

# A top management perspective of total quality service dimensions for private higher education institutions in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

The growing need for higher education in Africa with the concurrent explosive growth of private higher education institutions in South Africa indicates the concomitant need for quality assurance of these institutions. This article presents leadership perspectives on the strategic need for developing a service quality excellence framework for private higher education institutions, a need which arises from the limitations of conventional quality assurance instruments, and highlights the importance of a holistic approach to service quality management in terms of a total quality service framework. The development of such a framework is being done in two phases: (1) from a top management perspective (the qualitative phase) and (2) from the perspective of academics and students (the quantitative phase). This article explains the first phase of the research with the focus on prominent South African private higher education institutions offering degree qualifications. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 principals (CEOs or top managers) of these institutions. A thematic analysis approach was followed to identify service quality dimensions as the point of departure for the eventual development of a total quality service framework.

**Key words:** total quality service, private higher education, service quality dimensions, service quality frameworks, leadership, SERVQUAL

## Introduction

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, public higher education is unable to expand rapidly enough to satisfy the growing demand for higher education, hence the

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exponential growth in private higher education. Unfortunately, private higher education is often seen as being of poor quality and not providing 'value for money'.

The private higher education institutions (PHEIs) need to address these negative perceptions if they wish to become the 'Harvards' of the future. This implies that the leadership of PHEIs needs to 'go the extra mile' in terms of strategic brand building, credibility and reputation based on service quality excellence.

Service quality excellence is of paramount importance for any economic enterprise in today's competitive business environment (Sandhu & Bala 2011). Managing and improving service quality is therefore crucial to sustaining and improving private higher education, and it could be the differentiating factor for success.

The notion that organisations are either producers (suppliers) of products or suppliers of services is disappearing (Slack, Chambers & Johnston 2010). Since all organisations are service providers, service quality should be at the core of all PHEIs. The service provider (or manufacturer) depicts its character in terms of chosen strategic performance objectives (e.g. service quality, cost-effectiveness, speed and responsiveness). Service quality is generally of strategic importance to any type of service provider (e.g. a professional service provider, a mass service provider and service shops), because it is at the core of the operations system, describing the nature and/or the distinctness of the business. The status and reputation and the service quality of the institution are therefore intertwined, and service quality is becoming a key objective for PHEIs (Štimac & Šimić 2012).

In this changed context the conventional narrow approach to service quality management (Senthilkumar & Arulraj 2011) no longer suffices, signalling the need for a holistic framework to measure, improve and manage service quality at PHEIs. This quest for an integrated effort to develop and implement a comprehensive holistic model is the first step in enhancing the service quality experience in higher education (Chong & Ahmed 2014; Sultan & Wong 2010; 2012).

Service quality dimensions are not universal within industries (Clemes, Cohan & Wang 2013), and Choudhury (2015) emphasises the need for further research on service quality dimensions within a specific industry or service setting. The point of departure for this solution (a holistic framework for service quality excellence) – and focus of this article – is to identify the full array of underlying service quality dimensions of South African PHEIs.

This holistic approach to service quality management is based on the premise that total quality management (TQM) principles will achieve both internal and external customer satisfaction. This article focuses on the top management perspectives of total quality service (TQS) dimensions in South African PHEIs as the first phase of the eventual development of a TQS framework to measure, manage and improve service

quality on a continuous basis. This framework will include several sub-dimensions that contribute to the PHEIs' reputation of being excellent or remarkable.

PHEIs need to be remarkable (outstanding) in providing the ultimate experience of service quality excellence. One specific PHEI in South Africa refers to the 'purple cow' approach to service quality based on this concept of 'remarkability' (as introduced in Seth Godin's book titled *Purple Cow*). Remarkability, or 'purple cows' in this context, refers to 'being noticed'. Something remarkable is worth talking about, worth paying attention to, and this PHEI even rewards remarkability (e.g. remarkable behaviour) through an innovative 'Purple Cow' peer reward system (Stoltz-Urban, pers. comm. 2015).

The article continues with a brief literature review (with a focus on the research problem), followed by the purpose and methodology of the study, and the discussion of the findings. The value of the findings is highlighted in the conclusion.

## Literature review

This section underlines the importance of achieving service quality excellence for PHEIs by means of a TQS approach. Since the service sector has gained much economic significance in the past few decades, the modern service economy needs to be more dynamic because of its agile and responsive demands. It operates in a growing economy requiring quick market responses from its operational service delivery capabilities. Multiple industry-specific TQS frameworks and models come into play in this context. This section discusses the redefinition of service quality, strategic perspectives of service quality leadership, the limitations of conventional service quality instruments and the need for a TQS framework.

