# SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

# - THE CONSUMER'S EXPECTATIONS AND EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the service quality experience of a sample of part-time postgraduate students over a three year period of study at Nottingham Business School. The research aims to identify important aspects in students' evaluation of service quality, to consider the role played by expectations in this process and consider if the longitudinal nature of the higher education experience affects expectations and service quality evaluation. The research design is shaped by concepts in both the service quality and the educational quality literatures. In addition, the philosophical position of the researcher, that of transcendental realism, has impacted on the research design which involves interviewing ten students on multiple occasions during their two or three year period of study.

The findings of the research highlight three distinct stages in the educational service experience. Firstly the pre-course position which is centred on service expectations. Secondly the in-course experience where lecturers, module content, assignments, course organisation, student-to-student interaction and personal time are all important aspects of the experience. Finally post-course service value assessment focused on the value derived from the qualification, an expanded social network, learning, application at work and personal change. The findings also support the proposition that service quality evaluation is based on an assessment of process quality and service value and that expectations have an indirect influence on service quality evaluation through their effect on service value assessments. A contribution to knowledge is made through the integration of concepts from both the service quality and educational quality literatures and proposed models of the student service quality experience and evaluation process. Finally recommendations are made for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School, based on an assessment of the changing context of quality assurance in higher education and the empirical research presented.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In conducting my research I would like to acknowledge the support provided by my supervisors Professor Caroline Tynan and Professor Tony Watson . In particular, Professor Tynan has provided long-standing guidance and feedback when many supervisors would no doubt have given up on such a 'busy' student – thank you very much. I would also like to thank other colleagues at Nottingham Business School; Dr. Alan Lovell, Professor Peter Franklin, Keith Melton, Dr. Carol Tansley, Dr. Denise Fletcher, Fioan Winfield and Chris Davis who have all taken a supportive interest. Finally, of course, I would like to thank all the students who have given their time and accounts of their experiences

As with any dissertation, family members are also very important in the encouragement they provide. My husband, Robert, has been my 'right hand man' for many years taking over from my father. Towards the end of the project he contributed in the way only partners can in the production of another very important project – Eloise our first daughter. My other most important supporter, my mother, sadly died shortly before the completion of the dissertation so I would like to dedicate this work to her. It is not, of course, nearly good enough to do justice to all the hard work she invested in me, but I hope the fact she lives on in me, Eloise, our thoughts and in this dedication gives another reason for keeping this 'black book' on the library shelf.

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

"There is little evidence that the literature on service quality has had much impact on higher education....The application of service quality models to education and training is an area which requires further research and evaluation."

(Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992a, p. 47)

## 1.1 The Research Focus

This dissertation is concerned with service quality in the context of Higher Education. It focuses on the expectations, experience and evaluation of the consumer of Higher Education – the student. The researcher's interest in this area began as an enthusiastic lecturer talking to her students about the value of developing a marketing-orientated business, one that holds, as its central philosophy, the ultimate importance of the customer. The impetus to conduct a substantial amount of research into this area is really threefold. Firstly, as a Marketing Lecturer, I have a genuine curiosity to develop a better understanding of what is important to my customers. Secondly, I have an interest in the success of Nottingham Business School in relation to improving the quality of service provided. Thirdly, I want to explore research gaps identified in both the service and educational quality literatures. As the introductory quotation highlights, the application of service quality concepts to education is an area where little research has been conducted. In addition the vast majority of service quality research is quantitative and cross-sectional in nature. In contrast, this dissertation has a research design which is qualitative and longitudinal thereby providing an alternative view of service quality based on a deeper and richer understanding of how consumers experience service quality in the education context over time.

## 1.2 Background to the Research

There has been a significant rise in the interest shown by successive Governments in the quality and efficiency of Higher Education over the past fifteen years beginning with the 1985 Green Paper 'The Development of Higher Education' (Green 1994, Rowley 1996, Jackson 1998a and b). Close to the beginning of this research project, Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992a) considered different views of an appropriate definition of quality for higher education. The perspectives of eight stakeholder groups who have an interest in the quality of Higher Education were considered: employers, staff and managers in HE institutions, the Government, validating bodies, assessment bodies, funding councils and students. Interestingly, no two groups selected the same criteria for quality assessment. This indicates that quality is a relative concept and that consensus, in relation to whose view of quality is most important in the educational context, does not exist. Harvey *et al.,*'s (1992a) research also considered approaches to quality assessment and concluded that models taken mainly from the manufacturing industry such as BS5750 are 'product orientated' and therefore may prove inadequate in the service sector. Therefore the application of service based models of quality assurance such as Gronroos' (1984) service quality model, Bitner's (1990) service encounter model and Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1985) gap model may be more helpful. These service quality models come from the marketing literature where quality is defined from the consumer's perspective;

for education the consumer is the student. However, the literature on service quality still has not had much impact on higher education. As such this research focuses on the direct consumers of Higher Education, the students, with concepts taken from the service marketing and educational literatures - areas which require further research and evaluation.

