

Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education at a higher education institution

P Moleko

 orcid.org/0000-0002-9841-3377

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Supervisor: Prof N Mouton

DECLARATION

I proclaim that "Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education at a Higher Education Institution" represents the product of my efforts. I ensure that every resource utilised or cited has been demonstrated and recognised by complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Signature

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I thank the Almighty God, for His uncommon grace and favour in my life and the tenacious spirit He has bestowed upon me in this challenging journey. I am also grateful to God for blessing me with the wonderful people who have assisted me on my journey.

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ABSTRACT

Organisations worldwide are working hard to improve their effectiveness and processes to keep themselves comparable in constantly evolving marketplaces for businesses. Total quality management (TQM) has transformed into a philosophy that most businesses adopt once they have reached the point where they want to have a system in place. In which every attempt is made to comply with consumers or add value to their experiences. An investigation was conducted in the Distance Education (DE) within a Higher Education Institution (HEI) to determine whether TQM's key concepts (constant improvement, customer focus, and winning with people) are considered significant at all levels of the organisation.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, with an exploratory case study serving as a structure for data collection. The information was gathered from numerous sources based on proof and personally analysed, categorised into subjects and subdivisions using Microsoft Excel and Word.

The study demonstrated that the institution comprehends the importance of quality and its impact on students' happiness. The research will make the most significant contribution to the DE's management team regarding how it may employ excellence in delivery services through TQM techniques. This will give the DE institution a competitive advantage due to the exceptional service it can provide. TQM and the regulation structure will be used as moderators to ensure student satisfaction and value proposition for the institution.

The information gathered during the discussion with the focus group indicated that top-down interpersonal interaction needs to be enhanced to ensure every individual in the institution is apprised of all improvements. According to the findings, the company is practising the fundamentals of effective TQM except for a few minor cases; thus, more emphasis should be placed on those cases.

Keywords: TQM, measurement, higher, distance, education, quality, control, business-driven, value, service.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHE	Council of Higher Education
DE	Distance Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DL	Distance Learning
DTA	Decision Tree Analysis
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis
IWB	Interactive Whiteboard
JIT	Just-in-Time
LSC	Learning Support Centre
QA	Quality Assurance
QM	Quality Management
RA	Research Assistant
RDGC	Research Data Gatekeeper Committee
SALA	Student Academic Lifecycle Administration
TA	Thematic Analysis
TOC	Theory of Constraints
TQC	Total Quality Control
TQM	Total Quality Management
UDL	Unit for Distance Learning
UNISA	University of South Africa

CHAPTER 1: NATURE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

HEIs worldwide have undergone significant transformations in the previous decade because of technical advancements, student requirements, and the increasing demand for the highest qualification level. However, the challenge for HEIs is to use competitive advantages and market positioning to attract students to the institution. As a result, excellent service has emerged as a crucial driver of competitiveness and market positioning.

For an institution to become a customer-driven organisation, quality service must be its highest priority, sustaining its integrity for longevity and stakeholders (Goetsch & Davis 2014). In addition, the institute should advance compared to other institutions, thus placing itself on the advantageous spectrum of the educational market. According to Sehat (2012), providing high-quality service is one of the most basic methods for a service business to set itself apart from its competitors.

This study investigates service quality in higher education entities as a distinguishing characteristic and contributor to institutional competitive advantage in a monitored and competitive environment. The centre of attention is on DE, which provides all programmes via distance delivery using technology and arranges Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) sessions through 46 study centres in South Africa and one in Namibia.

Educated and skilled citizens play a vital role in today's competitive globalised scenario. With the establishment of several privately owned institutions and colleges, HEIs are undergoing significant transformation. To provide high-quality education in a rapidly changing society, HEIs must implement changes to increase effectiveness and efficiency, including all internal operations and interactions with major stakeholders (Mircea & Andreescu, 2010).

Students are the essential stakeholders at a business-driven institution, and they effectively become business partners as they convert from students to customers. According to Tomlinson (2018), the term student-consumer has been attributed partly to the marketisation of HEI and individual students' rising personal financial

contributions to their higher education. This requires ensuring that the HEI provides what the students want and, as a result, understands their value. An HEI is an institutional service provider that is expected to prioritise and offer excellent quality service to advance the institute's management. On this subject, Total Quality Management (TQM) is identified to assist institutions in successfully adapting to the ever-changing industry and improving the quality of service it provides to students.

Van Schalkwyk and Steenkamp (2016:599) acknowledge that TQM will help institutions satisfy external and internal customers. This is achievable when assessing how TQM is defined by Sohel-Uz-Zaman and Anjalin (2016:207), who stated that improving the systematic and planned processes is a continuous endeavour to ensure that quality service exists.

Given the above, the competition will be won only by those institutes that prioritise the customers' demands (in this case, the students). Implementing quality management (QM) concepts at a central level and focusing on organisational issues that add to refining services might help any educational institution to become more relevant.

Overseeing outstanding customer service in the HEI boosts efficiency and happiness among administrative support staff. Staff members with high morale have an overall positive impact on the efficacy of the institution's services, the experience of students and loyalty (Cook, 2008). According to Sharabi (2013:320), the primary responsibility of line managers is to improve work constantly practices by paying attention to administrative support staff, employing their thoughts and proposals aimed at development, and empowering them to lead adjustment within a department of operations. Increasing the quality of work practices by establishing lines of communication with the support staff and offering repeated training will reduce errors, grievances, and disapproval while enhancing employees' assurance that they are responsible for quality service (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2010:392; Lobo *et al.*, 2012:508).

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Most areas of the economy have seen massive improvements in industrial technology during the last few decades. On the other hand, education institutions have been slow in catching up to this trend, evident in HEIs. The so-called Edutech business, on the other hand, is expanding, with a vast and ever-increasing selection of e-learning

platforms and DE tools (Anderson *et al.*, 2020:229). Considering the tremendous growth in the call for higher education worldwide, DE creates a new way of providing a service between the academic staff of the HEI and the students. This is because, in traditional education, technology supplements academic support. In DE, technology is a replacement (rather than a supplement) for academic support. The essence of DE is that it replaces interpersonal communication with a personal form of interpersonal interaction mediated through technology (Keegan, 2008). However, HEI does not manage the technologies utilised for the DE properly. In that case, it can be detrimental to the quality of management and the quality of service expected by the stakeholders, as it can impact the students' self-motivation in accomplishing their tasks (Al-Hariri & Al-Hattami, 2017:85).

Quality management is critical to the success of HEIs and essential for teaching and learning outcomes and a better reputation for an academic institution. HE, more than any other service sector, directly impacts society in terms of socioeconomic development. Everyone should be concerned about the excellence of HEIs. Furthermore, the topic of measuring service in the HEI has recently received much attention. Students consider the quality of service in HEIs one of the most vital aspects confronting institutions. HEIs must constantly monitor their services to ensure continuous improvement.

1.2.1 Higher Education Institutions (HEI) context

HEIs have been a place of choice for a select few for a very long time. However, it is progressively becoming more available to a broader public (CHE, 2004:11). Internationally, the HEI is still experiencing considerable changes (Lichy & Birch, 2015:1), and the industry is confronted by a variety of issues that also apply to South African HEIs. South Africa now has 26 fully registered HEIs with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

1.2.2 Distance Education (DE) and Distance Learning (DL)

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2016:441), DE is the capability to teach without being physically in the classroom. DE is a system of education that operates outside of the traditional classroom. The student and academic support are separated by distance, but the interaction between them is facilitated using multiple tools.

Programmes in DE are delivered through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) or by any means that bridges the distance between the students and DE by utilising Interactive Whiteboards (IWB).

DL can be characterised as a difference in time, place, or both (Wang, 2008:248). The use of distance learning additionally separates the lecturer and the student, but it also divides the student from their peers, which may have a bearing on the student's academic support.

1.2.3 Value Propositions in Higher Education

The conventional HEI sector is changing dramatically because of increased demand for education, industry environmental changes, technological advancements, economic changes, expansion without boundaries in the HE, and changes in labour demands from the market (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:1).

As a result, HEIs must constantly review their value propositions to ensure they remain relevant and sustainable, as well as meet the changing expectations of the students (Ibrahim & Dahlan, 2016:600). Business models offer a description of how institutions operate, guide successful and creative ideas for of implementing a quality service, and aid in the development of DE by determining and concentrating on its fundamental value propositions (Edralin *et al.*, 2018:79).

1.2.4 Service Quality in Education

Sallis (2014:1) contends that because HEIs are service providers, they should concentrate on raising the calibre of their services. According to Van Schalkwyk and Steenkamp (2016:578), managing and improving service quality is crucial to improving HEIs and can be viewed as the deciding factor for success among HEIs, particularly those providing services via distance learning. TQM is essential for education in this regard and helps institutions successfully handle developments in the market (Khan *et al.*, 2018:182). Additionally, TQM will aid institutions in reaching internal and external customer satisfaction, according to Van Schalkwyk and Steenkamp (2016:578). This is conceivable when considering TQM, which Sohel-Uz-Zaman and Anjalin (2016:209) define as a planned and organised procedure that guarantees the quality of services and their ongoing improvement.

Sutin (2016:18) adds that in addition to the elements, it is crucial for organisations to adapt to environmental changes to fulfil changing customer requirements and offer pertinent value propositions. Particularly the HEIs that offer service via distance learning, as their survival depends on outstanding performance, autonomy, service quality, dependability, comprehension of customer needs, and customer satisfaction (Sutin, 2016:21).

Service quality descriptions revolve around identifying and meeting students' needs. Educational institutions have been striving hard to alter the ways they do business and provide quality services for students. The views of students of how to evaluate services and what students require are also transforming. Consequently, HEIs must find ways for remaining relevant with modern times and meet the evolving requirements of current students. If an institution could identify students' needs, it could deliver them consistently. Students will return to the services and tell others about them.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Even though there is literature on quality service at the HEI, there is still a gap in the efficacy of TQM and quality service implementation in the institution (Jasti *et al.*, 2022:1272). Competition is increasing, and the institution should be able to compete in new ways to ensure its long-term viability in the current competitive market. In the HEI, the effectiveness of the academics and administrative supporting staff and the equipment affect the quality of service rendered to the students; hence, improvements always need to be made.

It can be observed that the HEI lacks strategies to manage the quality of service delivered to the stakeholders efficiently (Zavareh *et al.*, 2012:445). Therefore, this study investigates quality service delivery, DE management, and HEI support staff. With the fast-growing competition among HEIs, it is more necessary than ever to focus on the concerns of quality service. It is also critical to bring to cognisance the lack of management and monitoring of the practices of quality management for improved quality service. Evidently, the quality of the service rendered to stakeholders (bursary funders and the students) will deteriorate without properly implementing strategies (Akerere, 2008:16). A lack of resources can cause poor quality service, inferior planning methods for quality service, insufficient plan implementation, insufficient

performance tracking tools, and the absence of well-documented quality management strategies (Csizmadia *et al.*, 2008:455). Students are searching for more value for their money, and HEIs need to produce quality that meets the anticipations and demands of students (Smith *et al.*, 2007:351). Subsequently, this study aims to investigate the influence of TQM adoption on improving the quality of service an HEI provides to distance learners.

Furthermore, as stated in the preceding section, the three core dimensions of quality service are academic quality service, administrative quality service, and facility quality service. It is critical to emphasise the importance of administrative support staff given that they oversee processing large numbers of student data, which other departments rely on monitoring and reporting operations to the institution, as well as for internal preparation and decision-making. A lack of knowledge and awareness of quality management will result in a few blind spots and efficiency challenges, given administrative support personnel's critical role in the quality structure. Empirical research into the roles and functions of administrators within the quality structure will lead to a better understanding of their significant contribution to quality and the improvement of data quality management strategies in the HEI.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 Primary Objective

The research aims to gain an improved knowledge of whether service quality and principles of TQM are implemented in a DE within a HEI to assist the institution with required adjustments in the value proposition to students and acquire an edge over the competition by guaranteeing student satisfaction. It accomplished through the following objectives:

1.4.2 Secondary Objectives

- To assess the effectiveness of TQM principles in providing quality service to students.
- To determine how formalised TQM processes in DE improve the institution's core value propositions.

- To describe DE's use of TQM in constructing its service quality and its ability to contribute to the institution's value proposition.
- To establish to what degree TQM intervention strategies, contribute to students' contentment with the institution's fundamental concepts.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Considering the objectives mentioned above and research goals as discussed in the preceding section, the research questions brought up to achieve the objective of the study are as follows:

- To what extent is the supply of quality services in DE ensured in the HEI?
- To what extent is TQM ensured and applied internally to provide quality service delivery in DE?
- To what extent will TQM help DE in the HEI, and provide high-quality service to students while guiding them to stay relevant in the industry by allowing them to alter their value proposition?
- To what extent was high-quality service delivery in the DE ensured by the regulatory framework externally and TQM internally within a HEI at the time of the research?

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the two-phased research approach:

- Phase 1: Literature review
- Phase 2: A case study

1.6.1 Phase 1: Literature review

The literature review was conducted by researching relevant documents such as previous investigations, relevant academic publications, rules and regulations, and other materials related to higher education.

1.6.2 Phase 2: A Case Study

A qualitative research approach was considered suitable for the study and was employed to comprehend the social phenomena under investigation using information obtained from comprehensive interviews, a review of documentation, and reading (Henning, 2018:3). An exploratory case study was employed as the qualitative method. One of the reasons for choosing the case study methodology was that the case study approach provides the researcher with an in-depth grasp of the issue under investigation, namely the DE within the HEI (Yin, 2009:18). When a phenomenon examined has discernible boundaries the case study genre is a preferred research approach (Henning, 2018:41). This is the situation with HEIs, and that is why the case approach was chosen. The identifying constraints included that the institution must be designated as an HEI, registered with the DHET, and fulfil all criteria regarding HEI registration.

This investigation assists in creating rich and comprehensive clarification of the subject matter and areas of inquiry through the case study as an additional interpretative approach using various data collection techniques, including document review, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:112). Data were analysed using pattern matching and the identification of themes and subcategories.

The investigation was cross-sectional, meaning data were obtained from the unit of analysis at a single point in time rather than over time, and thus offered information about the institution's current functioning. Cross-sectional data were gathered from the unit of analysis at a specific time. In contrast, longitudinal data are acquired from the identical unit of analysis at various points over time (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:107).

1.6.3 Unit of analysis

The research unit of analysis was DE executive management, middle management, and administrative support employees inside the HEI, a real-life case study related to the research topics.

The sample will be diverse, with ten managers from the HEI's top and middle management structures included in the research study due to their involvement in the quality procedures in the examined phenomenon. In addition, eight support staff

members directly involved in the service provided to students will be included in the sample because they play an essential role in the institution's daily operations.

1.6.4 Data collection

Several data sources were employed in the data gathering procedure, which included researching local and worldwide academic sources to determine what has been written on TQM and the quality of service in the HE domain. Additional data was collected on study themes, which included a description of the advantages of DE offering the HE.

For cross-checking and complementing the data collected from the literature review and document research, the single case study technique was employed in conjunction with extensive interviews and discussions in focus groups. The data were combined to ensure control over elements that could affect the research quality and provide a legitimate and reliable manner of interpreting the phenomena being examined (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:45).

Data were collected in identical settings, including protected office spaces for administrative support personnel and managers' offices for managers, employing the same questions for interviews and time frames for interviews. The researcher and research assistant performed peer reviews and reliability checks before analysing the data. This confirmed the research's credibility. The person conducting the study and the research assistant reviewed their findings to clarify any ambiguities and avoid bias. The data were triangulated during the analysis,

Cohen *et al.* (2000:112) defined triangulation as using various data gathering methods to reinforce study conclusions. The study's validity was addressed by the researcher's honesty, depth, richness, and scope of data obtained, triangulation, and objectivity (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:105).

1.6.5 Data analysis

The data analysis aimed to establish a link between the study problem and the objectives and simplify the data to readable formats that would aid in drawing significant findings from conversations and focus group conversations. All

conversations in the focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the participants' permission.

The evidence that various researchers would be able to duplicate the findings of the research undertaken using the same procedures is referred to as reliability (Riege, 2003:81). The trustworthiness of the research was ensured by building an alliance between the researcher and the interviewers and the participants of the focus group, and the function of the representative group was established.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The treatment of participants was a key feature of the research to comply with ethical considerations (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2014:127). The ethical criteria according to (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:120) were followed throughout the research. The criteria are listed below;

- Obtaining full permission from all participants.
- Maintain participant anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy.
- Ensure that no deception occurs in the study process.

Furthermore, before the start of the interviews, individuals who consented to taking part in the study were given a consent form. The consent form assured those who participated that the data they stipulated would be kept private and that their data would not be disclosed or used. They were assured that there would be no danger in participating in the study.

1.8 LAYOUT OF THE STUDY

The research was divided into five chapters:

Chapter 1: Covers the introduction, study background, problem statement, research questions and objectives, research methodologies and design, the keywords that were used in the case study, and chapter structure.