## Service quality for private higher education institutions to be redefined

There is a noble beauty to service delivery, servanthood, stewardship and service leadership. Conventional service quality management and measurement need to adapt to the new HE landscape of the future. According to Jain, Sinha and Sahney (2011), an industry-specific model of service quality needs to be developed for the higher education sector. In this context service quality can be redefined as the service identity of PHEIs that will create additional value through service excellence. This unique vision for service delivery organisations could bring a novel perspective to adding value through new and improved services as opposed to merely maintaining a basic level of service quality (Zenger 2013). Service quality for PHEIs, should be redefined in terms of a holistic approach to service delivery, hence the focus on TQS.

The following section presents definitions of TQS by leading TQS experts over the past 25 years. From the definitions provided below, it is clear how TQS developed in terms of its holistic approach to quality service and quality service management.

Albrecht (1991: 19) defines TQS as “a family of interrelated methodologies for assessing, defining, and improving service quality”. In contrast to Albrecht’s methodological approach to TQS, Perotti (1995: 19) refers to TQS as ‘the creation of a service strategy, a service package, and service systems’ and adds that TQS includes four parts:

1. A strategy to satisfy specific customers;
2. A service package which satisfies customers’ specific needs;
3. A service delivery approach designed for the convenience of the customers; and
4. A customer-friendly system to support service delivery.

Stamatis (1996: 43) adds a research approach by positing that TQS is “a strategic, integrated management system which involves management and employees and uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to continuously improve an organisation’s processes in order to meet and exceed customer needs, wants, and expectations”. Equally important, Milakovich (1998: 51) focuses on internal and external processes as well as statistical methods and reports that

... TQS is aimed at satisfying customer expectations by continuously working across the organization to improve internal and external processes; encouraging teamwork and active employee participation; using problem solving techniques, such as brainstorming, quality circles, or Pareto analysis; and employing statistical process control methods.

Sureshchandar, Rajendran and Anantharaman (2003: 1034) define TQS in its simplest form as “a sustained effort with total commitment from the entire organization towards improvement of everything it does”. Another definition of TQS is the one by Gupta, McDaniel and Herath (2005: 398) in which TQS is referred to as

... the achieving of short and long term financial goals, the realisation of increased market share, and the creation of sustainable competitive advantage. TQS is a comprehensive methodology, which engages crucial elements of the firm toward a vision of delivering increasingly high quality services to customers.

Saravanan and Rao (2006: 733) add TQM to their explanation of TQS by stating that it “is a comprehensive approach in which the various critical factors of total quality management are integrated and implemented in a service organization to achieve customer satisfaction”. More recently, Kaur, Sharma and Lamba (2012: 269) have

asserted that “organisations adopted TQS approach to achieve business excellence, satisfy the demands of internal and external customers, maintain a healthy and competitive workforce, provide infrastructure and deploy technology”. Equally important, Singh (2015: 392) argues that TQS is

... a social-technical approach for revolutionary and effective management. This approach takes service as work done by one person for the benefit of another, with the help of changed management methodology based upon the system perspective for improvement in products and service quality.

With due consideration of the above definitions, TQS for PHEIs is defined as a holistic comprehensive methodology that incorporates TQM principles for improving service quality, achieving internal and external customer satisfaction and exceeding customer expectations. It is also a service strategy and system that takes a holistic approach by fostering total commitment to improvement that could lead to the achievement of financial goals, increased market share and the creation of a viable competitive advantage.

### **Strategic perspectives on private higher education institute leadership**

The rise of PHEIs is mainly the result of the massification of higher education (with which public higher education could not keep up), as well as the need for flexible product offerings that can address the needs of industry. This trend has given rise to a new service industry to be reckoned with that will have a different view on and approach to service quality. Khan, Ahmed, and Nawaz (2011) report on the insignificant relationship between tangible dimensions (such as the physical appearance of the institution) and university student satisfaction and the significant relationship between service quality dimensions and satisfaction. Svensson (2006), Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007), Carrillat, Jaramillo and Mulki (2007), Dimitriadis and Stevens (2008), and Yee, Yeung and Cheng (2008) all argue that the better an organisation can satisfy its customers’ needs and the more it can build up a loyal customer base, the better it will be able to differentiate itself from its competition.

The ‘corporate university’ concept (Waks 2002), and the different types of corporate university such as the University of Phoenix (known as a for-profit innovative corporation) and the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland (named as the UK’s Entrepreneurial University of the Year 2013/2014), underline the variety of the dimensions of service delivery. When PHEIs are regarded as social institutions, service delivery goals can become broad and diffuse to include aspects such as citizenship, human respect and the inculcation of moral and aesthetic values

(Persell & Wenglinsky 2004). Although service quality has many dimensions, it culminates in the collective status of a PHEI. Here, the multidimensional model for the conceptualisation of service quality (Jain et al. 2011) can be applied by the PHEI leadership.