In addition, the service quality field has been dominated by quantitative studies despite qualitative methods being identified by Gilmore and Carson (1996) as better suited to the interactive and longitudinal nature of service contexts such as education. The dominant survey research approaches are not well suited to learning about the process aspects of the service experience or the social context of the service provision (Swan and Bowers, 1998). Therefore this study has adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods and analysis are used within a transcendental realist interpretive paradigm discussed in detail in chapter 4 (Denzin and Lincoln 1998a, Miles and Huberman, 1994). This is predicated upon the researcher's belief that social reality exists independently of people's perception of it but that the reality of service quality can only be imperfectly comprehended through accessing the individual's experience, described in socially and contextually bound terms. A rich description of both the part-time students' experience in their own words over time and the changing context of the research is seen as important in this study rather than statistically significant sample sizes and measurement at one point in time. This research design choice should increase the internal validity of the findings but it does limit the external generalisability of the results. The study takes place at Nottingham Business School, one of the nine faculties of the Nottingham Trent University. It is based on 41 interviews with a sample of postgraduate, part-time students over a three year period of study on the Integrated Management Development Programme. This incorporates the Certificate in Management, Diploma in Management Studies and Master of Business Administration courses.

### 1.2.1 Aims of the Research

The aims of the research are:

i) To understand which aspects of the Higher Education experience are important to postgraduate part-time students' evaluation of service quality.

ii) To consider if and in what ways expectations change over the student's period of study.

iii) To consider how part-time students evaluate service quality and if this process changes over the student's period of study.

iv) To develop a student-centred model of service quality for the higher education context.

v) To make recommendations for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School.

This research should therefore be able to contribute empirically based information for considering the following strategic issues. What factors should be prioritised for attention in order to ensure that student evaluations of the service provided are as high as possible within resource constraints? Should the service provided be changed as part-time students' expectations and experiences of the learning process change?

Finally, how should student feedback on service quality be used in relation to Nottingham Business School's quality assurance processes?

### 1.2.2 The Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter two takes the form of a critical literature review on service quality from a marketing perspective. The foundations of services marketing are presented followed by a consideration of the applicability for this research of three contrasting models of service quality offered in the Nordic School, Customer Satisfaction and SERVQUAL research streams. This chapter provides part of the conceptual framework for this study.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, context is very important. As such chapter three considers contributions from the educational quality literature in order to add context specific dimensions to the conceptual framework which influences the research design. In addition, the policy background of quality in Higher Education and the setting of this research, The Nottingham Trent University and Nottingham Business School, are considered in some detail in the this chapter.

The reasons for the many different definitions and approaches to quality assessment considered in chapters two and three can be explained by the different ontological and epistemological positions of researchers and policy makers in this area. Chapter four presents the philosophical position of the researcher, that of transcendental realism. This has influenced the research design (methods, sample, analysis approach) employed in this study which is detailed in chapter five.

Chapter six presents the results of the research and the researcher's interpretations of the part-time students' experience and evaluation of service quality at Nottingham Business School over the three years.

The dissertation concludes in chapter seven where an attempt is made to integrate, synthesise and develop both theoretical and managerial implications from this research.

The next chapter explores the service quality literature in search of a conceptual framework to guide this study.

# CHAPTER 2

# THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – SERVICE QUALITY

"Quality is an elusive and indistinct construct. Often mistaken for imprecise adjectives like 'goodness, or luxury, or shininess, or weight'"
(Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985, p.41)

## 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the service quality literature in order to identify relevant concepts and frameworks for application in this study. The first part of this chapter outlines the foundations of the services marketing literature and then goes on to consider the issue of service quality in-depth. A number of conceptual frameworks (Gronroos 1984, Bitner 1990, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985) are considered followed by the currently unresolved debate concerning the best way to conceptualise and measure service quality (Robinson, 1999, Grapentine, 1999). Whilst much is known about service quality the majority of our understanding comes from quantitative research administered at one point in time based on generic service dimensions. In addition, very few studies have focused on developing a deeper understanding of the particular dimensions of educational service quality. As such this chapter concludes by highlighting criticisms and gaps in the current body of knowledge.

