

## The Gaps Model of Service Quality and Higher Education Delivery in Botswana: An Internal Customer Perspective

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### *Abstract*

*This paper sought to establish the existence or absence of gaps in the quality of service delivery in selected higher education (HE) institutions in Botswana, based on the Gaps Model of service quality, from the perspective of selected employees as internal customers. A survey of key literary sources on the Gaps Model of service quality as well as general marketing and services marketing was conducted which formed the theoretical underpinning for the study. Five HE institutions were chosen and treated as a single case study. The quantitative research methodology was adopted whereby quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire. Probability sampling procedure (random sampling) was used for quantitative data collection. The results of the study revealed the existence of all the five gaps that comprise the Gaps Model of service quality in terms of the state of service delivery in the selected HE institutions covered in this study, from the perspective of their employees. It was revealed that service standards were not what employees expected; there was poor upward and horizontal communication; there was excessive employee monitoring, and there was lack of stakeholder involvement in decision-making.*

**Key Words:** *Gaps Model, Service Delivery, Services Marketing, Service Quality, Internal Customer.*

### **Introduction**

According to Schwab (2014), Botswana is ranked in the world's top 50 per cent of positive indicators such as institutions of governance, good market efficiency, labour market efficiency, and financial market development. Its primary weakness is in its human resource base, that is, the quality of the education system continues to maintain a mediocre position. For example, in this report, Botswana is ranked 114 out of 144 on higher education (HE) and training despite heavy investment in this sector.

While the country has succeeded in building a relatively sophisticated, modern economy from its extensive diamond and tourism wealth (Wilmoth, 2008), it faces a serious shortage of skilled manpower to the extent of heavily relying on expatriate staff from countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa, India, and China. The country has therefore attempted to expand tertiary education by encouraging investment in HE, including private higher education (PHE) which has seen the dramatic rise of private colleges and universities such as Baisago University College, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Botho University, Gaborone Institute of Professional Studies (GIPS), ABM University College, and others all offering certificate courses, diplomas and degrees either individually or in partnership with universities in South Africa, United Kingdom, and India (Setume, 2013).

While these institutions are not directly funded by the government, they receive specified quotas of government-sponsored students according to their capacity and infrastructure (Tertiary Education Council,

2013). PHE institutions are meant to complement the efforts of public tertiary institutions after the realization that the latter could not cope with the continued demand for HE from Botswana (Tertiary Education Council, 2013).

The research problem is that private higher education (PHE) institutions in Botswana operate in a highly regulated environment owing to a strong belief by some key stakeholders such as students, parents, government, and industry that they offer poor quality education to maximise profit. This paper therefore sought to establish the perception of selected employees of HE institutions covered in this study on the quality of service delivered by these institutions.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Concept of Service Quality**

The concept of service quality is a very important phenomenon in services marketing. Lovelock (2000) emphasised the importance of understanding the elusive nature of service quality and alluded that a service is deemed 'quality' if that service meets the needs or expectations of the customer. Kotler (2002) expounded further on the concept of quality by asserting that modern business executives view the task of improving product and service quality as their top priority. He argued that service quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied need. We can only talk of the service provider having provided quality service whenever his/her service meets or exceeds the customer's expectations and this organisation qualifies to be called a quality service company (Kotler, 2002).

The concept of quality was further explored by Lovelock (2000) when he argued that service quality at workplace has gone beyond creating a better-than-average service product at a good price, and now refers to achieving increasingly better services at progressively more competitive prices; this includes doing things right the first time rather than making and correcting mistakes. Many successful service organisations today are successful precisely because they focus on providing quality service to customers in a manner that is unmatched by competitors. The essence of this study was to determine if selected HE institutions were doing this based on the perceptions of selected employees as internal customers.

### **Strategic significance of Service Quality**

According to Coppett (1998), service is very frequently referred to as the definitive competitive tool and has warned that services, if not managed suitably, could follow manufacturing into decline, as inattention to quality, emphasis on scale economies and short-term orientation predominate.