Although some PHEIs do not pursue the elusive goal of becoming research-intensive universities (owing to a lack of academic capacity and government subsidies), they should be able to position themselves to produce quality products (qualifications and graduates) with vocational and applied skills for employability. Whereas public higher education institutions are slow to respond to the immediate demands of the market because these demands would presumably require a substantial reallocation of national and/or institutional resources (Ramachandran, Chong & Ismail 2011), PHEIs can overcome institutional limitations more easily and should therefore be more responsive to employers' needs.

A further example of PHEIs' institutional responsiveness that can lead to corporate innovation is their ability to adopt the 'triple-helix approach' (Ferreira & Steenkamp 2015) more easily by seeking partnerships with government and industry as entrepreneurial universities. PHEIs are business-minded and entrepreneurial by nature (non-subsidised institutions), giving them the edge to seek creative ways to broaden their service delivery through university–industry interaction, corporate innovation and institutional entrepreneurship.

### Limitations of conventional service quality frameworks

Conventional service quality frameworks (management and measurement instruments) mainly depart from the gap approach which focuses on types of gap such as the 'delivery gap' representing the difference between the actual service provided by the employees of the organisation and the specifications (targets) set by management (Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2012). Such gaps in service quality can be measured by the SERVQUAL instrument, which is an established but under-utilised instrument in PHEIs. This instrument is an important toolkit for any service-oriented organisation (Chase, Aquilano & Jacobs 2001: 278).

The first reports of SERVQUAL were published in 1985 (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985). Originally SERVQUAL consisted of ten dimensions which were later reduced to five. These service quality dimensions are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing the customer, and access. This narrow view of service quality does not adopt a holistic approach to service quality or service leadership, nor was SERVQUAL designed to measure TQS. However, Foster (2015) lists several

advantages of SERVQUAL and posits that it is accepted as a fundamental standard for service quality and is valid for a number of service institutions.

Despite being widely used in the field, SERVQUAL has received much criticism. Later models such as SERVPERF are based on SERVQUAL (Chase et al. 2001) and Kang and James (2004) elaborate on the criticism of SERVQUAL. Buttle (1996) adds to this criticism by subdividing it into theoretical and practical (operational) components. Other limitations include conceptual and operational flaws, the fact that the SERVQUAL dimensions are not universally applicable and that the measuring of the gap score as the basis for service improvement is questionable (Sultan & Wong 2010; Ramseook-Munhurrun & Naidoo 2010; Law 2013; Choudhury 2015).

Table 1 focuses on the weaknesses and limitations of other selected service quality models as suggested by Seth, Deshmukh and Vrat (2005).

**Table 1:** Table 1: Limitations of service quality models

Model	Select weaknesses/limitations
Technical and functional quality model	The model does not offer an explanation of how to measure functional and technical quality.
Gap model	The model does not explain clear procedures for the measurement of gaps at different levels.
Attribute service quality model	The model does not provide for the measurement of service quality. It does not provide a practical procedure capable of helping management to identify service quality problems or practical means of improving service quality.
Synthesised model of service quality	The model needs empirical validation. It also needs to be reviewed for different types of service setting.
Performance only model	The model needs to be generalised for all types of service setting. The quantitative relationship between consumer satisfaction and service quality needs to be established.
Ideal value model of service quality	Fewer items are used for value and customer satisfaction. The model needs to be defined for all types of service setting.
Model of perceived quality and satisfaction	The model does not highlight how service quality is achieved and operationalised. It is weak in providing directions for improvements in service quality.
PCP attribute model	The model fails to provide general dimensions of three levels of attributes and lacks empirical validation.

Source: Adapted from Seth et al. (2005: 913–949)

Taking into account the various limitations of current models and the lack of consensus on how best to measure service quality, it has become evident that there is a need for a fresh perspective on how to define and manage service quality from an industry-specific viewpoint.

TQM has a strong internal customer focus and the philosophy is simply that quality starts internally at the source. Gržinić (2007), for example, refers to INSQPLUS, a framework for the development of an internal service quality measure. A combination of these approaches and frameworks could contribute to a TQS framework for PHEIs. The original ten service quality dimensions of Parasuraman et al. (1985) and the proposed instrument developed for measuring TQS by Saravanan and Rao (2006) could be combined and used as a point of departure. Saravanan and Rao (2006) identified 12 TQS dimensions as critical from a top management perspective, covering all aspects of TQM in service organisations.

### **The need for a total quality service framework for private higher education institutions**

For most organisations in service industries, service quality is the single qualifier or disqualifier for sustainability. According to Wang, Lo and Yang (2004), customer-perceived service quality is one of the key success factors for sustained competitive advantage in both manufacturers and service providers. The growing number of PHEIs indicate a greater importance for service quality assurance as indicated by the spread of private institutions across the following seven provinces: Gauteng (59); Western Cape (36); KwaZulu-Natal (16); Eastern Cape (5); North West (2); Limpopo (3); and Mpumalanga (2) (South Africa. SAQA 2016). The surge in PHEIs should be seen against the backdrop of the growing demand for flexible post-secondary education. The growing number of registered PHEIs in South Africa is a clear indication of the demand for this type of higher education, but is accompanied by the need for its regulation and corporate governance. Sustainable service quality is a requirement both in terms of a government perspective and for the sustainability of the PHEI.