## 2.2 Foundation Concepts and Frameworks of Service Marketing

The rise in interest in quality in higher education follows a similar chronological pattern to the rise in legitimisation of the service marketing discipline. In 1964 the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was established to guarantee quality and standards in the new polytechnic sector. The first book on services marketing was written in the same year by Johnson (1964) and was followed by an influential article by Rathmell (1966) in which he described services as deeds, performances and effort and argued for marketing people to pay more attention to the growing service sector. Thirty years on, services are still defined very similarly,

*"Services are deeds, processes, and performances." (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996, p.5)*

however there has been a substantial growth in the service marketing literature around a number of significant issues and conceptual frameworks including service quality (Bateson 1995, Lovelock 1996, Fisk, Brown and Bitner 1993, Berry and Parasuraman 1993). In a detailed review of the evolution of the literature, Fisk, Brown and Bitner (1993) offer three stages:

Stage one: 'Crawling Out ' (1953-1979)

Stage two: 'Scurrying About' (1980-1985)

Stage three: 'Walking Erect' (1986- 1993)

### 2.2.1 Stage One: Concepts and Characteristics

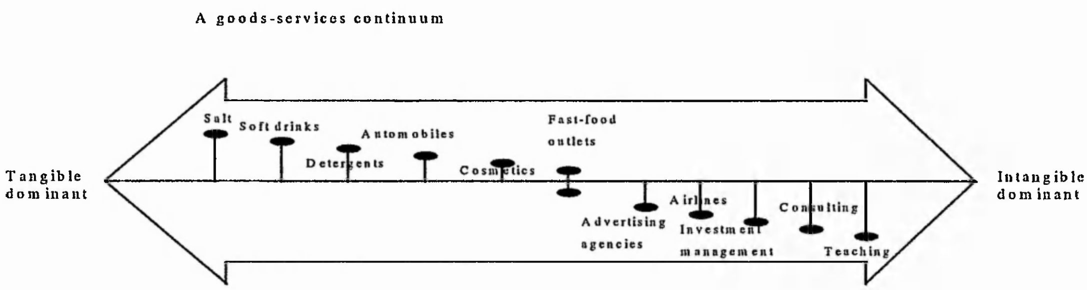
Stage one was characterised by conceptual rather than empirical work. The debate regarding whether services are different from goods began with the publication of Johnson's (1969) doctoral dissertation. Rathmell (1974, p.5) made a notable contribution to the debate when he stated that existing frameworks were 'awkward' and inappropriate for the service context. Shostack's (1977) practitioner plea to the academic community to 'break free from product marketing' took this argument further and was a publication which,

*'clearly accelerated the development of services marketing..(and) a new sub-discipline began to take shape' (Berry & Parasuraman, 1993, p.42).*

The basis of the debate was that service marketing should be treated as a separate sub-discipline within the overall marketing domain because of the now widely accepted service characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Fisk, Brown and Bitner 1993, Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1985).

Shostack (1977) emphasised the relative dominance of intangible attributes in the make-up of the service product. Figure 2.1. illustrates that there are few 'pure' goods or services but offerings that are made up of combinations of tangible and intangible attributes. Teaching is classified as highly intangible. Palpable intangibility occurs because services are performances or actions rather than objects so they cannot be seen, felt or tasted in the same way that one can sense a tangible good. Many services, including education, are also difficult for consumers to grasp mentally (Zeithaml and Bitner 1996). Palmer (1994) suggests managers therefore need to manage physical evidence, use tangible cues to service quality, reduce service complexity and encourage word-of-mouth recommendations.

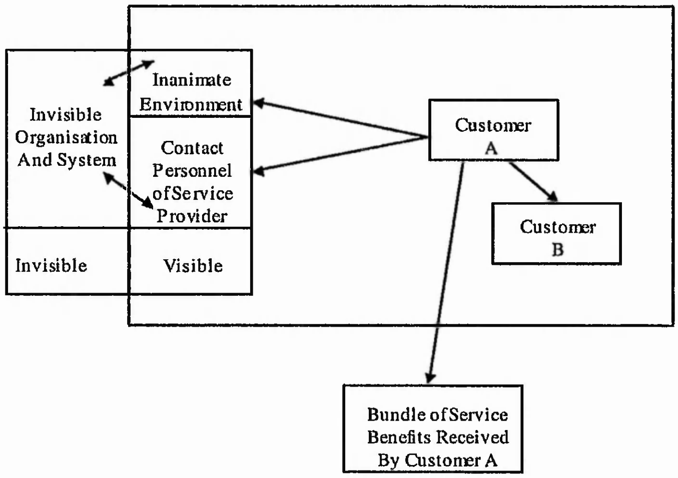
**Figure 2.1. Shostack's Goods-Services Continuum**




Source: Shostack G. L., (1977), 'Breaking Free from Product Marketing', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol.41, No. 2, p.77