Chapter 2: Includes a focused literature study, a review of existing research and opinions, and an interpretive overview of the current DE of the HEI, core value propositions, TQM, quality of service, and student satisfaction.

Chapter 3: Describes the approach used to conduct the research and fulfil the project's objectives. This chapter discusses the research design, the demographic (work situation), and the data gathering procedures.

Chapter 4: Emphasises on the research findings. The analysed data were addressed based on in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions.

Chapter 5: Concludes the study with a summary and conclusion of the case study's findings. The study's limitations are acknowledged, and future research recommendations are addressed in this chapter.

1.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 1 presented the subject matter description and research goals, together with the history and setting of the research. After discussing the literature review, the chapter explains the research methodology and data analysis methods that have been employed. It ends with a study outline.

In Chapter 2, the literature that has been considered pertinent to the study that was done will be addressed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

According to Kasper, Van Helsdingen, and Gabbott (2006:6), the services sector includes various enterprises, including accommodation, entertainment, transportation, leisure, consulting, education, police, and cuisine. These sectors are in the profession of providing services rather than physical commodities. The service industries share traits that significantly impact their achievement and definition of service excellence.

This chapter will focus on the most current studies and information available on the quality of services and TQM at HEIs and the effects on DE. The literature review aims to provide a starting point for understanding the HE industry, particularly within the context of DE. It will additionally strive to define terms like "quality" and "quality assurance".

The literature review acknowledged the HE environment in South Africa and the way it has transformed over the past couple of decades in terms of ensuring the quality of services provided as a significant topic. It also investigates the consolidation of HE, the notion of TQM, and its importance in the service industry. Thus, the investigation will concentrate on advancing TQM within the services field, with a particular emphasis on the HE domain.

2.2 Concept clarification

This section presents an overview of significant ideas clarified in this study.

2.2.1 Total quality management (TQM)

2.2.1.1 History of the TQM

TQM is defined by Lau and Tang (2009:410) as a management philosophy and firm that strives to harness an organisation's material and human capital in the most productive manner possible to fulfil the organisation's objectives. TQM is further defined as a management-led approach involving all activities as part of normal business operations to satisfy customers' requirements and demands inside and outside the company.

TQM, as defined by Anjard (1998:238), is an innovative, cultural movement that signifies the acknowledgement of an approach to management that encourages people to assume responsibility for delivering excellent services and products. Lau and Anderson (1997:85) defined TQM as an acronym:

- TQM's **T**-component: TQM entails a whole company pledge to uphold quality and requires everyone to be accountable for the quality and participate in all attempts to preserve and enhance their work.
- TQM's **Q**-component: The fundamental objective in quality management is to achieve and surpass customer expectations. Internal and external clients are equally vital. Both systems and processes should be managed with a focus on continuous improvement. Staff members should be taught and empowered to comprehend and rectify quality-related problems through effective training.
- TQM's **M**-component: The broad scope of TQM efforts necessitates top management's willingness to invest in the process. The top management must provide explicit and readily apparent principles in strategic plans for the company. TQM necessitates the involvement of all employees, and as a result, it is critical to reshape the workplace environment that supports it.

2.2.1.2 Total Quality Management (TQM) Principles

TQM is among the most popular and durable management concepts (Benavides-Velasco *et al.*, 2014:87). TQM is defined by Goetsch and Davis (2014) defined TQM as a method of business that aims to maximise an organisation's competitiveness by continuously enhancing the quality of its services and processes. As a result, when TQM is implemented in an institution, the institution is obligated to work towards quality in all areas of the institution to achieve client contentment by providing quality service, quality control, and quality assessment, according to Stander (2017:23). Organised assessments can be utilised to quantify a service against a pre-determined standard and are part of the institution's operative workings, where applicable activities are employed if the service does not meet the stated quality principles (Al-Shafei *et al.*, 2015:1).

The principles of TQM (what an institution does to show its commitment to TQM) are further defined by Karia and Asaari (2006:30) as a set of achievable objectives such as:

- Ongoing improvement;
- Meeting the needs of customers;
- Minimising rework;
- Long-term thinking;
- Increased staff engagement and teamwork;
- Revamping processes;
- Competitive benchmarking;
- Team-based creative thinking;
- The regular evaluation of results; and
- Developing stronger relationships with suppliers.

All organisation members, from top management to operational level staff, must work together to achieve the abovementioned goals. According to Karia and Asaari (2006:30), effective TQM settings empower everyone in the workforce to participate in accomplishing organisational goals. TQM is founded on the concept that personnel most familiar with daily operating processes are in the most advantageous position to understand them and improve their standard of excellence. It seeks to create an environment where managers and employees interact positively and encourage people to accomplish their best.

Iruobe *et al.*, (2012:48) state the TQM principles and describe the three main TQM philosophies outlined below:

- Continuous enhancement as an ongoing push to improve;
- Engagement of every individual in the organisation to ensure client satisfaction; and
- All members of the team who execute quality-related duties should strive to produce quality products on the first attempt. This will ensure customer satisfaction while saving money on rework.

2.2.1.3 Total Quality Management in HEI

According to an investigation on higher education, Manatos *et al.*, (2017:161) state that there are three degrees of excellence management integration inside institutions. The primary focus is on the workflow level, the second on the structure of the organisation, and the third on the way the institution uses quality management principles. Al-Shafei *et al.* (2015:2) established three aspects related to quality HE, stating that institutions accomplish their fundamental responsibilities and that the process adopted in accomplishing these HE functions results in the final product of pleased graduates.

As a result, when TQM is implemented in HEI, the institution commits to working towards quality in all capacities of the HEI to achieve students' contentment by providing quality service. TQM implementation in education is critical because quality education constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of economic development. According to Samat *et al.* (2006), TQM has been described by numerous researchers as the most globally advanced approach to quality. TQM increases students' loyalty and profits for the HEI. According to Yeo (2008), one of the most significant difficulties for today's educational institutions is identifying and implementing suitable procedures that will influence the ongoing viability of the quality of service.

De Jager and Gbadamosi (2010) recommended a process to create a scale for measuring the quality of service in South African higher education. They also investigated the connection between service quality indicators on one end of the spectrum and related factors such as the intent to withdraw from the institution, trust in the university's administration, and general satisfaction with the institution of higher education on the other.

To choose their educational path, students evaluate institutions based on the quality of service. Although there have been many research investigations on the quality of service in different areas, only a few studies have been conducted on the quality of service of HEIs. Previous research on the quality of services and student satisfaction failed to address all aspects. Therefore, this study fills that gap.

Essop (2015:204) empirically discovered that an institution's outstanding customer service will improve if a TQM philosophy is used to establish fundamentals for

continual enhancement. TQM as an approach implies that everyone is involved in achieving the goals of continuous enhancement of quality and customer satisfaction. Making quality a priority in HEIs involves surpassing client requirements through collaboration at all levels (Wiley, 2017:137).

2.2.1.4 Measurement of the TQM Effectiveness

Assessing the quality of management processes will assist the HEI in determining where they currently succeed and how they could be improved. As quality elements, an institution can additionally assess effectiveness or efficiency.

Measurement is required for effective process management. Effective organisational management of performance requires monitoring and measurement. The system must track the extent to which the institution achieves objectives. In most instances, financial performance data are insufficient to address quality enhancement progress. After goals are established and forecasts are developed, measurements are used to provide feedback on progress towards achieving the goals. The measurement technique will also allow for quick reconnaissance of shortcomings and intervention to tackle them, thereby significantly improving the institution's quality of service in general.

Quality management is an essential component of the success of any institution. Gaps and the procedure for improvement can be tracked in several ways, carrying high-quality results to the awareness of all parties involved. It is critical to have accurate data on students, competitors, services, and processes to make quality improvements. Collecting and disseminating measurable information on institution-specific quality aspects can be considered the foundation of a successful TQM.

2.2.2 Value Proposition of a Higher Education Institution

A value proposition is a statement that highlights the benefits that students and families can expect from attending a particular HEI, why it is a better choice than alternatives. Also, how the institution will assist a student in achieving their highest aspirations.

The consumer defines the service's value, which is also true in higher education, where students define the worth and the corresponding modifications required in value

generation (Tian & Martin, 2014:939). This value should improve their quality of life once they have completed their qualification (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:6). Wenger (2015:1) agrees that HEIs ought to view students as consumers, realising that it is critical to know students' demands concerning how they wish education to be delivered to them.

Significant stakeholders in the HEI are all external to the institution, yet they are also the primary drivers of business model changes within the HEI. Consequently, HEIs must understand the varied stakeholder needs. The value proposition pillar is where HEIs can improve service quality to ensure students' happiness. According to Newman (2015:9), the organisation's value proposition is why students choose one institution over the other because it pleases a certain demand that the student has or satisfies it in a specific way.

According to (Sutin, 2016:18), institutions must view changes as opportunities to address students' needs by concentrating on the quality of service provided and assuring students' happiness (Manatos *et al.*, 2017:161). HEIs are required to consider students' needs when they focus on the institution's value proposition. This should guide them on their approaches and revenue models, resulting in a positioning instrument that an institution will use to differentiate itself from other institutions in the sector (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:4).

2.2.2.1 The Value Proposition of the Distance Education

The customer defines the value of the service, and the same is true in DE, in which students define appreciation and the associated changes needed to create value (Tian & Martin, 2014:939). After completing their educational requirements, this value should improve their overall standard of life (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:6). Wenger (2015:1) agrees that DE within the HEI should view students as customers and highlights the importance of understanding customer requirements in terms of how they would like to receive education services.

Therefore, it is critical to concentrate on the attractiveness of DE. The HEI's two primary goals are to: 1) provide students with advanced workplace skills and to 2) transmit their knowledge and comprehension of global issues (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:6).

The value proposition is linked inextricably to the institution's reputation. Consequently, the institution must ensure to uphold its standards. This is essential for providing on-demand offerings and attracting students from all over the world. The significance of education is intangible, and the sole interaction that students will have with the importance of education will be the quality of service they receive from the institution. For the present investigation, service is defined as the service provided through the DE to students from their initial interaction with an institution, thus from the application and enrolment at the institution, through qualification completion and graduation, to ultimately being an alumnus of the institution.

Service delivery provided employing DE throughout the institution can determine the way they ought to arrange the amenities that they offer to students based on in-depth knowledge of students' needs and student profiles (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:5). Armstrong (2014:7) believes that customers' value propositions are constantly changing, posing new obstacles and possibilities for DE. As stated by Newman (2015:5), the solution to delivering innovative value propositions is to ensure that DE within the HEI can reinvent its business model.

As stated by Van Schalkwyk and Steenkamp (2016:578), improving the quality of service provided by the DE service provider within the HEI could be a key factor in success. This is due to the institution recognising students' changing consumerist entitlements and adjusting their approach to offering appropriate courses while also demanding academic standards and intellectual commitment from students (Tomlinson, 2018:717). It is critical to ensure, monitor, and develop quality within the DE of the HEI to remain relevant and competitive in this sector.

2.2.3 Human Resources Aspects of the TQM

2.2.3.1 Job Involvement

According to Boon *et al.* (2007:939), it is critical to incorporate human resource strategies into TQM to implement it in an organisation successfully. This refers specifically to employees who are given the opportunity and enabled to participate in improvements that work above their regular job duties and initiatives towards self-management. Employee involvement in quality management can take many forms, including participation and contributions to continuous improvement.

2.2.3.2 Empowerment

In the current competitive global environment, it's necessary to do more than follow up on operational achievements for any given company's operations: if any institution wants to increase its revenue while enhancing productivity, it must engage its staff members who present the most innovative concepts, knowledge, and alternatives; in other words, empowering staff members is critical for the institution (Wang *et al.*, 2019:1076), with some researchers even mentioning that certifying staff members may be considered as a form of compensation. Employees would be more willing to perform tasks that contribute to the overall success of the institution by enhancing empowerment levels and commitment ideas among staff members within a given institution (Judge *et al.*, 2022).

Employee empowerment is regarded widely as a persuasive practise that improves performance by increasing opportunities for investment and participation in key decision-making processes (Hunjra *et al.*, 2011:692). This process centres around instilling trust, inspiration, and participation in decision-making among employees and management (Meyerson & Dewettinck, 2012:46). Notably, empowerment can be defined as giving the staff of an institution a sense of power to manage their day-to-day work activities (Liden *et al.*, 2000:407).

According to Khalili *et al.*, (2016), empowerment may be outlined as a managerial method in which managers and other members influence decisions (i.e., decision-making cooperation). This definition corresponds with Baird and Wang (2010:577), who defined employee empowerment as "the delegating of authority and accountability from higher positions in the chain of command to lower-level staff members, with particular decision-making power." Thamizhmani and Hasan (2010:210) define employee empowerment as allowing employees to participate in decision-making.

2.2.3.3 Management commitment

TQM necessitates total commitment from management and progressive, dynamic leadership, particularly at the top level, due to its primary focus on satisfying or even exceeding customers' expectations through continuous enhancement of the standard of excellence of everything an institution does.

Unless accompanied by the leader's involvement, commitment yields no results. As a result, leadership can be considered the single most significant variable determining the achievement or lack thereof of the institution's TQM. Without top management commitment, implementing TQM effectively is a pipe dream. Furthermore, explicit commitment from all managers is required throughout the entire institution, from the top to the bottom. The commitment, however, must begin at the top and extend down to the operational level. Everyone in management should have faith in TQM, be dedicated to implementing it, and demonstrate that commitment to others in the workplace.

Knowing that human beings possess distinctive characteristics makes one comfortable leading staff members, thrilled in steering individuals towards using their abilities and knowledge in the work environment, optimistic about developing dedication in people, and an unwavering optimist in having goals involving people.

The managerial position involves creating and disseminating an appealing goal for the institution. It propagates the objective to all stakeholders and inspires staff members to achieve the vision. Some define leadership in TQM as "having the capacity to encourage individuals to make a total, willing, and voluntary commitment to achieving or exceeding organisational objectives" Goetsch & Davis (2003:212). This definition demonstrates 'inspiring people' rather than people's more commonly used motivation. While inspiration is a temporary reaction to external stimuli, it is an internalised inspiration that originates within a person. As a result, it inspired employees to adopt the organisation's objectives as their own instead of motivated staff members who merely committed to goals (Mannan, 2017:50).

Vouzas and Psychogios (2007:65) argue that in addition to the management's dedication and encouragement for TQM, a transparent and democratic, actively involved management style is desired to ensure the success of the TQM programme. Quality management fosters high-trust social relationships, a shared sense of belonging and an understanding that continuous enhancement is for the benefit of every individual within the institution.

The implemented management system will assist everyone in accepting responsibility and exercising leadership by removing barriers and facilitating successful decision-making.

2.2.3.4 Training and Development

Training and development are critical components of TQM implementation. According to Mohammad (2006:625), education and training are essential for strengthening and enhancing abilities related to the institution's beliefs and values. This will assist the institution in transforming its culture to focus on issues related to quality. Training should contribute to the accomplishment of the institution's goals and objectives.

TQM success depends on adequate training and some TQM context-related variables such as management, working together, duties, and customer satisfaction. Training is critical to properly executing TQM to acquire a competitive advantage. Successful training leads to the maintenance and enhancement of the institution's TQM.

According to Boon *et al.*, (2007:942), educational and developmental opportunities increase employee job involvement and benefits, increase commitment to the institution, and strengthen the institution's competitiveness. An effective development and training programme is believed to foster positive employee attitudes and loyalty and aid staff members in growing as individuals and in job involvement. Furthermore, Boon (2007:944) emphasised the significance of educational and developmental opportunities for continuous enhancement, modification, and improvement, identifying self-motivation as one of the sources of individual motivation at work and involvement in growing, learning, and developing oneself.

According to Zheng, Morrison, and O'Neill (2006:1803), training improves competency, turnover, and employee commitment. Radwan *et al.*, (2007:80) studied the effects of TQM, which included five major components: commitment from senior management and collaborative management behaviour, culture, educational and training opportunities, and operational efficiency. According to their findings, each element gave an advantage over the competition. According to an assessment of all the research studies mentioned and discussed, implementing TQM necessitates significant training efforts. Training is essential for informing individuals regarding the fundamentals and values of TQM, nurturing fresh perspectives that contribute to the

change in culture necessary for TQM to succeed, providing people with the problem-solving and teamwork skills they need, encouraging advancement in their careers, and enhancing customer satisfaction.

Training and development assist businesses in attracting and retaining top talent, increasing satisfaction with work and morale, boosting worker efficiency, and increasing customer satisfaction. Subsequently, it will also help further develop and enhance institutional resources such as collaboration-oriented methods, just-in-time (JIT), total quality control (TQC), and administrative planning systems.