Strategic service leadership and TQS management therefore comprise an area of growing interest to researchers and managers of PHEIs. At present, this interest is characterised by debates about the ultimate model or framework to enable PHEIs to exceed expectations at all levels. As indicated in this section, the limitations of other instruments (e.g. SERVQUAL) give rise to the challenge of identifying and developing a PHE-specific TQS framework that will most effectively embody the core and holistic definition of service quality, as determined by internal and external



customers. This TQS framework should eventually become part of a service quality management system for PHEIs.

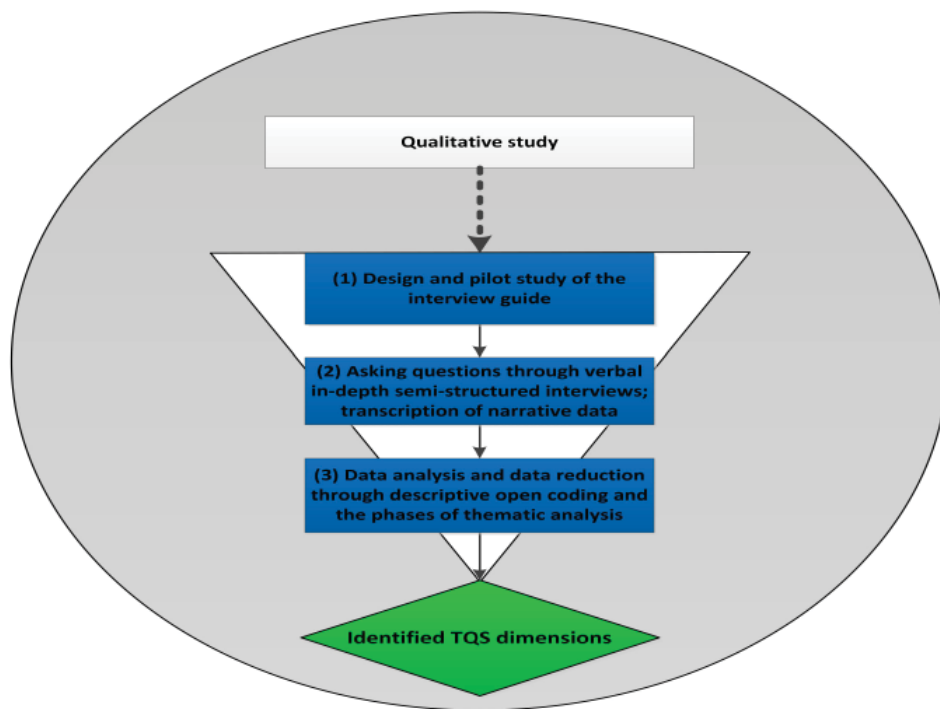
## Problem statement

The surge in new PHEIs and the growth in current PHEIs in South Africa are an indication of a growing PHEI industry. This also implies fierce competition among PHEIs and with public universities. PHEIs do not receive any government subsidies; this makes the general sustainability of PHEIs more challenging than that of public institutions, and implies that sustainability will depend primarily on the nature (type) and status (quality level) of its core business of service delivery. Conventional service quality dimensions, measures and instruments will therefore not suffice. The problem is exacerbated by the different non-standardised methodologies and approaches used to manage service quality. The challenge is therefore to address this inadequacy by means of a comprehensive TQS framework for the management, measurement and improvement of service quality of private higher education on a continuous basis.

## Purpose and methodology

The purpose of this article is to identify TQS dimensions from a PHEI top management perspective for the development of a TQS framework. In order to do this it reports on a study that was completed as the first phase of a sequential research project. The second phase will incorporate the development of a questionnaire to test (measure and prioritise) the identified TQS dimensions (identified in this phase) among academic staff and students of PHEIs.

The methodology adopted a qualitative research approach as illustrated in Figure 1. The accessibility and cooperation of six prominent South African PHEIs (with 13 campuses across South Africa and Namibia) offering degree qualifications made it possible to obtain this purposive and convenience sample. This manageable sample enabled the researchers to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 principals (CEOs or top managers) of the PHEIs. Figure 1 shows the summary of the qualitative study.



**Figure 1:** Summary of the qualitative study

Source: Authors

## Design and pilot study of the interview guide

After designing a concept interview guide, the researchers set about validating the guide. During validation the concept interview guide was adapted by experts in qualitative research. These included two professors and one associate professor from the University of South Africa, one of whom is an NRF-rated researcher specialising in business management research, while another is an expert in quality and service quality management. The associate professor is an expert in qualitative research. Further validation included input from a director of one of the leading PHEI groups in South Africa. In addition, the first interview was used to pilot the data collection method.