The new research by modern marketers now refers to quality of service as "the most important single factor affecting a business unit's long-term performance" (Pitt, 1995:256). Buzzel and Gale (1997) make the point that quality boosts performance in two ways:

- In the short-run, superior quality yields increased profits through premium prices. Their research shows companies ranked in the top third on relative quality to be able to command a price edge of six percent above those in the low third.
- In the long-run, the quality route is the more effective way for organizations to grow. Quality leads to gains in both market expansion and market share.

Further support for the desirability of quality service comes from a study of employee perceptions on the performance of retail stores. Pitt (1995) and Lovelock (2000) discovered in their study that, after store size, employees' perceptions of quality of service to customers was the major predictor of sales. This finding emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of service quality.

Davidow and Uttal (2001) also identified customer service quality as the critical issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in their comprehensive work on service delivery in the United States. They established that service quality has a profound and substantial impact on the financial and strategic performance of service organizations. It is therefore essential for organizations to develop and build adequate measures of service quality and to implement them. By doing so, they will be ensuring that they come to grips with one of the fundamental predictions of performance.

### The Gaps Model of Service Quality

The “Gaps” model has received much attention of late and is expanded below (Pitt, 1985:258):

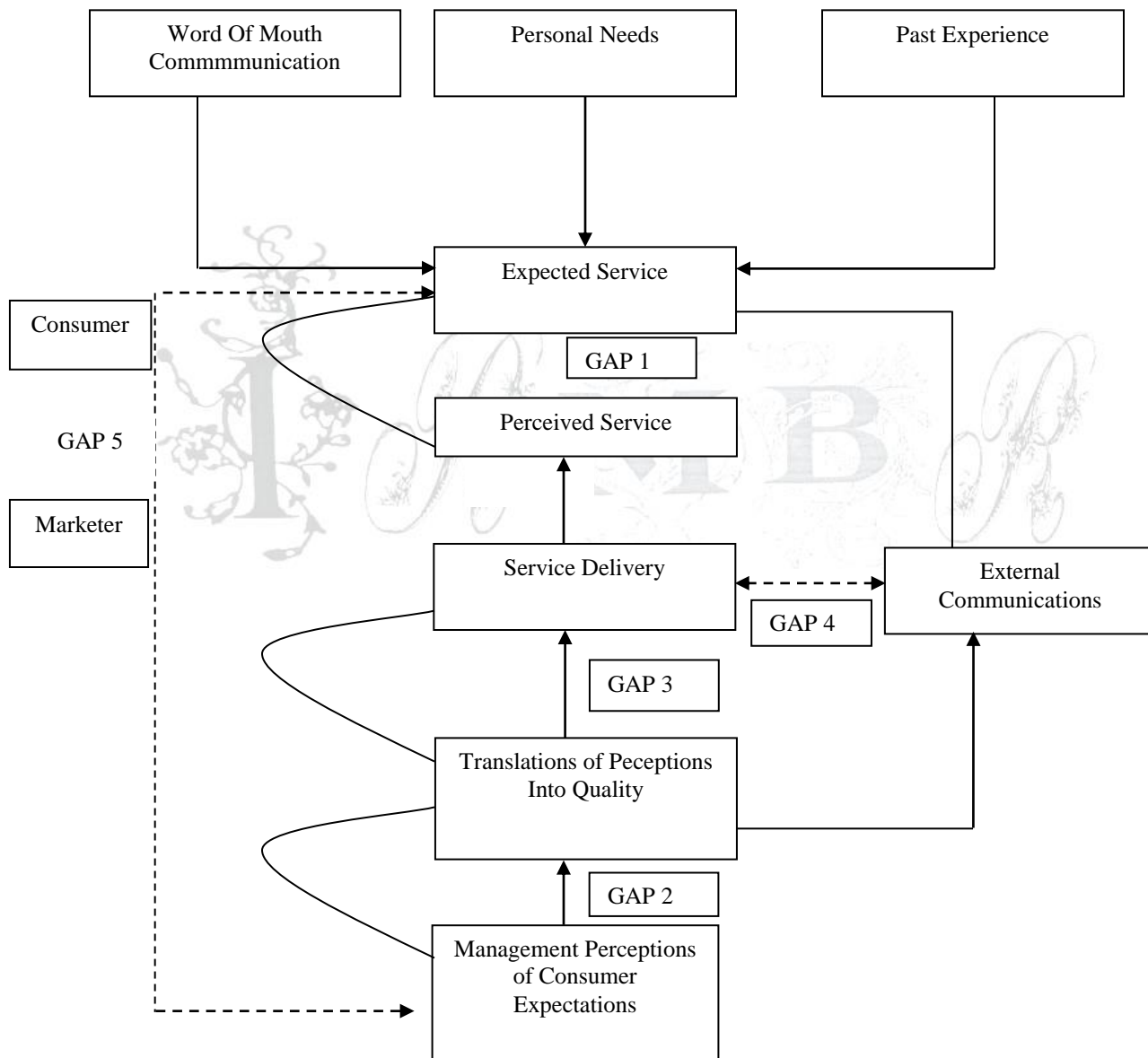


Figure 1: The Gaps Model of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985: 258)

A more detailed explanation of the Gaps is necessary.

#### GAP 1 - Not understanding what consumers expect

This is a gap between managers' perceptions of expectations and the customers' actual expectations. Managers do not always understand what customers want yet understanding what customers expect is a critical prerequisite for delivering quality service. Being able to deliver what customers will perceive as excellent service requires that management knows what customers expect. Being wrong about this means losing customers to competitors; it also means expending substantial sums of money, time and effort on things that probably do not make that much impression on customers. The usual causes of gap1 are a lack of a marketing research orientation, a lack of upward communication and too many levels of management.

#### GAP 2 - Setting wrong standards

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) argue that understanding what customers expect from service quality is not enough to ensure it. This intelligence must be converted into meaningful service-quality standards for the organisation. This gap is often caused by a lack of commitment by management to service quality. Frequently, service quality is defined from the company's point of view, and not the customers. Middle management and contact employees can not be expected to commit to quality service if senior employees in the organisation have not. In many organizations, various excuses for poor quality service are given such as "we do not have skilled people, committed people, no money, time or equipment". If service-quality goals are based on company standards rather than on customer standards and expectations, then there really is an absence of goal setting.