A second distinctive service characteristic is inseparability. Services very often have simultaneous production and consumption, as with lectures, which emphasises the importance of the service provider and therefore the role of contact personnel. Whilst distance learning can separate the lecturer from the student, the vast majority of teaching takes place face to face. Consequently, selection, training and rewarding staff for excellent service quality is very important. (Zeithaml *et al.,*1985). In addition, Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock and Eiglier (1981) in their Servuction System model illustrated in figure 2.2, highlighted that consumption of a service often takes place in the presence of other consumers, as in a seminar, therefore satisfaction is not only dependent on the service provider but on other consumers as well. It is important, therefore, to identify and reduce the risk of

**Figure 2.2 Servuction System Model**




Source: Langeard, E., Bateson, J., Lovelock, C. and Eiglier, P. (1981), *'Marketing of Services: New Insights from Consumers and Managers'*, report no. 81-104, Cambridge, MA: marketing Sciences Institute.

possible sources of dissatisfaction. For example, seminars designed to encourage prior student preparation to increase the quality of debate.

A third characteristic, heterogeneity, means that it is very difficult to standardise the service consumers receive. This is a particular problem in labour intensive industries such as hotels and education as many different employees will be in contact with an individual consumer, raising the problem of consistency of service employee behaviour. Service performance from the same individual may also vary as well as variability between consumer to consumer interactions (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985). This again emphasises the need for rigorous selection, training and rewarding of staff. Evaluation systems should be established which gives the consumer the opportunity to report on their experiences with staff and processes, as monitoring reliability becomes very important in maintaining quality levels (Woodruffe, 1995).

The final differentiating characteristic between goods and services discussed by Zeithaml *et al.,* (1985) is perishability. Consumption cannot be stored for the future, once a hotel room is left empty for the night or a place on a course is not filled, that potential revenue is lost. Because services are performances that cannot be stored, service businesses frequently find it difficult to synchronise supply and demand. Usage rates become important and weekend and evening courses have developed, in part, to make use of fixed assets in times of lower demand. To cater for peak demand part time staff and multi-skilled full time staff can be employed. Hotels also use reservation systems in the restaurant and beauty salon to smooth out demand and ensure that if consumers have to wait comfortable seating in the reception is provided (Palmer 1994).

Berry and Parasuraman (1993) cite Shostack's article as the 'turning point' when the author accused marketing of being 'myopic', asserted that existing theories were wrong and that academics should provide service practitioners with frameworks they urgently needed to deal with these context specific characteristics (Shostack, 1977, p.73). Fisk, Brown and Bitner (1993) suggest a slightly later date for the next step in development of the literature and cite Berry's (1980) assertion that 'services marketing is different' as marking the victorious end of the first stage which was,

*'..a fundamental challenge to the right of the services marketing field to exist' (Fisk, Brown & Bitner, 1993, p.69).*

Similarly Venkateson, Schmalensee & Marshall (1985) see pre 1980 as the exploration phase and the early 1980s being the discovery phase with full legitimisation of services marketing as a sub-discipline.

### 2.2.2 Stage Two: Frameworks and Emerging Issues

The early 1980s represented the second stage in the evolution of services marketing thought. This stage is characterised by the emergence of substantive frameworks and issues which service practitioners need to manage.

In 1981 Booms and Bitner proposed the idea of an expanded marketing mix for service organisations from the traditional 4Ps to 7Ps including:

- physical evidence: the environment in which the service is assembled and where the firm and consumer interact; the tangible commodities that facilitate performance or communication of the service
- people: all human actors who play a part in service delivery and thus influence the buyer's perceptions; namely the firm's personnel and other consumers in the service environment
- process: the actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is operationalised and delivered.

Physical evidence developed largely as a tool to manage service intangibility with informants and process evolving as a partial solution to the unique challenges of, 'dealing with customer interaction in the service delivery process' (Bitner, 1991, p.25).

Lovelock (1983) developed five classification schemes for services in order to transcend service industry boundaries and provide strategic guidelines for service firms in 'analogous situations'. Lovelock's (1984) book also helped remove one of the forces inhibiting the development of interest in services marketing, a 'lack of instructional materials' (Berry & Parasuraman, 1993, p.46). This was followed closely by European contributions from Cowell (1985) in the UK and Gronroos & Gummesson (1985) from the Nordic School of Marketing. Adding to the literature during this period were two journals dedicated to service marketing issues; Services Industries Journal (1980) and the Journal of Professional Services Marketing (1985).