## In-depth semi-structured individual interviews and transcription of narrative data

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The total interview time was 631.53 minutes. The average length of each interview was 42 minutes. Logistically, it

was a challenge to meet all of the participants face to face within a given timeframe. Travelling had to be coordinated between Gauteng, the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Namibia. All interviews were conducted between August and November 2014. No major challenges were experienced during the interviews.

Participants were not merely regarded as ‘numbers’ with specific demographic properties but rather as a unique pool of individuals that could provide rich and exceptional descriptions of service quality dimensions for PHEIs in South Africa. The CEOs and principals were selected through purposive selection. Seven of the participants were male and eight were female. With the exception of one participant, all the participants had more or less the same level of education (postgraduate qualifications) and the ability to express themselves clearly. It also seemed as if all the participants were familiar with the area of study. Moreover, all the participants welcomed the study and expressed the expectation that the research would add to the long-term sustainability of their businesses. The central storyline (narrative) that emerged revealed that management is in tune with the measuring and improvement of the quality of services offered on their campuses, but they seem to be negatively inclined towards the current systems implemented to improve overall quality. All the interviews have been used in this article.

Table 2 indicates the academic qualification, position, and demographic information relating to participants as well as the interview context.

**Table 2:** Demographic information of participants and interview context

Inter-viewee	Academic qualification	Position	Interview context
1	Postgraduate diploma	Campus principal	The interview was conducted in the participant’s office in the city of Cape Town. The participant provided rich responses and I observed him as very operations-driven and knowledgeable about the systems approach to quality improvement. His replies testified to many years of experience in both the higher education and the private sectors.
2	Doctorate	Campus vice-principal	As in the case of interviewee 1, this interview was also conducted in the city of Cape Town. This participant was one of the few interviewees who hold a PhD. The participant seemed to be very negatively inclined towards current customer service procedures, but provided valuable suggestions for improvements.
3	Master’s	Dean	The meeting was held in the participant’s office in Cape Town. The campus portrayed more of a corporate image than that of a college, which made sense because their main target group of students is working professionals studying towards an MBA degree. I perceived the participant as highly analytical (from her background in the banking and finance sectors) and a highly skilled and driven person.

Table 2 Continue

Inter-viewee	Academic qualification	Position	Interview context
4	Master's	Dean	The meeting was held in the participant's office in Cape Town. The office also reflected more of a corporate feel than an academic environment. I perceived the participant as policy-driven and energetic with regard to improving service quality. I found her feedback on service quality highly significant since she could speak from a student's as well as a dean's perspective.
5	Master's	Director	The meeting was held in the participant's office in Windhoek. The first impression I got when I arrived at the campus was that of an office park. The participant provided lengthy feedback with rich descriptions which revealed his years of experience in both the public and the private higher education sectors. What impressed me about this participant were his positive attitude and the willingness to go the extra mile for his students.
6	Master's	Campus principal	The meeting was held at the campus in Johannesburg. My first impression of this participant was that she is a dynamic, career-oriented person who will succeed in any project that she pursues. The interview was interrupted twice by students seeking her advice or counselling. This confirmed her open-door policy and customer-centred approach to students. I considered her most valuable contribution to be her reference to a metric needed to measure service quality – the development of a TQS framework – which contributed to the main objective of the study. The participant was excited about the study and requested a presentation of the findings upon project closure.
7	Diploma	Campus principal	The meeting was held in the boardroom of this PHEI in Pretoria. The participant shared various constraining operational conditions but remained optimistic and made valuable contributions. This was probably the most difficult interview due to the participant's initial lack of engagement. Nevertheless, I was very positive about the information provided.
8	Postgraduate diploma	Campus principal	The meeting was held in the participant's office on the Pretoria campus. My first impression was that of a positive and energetic person who is process-driven and who would meet and overcome all challenges without hesitation. I perceived this person to have a high work ethic and he appeared to be a humble person who would not be afraid to ask for assistance.
9	Master's	Campus principal	The interview was conducted in the participant's office on the Johannesburg campus of this PHEI. I was amazed by this participant's professional businesslike conduct while he explained that he had many other business interests apart from the day-to-day management of a PHEI. As with previous interviewees, the respondent conveyed excitement about the study and confirmed the need for a TQS framework.
10	Master's	Manager: Academic development	Although this PHEI is situated in Johannesburg, the respondent requested the meeting to be held in a coffee shop in Pretoria. I perceived her answers as honest and sincere and believed she was an open-minded person with a strong quality drive. She acknowledged the shortcomings in private higher education (PHE) in South Africa but replied with positive inputs and suggestions for improvements.

