of MBA program as an MBA SQ criteria entails organisation of the program, effective communication with students, convenience of class time, admission standards, program access and fees management. It is surprising that management of the service encounter has not been emphasised as an important SQ criteria in measurement models in literature; however, the study highlights that management of the experience is an important criteria of SQ.

The study also highlighted image as an important criteria in MBA SQ perception. The Technical and Functional Quality Model (Gronroos, 1984) is the only SQ model that highlights image as an SQ dimension but image has not been configured for measurement in any SQ scales. However, the impact of image of the HIE cannot be underestimated in postgraduates' SQ perceptions of MBA programs and their decision making in selecting HIE for future study as highlighted by this research. Further studies though are required to investigate what constitutes this image of an MBA program how management can build it.

The study has therefore highlighted seven dimensions of importance in postgraduates' own terms of MBA service quality that include; the syllabus quality that covers course content, course relevance to industry and learners' needs, syllabus that is challenging, updated and comparable to international universities. Lecturing quality (faculty) is the second dimension of SQ as highlighted by this study and it covers teaching/learning methods and styles, lecturer qualifications, lecturer experience, lecturer commitment and level of supervision of the thesis. The third dimension is the reliability of the MBA program. It is an important SQ criterion that entails the MBA program having a definite timeframe where students enrol and graduate within the stipulated program timeline. Management of the MBA program is the fourth SQ criteria for MBA programs according to this study where the focus is on the overall organisation of the MBA program, effective communication with students, the admission standards, convenient access to the program and fees management. The academic facilities are the fifth SQ dimension for MBA program as highlighted by this study where the focus is on availability and access to academic resources: library (books, journals, research material); IT facilities (Computers, printers, copiers) and the internet. Academic facilities further cover the learning environment that includes the classrooms (chairs, tables, lighting) and utility facilities (lounge, toilets etc).

The sixth dimension is the outcome of attending the MBA program in terms of availability of placements and the quality of the thesis and the last dimension is the Image of the HIE where students rate the MBA program SQ by its reputation and the accreditation of the HIE.

The following section draws the conclusion of the research by presenting the implications of the study results, its limitations and areas for future study in MBA SQ measurement research.

## Conclusion

The study replicated Lee (2011)'s top-of-the mind definition technique to identify MBA SQ criteria that are perceived important to postgraduates without using prescribed SQ indicators of any measurement model. The study identifies syllabus, lecturing quality, reliability, management of program, academic facilities, outcome and image as the important criteria for MBA SQ.

The results confirm multidimensionality of the SQ construct and identify seven important dimensions of MBA SQ. The identified SQ dimensions confirm the dimensions in existing SQ models that is SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), HEdPERF-SERVPERF (Firdaus, 2005), MBA SQ (Merican et al., 2009), Technical and Functional Quality Model (Gronroos, 1984) and the Attribute SQ Model (Haywood-Farmer, 1988).

The study introduces two new dimensions to MBA SQ criteria that is management of the MBA program and image of the HIE which are not conceptualised for measurement in previous models.

The study results further display the variations in perceptions of MBA SQ among the postgraduates within same environmental contexts. That means these perceptions of MBA SQ may vary further with differences in environmental contexts in line with Zhang et al. (2008) who identified consistent results showing that service users from different countries and cultural backgrounds record different service quality expectations.

The most important criteria the postgraduates would use to call an MBA program a quality program could represent the postgraduates' expectations of an MBA program. Delivering in these attributes or criteria would enhance the university to meet the expectations of its future postgraduates and significantly improve its SQ perceptions to prospective students with similar personal characteristics to the study sample.

The top-of-mind definition technique has provided a basis for identifying MBA SQ attributes that are more applicable in the context of postgraduates in the market sphere of a particular university. Universities need to understand the SQ attributes/criteria about their MBA programs to develop specific strategies for developing their MBA programs to attract prospective students.

The top-of-mind technique has shown that the generation of SQ criteria by direct means may be an

important methodology for HIE management or other service providers to identify important areas for improvement in specific contexts than would happen using generalised measurement models.

## IMPLICATIONS

Measuring SQ in HIE and MBA programs has become of particular importance due to the growing internationalisation of HIE as students have access to international universities. Therefore, local and public universities now compete with standards set by other educational institutions of the world (Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Shahney et al., 2004) and therefore need to be very competitive and attractive to prospective students even within the catchment geographical location.

The management of a HIE in line with the results of the study require to focus in delivering in the key MBA SQ dimensions as identified by the study. These SQ dimensions include the syllabus, lecturing quality, reliability of program, management of program, academic facilities, outcome and image.

The syllabus requires good course content which is continuously updated, more challenging and relevant to the industry and learners' needs. It is imperative for public universities to ensure that their syllabus is comparable to international universities. Local universities are more and more competing with standards set by international universities and to attract students the courses offered should be of international standards.

Improving lecturing quality at MBA level is an area for consideration as highlighted by the study to achieve MBA SQ. The lecturing quality involves the teaching/learning method and styles, lecturer qualifications, lecturer commitment and lecturer experience. An absence of real world experience is seen as a major weakness in many MBA programs particularly in areas of strategic planning since an instructor with little or no real practical experience of the application of the theoretical material may not provide students with useful experience.

Reliability of the MBA program is another key dimension of SQ that entails providing a promised service dependably and accurately (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Management of the MBA program and the image of HIE are the two SQ dimensions discovered through this study. To achieve SQ of MBA programs management of HIE needs to manage its programs effectively. As identified by the study, that means setting and adhering to quality admission standards, maintaining effective formal communication with students and good overall organisation of the program. An MBA program should have a clear calendar of events that is communicated and adhered to.

To be perceived a quality program the MBA program

requires academic resources to be available and accessible to MBA students. Academic resources highlighted by the study are library resources (books, journals and research materials), ICT (computers, printers, copiers and internet). The academic facilities further include the learning environment, that is, the classrooms, chairs, tables, lighting and other utility facilities (lounge, toilets). The MBA program offered to top level executives requires board room level environment where learning is facilitated through discussions and is interactive.

Lastly, the image has been highlighted by the study as a SQ dimension for MBA program; therefore management of HIE needs to build the image of their programs to meet the perceived images that transcend SQ to prospective students. That means performing in the SQ dimensions as highlighted by the study.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

It is therefore important to replicate this study with MBA postgraduates from universities across the globe to determine the divergent or convergent perceptions of MBA service quality using the top-of-mind definition in different environmental contexts.

Further, researches need to test the 'top-of-the mind' technique on its validity and reliability in drawing SQ issues in different contexts. The technique is based on the premise that using unaided responses free from predetermined descriptions of SQ attributes in respondents' own expressions augment current understanding of SQ in specific contexts. Respondents are limited to three responses to invoke their top of the mind responses.

There is need to conduct more studies in service quality to improve overall global competitiveness of local firms and institutions.

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