From such sources sprang a number of influential articles which came to provide firm foundations for the significant research issues of today included in stage 3 of Fisk *et al.'s* (1993) service marketing evolution. These comprise seminal papers on service encounters (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel and Gutman 1985), relationship marketing (Berry 1983), internal marketing (Gronroos 1981), service design (Shostack 1984) and service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*,.,1985). Fisk, Brown and Bitner (1993) refer to Parasuraman *et al.*,'s (1985) paper, which presented a conceptual model of service quality, the 'gaps model', as, *'a landmark article' which 'led to service quality being a core topic for services marketing' (Fisk et al.,., 1993, p.72).*

This assessment is perhaps not surprisingly supported by Berry & Parasuraman's (1993) survey which ranked the paper as first on the criteria of conceptual breakthroughs and stimulation of the involvement of other researchers. The next section presents a critical review of the stream of literature associated with the service quality issue which has continued to grow after Fisk *et al.'s* (1993) paper to form a substantial body of research, containing contrasting ideas, concepts and models.

**2.3 Service Quality**

The importance of service quality for improved business performance is widely acknowledged (Gwynne, Devlin and Ennew 1998). Second only to market share in the PIMS (Profit Impact of Market Strategy) research, high relative quality is a key contributor to bottom line profit performance (Buzzell & Gale, 1987). The reasons why service quality influences profits includes increased market share, premium pricing, reduced re-work and labour turnover and ultimately the defensive effect of higher customer retention levels with increased repurchases and referrals (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996, Chenet, Tynan and Money 1999).

Researchers in the service marketing field argue that because of the distinctive characteristics of services, a distinctive approach to defining and measuring service quality is required. A marketing-orientated perspective of quality adopts the user-based notion centred on the argument that,

*'if customers are dissatisfied with the quality of a service, they won't be willing to pay very much for it - or even to buy it at all if competitors offer better quality' (Lovelock, 1996, p.487).*

A service marketing definition of quality revolves around the idea that quality has to be judged on the assessment of the user or consumer of the service. This results in the most common definition of service quality as being a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations (Parasuraman *et al.*,.1985, Gronroos 1984, Chenet *et al.*,1999). However other researchers argue that service quality is derived from a comparison of performance with ideal standards (Teas 1993) or from perceptions of performance alone (Cronin and Taylor 1992). These different definitions are made evident by the variety of measurement methods discussed later in this chapter. This also indicates a significant weakness of the research conducted to date, despite fifteen years of research focused on this area, there still exists no consensus regarding the best way to conceptualise and measure service quality.

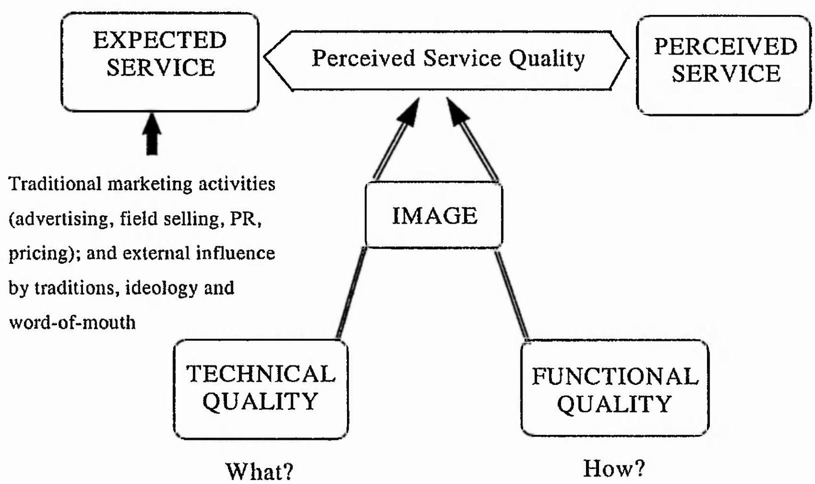
Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1985) conceptual framework was the major catalyst for explosive growth in service quality literature. However the 'Gaps' model is only one of the theoretical frameworks which has been offered as a useful way of conceptualising service quality. In the next section three alternative conceptualisations of service quality will be considered; the Nordic School's contribution and Gronroos' (1984) service quality model, customer satisfaction theory with Oliver's (1980) early contributions used later by Bitner (1990) to develop a service encounter model and the gaps model of service quality and associated generic service quality evaluation criteria and measurement approach (Parasuraman *et al.,*1985, 1988).