#### GAP 3 - The service-performance gap

It is the gap between service standards and service delivery. It is probably the most serious from the manager's point of view. The causes of this gap are role ambiguity, which exists whenever employees do not possess the information or training necessary to perform their jobs adequately; and role conflict, which occurs when employees perceive that they cannot satisfy all the demands of the individual they must serve. Very often in organisations there is a poor fit between the employee and the job, and between technology and job. These two causes can be cured by giving adequate attention to the type of people into jobs, and making sure that the customer's expectations are met. Another common cause of gap 3, according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), is inadequate supervisory control systems, for example, supervisors who act as policemen, believing it is their job to "catch out" subordinates, or as army sergeants, maintaining that they should "tell" subordinates what to do.

#### GAP 4 - Service delivery and broken promises

It is a gap between what a firm promises about a service and what it actually delivers. Lots of advertising money is spent on creating expectations in the minds of customers. When what is delivered does not match these expectations, customers are often dissatisfied to an extent that the organisation would have been far better off had it said nothing.

The major causes of Gap 4 are inadequate horizontal communication and a propensity to overpromise. Promising is one of the easiest things to do in business, delivering one of the hardest. Appropriate and effective communication about service quality must be developed, and attention given to dealing with the quality dimensions and features that are most important to customers, accurately reflecting what customers actually receive in the service encounter, and helping customers understand their roles in performing the service.

## Methodology

The quantitative methodology was adopted for this study wherein data was collected from a representative survey using a questionnaire. The study's target population was made up of all five PHE institutions in Botswana which were strictly regulated by the Tertiary Education Council (TEC) and which offered higher education to degree level. All in all, the total population surveyed (that is, all teaching employees of these institutions and managerial staff who had been with these organisations for at least one year) came to 670.

In determining sample size, a sample size table developed by Research Advisors (2006) was used. According to the table, for a population size of 670, using a 95% confidence level and a 3.5% confidence interval (margin of error) for more precision, the sample size lies between 340 and 370 hence the figure 350 was decided upon constituting 52% of the population.