2.2.4. Challenges in implementing TQM

TQM is the management of staff and company procedures to guarantee customer satisfaction at all stages. However, it is important to note that there may be challenges in successfully conducting TQM inside the institution. The Theory of Constraints (TOC) was developed by Zadry and Yusof (2007:1020) to help organisations think about problems, develop breakthrough solutions, and successfully implement those solutions using Decision Tree Analysis (DTA). The TOC can be integrated into implementing TQM to ensure the institution's success and efficiency.

Following Panuwatwanich and Nguyen (2017:555), not every sector that used TQM was satisfied. According to Suwandeji (2015:2222), TQM factors affecting HEI implementation encompass leadership, training, organisational structure, interaction, incentives, measurements and evaluation, and teamwork (Fu *et al.*, 2015:139). Furthermore, they noted that strong collaboration, appropriate training, incentives, evaluation, and effective communication contributed to the institution's success.

According to Panuwatwanich and Nguyen (2017:555), the lack of success in implementing TQM is primarily due to the failure to integrate TQM with a culture shift. Subsequently, it is a rather complicated project for a company. Nevertheless, researchers have identified the types of workplace environments required for successful TQM implementation and compared those cultures to demonstrate their positive and negative connections to TQM achievement (Prajogo & McDermott, 2005: 25), Zu, (2009:149) & Gimenez-Espin *et al.*, 2013:692). Clan, advocacy, structure, and market culture are all aspects of organisational culture. Changing everything is easier

than changing people. Therefore, resolving issues is easier than the TQM process's cultural change aspect.

Industries devote substantial resources to embracing and conducting all-around quality management to gain a competitive advantage (Nasim, 2018:1033). However, TQM implementation has had several failures and challenges (Salaheldin, 2009:58; Irani *et al.*, 2004:650; Haffar *et al.*, 2013:115). As a result, it is critical to investigate why TQM initiatives fail and determine what should be done to implement TQM to compete and achieve corporate objectives properly. Previous studies on TQM adoption in this setting have generally reached two key conclusions. First, critical success variables are overlooked frequently during TQM implementation (Fotopoulos and Psomas, 2009:163; Gimenez-Espin *et al.*, 2013:692). Second, organisational culture attributes are underappreciated (Sinha *et al.*, 2016:235; Al-Bourini *et al.*, 2013:95; Zu, 2006:106).

Recent TQM research indicates that the significance of the organisation's (OC) culture on TQM implementation success or failure is becoming more widely recognised (Fu *et al.*, 2015:139; Sinha *et al.*, 2016:235). Furthermore, many TQM-related studies demonstrate that TQM implementation failures are primarily attributed to an absence of TQM and changes in cultural collaboration (Sinha *et al.*, 2016:235; Al-Bourini *et al.*, 2013:95; Zu, 2010:106). As a result, in organisations trying to apply TQM, it is beneficial for researchers to investigate the connection between essential TQM success factors and organisational culture characteristics (Sinha *et al.*, 2016:235). Identifying the fundamental organisational values of the culture that encourage the design and implementation of TQM measures may also be highly beneficial to the effective implementation of TQM.

2.2.5 Distance Education (DE) in South Africa

External quality controls in the form of national frameworks and policies were introduced to ensure quality through the education sector for all institutions delivering services within HEIs, including the DE within the institutions.

Institutions that want to offer learning programs that result in formal qualifications must register with the DHET, and the purpose of this registration (DHET, 2018):

- Making sure the institution provides a satisfactory standard of education;
- Protecting students by ensuring that the educational institutions have the resources required, the capacity, and proficiency to deliver high-quality courses before beginning teaching and learning;
- Making sure that the qualifications presented are aligned with the national framework; and
- Collaborating regarding achieving the change in the education sector as anticipated by the government.

Ellis and Steyn (2017:445) state that these educational institutions are operated primarily like businesses. They must adapt to practices such as transparency and effectiveness in their day-to-day activities to remain profitable and competitive in changing markets and student needs. The HE sector, like almost every other industry throughout different economies, is undergoing significant adjustments Lichy & Birch (2015:1). The environment shifts, changing monetary circumstances, a growing need for education and rising real cost of HE, advancements in technology, and shifts in expectations among stakeholders are just a few examples (Armstrong, 2014:1). Because of the growing need for education, Stander (2017:34) contends the DE within HEIs serve an additional function to education institutions.

DE's strength lies in adapting to consumer demands, lack of administrative constraints, and flexibility in changing how they operate. There is a growing demand for more post-secondary training within the South African HE sectors. The DE can help to meet that demand by working alongside institutions, as HEIs alone can't satisfy the demand (Van Schalkwyk, 2018:23). This increased demand, as well as the transformations that have occurred, provide an opportunity for DE within HEIs to reconsider their propositions for value Lichy and Birch (2015:1) and make sure that they remain significant to their prospective students (Ibrahim & Dahlan, 2016:600).

2.2.6 DE Service Quality Model

Various models and concepts exist to assess the institution's service delivery quality. However, given that there haven't been numerous research efforts that use

SERVQUAL in DE, it's worth looking into studies that use the approach known as SERVQUAL in HEIs. There is a substantial body of academic research indicating that SERVQUAL has been employed in HE to evaluate the excellence of services (Sultan & Wong, 2012:784; Git & Sulaiman, 2012:41; Van Schalkwyk & Steenkamp, 2014:107; Koni, Ibrahim & Zainal, 2013:48; Yu *et al.*, 2008:11; Hasan *et al.*, 2008:175; Fong & Wai 2008).

Some studies used the SERVQUAL model unchanged, while others enhanced it. SERVQUAL adaptation might involve integrating new dimensions to existing SERVQUAL measurements, reducing the number of dimensions, or modifying the measuring scale items.

After considering every single one of these concepts, the researcher established that five quality dimensions would be used to assess the excellence of service delivery in the DE within the HEI. A total of four of these characteristics of SERVQUAL were tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, and assurance (Yousapronpaiboon, 2014:1095). For this research, the SERVQUAL model now has an additional dimension. And that is the delivery. The literature supports all these dimensions. The trustworthiness of the SERVQUAL dimensions relies on the knowledge that the model was empirically validated. The dimensions' reliability was tested and found to be suitable for measuring the quality of service in almost any service sector. The SERVQUAL dimensions were used to evaluate service quality in various sectors, including education, health, transportation, sports, and others. The literature also supports the delivery aspect as it is a dimension employed in HE when evaluating services (Sangeeta *et al.*, 2004).

Each dimension is discussed below to demonstrate its importance in evaluating the standards of the services offered in the DE in the HEI under investigation.

- **Tangibility**

Tangibility refers to the touch ability of physical components of service quality, such as lecture halls, electronic displays or chairs. The tangibility dimension is relevant in measuring the level of excellence of LSCs. The tangible dimension is included in numerous research investigations evaluating the quality of services in HE. When Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985) assessed the importance of tangibles, they observed that the dimension was more critical in banking operations than in any other service.

- **Reliability**

Trust and responsibility are central to trustworthiness. A HEI is expected to be dependable. Promises are broken when people are undependable and not doing “the right thing”. When compared with the remaining dimensions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), the dimension of reliability was frequently determined to be the "most critical dimension" of each of the five dimensions.

- **Delivery**

Given that it is associated with educational contexts, the aspect originates from the research findings of Sangeeta *et al.*, (2011). In an educational setting like DE, delivery services traits are essential for students' learning. In DE, such operations include the distribution of study materials, feedback, student interactions with the academic and administration staff, and staff assistance of students. Empathy, an emotional function of student support, has been incorporated into the dimension (Tait, 2003:173).

- **Responsiveness**

The speed of response dimension relates to how much time service users must endure for the provider's service and how responsive it is to their needs.

- **Assurance**

The assurance dimension focuses on the subject knowledge, work knowledge, and skills of lecturers, tutors, and administrative staff. Due to the lack of physical interaction, this constitutes a significant aspect for DE institutions. A DE lecturer and administrative support staff must be knowledgeable and skilled to prepare authentic,

high-quality study materials for students. The academic and administrative support staff should also possess technical competencies such as proficient use of computers and interpersonal communication abilities.

The SERVQUAL model defines the quality of service as the difference (gap) between service users' expectations for a service to be provided and their perceptions of what is offered (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). According to this model, the best way to assess service quality is to assess the service user's expectations and perceptions.

Furthermore, the SERVQUAL model clarifies the differences between perceived and actual quality. It differentiates service assessments from product assessments and provides an analytical basis for appropriate measurements for assessing the standard of services as viewed by users. Robinson (1995) (Table 1) depicts the differentiation between the products and services in DE by identifying components related to quality that management and quality assurance processes should consider when assessing quality.

Table 1: Areas for quality management in DE (Adapted from Robinson, 1995)

PRODUCTS	SERVICES	PROCEDURES
Programmes	Applications and Registrations	Development of programmes
Resources	Advice–giving services	Delivery systems
Assessments	Teaching and Learning	Class and exam timetables
Number of graduates	Prompt response	Complete
	Administrative and academic support	Complete
	Provision of LSC's or learning hubs	Complete

The SERVQUAL model is typically used to assess service quality and identify areas for enhancement regarding the company's weaknesses and strengths. The SERVQUAL measurement instrument, according to (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2004:65), is more concerned with quality because it analyses customers' expectations before a specific service and how they perceive the standard of service received. SERVQUAL is an extremely frequently employed indicator of performance for assessing the standard of quality services provided as an analytic approach and measurement instrument (Brochado, 2009:174-190).

This research study focused on management and administrative support staff perceptions of the quality of services and how they may be enhanced to meet or surpass students' expectations. According to customers, "service quality is like beauty in the sense that it has various implications to numerous people and is person dependent." When quality is attained ultimately by services offered, it is considered customer-centred, implying that perceived excellence is a measure of consumer approval and the other way around Gharakhani *et al.*, (2013:70).

2.2.7 Administrative Support Staff in DE

One of the administrative staff's responsibilities in DE institutions is to provide administrative support to DE students. Students are at the very core of these services, interacting with them throughout service performance and delivery. According to SAIDE (2003), DE programs require more support from the administration than face-to-face institutions. DE administrative staff oversee student registration, material production and study material distribution, technical management and support, assignment administration, and tutorial class administration.

There have been few studies on students' perceptions and expectations of administrative personnel. According to Daweti (2003:8), students found their institution's administrative staff untrustworthy and poor organisers. Furthermore, Daweti (2003:8) observed that opportunities "to acquire particular skills necessary to assist students in several ways" were required for support staff.

2.2.8 Learning Support Centres (LSCs)

The establishment of LSCs' has been described as a critical service that bridges the interpersonal gap between students and the institution and strives to reduce isolation. According to HEQC (2010:10), many DE students go to the institution's locale-specific centres and main campus "seeking both social and physical spaces whereby they can study, develop, and interact with a group of higher education students." Moreover, LSC's provide support, including interaction with the academic staff through Whiteboard sessions, discussions, administrative assistance, study group assistance, and accessibility to educational materials such as computers and other readily accessible learning equipment.

2.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter offers literature relevant to this research and focuses on key concepts, including the quality history, principles, training, value proposition, TQM implementations, and challenges. All the concepts discussed in this chapter are critical because they will assist the reader in understanding all the variables that may influence the improvement of quality management within a HEI.

The following chapter presents the empirical research, which includes the investigation's methodology and empirical study results.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The research approach of the investigation conducted in a DE offered at a HEI in the Northwest Province will be addressed explicitly in this chapter. TQM procedures, addressed in Chapter 2, are the most important in improving the institution's effectiveness.

Educational institutions additionally recognise the critical role of ensuring that TQM is effectively implemented within organisations to take advantage of the benefits of proper implementation. The TQM literature review in Chapter 2 aided in providing comprehension of the fundamental concepts of TQM and their effects on company performance.

TQM is implemented frequently in organisations with the primary goal of enhancing their operational efficiency. This study investigated the impact of implementing TQM in a particular HEI.

This chapter describes the methodology and design of the study used to understand the phenomena under investigation fully. It outlines the methodology and design used to collect and analyse data to achieve the research's objectives.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method of investigation refers to the researcher's approach to investigating issues during the research process, and it should be selected to fit the research strategy (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008:144). There are two research paradigms: positivism (quantitative) and phenomenology (qualitative) (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:12). The following are the primary distinctions between the two research paradigms:

Table 2: Difference between research paradigms (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:30)

Positivism paradigm	Phenomenological
The primary approach to the role of theory in research is deductive, with empirical testing of theory.	The primary attitude towards the role of theory in research is inductive, with the theory generated from data.
The purpose of this research is to test hypotheses.	The goal of this research is to generate theories.
From the research generalised the sample used in the study to a population.	The findings of the study are generalisable from one situation to the next.
Quantitative data are typically produced by research.	Qualitative data are typically produced by research.

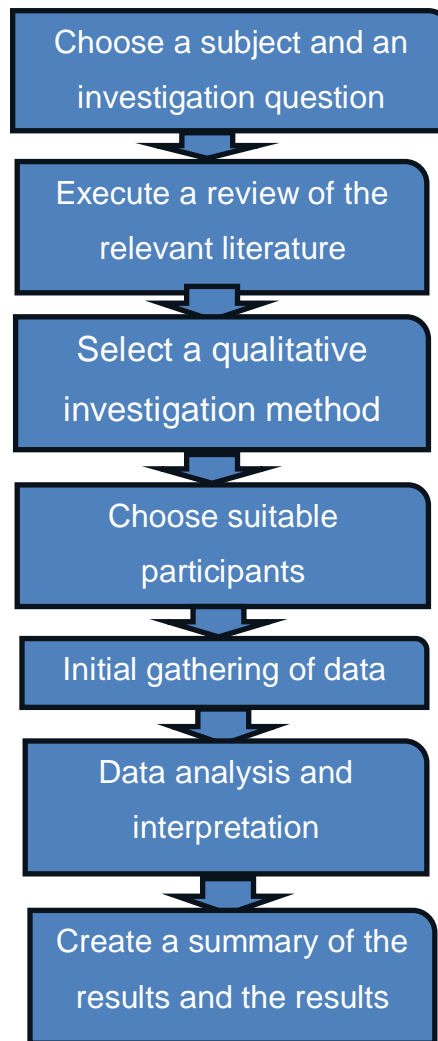
As the proper research strategy for the study, a qualitative research methodology guided by constructivism and interpretivism will be used (Creswell, 2009, Bryman *et al.*, 2017:41). Social constructivism seeks to be coherent with the societal world by viewing understanding as being assembled through how the individual describes the authenticity and is thus concerned with the subjective skill of a person's daily life and how the individual understands the world rather than the natural world's truth (Andrews, 2012:39).

As a result, social constructivism is considered appropriate for this study since it will allow the researcher to investigate in their natural setting the insights and involvements of both managers and support staff inside the HEI on what the value proposition of DE is. Also, to determine the TQM principles applied and whether current service quality could prompt a student's selection.

Because the study focuses on knowledge, thinking, views, and research through the gathering of non-numerical data, the use of a qualitative research design enriches the impact on understanding TQM and service quality within the HEI by employing an interpretive approach (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:41).

The purpose of using phenomenological research is to seek reality from people's interpretations of their experiences and feelings and generate detailed descriptions of the events. These will help the researcher develop sound conclusions and make an actionable recommendation at the end of the study.

Figure 1: Structured approach used in this study.



Phase 1: Choose a subject and an investigation question.

The researcher's first step was selecting a research field and question. Given the researcher's background in higher education and the challenges the sector has faced in recent years, a decision to investigate and better understand the phenomenon of proliferation in this industry by focusing on its worth proposal and quality of service.

Phase 2: Conduct a review of the relevant literature

A thorough review of the literature in both domestic and international HE sectors and the challenges they face. The literature review focused on areas such as sector competition, challenges and changes in the last few years, the proposition for the value of HE, problems of TQM, and the quality of service in HE.

Phase 3: Select a qualitative investigation method

The person conducting the study had to decide the study technique by weighing the positive and negative aspects of qualitative and quantitative investigation methods. The researcher chose a qualitative approach to research and determined that one case investigation was the best research method.

Phase 4: Choose suitable participants

The unit for investigation was chosen, and approval for investigating the institution was obtained. All participants who underwent interviews throughout the investigation provided official and informed consent.

Phase 5: Initial gathering of data

The creation of documentation, archival records, screenings, first-hand testimony from participants, and actual items are common sources of evidence in case investigation research (Yin, 2009:102).

Records examination and interviews identified as suitable for the study were investigated.

Phase 6: Data analysis and interpretation

In every instance of a study investigation, an information-analytical strategy is essential. Analytic strategies that ensure the reliability of the investigation ought to be used to support the analytical strategy (Yin, 2009:136). The overall analytical approach in this investigation made it possible by data analysis using the pattern matching technique (Creswell, 2009:3). Recognising themes and categories from focus group meetings and interviews was used to display the data.