### 2.3.1 The Nordic School perspective

Much of the work on services marketing comes from American academics with the majority of research being quantitative in design. However a significant and complementary body of thinking resides within the so called Nordic School of marketing led by Gronroos and Gummesson (Fisk *et al.,* 1993). As early as 1978, Gronroos used twelve case studies of marketing planning procedures of successful Swedish and Finnish companies to test his theory of the importance of accessibility, the administration of human resources and the development of auxiliary services as part of the product development process for service firms. This research introduced the idea that, 'corporate image seems to be very important to service firms' (p.600). Taking forward this idea, Lehtinen & Lehtinen (1982) offered two alternative approaches to analyse service quality and its dimensions, one of which incorporated the ideas of corporate image under the term corporate quality. In the first approach the dimensions of physical quality, interactive quality and corporate quality were suggested, in the other approach, process quality and output quality were presented. Using three contrasting restaurant situations the researchers used in-depth interviews with 45 customers to consider the applicability of the five service dimensions proposed. They concluded that, *'service quality is a customer's subjective interpretation of his experience..there are fairly general quality dimensions that customers use in certain situations...different criteria and different valuations of these criteria were used by different customer groups' (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1982, p. 458)*

Gronroos took these idea further and was the first to consider quality from a service perspective when he introduced the concept of 'perceived service quality' in the development of his widely cited model of service quality in 1984, illustrated in Figure 2.3. The model suggests that the quality of a given service is the outcome of an evaluation process where the consumer compares what they expected to receive with what they perceived they actually received. Consumer expectations are influenced by marketing mix activities, external traditions, ideology and word-of-mouth communications.

**Figure 2.3 Gronroos' (1984) Service Quality Model**




Source: Gronroos, C. (1984), 'A Service Quality Model and its Marketing Implications', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol.18, No.4, p. 40

Gronroos also suggests previous experience with the service will influence expectations. In terms of perceived service, Gronroos suggests there are two principal components of quality, technical and functional, with a third, image, acting as a mediating influence. Technical quality, 'is what the customer is left with, when the production process is finished' (p.38). The consumer can much more easily measure this as with technical product dimensions. Functional quality, on the other hand, is more difficult to measure objectively because it involves an evaluation of how the consumer receives the technical quality in the interactions between consumer and service provider and other consumers. Gronroos' suggestion that service quality is dependent on both what you receive and how you receive it (i.e. the process of service delivery) emphasised the importance of service interactions, contact employees and managing face-to-face encounters in the service experience.

In addition, both expectations and perceptions are affected by the consumer's view of the company's image. If a consumer has a positive image of a university or lecturer but they have a negative experience, for example a rather confused lecture, they may still find the perceived service satisfactory because they find excuses for the negative experience. Correspondingly, Gronroos suggests that a negative image may increase perceived problems with service quality. A survey of 219 Swedish service firm executives led Gronroos (1984) to conclude that functional quality is a very important dimension of perceived service and in some cases more important than the technical quality dimension.

This observation continued to hold true in a later 1988 paper in which Gronroos offers six criteria of good service quality. These are:

- Professionalism and Skills - service providers, systems and physical resources have knowledge and skills to solve their problems
- Attitudes and Behaviour - contact people are concerned about customers and interested in solving their problems in a friendly and spontaneous way
- Accessibility and Flexibility - service providers, location, operating hours, systems are designed for easy access and are flexible to customer demands
- Reliability and Trustworthiness - customers can rely on the service provider to keep promises and perform with their best interests at heart
- Recovery - when something goes wrong the service provider will take actions to keep customers in control of the situation and find a new, acceptable solution
- Reputation and Credibility - operations of the service provider can be trusted and give adequate value for money and stand for good performance and values which can be shared by customer and provider.

Criterion one is outcome related, criterion six is image related with the other four indicating the importance placed on functional quality or process-related factors in service quality evaluations. The six criteria should,

*'be viewed as guidelines based on a solid body of empirical and conceptual research...In various industries and for various customers certain criteria are more important than others. And of course, there may in specific situations be other determinants of good quality..' (Gronroos, 1990, p.48).*

Gronroos does not suggest these criteria are generic across all service situations but rather suggests different criteria are applicable in different service contexts (Gronroos 1988,1990).