The study adopted stratified sampling whereby the population was stratified into several sub-populations (strata) that were individually more homogenous than the overall population. The different strata comprised academic staff in middle management, lower management and non-managerial teaching staff from the five PHE institutions covered in this study and then units were selected from each stratum to comprise a sample.

## Results

The following results were found based on the Gaps Model of service quality:

### Gap 1 - Not understanding what consumers expect

This gap is caused by lack of a marketing research orientation, a lack of communication (especially upward) and too many levels of management. This study revealed an absence of these fundamental variables required to close or prevent this gap. For instance, when respondents were asked whether there were any behaviours top management was doing that led to an unsatisfactory work environment, they mentioned the following:

- Heavy workload leaving no room for informal interaction;
- Hiring and firing of staff leading to staff living in constant fear hence no initiative;
- Not providing lunch and tea facilities where staff could meet informally and share knowledge;
- Failure to provide space for staff meetings;
- Tight monitoring of staff activities including access to internet whereby staff members had to log in to the institutional domain which was heavily monitored by management when they wanted to access the internet;
- Not consulting staff when making key decisions that affect them/arbitrary decision-making;
- Lack of general staff meetings;
- Lack of clear criteria for promotion of staff;
- Preventing formation of staff associations; and
- Lack of a clear salary structure with clandestine salary negotiations and increments.

The above responses were an indication that no market research was carried out by top management to ascertain the expectations of employees as internal customers.

In order to determine the views of selected employees on whether there was effective communication in their institutions (another critical cause of Gap 1), the following questions were asked which solicited the recorded responses:



Table 1: Responses to effectiveness of communication in institutions

Items	Std. Deviation	Mean
1.To what extent does information flow downwards most of the time in your organisation?	.85	3.86
2.To what extent is there cooperation among employees in the organisation which fosters service quality and organisational efficiency?	.71	2.04
3.To what extent do employees in your organisation have easy access to social networks (Face-book, Twitter, Linked-In etc) that facilitate interaction hence communication within the organisation and outside?	.81	2.07
4.To what extent does top leadership of your organisation ensure the existence of formal networks in order to facilitate effective communication?	1.02	2.10
5.There is adequate infrastructure (office space, meeting rooms, tea rooms, internet, intranets) to create space which facilitates organisational communication in my organisation.	1.13	2.13

The majority of respondents felt strongly that communication flowed downwards most of the time meaning that there was little upward communication. This meant that employees in these organisations had little opportunity to air their grievances with management. Results in Table 1 mean that respondents were of the view that employee' access to social networks was limited.

#### Gap 2 - Setting wrong standards

This gap is often caused by a lack of commitment by management to service quality. This study sought to establish the extent to which top management of selected institutions exhibited evidence of commitment to providing quality higher education to their customers based on the views of the selected employees of these institutions. Respondents were asked questions through a questionnaire which were meant to establish the role played by top leadership of the institutions in promoting or stifling quality of service in their organisations. The results are shown in Table 2. The mean scores of all the items range from as low as 1.72 to 2.26 (well below average which is 3). This indicated that most of the selected employees either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements whether leaderships of the selected institutions initiated, managed and supported activities that promoted service quality and the variability of the responses was low as standard deviations ranged between 0.86 and 1.06.

The results revealed that the standards of service quality top leadership had in mind were not the same standards of quality expected by their employees who were the ones closer to external customers (students). In other words, top leadership of the institutions set wrong standards resulting in a big Gap 2. The results in Table 2 revealed that respondents believed that top leadership did not have a strong appreciation of the skills of its staff. This meant that they were not likely to be able to derive the best out of their employees and also that the wrongly deployed employees were not likely to be satisfied with their work so as to be able to satisfy external customers.