Phase 7: Create a summary of the results and the results

The theoretical propositions that underpin this research are apparent in the investigation inquiries and the scientific literature review. Following the review and interpretation of the data, a conclusion may need to be reached, and the theory might require modifications to adapt to the specific situation at hand, with proposals offered for the DE section at the HEI based on the investigation.

3.2.1 Researcher's Role

Qualitative research emphasises words over data quantification, and an inductive strategy is used to develop a theory on how people interpret their surroundings and perceptions of the world around them (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:30). This implies that the study's methodology is the primary tool employed for gathering and evaluating data and ensures that what is said makes sense within the context of the participants. The focus of this study was on managers' and students' experiences and perceptions of the proposition for the value of the DE section provided in the HEI, as well as the way the execution of the quality of service helped to modify of the institution's value proposition.

The opinions and experiences were examined through the choice of employees responsible for ensuring the achievement of the quality of service in the HEI, as well as admin support staff responsible for HEIs daily operative tasks and have been within the HEI for a period exceeding one year. Because the researcher was the main tool for gathering information, it was critical to establish ethical procedures throughout the research. As a result, an assistant researcher was hired.

3.2.1 Building rapport with participants

Establishing rapport with those who participated was critical to fostering trust between the researcher and the participants. The first step in establishing rapport with the research volunteers was to contact them and appreciate them for agreeing to participate in the study, as well as to set up interview dates and times.

Following the telephone conversation building, each participant received subsequent emails with interview topics, giving them ample opportunity to become acquainted with

the subject matter before the actual interviews. Providing questions days before the interviews was done to avoid wasting precious time and contributing to confusion while attempting to explain or clarify certain questions.

3.2.2 Standards of Ethics

The following ethical standards were followed throughout the investigation (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:120):

- Acquiring informed permission from all participants.
- Ensuring anonymity for participants and confidentiality; and
- To guarantee that no fabrication takes place in the conduct of the investigation.

a) Informed permission

Before engaging with the researcher, explicit permission was obtained from every individual involved in the investigation by explaining what would be expected from them throughout the investigation. The following information was communicated to the participants (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:124):

- The investigation project's objectives and implications.
- Having the choice of pulling out at any point during the investigation.
- Assurances that the investigation is free of bias and that participants can pose concerns at any moment to gain insight into issues they may not understand.

The executive committee of the HEI was approved, and the appropriate management members of the team were contacted. Management members were given information about the investigation and anticipated advantages for the institution. The managerial staff volunteered to participate in the investigation. Administrative support staff responsible for the daily operational functions of the institution were also identified and informed about the study. All the admin support staff who participated in the focus group discussions did so voluntarily under the condition that their confidentiality and anonymity were to be maintained.

b) Anonymity of participants and confidentiality

Everyone who participated was assured of privacy and confidentiality during and after data collection. None of the interviewees could be identified after data collection.

c) Fabrication and privacy

The researcher informed everyone who participated of the reason for and processes that would be executed and complied with throughout the investigation and gathered explicit permission from every one of the participants to ensure that fabrication was prevented during the investigation and participant privacy was protected (Appendix A).

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of a study is the framework and strategy that guides the person conducting the study, employing the investigation method along with information assessment to obtain answers to the questions (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:101). As a result, the study's design provides the framework for collecting the information.

3.3.1 Method of the case study

An exploratory case investigation was used as the research design. Case study research explores one specific case to develop a holistic and complete knowledge of the institution (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008:162). According to Yin (2009:18), the case study method investigates an occurrence within the actual setting in which it exists, with no identifiable limitations between the phenomenon under investigation and the environment itself. Consequently, the aim of the study is a qualitative inquiry into the chosen instance, taking the lead role in the investigative process. The researcher was able to thoroughly investigate the DE inside the specific HEI, which includes the physical setting in which it operates and its internal operations relating to the service delivery services to students from enrolment to graduation. A single case development was considered appropriate because the HEI under investigation is an excellent example of a business-driven HEI in South Africa's HE sector. The investigation assumes that the experiences and views regarding DE inside the HEI will be helpful for the evolution and enhancement of the HE sectors in South Africa.

The case study method enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth comprehension of DE and TQM improvements within the context of the higher education (HE) industry (Yin, 2009:18). The conduct of the study enabled the researcher to answer the "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2009:11). The research question inquired to how delivery of the quality-of-service excellence could be ensured, by employing the regulatory setting external to the institution and TQM within the HEI. The "why" question in this study is investigated by gathering information on managers' and admin support staff perceptions of whether the quality of service offers an edge over rivals that can be used as an asset of differentiation for the institution.

The investigation was cross-sectional, as information was gathered from the unit of analysis at a single point rather than over time, and consequently offered information about the institution's current functioning. Cross-sectional data is collected from a unit of analysis at a specific time. In contrast, longitudinal data are collected compared to a single unit of analysis at various times during time (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:107).

3.3.2 Sampling

According to Welman *et al.*, (2010:55), for the research conclusions to be accurate, the research sample needs to be representative of the study population, meaning that the sample must have the exact properties of the population from which the sample was drawn. As shown in Table 3.2, two types of sampling strategies are accessible.

Table 3: Sampling techniques (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:213)

Probability sampling	Non-probability sampling
The likelihood of the case being chosen is known, and the likelihood of being chosen is the same for all cases.	The chance of a case being chosen is unknown. Thus, study questions and goals cannot be answered if the researcher must make statistical insinuations about the case's attributes. It is feasible to generalise findings. However, this cannot be done on statistical grounds.
Techniques employed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple randomness • Systematic • Stratified randomness • Clustering 	Techniques used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quota • Purposive • Snowball • Self-selection • Convenience

According to Welman *et al.*, (2010:69), a purposeful form of sampling method is a highly essential non-probability sampling since the researcher depends largely on their knowledge, ingenuity, and/or past research findings to find units of analysis or population consciously. Non-probability sampling was utilised for this study, with purposive and convenience sampling employed, by the researcher from the segment of the DE in the HEI under examination, with the understanding that it does not represent the larger population but is representative of the unit of analysis that the study will be investigating (Gentles *et al.*, 2015:1778).

Participants in the interviews and focus groups for the research study were chosen based on their expertise, understanding of the HEIs, and the approaches and procedures used within the DE section (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:102). Maree (2007:178) agrees that purposive sampling is preferable when researching a particular topic or aspect of interest.

Purposive sampling is the deliberate selection of study participants based on their significance to the study questions (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:186). Purposive sampling in

this investigation enabled the researcher to gather comprehensive data to clarify the case study's research question because the participants were chosen because they were able to purposely tell the comprehension of the investigation's query, which have been fundamental to the phenomena in the context of the investigation and happen to operate at the same study centre of the place of study (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:239). The investigation used purposive sampling to gain comprehensive knowledge of the management teams and administrative support staff's perceptions and experiences at the HEI.

3.3.2.1 Unit of analysis

The sample was diverse, with eight managers from the DE section's highest and middle management structures participating in the research investigation due to their involvement in the quality of procedures related to the studied phenomenon. Six administrative support staff members who oversee the institution's daily operations were additionally included in the sample because their perspectives on the quality of service provided to students and the value proposition of the case investigated are crucial.

For the following reasons, the number of participants was deemed appropriate for the objectives and questions studied (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:234):

- The data were thoroughly analysed, and no new evidence was discovered (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:178).
- In terms of experience and perceptions, the participant pool was heterogeneous and varied (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:239).
- Numerous data collection methods were used, including document review, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions to ensure rich and in-depth data.

3.3.3 Collection of data

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005:94), the qualitative approach is used to answer questions about the nature of the phenomenon. It is used primarily to comprehend the phenomenon from the participants' perspective. According to Leedy and Ormrod

(2005:134), qualitative research serves four purposes: description, interpretation, verification, and evaluation. In addition, data will be collected from the managers via face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured interview with each manager.

This study focused on the experiences of managers and administrative support staff, their views of DE's value proposition, and how conducting out-of-service quality will contribute to the institution's value proposition adaptation. These perceptions and experiences were studied by selecting senior management responsible for implementing and assuring TQM principles in the HEI and supporting those accountable for the institution's day-to-day operations. Because the researcher is the primary research instrument for data collection, it is critical to maintain moral standards throughout the investigation. In support of this, the researcher always collaborated with the research assistant, who was knowledgeable and experienced in the research component. Furthermore, the researcher and research assistant practised peer scrutiny and face validity to ensure the trustworthiness of the investigation. The results of the findings were compared to eliminate any miscommunications and to reduce any bias.

Truthfulness in research is essential for conducting effective research. The study design discussed this aspect through the researcher's honesty, depth, richness, and scope of data collected, triangulation, and objectivity (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:105). Triangulation will aid in cross-checking findings to provide a valid and reliable approach to comprehending the phenomenon under investigation to ensure direct authority over the variables that could influence the reliability of the investigation (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:45).

Data were gathered through document review and analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The researcher and the research assistant managed the interview questionnaires and answers.

3.3.3.1 Data collection processes

The following steps were followed before and throughout the data collection process:

Step 1: The Economics and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) at North-West University must grant ethical approval (Appendix F).

Step 2: We received permission to conduct the study at this institution from the Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (RDGC) (Appendix G).

Step 3: Identify those who participated.

Step 4: Set up interviews with those who participated.

Step 5: Interview transcription.

3.3.3.2 Document Review and Analysis

During the document review process, relevant studies, policies (quality policy), and procedures (general academic rule) regarding HEIs were examined to confirm and improve knowledge about the industry. A literature review of TQM procedures employed in higher education was thoroughly conducted (Yin, 2009:103). All internal documentation on the HEIs quality frameworks, student satisfaction, and ability to adhere to regulatory requirements were reviewed.

3.3.3.3 In-depth interviews

In case study research, a personal in-depth interview is an essential data collection method (Yin, 2009:106). The interview session included senior and middle management from the DE section within the HEI under investigation. The interviews were employed to determine the methods used by the institution to ensure the delivery of good quality service, to assess the standard of service delivery, and to continue to adapt its fundamental procedures. The interview guide in Appendix C outlines the flow of the inquiries and the subjects covered during the interviews. The in-depth interview enabled the researcher to gather information connected directly with the study's objectives, and it also made a few unclear uncertainties that arose because of the document analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:268).

During the semi-structured interviews, were used to acquire unique and tailored memories and viewpoints from the participants, alongside an opportunity to ask further inquiries whenever necessary (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:216).

Since there were time limitations on arranging the attendance of the engaging upper management and middle management for extended interviews, the following procedure was followed (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:227):

- A request via email was sent to all those being interviewed describing the subject matter of the investigation and why they were asked for an interview;
- The email was then followed up with a phone conversation a few days later to answer any inquiries that interviewees were likely to have about the investigation and the interview;
- A guide for the interviews (see Appendix C) was created that described the sequence of the inquiries as well as the subjects that were dealt with during the interview;
- A time and date that was convenient for each interviewee were set;
- Consent was received from the people being interviewed for recording the interview to avoid the loss of important information; and
- Notes from the field were recorded during the interview process.

3.3.3.4 Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews enabled the researcher to conduct the interviews within a particular demographic structure, resulting in engagement between group members and the generation of data and outcomes because of the discussions that occurred during the discussions (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:288). Focus group interviews were scheduled with the HEIs administrative support staff to allow the researcher to gain an awareness of their interactions with the quality-of-service delivery and the barriers to it. The focus group discussions enabled the researcher to clarify and comprehend the data obtained from the document review. The interview guide in Appendix D outlines the flow of the inquiries and the subjects covered during the interview. The focus group discussions occurred in a central location convenient for the staff members.

3.3.4 Analysis of the data

There are several approaches or techniques for analysing qualitative data. The most used methods are thematic Analysis (TA), Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA), grounded research, and qualitative analysis of content. The in-depth investigation data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006:101) TA method. The adaptability of TA to be used throughout various frameworks for responding to several types of research questions led to its selection throughout other data analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006:101).

3.3.4.1 Thematic Analysis

TA is a popular qualitative data analysis method that is defined as "a qualitative analysis technique that involves recognising, analysing, and communicating themes (patterns) within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006:101). It identifies meaning patterns throughout data sets which offer a response to the investigation question at hand. A meticulous method of data familiarisation, data coding, and creation of themes is used to identify patterns.

3.3.4.1.1 Methods of thematic analysis

Interviews have been conducted with senior executives, line management and support staff to learn about their perceptions of TQM implementation within the institution. The interviews generated enough data to be analysed using the TA approach. Braun and Clarke's (2006:101) Six-phase Guidelines for Thematic Data Analysis were used. They are as follows:

1. Get acquainted with the data.
2. Create the initial codes.
3. Look for a theme.
4. Examine the themes.
5. Themes should be defined and named.
6. Make a report.

Phase 1: Get acquainted with the data

Because the data gathering and analysis processes were conducted concurrently, Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data occurred during the gathering of information period. This encompasses repeatedly reviewing the data until the subject matter is fully understood. The immersion method involves examining the data repeatedly to find implications and sequences (Braun & Clarke 2006:101). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006:101) warn against skipping this first phase because it "provides foundational information for the remainder of the analysis.

The researcher became acquainted with the findings by repeatedly reviewing the power source recorded (raw data) shortly after each interview. An interview guide served as a template to expand the collected data in each interview. It is retained in distinct documents so that every data has a separate file (11 in total). The reading process was done actively (Braun & Clarke 2006:101). Unique font colours highlighted important meanings. After each interview, the researcher read, expanded the data, and searched for patterns, becoming acquainted with the breadth and depth of the information provided (Braun & Clarke 2006:101). In addition, the eleven interviews scribed material necessitated adequate administration and storage of soft copy documents that were retained electronically.

Phase 2: Create the initial codes

Reading the information in the text under every question was the first step in identifying codes. The respondent experiences were highlighted for every question and response. Ryan and Barnard (2003:109) recommend demonstrating codes in different colours.

A significant portion of the information had been successfully determined and pointed out using appropriate colour codes after the entire coding procedure.

Phase 3: Look for a theme

This phase involved searching for and "discovering" themes from the codes identified in Phase 2. Themes are defined as "recurrent and unique characteristics of participants' accounts, characterising specific encounters that the researcher regards as associated with the research question" by King and Horrocks (2010:150). A theme,

according to Braun and Clarke (2006:101), "captures a significant aspect regarding the data in connection with the study's question and demonstrates some level of pattern of reaction or significance within the data set." Furthermore, according to Ryan and Bernard (2003:88), themes emerge from* "the distinctive features of the phenomenon studied."

Ryan and Bernard's (2003:109) guidelines for discovering themes from datasets were followed, which include "word repetitions," "compare," "social science issues," "metaphors and analogies," and "transitions." This study used a compare (similarities and differences) approach to identify patterns and themes in the data; one theme has been contrasted to various other concepts from the same information to identify differences and similarities. The contrasting and contrasting approach, as defined by Ryan and Bernard (2003:109), has characteristics comparable to the constant comparing technique used in the grounded theory framework. However, steady analysis of comparison has since been modified to evaluate data gathered in just one round of interviews, as reported by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007:565).

Phase 4: Examine the themes

The theme identification process was carried out. It entailed bringing together comparable concepts throughout the information sets and considering concepts unique to the respective interviewees. Themes such as these have significance because the quality of service is specific to the setting and is understood through the service user's perceptions. King and Horrocks' (2010:150) declaration that it is "useful for discovering themes distinctive to an individual case" [interview] lends support to considering individual codes.

The criterion employed was to connect exclusively themes closely associated with the research questions. Additional themes that failed to meet the requirements were eliminated.

Phase 5: Themes should be defined and named

The themes were developed further and given names to determine each theme's narrative. The names of the themes correspond to the topics discussed during the interviews.

Phase 6: Make a report

The results are presented in Section 4.2 of the following chapter, which also includes a written report on the analysis that the researcher conducted.

3.3.5 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, validity refers to the trustworthiness of the results and is made up of four criteria (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:44):

- Credibility relates to how well participants' practices are conveyed in the data analysis. The study's credibility was enhanced by verbatim transcription of interviews and focus group discussions and using numerous data collection methods.
- Transferability relates to whether the research findings can apply to a larger population or in different circumstances. Because this case study only focused on the DE at the HEI, additional research among other HEIs, can be conducted in the future.
- Dependability is like reliability in quantitative research and relates to the "auditing" of the researcher's study method (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:44). Keeping accurate records of all phases of the research procedure was ensured.
- Confirmability refers to the researcher's objectivity during the study process. The researcher secured the study's validity by not allowing personal values or theoretical inclinations to influence the research operations.

3.3.6 Reliability

The proof that various researchers can duplicate the research results piloted using the same methodology is reliable (Riege, 2003:81). The researcher's relationship with the interviewees and focus group members was established to ensure reliability. Likewise, the research objectives and the role of the sample group were also established. According to Yin (2009:45), dependability aims to minimise flaws and biases in the study. The researcher will take the following steps to ensure reliability:

- Ensure that the data are complete during the data collection and analysis process.
- Never deviate from the codes when analysing data.
- Establish an affiliation between the researcher, the individual, and the focus group participants.