### 2.3.1.1 A critical appraisal of the Nordic School contributions

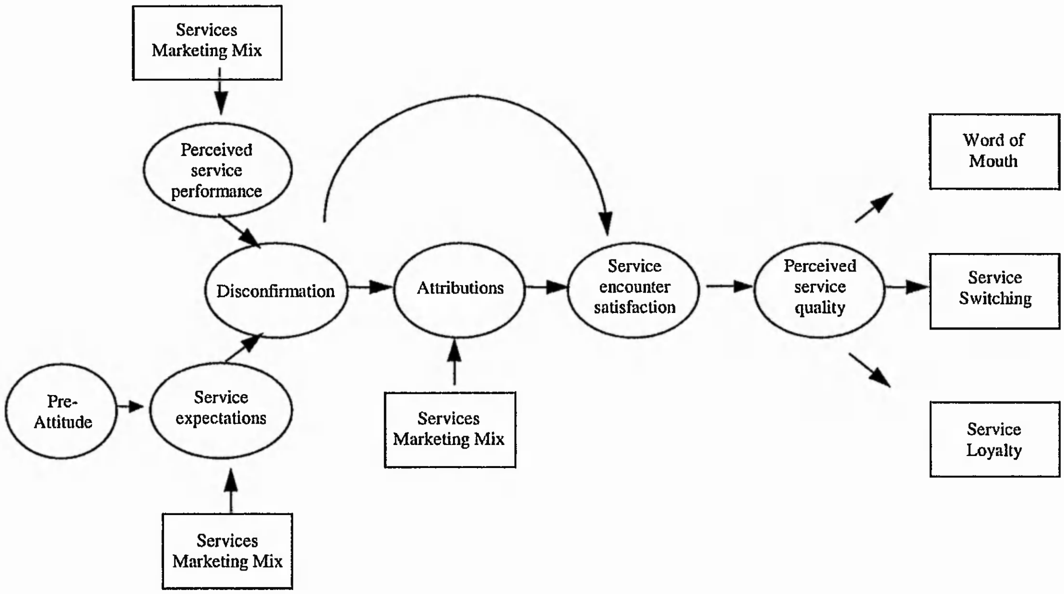
In reviewing this literature, the emphasis is on the practical implications of service marketing within the management structure of companies. It is also distinctive due to the emphasis placed on qualitative rather than quantitative research and the use of case study methodology. The main strengths of the Nordic School research are therefore the consideration of context and the interactive nature of the service experience.

Whilst the model is useful in distinguishing between tangible and intangible dimensions of service quality, it can be criticised for over-simplifying the process of service quality evaluation. Specific dimensions of technical and functional quality are not included, neither are different types of expectations considered. Neither the role of other consumers in the process or any longitudinal aspects of the service experience are highlighted. Much of the research can also be criticised for its reliance on small sample sizes therefore from a positivist perspective its reliability and generalisability can be questioned.

### 2.3.2 The Customer Satisfaction perspective

In contrast, the majority of research in the customer satisfaction field is quantitative. Researchers agree that service quality and customer satisfaction are related yet distinct constructs (Bitner 1990, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1994a, Robinson 1999). The majority of studies concerning satisfaction have adopted Oliver's (1980) expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm which encompasses four constructs: expectations, performance, disconfirmation and satisfaction. Disconfirmation arises from differences between prior expectations and actual performance. Churchill and Suprenant (1982) suggest that satisfaction is similar to an attitude as it can be assessed as the sum of satisfactions with the various attributes of the service. A number of distinctions are made between satisfaction and quality in this area. Firstly satisfaction is transaction specific whereas quality is a long term attitude and satisfaction requires customer experience whereas quality does not (Oliver, 1980, Bolton & Drew 1991, Caruana & Money, 1997). Certain researchers suggest that satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality (Bitner 1990, Bolton & Drew 1991, Bitner & Hubbert 1994). Bitner has developed a detailed model based around the service encounter and theories of customer satisfaction illustrated in figure 2.4. Bitner draws on three bodies of literature; consumer satisfaction theories in consumer behaviour (Oliver 1980), attribution theory in social psychology (Weiner 1980) and perceived service quality in service marketing (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1985). Bitner (1990) proposes that the service marketing mix directly influences three antecedents of service encounter satisfaction - expectations, perceived service

**Figure 2.4: Bitner's Model of Service Encounter Evaluation**




Source: Bitner, M., "Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Employee responses", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol.54, April 1990, p.72

performance and attributions. In contrast to previous conceptualisations, the model suggests that causal attributions for disconfirmation will mediate customer satisfaction. Thus dis/satisfaction is not just dependent on the actual experience but on the customer's perception of its cause. Therefore if the cause lies within the firm and within its control and it is likely to happen again the customer will be more dis/satisfied than when the opposite conditions hold. Satisfaction is an antecedent to perceived service quality which in turn leads to customer behaviour towards the service provider.

In relation to the education experience, multiple service encounters are experienced over time hence the concept of critical encounters or incidents may be particularly relevant. In a rare but related qualitative study in the customer satisfaction field, Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990) use the critical incident technique (CIT) to research the events and behaviours of contact employees that cause customers to distinguish very satisfactory from very dissatisfactory service encounters. They argue that,

*'when the purpose of the research is to increase knowledge of a phenomenon about which relatively little has been documented and/or to describe a real-world phenomenon based on a thorough understanding, an approach such as the CIT seems particularly well suited to the task' (Bitner et al.,. ,1990, p.73).*