Results in Table 2 indicated that PHE institutions' overall business strategy, in practice, did not emphasise on service quality as depicted by a mean score of 2.03. This meant that there was not much to force employees to ensure quality service since the activities of the institutions were not driven by a service quality agenda since this was not part of the organisations' business strategy. There was no strategy-led service quality practice in the selected institutions. Again, the results showed that the leadership of the institutions did not do much to ensure that good service quality behaviour such as courtesy, creativity, responsiveness, and so on was fused into the institutions' performance appraisal system as evidenced by a mean score of 1.99. This means that when employee performance was being measured, it did not have

much to do with the extent that the employees exhibited behaviour or practices that amounted to customer service quality, meaning that employee promotions and rewards were not linked to the extent to which employees offered quality service to customers. This view was buttressed by the findings that respondents felt that organisations' leadership rewarded employees who did well in offering quality service to customers and penalised those employees who offered poor quality service to a little extent (as shown by mean scores of 1.89 and 1.72 respectively).

Table 2: Analysis of role of top leadership in promoting quality service

Items	Mean	Std dev.
1.To what extent does your organisation's top leadership have a strong appreciation of the skills of its staff?	2.26	0.86
2.To what extent does the leadership of your organisation ensure that all functions are linked to share information thus enabling the organisation to tap into the skills of its staff to ensure quality service delivery?	2.18	1.03
3.To what extent does your organisation's overall business strategy, in practice, include service quality?	2.03	1.02
4.To what extent does the leadership of your organisation ensure that good service quality behaviour (courtesy, creativity, responsiveness) is fused into the organisation's performance appraisal system?	1.99	.98
5.There is a well-coordinated and practical service quality programme in my organisation.	1.98	1.01
6.To what extent does your organisation's leadership ensure that training programmes in service quality are promoted?	1.90	1.06
7.4.To what extent does your organisation's leadership reward employees who do well in offering quality service to customers?	1.89	.94
8.To what extent does your organisation's leadership penalise employees who offer poor quality service to customers?	1.72	.992

The results also showed lack of intra-organisational linkage of business functions meaning that there was little inter-dependency on employee skills which would make it easy for employees to get assistance from colleagues in solving work-related problems leading to enhanced organisational efficiency and improved service quality. Respondents also believed that not enough was being done by top leadership to ensure that training programmes in service quality were promoted and well-coordinated and practical service quality programmes were in place in the institutions to equip staff with practical skills that would enable them to offer quality service, and also guide them in quality implementation and evaluation in their organisations.

### Gap 3 - The service-performance gap

This gap exists where there is a poor fit between the employee and the job, and between technology and the job, or where supervisors act as policemen, believing it is their job to catch subordinates who do not do things as per the norms and who believe that they should simply "tell" subordinates what to do and they should do exactly that. The gap revolves more around the organisation's reporting structure and culture of doing things (see Figure 2 and Table 3). When asked whether their reporting structure was hierarchical or not, that is, whether it was top-down and bottom-up (Figure 1), 96.4% of the respondents indicated that their reporting structures were hierarchical, while 3.6% indicated that they were not. This meant that most of the communication was that coming from top management in the form of instructions and going back to top management in the form of acknowledgement and accomplishment of the given task.

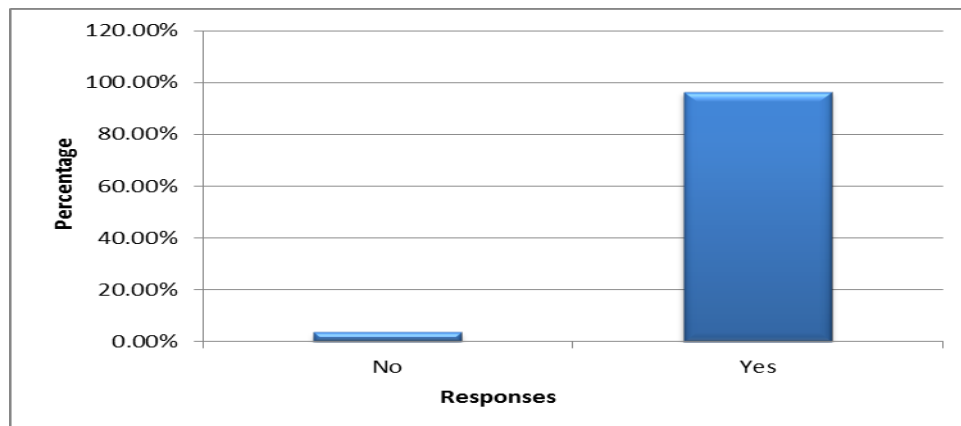


Figure 2: Whether organisational structures of selected institutions were hierarchical or not