Table 2 Continue

## A management perspective of total quality service dimension for private higher education

Inter-viewee	Academic qualification	Position	Interview context
11	Master's	Registrar	The interview was conducted off-campus at a popular restaurant in Pretoria. The participant could provide several examples of service quality initiatives, what was working and what had to be re-engineered to add value. Similar to interviewee number 4, the participant was also busy with her postgraduate studies (PhD) and could give feedback from both a manager's and a student's perspective. She provided extremely rich descriptions and valuable suggestions for service improvement.
12	Postgraduate diploma	Campus principal	The interview was conducted in the participant's office on their Durban campus. This participant was one of the founding members of this PHE group. His comments reflected years of experience of running his own advertising agency. His office gave the impression of an art studio, which led me to believe that this was a creative and 'out of the box' thinker. I considered the participant to be highly skilled but noticed that he was not systems-oriented or policy-driven like the previous interviewees. He provided rich descriptions and focused all his comments on the importance of quality teaching.
13	Postgraduate diploma	Head of school	As in the case of interviewee 12, the interview was conducted in Durban (in the PHEI's boardroom). I observed the participant as someone very dedicated to her internal customers (lecturing and administrative staff). The participant displayed a positive attitude and made valuable comments with detailed examples on how she would improve service quality on the campus.
14	Doctorate (Professor)	Academic president	The meeting was held on the campus of the PHEI in Johannesburg. This institute is part of an international education group with various PHEIs in North America, Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, Asia Pacific and Africa. It seemed as if his conceptual skills motivated others to see the big picture at all times. During our discussion, he focused a lot on creating an enabling environment where both academics and students can realise their aspirations.
15	Doctorate	Dean	The interview was conducted on the PHEI's campus in Johannesburg. This PHEI is also part of an international group with campuses situated in the Americas, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Asia Pacific and South Asia. The PHEI was rated as the number one private institute offering the MBA degree in 2013, according to a national survey on accredited business schools. He emphasised his passion for service quality and indicated that the only way forward for PHE in South Africa is through exceptional service quality to stakeholders.

Source: Authors

## Data analysis and data reduction through descriptive open coding and thematic analysis

### *Open coding*

Tesch's descriptive method of open coding presents 'a way of working' with textual data (Creswell 1994). The core phases suggested by Visagie and Maritz (2013) guided the researchers through the process of data analysis after they had obtained

a sense of the whole by reading through the transcriptions. One interview was selected, and to arrive at the underlying meaning in the information the question was asked: 'What is this about?' After the initial thought process, preliminary thoughts were written down. This was then done for all the interviews. These thoughts were then combined in groups to eventually become topics. Thereafter, topics were clustered together to form initial major topics and unique topics. The topics were then abbreviated as codes and the codes were written down next to the appropriate segments of transcribed data. This preliminary organising scheme was repeated several times to see whether new codes emerged. The codes were then combined and grouped together to form categories and subcategories (dimensions) that related to one another. The data belonging to each category were assembled in one place and a preliminary analysis performed to identify the overarching themes that emerged from the open coding process. The data were co-coded for verification by an independent expert in qualitative research. This expert was from a different field (health studies) and did not review the literature on which this article is based. Consensus was reached on all identified themes, categories and dimensions.

### *Thematic analysis*

According to Howitt and Cramer (2014), thematic analysis implies that the researcher identifies a limited number of themes which sufficiently reflect their textual data. As with all qualitative analysis, it is vitally important that researchers are familiar with their data. Data familiarisation is therefore crucial to thematic analysis. In addition, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) point out that thematic analysis consists of a search for themes that best describe the phenomenon under investigation. It involves reading and re-reading the data and seeking patterns to convert emerging themes into categories for analysis.

Howitt and Cramer (2014) contend that there is not a single, standardised approach to conducting thematic analysis. Different researchers can therefore do things differently, as long as certain quality criteria for thematic analysis are adhered to.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide fundamental principles in what is probably the most systematic introduction to doing thematic analysis to date (Howitt & Cramer 2014). Table 3 explains the phases of thematic analysis that were followed to analyse the coded data. The criteria for good thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied in this research. The data were transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts were checked against the recorded interviews for accuracy. Each data item was given equal attention in the coding process and all relevant extracts for each theme were collated. The themes identified were

internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. Data were analysed and interpreted (made sense of rather than just paraphrased or described). Finally, enough time was allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.

**Table 3:** Phases of thematic analysis

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

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006: 35)

## Discussion of findings

The data analysis and data reduction process through descriptive open coding and thematic analysis produced several service quality dimensions and overarching themes from a top management perspective. This section briefly lists, describes, categorises and illustrates these dimensions.

The following overarching themes emerged in relation to the research conducted:

Theme 1: *Contextual realities of higher education and PHEIs: dynamic creates dissonance*

Theme 2: *Multiple and diverse stakeholder perspectives and expectations towards a holistic experience*

Theme 1 is inclusive of no government funding, business model, reputation, human resources and ethos. Whereas public HEIs receive subsidies from government, PHEIs receive no government subsidies and have to generate their own income.