3.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter described the research method used to investigate the implementation of TQM measurements in modifying the significance proposal of the DE within a HEI. The motivation for using a method of qualitative investigation was justified, and the information collection and analysis procedures were described thoroughly.

The findings of the research investigation will be analysed and discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: EMPIRICAL OUTCOMES, INCLUDING DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The descriptive results of the study are presented and addressed in this chapter. The findings of the study originate from the analysis of the personal semi-structured interviews with the middle- and upper management of the DE in the HEI. The focus group interviews with the administrative support staff provided information regarding the DE's daily operation functions.

All the focus group meetings and interviews were conducted during working hours at the DE institution. Appendices E and F provide interview questions for managers and support administrative staff. The data obtained during the research study focused on participants' responses to the queries posed to them.

In both instances, frequency tables simplified the information collected and to understand the research findings. According to Motlhodi (2012:47), data analysis entails performing associated processes, including the editing process, coding, classification, and tabulation of data to summarise the information gathered in a way that may respond to the research question(s).

4.2 DATA PRESENTATION

As described in the research methodology, the qualitative research design enabled the individual conducting the study to acquire an understanding of and explore managers' and administrative staff perceptions and experiences in real-world settings (Andrews, 2012:39). Because the goal of the research was not to generalise, the data was examined and analysed in its entirety, with analogies derived between the cases to identify parallels and discrepancies using a social constructivist strategy in the interpretations.

This was simply because the researcher wanted to discover the distinct differences between the two groups of participants. The focus group findings are mentioned at the end of this chapter.

Table 4 summarises the participants in the study, with management participants designated as M1-10 and administrative support staff as A1-6.

Table 4: A Summary of study's participants

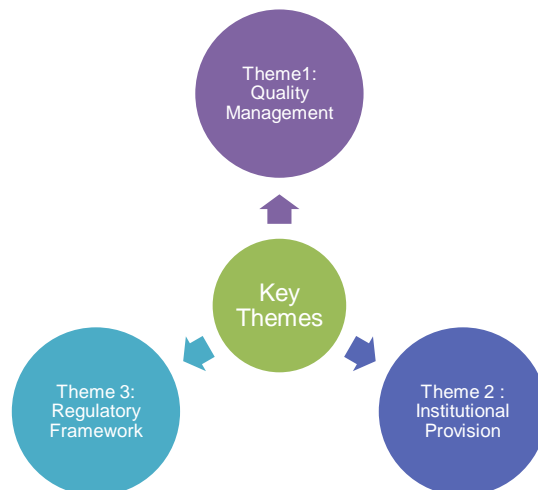
Participants	Management Level (Years of experience in DE)		Administrative Support Staff (Years of experience in DE)
	Senior Management	Middle Management	
M1		7	
M2		5	
M3	9		
M4	5		
M5	9		
M6	9		
M7	22		
M8	20		
M9	15		
M10	3		
A1			6
A2			6
A3			6
A4			8
A5			4
A6			7

The recorded conversations from the focus group and interviews were transcribed and examined, and emerging terms from different individuals were highlighted and coded. Table 5 summarises the emerging descriptions from the data.

4.2.1 Research findings

The researcher used the data analysis procedure described in chapter 4 to analyse the data. Participants' exact words were transcribed during the focus group conversations and interviews to create themes (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2014:596). The researcher analysed the data manually using Microsoft Word and Excel-based devices. Even though there are several automated computer software applications for qualitative data analysis, which include Atlas.ti and NVivo, Burnard *et al.*, (2008) indicate that these programs cannot analyse the data but rather regulate it, thereby rendering data handling more straightforward. The researchers emphasise that analysing the data is the researcher's duty.

Figure 2: The data revealed the following significant findings



The researcher analysed the data by categorising the unprocessed information into a table (see Table 5) as categories emerged under each theme.

Table 5: Themes and subcategories

Themes	Subcategories	Codes
Quality management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality • Service delivery • Improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback • Follow-ups
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • Empathy
Institutional provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering distance education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficiency • Benchmarking • Resources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible and adaptable processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology • Training
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student-focused approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support
Regulatory framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effect of compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation • Monitoring • Evaluations • Policies

The categories and subcategories were used to structure the qualitative findings. In each case, quotes from the interviews appear in the text.

4.3 RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The research findings were categorised by employing codes to determine the subcategories (as shown in Table 6), followed by codes to choose the themes. The following discussions utilised the subcategories and topics as main headings and subheadings.

4.3.1 Quality Management

Quality management has become an extensive topic; literature and management responses define the management of quality as being responsible and designed to guarantee adherence to the techniques through which quality services are guaranteed and encompasses compliance with necessities (Tricker, 2010:23). This issue involves maintaining operations support the concept of doing everything right the first time and guaranteeing that there are no mistakes in the execution of services as well as ensuring that operations and procedures are consistent (Tricker, 2010:23). Studying the summary of answers, it was clear that the majority of those who took part had adequate knowledge of the meaning of quality management and how it is implemented to their work. This was made clear during the raw data collection process when the institution's use of quality manuals or the word "quality" kept coming up frequently.

This group aimed to assess whether TQM was employed within the DE inside the HEI and how it was executed to maintain excellence within the institution.

In addition, two subcategories emerged during the data analysis:

- Influence of TQM execution; and
- Quality of service delivery.

4.3.1.1 Influence of TQM Execution

The DE institution is involved in various activities, both academic and administrative. When these activities are combined, they form a procedure in the institution, and both the processes and operations are associated with TQM.

During the management interviews, the focus was on determining how TQM is carried out within UDL and, which monitoring measures have been implemented to guarantee student satisfaction and that students accomplish their goals and graduate as expected at the start of their educational journey with the institution. According to the interviews, the institution follows a method known as TQM. It maintains its capacity to deliver high learning, while administrative services standards must be improved by continually enhancing the DE processes to offer value to students.

The quality of academic support services offered is additionally related to the regulatory framework. Therefore, an external quality assurance component already exists, but the DE also values an in-house quality assurance component. This was evident from the comment from **Participant M5**, who noted that:

"... However, we do have quality manuals, process manuals, and distance education processes. An instruction manual for providing distance education is also available. So, I make certain that the other things that constitute the golden thread exist in every detail we plan to do in the services that we offer throughout our procedures, we constantly consider how to proceed and how they guide us. We have some of the things that I personally make use of are, for instance, the distance education good practice guide".

Everyone in management agreed that processes are critical to ensuring students' happiness. TQM was determined to be an in-house quality structure for teaching and learning adopted within the DE, and feedback from students is employed to track how satisfied students are in terms of the DE's overall service delivery. The DE institution also schedules peer evaluations to ensure objectivity, which is not a regulatory requirement but offers the institution an advantageous benchmark. This was evident when **Participant M5** stated the following;

"...So I considered assessing evaluations of programmes, self-evaluation, and external assessments with peers: For instance, the privilege of peers might consist of people from the University of South Africa (UNISA) or another institution. And then we have an evaluation that essentially describes how we do things followed by the recommendations, so that's the kind of thing I considered regarding our internal evaluations".

In summary, quality management integration exists at both the process and organisational levels. Management is aware of the institution's TQM practices, and that results in enhancements. An additional examination of the institution's perception of quality due to TQM implementation follows.

4.3.1.2 Quality of service delivery

Every day, academic and administration-related personnel complete several tasks in the DE institution. When these operations are grouped, they create a process within the institution, and the two procedures are relevant to TQM and its implementation.

During the management interviews, the focus was on determining how TQM is carried out in the organisation and what evaluation procedures are in place for maintaining the satisfaction of students. According to the interviews, the DE institution follows a strategy known as TQM and believes that the institution's ability to offer high standards in academics and administrative services needs to be improved by continuously enhancing the procedures to provide value to distance students.

The participants identified quality as one of the most frequently employed terms. According to Bobby (2014), the meaning of quality in higher education is complex, with numerous definitions. The framework for regulation depends on an understanding of quality as it pertains to how effectively the institution is conducting the primary objective of HE. It consists of the institution's effectiveness (CHE, 2004:11). The regulatory structure is an external quality control mechanism. The above context implies that quality management must be focused inwards. This qualitatively reflective thinking was further demonstrated by the study's data, with everyone in management confirming that excellent performance is the institution's responsibility. This was indicated by **Participant M6** in her comment about the responsibility of each employee when she said the following:

"... All of us are responsible, it is not only one person's responsibility. Again, it's not only the quality office that is responsible. If you think of the Student Academic Lifecycle Administration (SALA) process, one must you know the application and the registration process. Administrative support should account and take the responsibility for quality control during these processes.

This was also attested by **Participant M5** in her statement:

"... I think that firstly, we need to take the responsibility, we need to change the perception that people that should worry about quality is only the quality officers. I continuously preach that quality is everyone's business, because in your job, if you

already do your own quality control, do your own checks, verification, all those things, right? And if you want to make sure that what you are producing or what you are doing is proper work, right, then it moves on to the next person. Then it is that person's responsibility to also do the same”.

The data analysis also revealed that in nearly every one of the cases, managers used the terms "quality" and "service delivery" were connected. Table 6 shows the significance of the two terms and the detrimental effects on the DE if these conditions are not improved within the institution.

Table 6: Service quality delivery and the impact of its deficiency

Delivery of high-quality services to ensure student satisfaction	Damaging cases of not delivering high-quality services
<p>“...It is so important for me to realise service delivery and the quality of service is so important as these other students we train, and we send them out into the world and into the work industry. So, it is important, be it in the administrator department or the academic department, students need to be supported in both aspects, both academically and administratively”. M1</p>	<p>“...That is a reputational risk for the institution, and it can harm the HEI's image and the reputation thereof”. M3</p>
<p>“...Service quality means that they have access to the information they need, and we communicate with them. We also set up a platform on the web where they can access their information from there. We also have a very good SMS structure in place where we inform students about what is going on. We also give training on eFundi (an online learning and providing instruction system that brings</p>	<p>“...So, as managers, we must constantly talk about the possibilities that are accessible, make students aware of what they can have, and we shouldn't wait for them to ask. We should be proactive in informing them that this is what library services can provide. Most of them are not aware that we, as an institution, provide such services.” M3</p>

<p>together enrolled distance students and lecturers). M4</p>	<p>Sharing information is critical for our students because if they lack knowledge about what the institution provides, they may become dissatisfied with the services. M3</p>
<p>"...I would say service quality for students is prompt feedback and communication. It is quality teaching and learning material. It's a support of teaching and learning experience. Exceptional administrative support. And one of the other things that they did mention, for instance, was fast delivery of study material. So those are the types of things that students look at and basically rate you and say that you have provided quality service to them. Good service to them". M5</p>	<p>"...And to make the process as straightforward as possible so that it does not hinder their ability to complete their qualification, like the delivery of study material, because it has an impact on their submission of assignments. For an example, if a student receives his or her study material late it will have a negative impact on the success of her academic results". M8</p>
<p>"...Evaluation forms is one of the things in place, and the other is I believe, these surveys that we occasionally conduct, and I believe with these questionnaires we can discover gaps in our service delivery". M6</p> <p>"...So that's one of the ways that we make sure that the students' needs are adhered to". M5</p>	<p>"... It is for this reason that we do site visits like when we go for site evaluations, right? And we get a student who must deal with, amidst the anxiety of the examination, who must wait for an invigilator who arrives late. Students are frustrated, and states that it constantly happens and all of that. These forms help us to keep the people accountable for a change because if that is not enhanced, the student might end up dropping the studies or even failing after that bad experience". M5</p>

According to management data, high-quality delivery of services has an advantageous effect on students' perceptions of the institution's standards. The term "quality" was used interchangeably with "standards" or "high standards" by management.

The following were key aspects regarding quality service delivery: 1) the DE institution is trying to provide improved services and support distance students by bridging the gap between the HEI and the students. 2) Providing prompt feedback from academics and administrators about the educational value of the course delivered at DE. In this regard, **Participant M5**, commented:

"... If I had to put that head and judging based on some of the feedback that we have received from students, I would say service quality for students is prompt feedback and communication. It is quality teaching and learning material. It's a support of teaching and learning experience. Exceptional administrative support. And one of the other things that they did mention, for instance, was fast delivery of study material. So those are the types of things that students look at and basically rate you and say that you have provided quality service to them. Good service to them".

Finally, the data demonstrated that the institution prioritises providing excellent services to guarantee students' happiness by taking a student-centred approach to service delivery. According to Stander (2017:89), institutions have a greater emphasis on satisfaction with students and addressing their requirements in their larger institution's function of educational instruction and overall effectiveness. Paul and Pradhan (2019:262) confirm that the quality of service is the most significant dimension of value that influences student satisfaction. Student satisfaction is critical for the institution because it ensures its long-term viability as previously alluded by Khan & Matlay (2009:780).

4.3.2 Institutional provision

DE is part of the bigger HE industry and competes with other educational institutions within an environment with strict regulations. The data analysis demonstrated the following subcategories:

- Offering distance education
- Flexible and adaptable processes

- The student-focused approach

4.3.2.1 Offering Distance Education

The DE differentiating feature is the way its methods of operation are business-driven. Although this institution operates in an environment of strict regulations, they have the freedom to be proactive, open to change, and original in how it conducts business to keep itself not exclusively competitive but also economically viable and relevant.

Managers had a strong feeling that HEIs would continue to be formidable rivals due to their history and legacy, so the DE technique needed to be distinctive in how they provided services to the target demographic.

This was more evident when **Participant M2** commented the following;

"...It is important for us to continually ask the following questions: are our courses of high-quality, technology functional is it accessible and easy to use, how we communicate with and supporting students via distance communication, how we evolve according to the times, is it flexible to the distance students' needs. Are we still significant? Are we still current? Are we still on track with our core business, which delivers a service to distance students"?

Participant M9 continued by stating the following:

"...We need to be relevant, offering current programmes that are significant in the field. One does not want to provide programmes that are out of date or that students will be unable to use in the future'.

Additionally, there is a requirement to maintain distance students to be perceived as individuals and not become entangled in the institution's numbers, as well as to understand why these individuals chose the DE institution. It is evident that even as managers focused on how they could enhance the administrative and academic services of the institution with a particular emphasis on delivering services. It also broadens the value proposition for the institution while increasing the satisfaction of distance students. Some of the managers mentioned the importance of treating distance students differently. **Participant M6** mentioned the following,

"... We must consider our distance students' backgrounds. Because 90% of our distance students are working adults, they must gather the information at night or on weekends, and the full-time student can access it immediately. However, the standard you set must be equivalent to that set for full-time students".

In summary, while the focus was on determining what the DE institution offers, the interviews naturally shifted to comparing the two types of students: full-time and distance. It was also clear that all the DE staff members are working to provide DE students with the same level of academic and administrative support as they do for full-time students. It was good to notice during the interviews that the academic staff are more cognisant of the fact that the distance student should be given the same academic support as the full-time students. The researcher believes that if the DE institution places more emphasis on the assertion, it could alter the perspective of previous researchers, (Warrender *et al.*, 2005), who pointed out that it is ironic that distant students are given significantly less support than full-time students, which raises their failure rate.

4.3.2.2 Flexible and adaptable processes

Aside from meeting the regulating authority's requirements for institutional registration and programme accreditation, the DE has the freedom and independence to decide how they want to conduct their business within the framework on the level of the HEI.

To remain in business, the institution must devise methods of communicating with distance students; thus, they must be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of the students. The DE institution's management must know the market it serves and the anticipated target to evolve and modify its operations, which will enhance the value proposition offered by the DE institution within the HEI, resulting in greater student satisfaction. The institution has certain unique features because educational services are characterised by elevated intangibility, customisation ability, abstract character, high cost, and significant impact on students. Numerous factors affect the institutions' operations (Marzo, Pedraja, Rivera, 2007:80) some are under their control (education quality, institution curricula, management), while others are a result of external factors (e.g., changes in the labour market, globalisation of the education market, shifts in the

age structure, the emergence of more appealing educational alternatives, youths' lack of motivation for learning, etc.).

The above statement was confirmed by **Participant M2** as he stated the following:

"... South Africa has a robust landscape, and you must be creative in the marketplace. You must know where you want to fit in the market first, the education market. There is not an online modality that suits all potential students, so we need to see which students we need to target and how to get there. We are entering the 4IR, but for a lot of people, that is not a reality. We cannot go into 4IR if the people do not even have the technology. You do not leave a student behind; you leave a community behind.

The DE administration is cognisant that not every distance student has access to the Internet, nor do they have an electronic device to access previous recordings of lectures. For this reason, the DE institution intends to set up learning hubs in various provinces where students can access libraries and computers. Hubs may improve equal treatment by providing distance students who struggle more with distance education, such as those who lack connectivity to the Internet or electronic devices, a secure environment for learning, or an individual who may offer guidance and advice within the learning hub. Additionally, this will improve the continuity of the standard of support full-time students receive at the university, as distance students will receive services from the learning hubs.