Table 3: Analysis of organisational culture and service quality

Items	Std. Deviation	Mean
1. In your organisation, to what extent is crucial information concentrated in the hands of a privileged few?	.80	4.07
2.To what extent are employees of your organisation involved in decision-making?	1.02	2.38
3.To what extent does the top management of your organisation publicly acknowledge the source of service quality even if it is a junior employee?	1.01	2.32
4.Top leadership of my organisation does not penalise employees who make mistakes while trying out new ideas that enhance service quality	1.09	2.08
5.To what extent has top management of your organisation created an environment where trust exists between management and external customers?	1.04	2.03
6.In my organisation, there are obvious benefits to the employee who engages in service quality practices (e.g. promotion, salary increase)	1.38	1.88

Results depicted in Table 3 showed that there was not much employee involvement in decision-making as indicated by a mean score of 2.38. Top leadership of the institutions was found to be penalising employees who made mistakes while trying out new ideas as shown by a low mean score of 2.08. Respondents also strongly believed that management of their institutions had not created an environment where trust existed between institutional management and external customers as perceived by employees. This could be having negative repercussions on the images and productivity of the institutions since for external customers to perceive the service as quality, a high degree of trust should exist between the service provider and the service recipient.

Quantitative results in Table 3 indicate that there were no obvious benefits to the employees who offered quality service to customers as evidenced by a low mean score of 1.88. This means that there were no employee rewards linked with offering better quality service than other employees.

#### GAP 4 - Service delivery and broken promises

The major causes of this gap are inadequate horizontal communication and a propensity to overpromise. This gap existed in selected higher education institutions as evidenced by inadequate communication in these institutions (see Table 1). Respondents believed that communication was mostly vertical and that



there was little cooperation among employees so as to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction. There was little access to social networks (Face-book, Twitter, Linked-In etc) that facilitate interaction hence communication within the organisations and outside. Also, leadership of the institutions did not do much to ensure the existence of formal networks in order to facilitate effective communication. Infrastructure (office space, meeting rooms, tea rooms, internet, intranet) to create space which facilitates organisational communication was found to be inadequate. All these symbolised the existence of Gap 4 meaning that the quality of service to internal and external customers expected at the selected institutions was not what they received – hence broken promises.

Gap 5: The first four gaps put together

This was established as a function of the four previous shortcomings, namely (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985):

Gap 5 = f [gap 1, gap 2, gap 3, gap 4]. The fact that responses by the research participants alluded to the existence of Gaps 1- 4 is an indication that Gap 5 existed.

## Conclusion

This study revealed gaps in the quality of service delivery in selected higher education institutions in Botswana based on Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985)'s Gaps Model of service quality. The study showed the existence of all the four gaps which meant that the employees surveyed believed that the quality of service offered by these institutions needed serious attention in order to ensure customer satisfaction. It was observed that top management practices that were heavily invested in such as controlling employee activities created a work environment that demotivated employees leading to low morale hence poor service quality, meaning that top management had not done enough research to find out exactly what made employees happy in the organisation leading to high morale and delivery of quality service. Again, most of the communication was found to be outward and very little was inward.

All these were evidence of the existence of Gap 1. It was also observed that top management lacked adequate commitment to service quality as indicated by some observed management practices which employees believed stifled service quality rather than promoting it. The fact that top management believed that these practices promoted quality yet they had the opposite effect meant that management had set wrong standards which is the gist of Gap 2. There was an observation from the study that the culture of the institutions covered in this study did not promote employee morale, initiative, and decision-making meaning that there was little involvement of internal customers who were key stakeholders. Virtually all decisions, including low-level ones, were made from the top with employees being mere recipients, which the effect of sapping their morale and self-worth, which impacted negatively on service quality. This indicated the existence of Gap 3. It was observed that there was inadequate communication and lack of team work (employee cooperation) in the institutions which meant existence of Gap 4. The existence of all these gaps were indicative of service failure. A further study focusing on external customers (students) is required to determine the actual extent of the service failure alluded to by selected employees (internal customers).

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