Furthermore, they have to compete with other institutions that are basically offering the same product at the same price. The operational model of PHEIs is purely business-driven and for-profit-oriented. Reputation, human resources and ethos are further central to the profitable survival of PHEIs in South Africa. The theme was then further conceptualised to include the following dimensions: subsidies; cost and profit; customer-centred approach; influence of the holding company; personal attention; unique product offering; servicescape; lack of experts and senior academics; lack of administrative staff and culture.

Theme 2 is inclusive of people (academics, students/parents, and principals), process and product (output). The three stakeholder groups are intertwined in terms of expectations. The theme was also further theorised to include the following dimensions: quality teaching; internal customer; managing expectations; quality learning experience; leadership; partnerships; accreditation; application and registration; technology; teaching and learning; student support; policies; communication; contribution to society; employability; practical application; operations management; ethical practice; reputation and repeat business.

Table 4 provides the themes, categories and sub-categories of all service quality dimensions identified.

**Table 4:** Themes, categories and sub-categories (Dimensions)

Theme	Category	Sub-category
1. Contextual realities of higher and private HEI: dynamic creates dissonance	1.1 No government funding	1.1.1 Subsidies
	1.2 Business model	1.2.1 Cost & Profit
		1.2.2 Customer-centred approach
		1.2.3 Influence of holding company
	1.3 Reputation	1.3.1 Personal attention
		1.3.2 Unique product offering
		1.3.3 Servicescape
	1.4 Human resources	1.4.1 Lack of experts and senior academics
		1.4.2 Lack of administrative staff
	1.5 Ethos	1.5.1 Culture

Table 4 Continue



Table 4 Continue

Theme	Category	Sub-category
2. Multiple and diverse stakeholder perspectives and expectations towards a holistic experience	2.1 People: Academics	2.1.1 Quality teaching
		2.2.2 Internal customer <i>[including staff training]</i>
	2.2 People: Learner (and parents)	2.2.1 Managing expectations
		2.2.2 Quality learning experience
	2.3 People: Principle	2.3.1 Leadership
		2.3.2 Partnerships
	2.4 Process	2.4.1 Accreditation
		2.4.2 Application and registration
		2.4.3 Technology
		2.4.4 Teaching and learning
		2.4.5 Student support
		2.4.6 Policies
		2.4.7 Communication
	2.5 Product/outcome: Learners/contributions	2.5.1 Contribution to society
		2.5.2 Employability
		2.5.3 Practical application
		2.5.4 Operations management
2.5.5 Ethical practice		
2.5.6 Reputation		
2.5.7 Repeat business		

Source: Authors

The perceptions of TQS, service quality and service quality dimensions as identified by CEOs and principals can also be described by using a framework of these perceptions. This will be done in a narrative way, based on a conceptual map as indicated by Figure 2: A conceptual map of the TQS process approach – perceptions of CEOs and principals of PHEIs in South Africa of service quality and service quality dimensions.