The above was commented on by **Participant M3**:

"...I am responsible for managing the Learning Support Centres (LSC) throughout the country and in Namibia. These are venues where students will attend when we have Whiteboard sessions. We currently have 46 LSCs across South Africa and Namibia. However, I must indicate that we are scaling them down and we have only 25 LSCs. The institution is moving fully online from the next academic year. We intend to close all of them next year and open the learning hubs where our students will fully be assisted as if they are on campus".

However, it is of the utmost importance for the researcher to express her concern about a gap in the institution's decision to close the LSCs for the following reasons.

A report released by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (2010:10) discovered that many students enrolled with the DE institutions go to the institution's LSC's and the main campus "searching for physical and social spaces where they can learn, evolve, and belong to a community of HE students. Because of the distinctive features of distance learning, most of DE structures are fundamentally at the other end of the communication spectrum. Distance learning relationships between students are inherently lower than interactions between students in traditional learning modes.

Communication deficiencies and academic gaps will likely result in elevated dropout and failure rates and study non-completion Simpson (2002). It has been suggested that offering suitable student support services at the LSC may solve the communication and pedagogical gaps associated with DE while helping students overcome most of their learning difficulties. The LSC is a liaison between the institution and the student (Krishnan 2012:460). In addition, many DE practitioners, including Mannan (2008:14) and Fraser and Killen (2005:40), have emphasised the significance of LSC as one of the most significant student support services in assisting DE students to achieve their academic goals.

Even though we are living in the 4IR times and seeing that the institution needs to be flexible and adaptable, the DE within the institution is relevant and adaptable to socioeconomic changes and strives to meet the needs of the students. During the data evaluation process, it was determined that most managers viewed adaptability primarily by delivering excellent services to students.

Participant M6 also mentioned how important it is to adapt the way they communicate with the distance students as follows;

"... The role of social media in the entire procedure of providing excellent customer service. I believe it is an instrument that we can use to improve quality, detect potential problems as well as avoid them, to be proactive. It is an instrument for diagnosis that shows us where we are experiencing issues so we can fix them. We can use it as a platform for social interaction because everyone is on Facebook and Instagram. People use it, and we need to use it to our advantage to further enhance quality within the DE institution".

Finally, managers see DE institution adaptability as permitting them to further enhance quality through being competent to make faster decisions about processes that are not working to improve service delivery and student satisfaction. This is related to the findings of Stander (2017:22), who indicates that stakeholders expect high standards for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of institutions in operations and that HEIs should be focused on student satisfaction.

4.3.2.3 The student-focused approach

Khoo *et al.*, (2017:432) reveal the significance of service delivery when a customer-centred approach is used. Customers' happiness or discontent with an institution is determined by their assessment of the standard of service provided. The evidence from the interviews supports the justifications of Khoo *et al.*, (2017:433), emphasising the significance of institutions taking a student-centred approach. It was clear that everyone in the management acknowledged that providing excellent student service is critical to their business operations and accomplishments. The key messages from the interviews indicate that students are at the core of the institution's operations.

During data analysis, four subcategories, namely support, communication, convenient processes, and empathy, were identified where management felt that the DE operations were indeed student-centred in their approach.

a) Support

The management's opinion of distance student support became clearer as "support" was brought up 30 times during management interviews. **Participant M1** states that:

"...It is so important for me to realise service delivery and the quality of service is so important as these other students we train, and we send them out into the world and into the work industry. So, it is important, be it in the administrator department or the academic department, students need to be supported in both aspects, both academically and administratively".

Then **Participant M7** stated that: *"...So that is what I consider to be service quality. However, regarding everything that we must do in support, we must be focused on the client, putting the student first. We would like these students to have an excellent*

encounter with the institution. We must provide them with all the resources they require for them to have a positive and seamless experience with us”.

However, for quality service delivery and support to the students, administrative support staff must also be provided with the necessary support to perform optimally.

Participant A1 commented during the focus group discussion that:

“... Regarding everything that we must do in support, we must be focused on the client, putting the student first. We would like these students to have an excellent encounter with the institution. I do not believe that we are receiving enough support from management. It is extremely difficult. I sat for two months without a computer, which I needed to do my work. I spent two months doing filing in a storeroom. Finally, I obtained an old computer, that I must warm up in the morning before I can assist students and provide quality service”.

Participant A5 continued to comment by saying: *“...I believe decision-making is not solely the responsibility of our line managers, as they must also hear from someone higher up. We give our input; we make suggestions, and it is taken up, and then it is taken up again. But, you see, it takes phases before those decisions are implemented”.*

The above comments demonstrate a gap in staff support because one way to enhance the quality of service is to encourage your employees. An example of empowerment is giving employees a sense of power to make decisions without seeking approval. This allows them to make choices to resolve students' issues quickly and without making the students wait (Jaupi & Llaci; 2014:112)

Also, giving administrative support staff what they need increases efficiency, accuracy, and quality, reduces inaccuracies, conserves students' time and money, reduces frustration and anxiety, and maintains competency in the institution and in the process, enhancing the service delivery.

Another point realised by the researcher in this comment is the confinement of power, in which line managers cannot quickly solve problems or devise a preventative plan. They are fully capacitated by daily leadership tasks and managing everyday operations.

As the structure of authority expands, so does its rank system. The bureaucracy slows down the process of decision-making, interaction, and action. Communication and requests must go up and back down the stream of command, which causes things to slow down. According to Robbins *et al.*, 2015 bureaucracy can be particularly damaging in fast-paced workplaces, such as DE institutions, where students can be frustrated if they do not get prompt responses or feedback.

b) Communication

Knowledge can be shared with students through effective communication. The most significant component that contributes to effective distance education is communication. A variety of factors could cause dropout rates in DE. According to the available research (Fraser & Killen, 2005:40; Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007:15; Simpson, 2003), communication failure leads to dissatisfaction among DE students, who disregard their studies (Simpson, 2003). Jung *et al.*, 2010:83) back up this assertion by looking at the fact that social isolation, insufficient faculty attention, and a lack of appropriate student support all contribute to high dropout rates. Furthermore, Kwek, Lau and Tan (2010:172) state that the service quality offered by DE contributes to students' performance and retention rates.

As a result, throughout the interviews with management, several of the members of management made the following statements:

Participant M8 states that: *"...There should be communication if we don't communicate clearly, we're going to have problems and then we need to have seamless processes"*.

Participant M4 continues by saying: *"Service quality means that they have access to the information they need, and we communicate with them. We also set up a platform on the web where they can access their information from there. We also have a very good SMS structure in place where we inform students about what is going on. We also give training on eFundi. This is an online platform that is used to interact with the students for the announcements and it can also be used for the submission of assignments and tests online."*

Participant M7 also states that: *"So, communication with students and the information that we provide distance students should feel as part of the HEI. So, I think that is critical and the access they need. Access to all information as much as possible, information that they need and require. And for me, it is communication and information because of distance education, and the information must be clear. It must be the correct information. There's a fine line between too much communication and too little. So that is very important"*.

Participant M10 adds: *"...another is communication or resolution of complaints. It is very critical, especially for distance learning. A contact learner can come into the office and do what they want, but distance students cannot do that because of the transactional distance. So, if there is no instant communication or reasonable feedback from either the administration office, a lecturer, or the finance office for that distance student, then we are not giving a service at all.*

Participant M3 states that: *"Sometimes we do not communicate enough with students by the time we communicate, it is late. Now, we only communicate at registration and then at graduation. In between, we do nothing. Sometimes, students submit assignments and are not registered for the module. We are currently forming a department called Student Support Services, whereby we will continuously communicate with students. When they are registered, we check whether they are registered correctly. We need to improve on communication. The student support centre will be the middleman between the call centre and the lecturing, making sure that information gets back, or the student does receive the feedback. It is important for the DE students to know exactly what they're supposed to be doing because if they're not doing the right thing, it will reflect badly on us. Hence, communication is extremely important"*.

This is notable because the institution employed in this study solely offers distance education. Students in a distance learning mode of delivery may face a variety of challenges, including failing to attend on time, not being able to have the opportunity to speak with lecturers who can address challenges with understanding the subject matter material and failing to maintain a connection with their educational experience in general. For this purpose, management at the DE institution continues to attempt to enhance communication to provide better customer service to distance students.

It is all wonderful and very strategic with the communication that is in place for the students. However, there is a lack of information from management to the operational level or the administrative support staff. In this regard, **Participant A3** commented that:

“It is critical to communicate with staff members. However, most of the time, we are not apprised of the communications that are sent to the students, and as administrative staff, we are unaware because we were not informed of the management’s decision. If students do not understand the information that has been communicated to them, they will seek clarification from us. However, because we were not informed of the changes or decisions, we are unable to assist the students, which makes us appear incapable of performing our duties and has an impact on the quality of our services”.

Using communication strategies should ensure that critical information reaches the appropriate individuals. Everyone must be on the same page for the workforce to be more efficient. Important information should be disseminated equitably across the organisation, with little or no details overlooked. Employees may find it challenging to fulfil their responsibilities properly if they lack complete knowledge. For example, clients and staff should be fully informed if your company changes policy. A good communication plan guarantees that everyone engaged has enough information to talk about it, ensuring workplace uniformity and avoiding ambiguity and that will enhance the service delivery within the institution.

c) Convenient Processes

It is critical for the achievement of DE to make students knowledgeable about the available resources to help them make their experience simpler regarding how to access these resources.

Finally, the student-focused approach is remarkably comparable to that that preceded the provisions on the versatility and adaptability of DE institutions' procedures. It additionally appears clear from the management's perspective that there is a need for individual and human interaction, which corresponds with their decision to use distance education. The findings of this study findings attest that DE inside the HEI focuses on establishing more customer-focused processes and approaches, which is consistent with the findings of a study by Van Schalkwyk (2018), who additionally

identified individual attention as an important factor in DE. The management team should use communication techniques to reach out to each student, regardless of their background.

d) Empathy

Empathy enables institutions to devise more precise studies attempting to measure feelings of compassion in how they deliver teaching and learning or how they interact with the students and to put into effect more reliable instructional initiatives involving empathy.

There is strong agreement in the field of education research that feeling empathy is highly beneficial for enhancing educational achievement (see, for example, Meyers *et al.*, 2019: 162); empathy teachers are found to improve the engagement of students (Cardoso *et al.*, 2012:155) as well as promote self-regulation (Young, 2005:40).

There is strong agreement in the field of education research that feeling empathy is highly beneficial to enhancing educational achievement (see, for example, Meyers *et al.*, 2019: 162), and enhances the service delivery thereof, has been found to improve the engagement of students (Cardoso *et al.*, 2011:155) as well as promote self-regulated students (Young, 2005:40).

The importance of empathy was attested during the discussion by both the management and administrative support staff, who commented the following:

Participant M9 states that: *"... and I believe that some empathy is also necessary. I'm not sure if I would call that a pillar, but I believe it's an important aspect, especially for distance students, who may feel isolated because they are not on campus"*.

Participant M4 adds that: *"We must consider our distance students' backgrounds. Because 90% of our distance students are working adults, they must gather the information at night or on weekends, and the full-time student will be able to access it immediately."*

However, from the perspective of the administrative supportive staff, **Participant A1** commented:

“...empathy. We need to know the kind of students we are delivering to. We need to know they are working students. They don't have Internet where they are staying. The equipment must be considered to accommodate students”.

The statement below was alluded by, A2 mentioned,

“...these students are working students, with some earning between R3500.000 and R4000.00 per month. They do not have internet where they are staying in the Eastern Cape because there are no WiFi towers. It is critical to understand the types of students we work with because this will help us, the administration, management, and academic staff, improve the quality of our service delivery”.

Empathy enables the management and the administrative support staff to develop more precise studies attempting to measure feelings of compassion in how they deliver the quality services of the institution and how best to interact with the students, as well as to put into effect more reliable instructional initiatives involving empathy.

When an institution and a student have an empathetic relationship, the student is more satisfied and experiences less stress. They also feel more secure, respected, and encouraged to pursue their educational goals (Maloney *et al.*, 2015:4).

Empathy-based understanding is essential to establishing a connection between the service organisation and the client. Students feel safe and confident in the professional's skills when that occurs. As a result, the knowledgeable individual and the student get closer, and their gap gets smaller, creating advantages for both (Kliszcz *et al.*, 2006:225).

4.3.3 Regulatory framework

The participants' responses were analysed to determine their perspectives on the regulatory framework's contribution to maintaining the quality of DE inside the HEI. Chapter 2 stipulated an overview of the HE industry's composition and explained the existence of various institutions within this industry, as well as pointed out the importance of ensuring that each of the institutions follows the same legal structure and rules enforced by the different regulatory bodies.

The managers agreed that the DE and the institution must adhere to the rules and regulations established by the regulatory agencies to uphold the quality of the DE and its efficient functioning in ensuring quality throughout accreditation processes and the development of new programmes. Participants are assumed to know specific aspects within the regulatory framework and that the DE indicates that quality programmes are offered.

This supports the findings of Thobega (2010:2637), who discovered that appropriate and trustworthy approval reassures students that the programmes and degrees offered by an HEI meet applicable academic and professional requirements. Even though the procedure for ensuring quality is external and more focused on quality control, the public perception created by compliance with the regulatory structure indicates that DE is of the same calibre and offers the same quality as that offered in a conventional learning environment where a student can attend class full-time and receive tutoring face-to-face.

Participant M4 also mentioned the following:

“... The support that we give to our distance students. What a lecturer presents to a contact student will also be presented to a distance student. I want to be clear that it is not being a copycat, as they also take the background into consideration. Most of the distance students are working adults, and they capture information at night or over weekends, where contact students will have it immediately. But the standard must be aligned with what you are giving to contact. That is quality, and to ensure quality, we need to be there to support students. They need to receive the same assistance as the contact students”.

However, it was evident throughout the interviews that certain executives lacked an understanding of the regulatory framework for HEIs, as some of the participants were unaware that institutions are obligated to comply with the requirements of external authorities, who are the custodians whose work is to evaluate the quality of service delivered in the HEIs across the country.

In conclusion, adherence to the regulatory framework positively impacts Thaver's (2006:862) results, which promote the opinions shared by the middle and upper

management that quality management refers to adhering to an established list of minimum requirements deemed critical to the institution's quality.

It is also important to note that the regulatory structure, therefore, offers basic support to institutions to maintain quality and standards. Still, it is designed in such a way that it cannot be measured continuously, which means that institutions must tackle quality in their internal procedures to provide an outstanding offering for students (Sallis, 2014:6).

Figure 3 provides a summary of the themes.

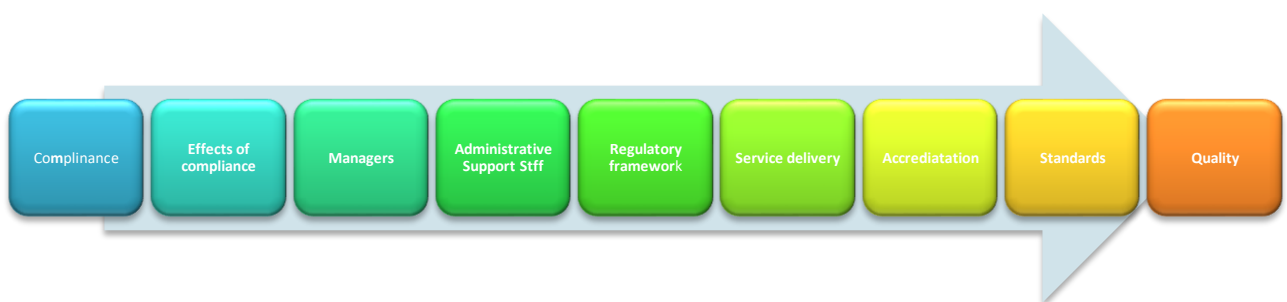


Figure 3: Summary of terms under the theme of compliance

4.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS SUMMARY

The outside quality systems, the implementation of TQM principles in the DE institution, and the impact these processes have on the institution's excellent service delivery and value proposition are summarised graphically in Figure 4.

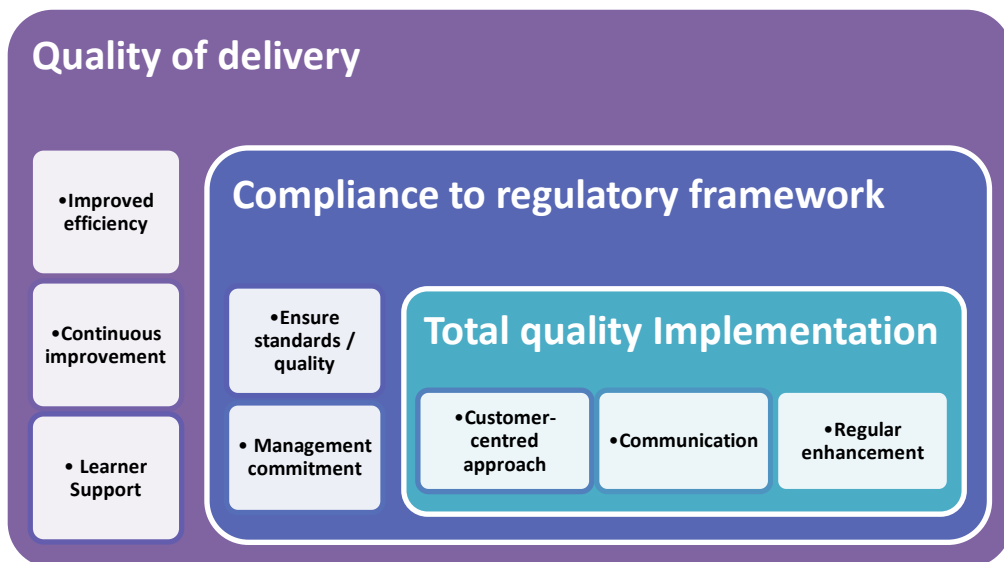


Figure 4: Findings of the study

Compliance with the legal framework is outside the institution, but it helps ensure high standards at DE institutions. It is perceived by management as a form of quality assurance by the institution and promises standards and quality.

TQM implementation in the DE institution brought about a customer-focused approach to service supply and regular enhancements in the service provided. These are critical components of the quality management system and the institutional offering, which help to demonstrate the significance of internal quality improvement over external quality control.

Internal quality measures are critical for DE institutions that are primarily business-driven and thus depend upon enrolment figures to fund their day-to-day operations. Therefore, the institutional offering should provide an edge over the competition for the HEI, and applying TQM principles is critical in this process. The institution is used to define quality and efficient management with centralised control, which has been viewed as the solution for attaining efficiency and effectiveness within an organisation. The primary focus should be on high-quality inputs into the delivery of student services.

In interviews with the institution's management, the TQM principles of concentrating on customers, continuous enhancement, collaboration, management commitment, communication, assessment, and feedback were established. Implementing TQM

resulted in quality service delivery, which serves as an advantage in the market for the DE institution, according to the analysis of administrative support staff responses.

Several potential benefits that the institution might provide students currently exist and are being developed because it is implementing a TQM strategy for its operations. It is critical for the institution to consider the needs of students because this will guide its strategies. Various value propositions that the institution might provide students exist and are currently being created because the institution is adopting a TQM approach in its operations. It is critical for the DE institution to consider the needs of students because this will guide its strategies. Furthermore, it will keep the institution competitive.

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter describes the data analysed from the semi-structured interviews conducted with senior managers and support staff during focus groups interviews. The researcher explained the data analysis methodology and how it was organised into concepts and subcategories. The results were addressed and backed up using participant verbatim accounts based on emerging themes. Evidence from the Chapter 2 literature review was used to support the findings. Further on, because of the data that had some similarities, indicating a consensus. Commonalities indicate that "a general conceptual framework for the quality of services can be developed" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985:44). It implies that the framework and metrics for comprehension and evaluation of the implementation of TQM, requirements, and opinions concerning the delivery of quality services in DE institutions established. However, the institution must continue to monitor the processes to enhance quality service delivery.

The themes derived from the study's data confirmed the utility quality of service dimensions in assessing service quality in DE by assessing tangibles, dependability, delivery, responsiveness, and assurance. These aspects are SERVQUAL aspects of quality (tangibles, dependability, reliability, responsiveness, and assurance). This indicates that SERVQUAL quality aspects are critical components of DE service quality, as the literature review indicates.

Chapter 5 presents the research study's findings, limitations, and recommendations regarding prospective studies in the DE in the HEI.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarises the research and draws conclusions based on the findings related to the research goals. The study's limitations are discussed, and suggestions to improve the service delivery in the DE institution are provided. This study's research opportunities and suggestions for future studies are presented.

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

In Chapter 1, an overview of the South African HEI context was provided (section 1.2.1), with a particular emphasis on DE (section 1.2.2), the impact of external changes on the HEI value proposition (section 1.2.3), and the significance of the quality of service to the DE within the HEI (section 1.2.4).

The problem statement stated that it was necessary to determine the impact of implementing TQM, the quality of services in the DE within the HEI, and the power source impact on value proposition adaptation (section 1.3). The goals and objectives of the investigation (section 1.4) were established for conducting empirical information on how well services are provided in the DE institution.

The qualitative research study and single case study approach (section 1.6) allowed the researcher to gain insight into the points of view and experiences of those who participated. Three different techniques were used to collect data for triangulation and confirmation (section 1.6.4). The research findings were interpreted using data analysis (section 1.6.5). All ethical procedures were followed (section 1.7), and the study's limitations were highlighted (section 1.8).

The second chapter focused on the HEIs currently operating in South Africa, with a particular emphasis on modifications to regulations that influenced DE within the HEI. The topic regarding quality throughout the HE sector was discussed, and historical details on the legal framework (section 2.2.5).

The HEI value proposition (section 2.2.2) has been clarified, followed by a discussion of the DE value proposition within the context of HEI (section 2.2.2.1).

Both the research approach (section 3.2) and the study development (section 3.3) have been addressed in Chapter 3. The researcher applied the actual study methodology for research (section 3.3.1) to a single case while offering a brief overview of the sample and unit of analysis used in the study's execution (section 3.3.2). Documentation investigation and evaluation (section 3.3.3.1), comprehensive interviews (section 3.3.3.2), and discussion in focus groups (section 3.3.3.3) were used to collect data for this case study.

The results analysis method (section 3.3.4) has been clarified, and the validity of the study (section 3.3.5) as well as reliability (section 3.3.6) were verified.

The dissertation author focuses on examining data and discussing what she discovered compared to the study, which was executed with senior and middle management in addition to administrative support staff employed by DE within the HEI in Chapter 4. Section 4.2 of the findings presentation offered details regarding the terms, themes, and categories that were discovered in the experimental research. The study's findings (section 4.3) have been laid out with verbatim quotations to support the research results. The following were the three predominant trends that appeared according to the data:

- Quality management;
- Institutional provision; and
- Regulatory framework.

Section 4.4 included an illustration of a summary of the findings.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

The following research constraints were identified:

- The experiences of executives and administrative support staff at the DE institution under scrutiny were presented, and the topic was linked to enhancing quality control and improving student service delivery. As a result, the study merely encompasses their points of view, and these cannot be extrapolated or employed in various other institutions.

- Because there is little data on the impact of the adoption of TQM in HEI, a case study of an exploratory nature was conducted to learn from participants' different points of view. However, more data are required as TQM develops in HEI. It could also lead to various interpretations.

5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

This research could be repeated to determine whether the present TQM surroundings are sustainable in terms of enhancing service delivery. Additionally, the study might solely concentrate on areas that need to be improved, and a comprehensive investigation to make improvements in these areas can be conducted.

The present research had constraints that students, who are service users and know how these offerings work, were not provided with a chance to be part of the research for their perspective of the level of quality and the services offered to them. In addition, because of the unique characteristics of services, such as intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability, the effectiveness (quality) of a service can only be evaluated by users on the delivery of services.

In conclusion, future research could investigate an assortment of samples for the investigation, including various DE institution participants.

- This study used a repeated-measures method to determine the opinions of students from their very first year of study through the completion of their qualification.
- By conducting a mixed research method study with all registered students, management, and administrative support staff, DE institutions might acquire additional knowledge to broaden institutional views.

5.5 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The following research findings are presented following the analysis of the literature on the HE environment in South Africa and the standard of quality management in the DE within the HEI, as well as the findings of the experimental investigation.

5.5.1 Conclusions based on the literature review

An in-depth literature review regarding the HE sectors in South Africa was conducted, and external and internal excellence measures in HE, as well as the economic proposition of DE, were investigated.

5.5.2 Higher Education in South Africa

Over the last few years, the South African HE industry changed from uncontrolled to being heavily regulated. The regulatory framework's central goal is to ensure minimum institution requirements and standards of quality by employing external excellence strategies in the manner of national policies and structures.

The HE sector faces several challenges, as do most sectors of the economy, with the massification of HE and increased demand for education among them. HEI and DE institutions complement each other, with DE being able to provide access for students who would otherwise be excluded due to the limited capacity of traditional HEI (DHET, 2018; Stander, 2017:4; Van Schalkwyk, 2018:24; Thaver, 2006:860).

DE institutions operate on a different model and are driven by business. To remain competitive, these institutions must optimise operational efficiency (Ellis & Steyn, 2014:445), continuously evaluate their value propositions (Lichy & Birch, 2015:1), and ensure they remain significant to students' needs (Ibrahim & Dahlan, 2016:600).

5.5.3 Ensuring quality in HE

The CHE serves as the industry's guarantor of quality. Quality assurance processes were introduced to enhance the public's confidence in the HE sectors and protect students from lower-quality services by the DE in HEI. The government uses external quality assurance as a mechanism for ensuring higher levels of effectiveness and efficiency throughout the HE industry (Lockett, 2007:98). Recognition of HEIs and all programmes constitutes only one of the systems that are in place to ensure accountability and helps improve the quality of the services provided in the DE (Stander, 2017:19).

According to Sallis (2014:6), external quality measures are essential but primarily serve as assurances of quality that impose adherence to the established criteria

(Luckett, 2007:111). Quality measures must be internalised in the institution and transformed into management interventions emphasising the provision of high-quality service to be effective (Alani *et al.*, 2014:232). Management interventions for service quality improvement are critical aspects of service quality management of the DE and could often act as a differentiating factor between institutions (Van Schalkwyk & Steenkamp, 2016:578).

5.5.4 Distance Education Institution

Van Schalkwyk (2018:280) asserts that DE institutions must use specific industry characteristics and aspects of service quality to ensure excellent services in the manner of academic efficiency in operations, which leads to student happiness (Stander, 2017:22). Consistent high standards of service foster customer trust (Sallis, 2014:5), which is a critical dimension for the DE institutions (Hwang & Choi, 2019:1). DE institutions have been predominantly centred around customers and thus satisfy students (Stander, 2017:139). Because these institutions follow a business-driven model, TQM aspects are integrated into their day-to-day operations (Van Schalkwyk, 2018:29).

Implementing TQM in an organisation is a commitment to constantly striving for outstanding performance in every aspect to maximise customer satisfaction through high-quality service delivery. By offering a high-quality service, DE institutions can generate value (Van Schalkwyk & Steenkamp, 2016:579) and gain a competitive advantage (Van Schalkwyk, 2018:49). The value proposition, therefore, serves as an asset of differentiation for DE institutions and serves a purpose in assisting institutions in increasing their level of competitiveness (Miller *et al.*, 2014:266).

The importance of education is intangible, and the only experience the student will have with the value of education will be the quality service they get from the institution. DE within the HEI can determine how they want to organise the support they offer students based on in-depth knowledge of students' needs and student profiles (Wehn *et al.*, 2017:5).

5.5.5 The empirical study's conclusions

The empirical study demonstrated three main themes: (a) quality management, (b) institutional provision, and (c) regulatory framework (as outlined in Figure 3).

5.5.5.1 Quality management

Internal quality controls are also required to ensure high service standards. Quality controls are additionally necessary for ensuring high standards of service where the institution's operations are driven by business. The internal quality indicators refer to the DE establishing internal procedures and strategies in the HEI to guarantee service quality and student needs. The HEI was determined to use a quality assurance framework and surveys from students for tracking student satisfaction. Processes are changed because of the continuous monitoring process. These modifications result in advantages and disadvantages for student experiences regarding keeping track of and processing changes.

Quality management collaboration exists only at managerial levels in the DE institution. The institution's emphasis on providing outstanding services stems from the need for differentiation from competitors, as well as the student-focused method to aid delivery services and the fact that the institution attempts to improve the service.

The researcher would like to emphasise the importance of the management level in pursuing quality enhancement in the institution. Figure 5 depicts the various categories of management.

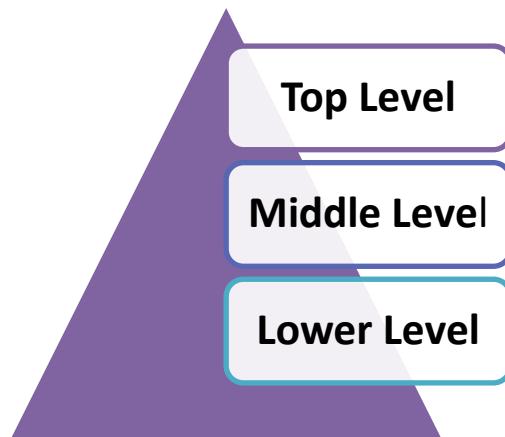


Figure 5: Management levels

- a) The organisation is led by top level management. Top managers render legally binding long-term objectives and approaches, bring collaboration to the organisation, manage organisational resources, and direct and manage different lower levels of management as the highest-ranking member of the family (organisation).
- b) Middle-level management is composed of functional heads of different divisions and those who oversee establishing and conducting departmental plans. Middle management levels are the leaders of various departments within an organisation.
- c) Managers at the lower levels are mainly accountable for successfully and efficiently conducting everyday tasks that ensure the achievement of short-term goals. Middle managers delegate the appropriate levels of power and responsibility to them for them to supervise operative employees. They provide employees with additional training, motivation, control, and inspiration. They communicate worker problems to upper management. They are primarily responsible for managing working employees and strengthening the organisation's workforce to successfully and efficiently execute the duties given to them. They also contain the tools and equipment required to complete the work successfully.

In this study, the researcher would like to emphasise the significance of communicating through all levels for quality enhancement. To ensure communication

with the management and staff members to ensure the message is received and can be actioned. Thus, it was clear that communication with senior managers was on a high level; nonetheless, communication with employees was low. Communication and engagement cannot be overemphasised. The action plan must be communicated effectively to all employees across the organisation. Everyone needs to play a role in ensuring the successful execution of a strategy, and all individuals must be completely acquainted with the intended goals for effective service delivery and sufficient quality management within the institution.

5.5.5.2 Institutional provision

According to participants' perceptions from management and administrative support staff, the DE institutions' provisions differ from conventional institutions. The DE's ability to make instant choices about procedures that are not functioning properly to enhance quality is beneficial to these institutions. Students expect enhanced efficiency and greater effectiveness in activities that are focused on their requirements. In DE, student satisfaction surveys are currently used to gather students' perceptions of institutions' offerings.

However, these questionnaires have limitations in that they lack an assessment of service quality and instead focus on a single operation or support service. The quality of service is a comprehensive assessment of the level of service of an institution's support services, so all the student assistance services should be determined for quality enhancement to gain insight into the quality of each service offered.

5.5.5.3 Regulatory framework

Following through with the statutes and regulations benefits a DE within the HEI by assuring students of the institution's standards and quality. Quality control ensures students that the institution's offerings are credible compared to other institutions within the marketplace (Stander, 2017:1). This is critical for DE institutions' expansion within their respective sectors. As a result, the regulatory framework provides fundamental support to institutions in ensuring excellence, but it continues to be an absolute minimum that has been established and externally controlled.

Nevertheless, given that the organisation has quality assurance policies implemented that the management abides by. The researcher wishes to underline how crucial it is that everyone receives this regulatory framework training or information, not just those offices. Knowing that the institution must answer to specific bodies is crucial for the academic and administrative support staff and will assist in enhancing quality delivery within the DE institution.

5.5.6 Research findings

The empirical study yields the following conclusions following the study's research question and objectives:

- Using internal quality control processes and TQM principles is thus critical to the DE inside the HEI under inquiry. The data collected through managerial conversations confirms that the institution has internal quality mechanisms in place. An internal standard structure and peer evaluations are used to ensure the institution's quality. Internal excellence mechanisms are incorporated into the DE's administrative duties and academic evaluation procedures. Constant student feedback and involvement in the student experience through the surveys is an important goal for the HEI to preserve its reputation for excellence. Evaluations of processes are done to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and student satisfaction.
- Adopting TQM helps the DE provide an excellent service to its students by ensuring that the institutional provision coincides with their needs. The institutional provision regarding a more customer-centred approach ensures that the demands of students are satisfied and provides an opportunity for the institution to ensure that its proposition for value coincides with student needs, creating an edge in the marketplace for the institution.
- The existing regulatory framework is more concerned with ensuring external control of quality than with ensuring internal quality improvement and transformation. Intangible quality aspects, such as continuous enhancement and organisational modification, are referred to as transformational quality. It was also clear from the focus group discussion that inspirational managers who provide administrative duties support employees with complete transparency

on decisions related to management and include them in making choices or at least give them the chance to be innovative in day-to-day operations is important for transformational quality.