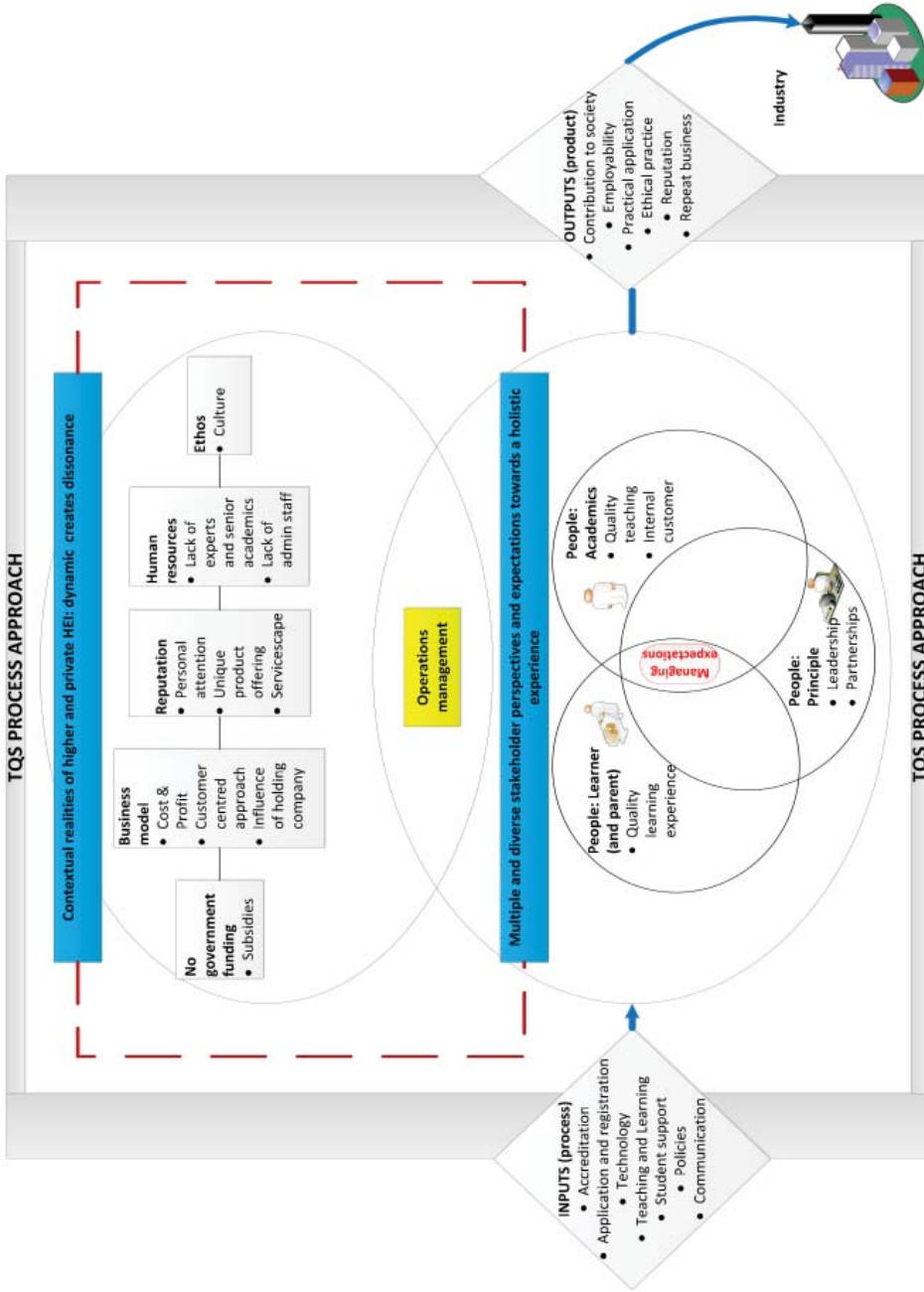


Figure 2: The TQS process approach

Source: Authors

Figure 2 represents the linkage between the two overarching themes identified:

Theme 1: *Contextual realities of higher and private higher education: dynamic creates dissonance*

Theme 2: *Multiple and diverse stakeholder perspectives and expectations towards a holistic experience*

Theme 1 includes the categories of no government funding, business model, reputation, human resources and ethos, each with its own underlying dimensions. Theme 1 is interlinked with theme 2 via an operations process approach, input–transformation–output (hence the process approach to TQS). Theme 2 was conceptualised into three clusters, namely, input, managing and exceeding various stakeholder expectations and output (each with its own underlying dimensions). The clusters co-exist in a process-driven environment which eventually leads to the final product – not just a final product (output) in the form of a graduate, but also the positive impact on and contribution to society as a whole.

## Conclusion

This article clearly explains the importance of service quality excellence and the need to overcome the narrow approaches to service quality management in the context of PHEIs. As pointed out in our problem statement and purpose of the article, the perspectives of top management were a crucial point of departure for identifying the core service quality dimensions in order to develop a TQS framework.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to investigate the perspectives of 15 top managers (CEOs and principals) of PHEIs on the core service quality dimensions for PHEIs. Their insights were based on leading institutions with business-oriented cultures as entrepreneurial universities.

The sentiments observed during the interviews were confirmed during the analysis and interpretation of the data. Enthusiasm to improve the overall strategic service quality of their institutions became evident and the participants' responses portrayed determination to become the drivers of a unique TQS framework initiative for higher education and specifically PHEIs.

The empirical investigation, transcription of interviews, open coding and thematic analysis produced a comprehensive list of service quality dimensions for PHEIs as listed and illustrated in Table 4 and Figure 2. The second phase of the research (the survey among students and lecturers) will now follow based on these dimensions. This survey will assist the researchers in doing further validation, data reduction, prioritising and categorising for the developing of a TQS framework for South African PHEIs.

It is therefore concluded that the qualitative identification of the 30 service quality dimensions for TQS was done on a scientific basis in the context of the purpose of the article. The core overarching themes that were identified from the 30 dimensions are interlinked with the operations process approach (Figure 2) depicting the process approach to TQS. The process-driven environment of the main themes will eventually lead to an output (graduate) that will have a positive input on society as a whole.

The identified dimensions will form part of the comprehensive second phase of the research to obtain a solid TQS framework for PHEIs. The dimensions identified during the first phase will be tested among academia (lecturing staff) and the students of the selected PHEIs during the second phase of the empirical research. Although this article offers compelling evidence of the need and dimensional content for a holistic TQS framework, it is believed that the final TQS framework will be developed after the second phase of the research process. This product could be widely accepted to become a significant asset (framework or model) for the PHEI industry to measure, manage and improve service quality on a continuous basis.

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