- The research demonstrated that the excellence of service delivery in DE is assured through the outside regulatory environment in the context of minimum standards and pushes for internal quality control to ensure that transformational excellence is achieved. According to the findings, it seems evident that the implementation of TQM supports the DE inside the HEI in remaining significant in the marketplace through comprehending the requirements of students and becoming competent to adjust the worth proposition to meet student needs.

According to the findings of the study, the majority of those who participated in this institution comprehend and respect the concept of excellence. The importance of quality when evaluating how satisfied students are is well understood. The student surveys employed to collect feedback, as well as demands about the delivery of services, revealed that continuous enhancement within the DE institution remains a priority shared by all.

TQM was executed across all stages throughout the DE institution under study, which was beneficial, considering TQM can only be advantageous if practised at all stages throughout the institution. It is evident that those who participated have gained the necessary knowledge in this institution, and those staff members have been with the institution for an extended period. This is frequently helpful in maintaining durability and ensuring that modifications in procedures that will affect the quality of service are identified and resolved as soon as possible.

Management support for TQM is critical because it provides all the resources needed to ensure the academic programmes provided at the DE institution comply with the legal framework described on behalf of the institution. In reaction to management's support for TQM, it became clear that top management had established desired outcomes. Furthermore, comments demonstrated that top management prioritises quality. This institution requires top management's encouragement to ensure its successful educational programme. Student focus, as a component of TQM, signifies how well an institution consistently meets students' needs and expectations. The institution's administrative support staff was discovered to be in constant

communication with the students. According to the responses, student feedback strongly influences the needs of students while also serving as the foundation for measuring quality. Instead of being reactive to students' grievances, it strongly suggests that student focus be implemented cautiously to enhance relationships with students and quality.

Employee involvement is an essential component of TQM. It can be defined as encouraging employees to come up with decisions and resolve challenges at their specific employment levels. Empowering staff members is a quality management practice that promotes employee engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty to the company. According to the study findings, this institution fails to comply with the requirements for employee involvement. The participants in a focus group discussion were unsure whether employee recommendations were considered and implemented. Employees, on the opposite end of the spectrum acknowledged their ability to occasionally collaborate on a team with their line managers, considering they have meetings with the team. However, the institution's hierarchical structure makes them unsure whether their suggestions are implemented. Suggestions from staff should receive responses so that staff members are updated concerning what has occurred with their suggestions for improvement.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

This section contains recommendations for the DE institution that was utilised in the current investigation and recommendations for future research.

5.6.1 Recommendations for the DE institution

5.6.1.1 The Competitive Advantage

The unique selling proposal offered by the DE within the HEI can only provide the institution with an edge over other institutions if it meets the needs of students. The quality-of-service variables fall under the services and procedures side of the DE and demonstrate the significance of procedures within the institution. As a result, the institution should prioritise feedback quality, which includes:

- A process for quality teaching and learning;
- The application and enrolment process;
- A process for continuous enhancement; and
- A process for benchmarking techniques.

5.6.1.2 Quality assurance

DE institutions' success depends on their reputation, which is based on providing goods and services of outstanding quality. The regulatory framework establishes certain minimum requirements for the programme quality, but the institution should concentrate in-house on delivering services and enhancing quality.

The institution must have in place the appropriate student support processes and ensure the focused on its customers' approach gets passed through to all sections within the HEI because it distinguishes the institution from competitors and serves as a value proposal for the institution.

5.6.1.3 Continuous improvement

A benefit of DE in the HEI is its adaptability and flexibility. Continuous process improvement to guarantee quality is thus possible. However, reservations should be exercised to avoid changing excessively and not allowing a sufficient period in the redesign procedure for stakeholders to adjust to the changes. Various kinds of services should be studied to determine which is successful or which is not.

For instance, the researcher believes the country's LSCs closures are concerning because they may negatively impact distant learners' academic opportunities. This process ought to have been included in a five-year strategic plan to determine whether it will improve the institution's value proposition and the advantages for remote learners.

Subsequently, the accessibility of an appropriate scale for determining the efficacy of support services for students in DE will foster additional research on the subject. Such investigations ought to determine what type of assistance is appropriate for the target market in DE. Support should be tailored to students' specific needs rather than being an all-embracing phenomenon.

The procedure enhancement, which serves as one of the fundamental components of TQM as an approach for continuous enhancement, was discovered to be frequently utilised in the institution and is recommended to continue.

Although communication with students was highly ranked, focus group participants indicated better staff communication would be highly appreciated. Staff communication must, therefore, also be enhanced substantially. According to these findings, the institution adheres to the fundamental principles of effective TQM except in a few instances (employee ideas and communication), and more emphasis must be focused on those areas.

Another crucial component of TQM is employee involvement, which can be defined as giving workers the authority to decide for themselves and resolve issues at their employment levels. One TQM practice that promotes employee engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty to the organisation is employee empowerment. Based on the research, it seems that this institution is not meeting all the standards for employee involvement.

During the focus group discussion, it became clear that those who participated were unsure whether their suggestions would be considered and put into practice. Management should pay attention to the staff members' recommendations and, if practical, act on them. Feedback regarding employee suggestions should be shared so that staff knows if their recommendations are implemented.

5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter provided a conclusion to the study's theoretical and empirical objectives. The study's limitations were identified, and recommendations were made for continuous improvement techniques for the DE in this case study. Potential areas for future research were made. Finally, this study successfully addressed the objectives and answered the research question.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM (SENIOR MANAGEMENT)



NWU Business School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

Ethics informed consent form: Individual Participants

RESEACHER: Patience Moleko
CELL: 084 636 6901
Email: patience.moleko@nwu.ac.za

Title of the research: Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education, at an HEI

Dear Interviewee

This Informed Consent Form confirms the following information as it relates to the MBA mini-dissertation:

1. The main goal of this study is to gather information from managers working in distance education about their perceptions of the HEIs fundamental value propositions and their contribution to the quality procedures adopted and used in the institution.
2. The technique will be a qualitative research design with semi-structured, open-ended questions where you will be able to share your thoughts on the related issue during a face-to-face in-depth interview.
3. The interview will be no longer than one hour in length.
4. If you are not comfortable at any point during the interview, you will be given the choice to express your dissatisfaction or terminate your participation immediately.
5. This interview is conducted on a purely voluntary basis.
6. The interview data will be kept private. When quoting statements in the dissertation, fictitious names will be used.
7. You are welcome to inform the researcher of any confidential material that is not permitted to be revealed in the final dissertation during the interview.

8. Before the interview, the interviewee will be given a set of questions that will be asked during the interview. This is done to ensure that everyone understands what will be asked so that there is no misunderstanding during the interview.
9. The researcher will request permission from the participant to ensure whether it will be acceptable to record the interview.
10. The information assembled from the interview will be utilised just for research.
11. On request, the interviewee will be provided with a synopsis of the completed dissertation.
12. Finally, keep in mind that the researcher will be assisted by the research assistant throughout the investigation to ensure protocol adherence and to avoid bias on the part of the researcher.

DECLARATION OF CONFIDENTIALITY BY THE RESEARCH RESEACHER (RI) AND THE RESEARCH ASSISTANT (RA):

We solemnly agree to:

1. Provide comprehensive instructions and guidance on what is required for maintaining research information confidentiality.
2. Maintain confidentiality following the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans.
3. For simplicity the above will be read and explained to the research participants, and they will be requested to give verbal consent.

Signatures:




23 April 2023

Ms Patience Moleko (R)

Mr Ben Schutte (RA)

(Date)

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM (ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT STAFF)



NWU Business
School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

Ethics informed consent form: Focus group participants.

RESEACHER: Patience Moleko
CELL: 084 636 6901
Email: patience.moleko@nwu.ac.za

Title of the research: Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education, at an HEI

Dear Participant

This Informed Consent Form confirms the following information as it relates to the MBA mini-dissertation:

1. As part of this study, you will be assigned to a group of 6 – 8 people. While facilitating the dialogue, the researcher will ask you various questions as accepted by the HEs office of the Director of Distance Education. This focus group conversation will be audio recorded, and there will be a note-taker present. Your responses, however, will be kept private, and no names will be used in the final report.
2. You have the option of participating in the focus group or not, and you can opt out at any moment during the study.
3. The duration of the interview will not exceed one hour and 30 minutes.
4. Please keep in mind that there are no correct or incorrect answers to focus group questions. For this research, it is critical to hear the many different points of view, and we would like everyone to submit their opinions.
5. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group participants by not exposing any information disclosed during the study. The researcher

will examine the data, but as indicated previously, your responses will be kept private, and no names will be used in any publications.

6. Any confidential information that prohibits the researcher to publish it in the final dissertation will be communicated during the interview.

DECLARATION OF CONFIDENTIALITY BY THE RESEARCH RESEACHER (RI) AND THE RESEARCH ASSISTANT (RA):

We solemnly agree to:

1. Provide comprehensive instructions and guidance on what is required for maintaining research information confidentiality.
2. Maintain confidentiality following the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans.
3. For simplicity the above will be read and explained to the research participants, and they will be requested to give verbal consent.

Signatures:



23 April 2023

Ms Patience Moleko (R)

Mr Ben Schutte (RA)

(Date)

APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION GUIDES (SENIOR MANAGEMENT)



NWU Business
School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

Discussion guide: Individual interview

Title of the research: Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education, at an HEI

Introduction

Patience Moleko is my name, and I am pursuing an MBA at North-West University (Potchefstroom campus). I have opted to undertake a qualitative research project, which means I will look at the lived experiences of a group of people in a certain setting. I am interested in the topic under investigation because I have worked in a Higher Education Institution for the previous eight years.

The goal of the study is to explore the experience of the management team of the HEIs distance education programme. Throughout the process, I'd like to understand more about your decision-making process for keeping the value proposition fresh, as well as how decisions are made to improve the quality of service provided to students, perhaps leading to higher student satisfaction. Finally, your perspective on the impact of the regulatory environment of higher education, particularly distance education, and its impact on the quality of service provided by the institution, will be developed.

You were chosen for this research study because of your extensive understanding of the higher education sector and your involvement with distance education.

This research entails participating in an individual interview and discussing your experiences with managing the institution and maintaining the quality-of-service delivery to students. This one-on-one interview will last 45-60 minutes and will be audio recorded for verification of the results.



The Researcher
Patience Moleko

APPENDIX D: DISCUSSION GUIDES (SUPPORT STAFF)



NWU Business
School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

Discussion guide: Focus group interviews

Title of the research: Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education, at an HEI

Introduction

Patience Moleko is my name, and I am pursuing an MBA at North-West University (Potchefstroom campus). I have opted to undertake a qualitative research project, which means I will look at the lived experiences of a group of people in a certain setting. I am interested in the topic under research because I have worked in a Higher Education Institution for the previous eight years and quality management is of paramount importance in my line of work.

The goal of the study is to investigate the students' experiences at higher education from the perspective of senior management and the support staff in distance education. Throughout the process, I would like to understand more about the elements that are influencing you to render quality service to the students. Finally, your thoughts on the adoption of modifications for the sake of quality and, ultimately, students' satisfaction will be debated and determined. This study entails engaging in a focus group interview, discussing your experiences with the institution's value proposition and with quality reviews implemented by the institution. This focus group interview will last 60-90 minutes and will be audio recorded for verification of the results.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patience Moleko', written over a horizontal line.

The Researcher
Patience Moleko

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (SENIOR MANAGEMENT)



NWU
Business School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: Semi-structured interviews

Questions that will be discussed

1. For this investigation, will you kindly mention your qualification and the years of experience in your current position?
2. What does your position entail?
3. What is your definition of quality of service in HEI
4. What is your wide, all-encompassing definition of service quality
 - From the DE student's point of view?
 - From the standpoint of management and the image of the university?
5. What formal quality processes does the DE in the HEI have in place?
6. What, in your opinion, are the critical pillars of service quality for the DE in the HEI? Why?
7. In your opinion, how is total quality management ensured within the DE in the HEI?
8. How does management make sure that the needs of the DE students are adhered to for the improvement of quality?
9. Do you have any other issues you may want to address with the issue of quality management within the DE in the HEI?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and for sharing your knowledge. Records acquired during the study will be kept private, and the results and findings will be released in such a way that your identity will be obscured.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (SUPPORT STAFF)



NWU Business
School
North-West University
Private Bag x6001
Potchefstroom, 2520

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: Focus group interviews

Questions that will be discussed

1. What is your definition of quality of service in HEI?
2. Do you think that you are given sufficient support in your working environment for optimal service from your side?
3. Are you in any way involved in the decision-making of the daily operations of the DE in the HEI concerning the services?
4. What, in your opinion, can management do to improve quality management within the DE?
5. Do you have any other issues you may want to address with the issue of quality management within DE in the HEI?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and for sharing your knowledge. Records acquired during the study will be kept private, and the results and findings will be released in such a way that your identity will be obscured.

APPENDIX G: NWU RDGC PERMISSION GRANTED LETTER



Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: +2718 299-1111/2222

Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

NWU RDGC PERMISSION GRANTED LETTER

Based on the documentation provided by the researcher specified below, on **21-August-2023** the North-West University (NWU) Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (NWU-RDGC) hereby grants permission for the specific project (as indicated below) to be conducted at the NWU:

Project title: Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education at a Higher Education Institution.

Project leader: Prof Neld Moutona

Researcher/Project Team: Ms Patience Moleko

Ethics reference no: NWU - 0 0 6 1 6 - 2 3 - A 4

NWU RDGC reference no: NWU-GK-23-159

Specific Conditions:

1. The recruitment process, please make sure that the approach to recruiting does not involve collecting emails that aren't publicly accessible unless you have the explicit agreement from potential participants.
2. When obtaining consent, the researcher needs to clearly state whether this process will occur online or in person and who will be obtaining the informed consent from the participants.
3. In terms of reporting of results, the researcher must ensure that there is no reputational risk of the institution.

Approval date: 21-August- 2023

Expiry date: 21-August- 2024

General Conditions of Approval:

- The NWU-RDGC will not take the responsibility to recruit research participants or to gather data on behalf of the researcher. This committee can therefore not guarantee the participation of our relevant stakeholders.
- Any changes to the research protocol within the permission period (for a maximum of 1 year) must be communicated to the NWU-RDGC. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal of the permission.

- The NWU-RDGC should be provided with a report or document in which the results of said project are disseminated.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemics the Committee would like to advise the researcher to practice the necessary caution and adhere to the National Covid-19 Guidelines when conducting research with participants.

Please note that under no circumstances will any personal information of possible research subjects be provided to the researcher by the NWU RDGC. The NWU complies with the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA) as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI). For an application to access such information please contact Ms Annamarie De Kock (018 285 2771) for the relevant enquiry form or more information on how the NWU complies with PAIA and POPI.

The NWU RDGC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU RDGC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Prof Jeffrey Mphahlele



Chairperson NWU Research Data Gatekeeper Committee

Original details: (22351930) C:\Users\22351930\Desktop\test 2.docm
13 November 2018

Current details: (22351930) M:\DSS\10533\Monitoring and Reporting Cluster\Ethical Applications RDGC\Updated RDGC Permission Letter.docm
15 November 2018

File reference: 1.1.4.3

APPENDIX H: ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



Private Bag X1290,
Potchefstroom South Africa
2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222

Fax: 018 299-4910

Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics

Tel: 018 299-484

Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

24 May 2023

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS- REC)** on, 24/05/2023 the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
 - *annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and*
 - *without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.**
- *The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to*

implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.

- *Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.*
- *The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.*
In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and EMS-REC reserves the right to:
 - *request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;*
 - *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;*
 - *withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - *any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;*
 - *it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the EMS-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;*
 - *submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or*
 - *new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.**

The EMS-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the EMS-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

**Mark
Rathbone**

Digitally signed by Mark Rathbone
DN: cn=Mark Rathbone, o=North-
West University, ou=Business
management,
email=mark.rathbone@nwu.ac.za,
c=ZA
Date: 2023.05.26 08:56:30 +02'00'

Prof Mark Rathbone
Chairperson: NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX I: LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR



Antoinette Bisschoff
71 Esselen Street,
Potchefstroom
Tel: 018 293 3046
Cell: 082 878 5183
Language@dlts.co.za
CC No: 1995/017794/23

Thursday, 09 November 2023

To whom it may concern

Re: Confirmation of language edit, typography and technical precision

The MBA mini-dissertation "Investigating TQM for improved service delivery in distance education at a Higher Education Institution" by P Moloko (24862363) was edited for language and technical precision. The referencing and sources were checked to comply with the guidelines specified by the 2020 NWU Reference Guide.

Note that the direct interview quotes were only checked for spelling and punctuation. Grammar and sentence construction are authentic as per the interview.

Last-minute corrections remain the responsibility of the author.



Antoinette Bisschoff

BA Languages (UPE – now NMU); MBA (PU for CHE – now NWU); Translation and Linguistic Studies (NWU)

Officially approved language editor of the NWU since 1998
Member of SA Translators Institute (no. 100181)

Precision ... to the last letter