The analysis of over 700 incidents from customers of airlines, hotels and restaurants resulted in three groups of employee behaviours; employee response to service delivery system failures, employee response to customer needs and requests and unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. Service recovery techniques, service adaptability and employee spontaneity are all important themes in particularly satisfying or dissatisfying service encounters. The applicability of this technique and the employee behaviours to higher education may be problematic due to the longitudinal nature of the service experience compared to the service contexts investigated. In addition to service encounter satisfaction, overall satisfaction is also discussed in the literature. In a later paper Bitner & Hubbert (1994) provide definitions and then go on to explore three interrelated constructs - service encounter satisfaction, overall service satisfaction and service quality. Service encounter satisfaction is the consumer's dis/satisfaction with a discrete service encounter, for example a single lecture. Overall service satisfaction is the consumer's overall dis/satisfaction with the organisation based on all encounters and experiences with the service provider. Service quality is the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/ superiority of the organisation and its services. Whilst the consumer may experience a number of satisfying encounters, perceptions of overall quality, it is suggested, may be tempered by perceptions of value, the opinions of others and marketing communications.

### 2.3.2.1 A critical appraisal of the Customer Satisfaction perspective

Whilst Bitner's (1990) model is useful in highlighting the importance of service encounters in service quality evaluations it can be criticised for suggesting that satisfaction in the service encounter results from a very rational, cognitive sequence. In reality individual personality traits and temporary mood states, caused by unrelated events such as parking problems prior to class, may well affect the level of satisfaction in specific encounters. It also does not take into account the effect of a number of service encounters on overall service quality. However in a revised model (Bitner 1991), perceived service quality is also affected by word of mouth, image and accumulated past experiences. Service encounter satisfaction is therefore just one of the factors likely to affect service quality evaluations. In contrast and criticism of Bitner's (1990) conceptualisation, other researchers suggest that quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). For example, Caruana & Money (1997) state that, *'although customers may believe that the service firm provides high levels of service quality, it does not necessarily follow that satisfaction will be high. If prices are perceived to be high this may still result in a negative effect on satisfaction' (p.163).*

Oliver (1993) argues that satisfaction is only an antecedent if quality is viewed in a global, enduring sense. He provides an encounter-specific model in which quality is shown to be one input to the encounter-specific satisfaction judgement. Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) concur that the debate is not yet resolved but suggest that consensus is growing that both customer satisfaction and service quality can be viewed at the individual service transaction level and at a more global level. At the transaction level a customer's overall satisfaction is influenced by their assessment of service quality, product quality and price as well as situational factors and personal factors. At the global level impressions about an organisation stem from an aggregation of transaction satisfactions (overall satisfaction) as well as their overall perceptions of the firm's service quality, product quality and price (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1994a). The assertion here is that service quality is the antecedent at the transaction level whereas customer satisfaction is the antecedent at the global level. Clearly further research is required to test this proposition. Rust and Oliver (1994) suggest that this is the most 'intriguing ' issue facing researchers in this field; the interplay between satisfaction, quality and value,

*'specifically, which are antecedent, which are mediating, and which are consequent?' (Rust and Oliver, 1994, p.14).*

In reviewing the customer satisfaction research a significant criticism of this literature is that despite years of research and many papers which focus in great detail on aspects of these concepts, no definitive answer is available to a new researcher in relation to the relationship between customer satisfaction, service quality and value. Anderson & Fornell (1994) provide an extensive customer satisfaction research prospectus covering theoretical, empirical and methodological issues at the customer, micro and macro-economic levels. At the customer level they suggest the top priorities for future research centre around clarifying the definition of satisfaction: is it transaction or brand specific, its distinction from quality and how convergent and discriminant validity of the defined constructs can be tested. In contrast and further criticisms of this research stream, Rust reportedly argues that,

*'small issues have been beaten to death in the academic literature. Further articles on...exploring the minutiae of customer psychology as it relates to customer satisfaction, may contribute to a professors receiving tenure, but such research contributes little to solving the more important issues confronting today's management' (Grapentine, 1999, p.19).*

On the grounds of practical value, Rust suggests that researchers stop focusing on the number of scale points, type of scale and distinction between customer satisfaction and service quality as whatever is used, researchers get more or less the same result. Even though they are not measuring the same thing the difference is not significant in relation to the managerial value of the customer feedback information. Rust suggests the more important issues include linking customer satisfaction to financial performance and producing a clearer managerial decision focus (Grapentine 1999).

In summary, much of the customer satisfaction literature can be criticised for its lack of managerial relevance. Another criticism is that, despite over a decade of research, there is no definitive, agreed model of customer satisfaction. The process of reviewing the literature in order to clarify and group the differences of opinion is not an easy task, a further degree in advanced mathematics would be a significant benefit for any researcher in this area. This dominant positivist, survey based research is cross-sectional in nature. Therefore the model of the consumer adopted is one of an isolated individual, rationally rating attributes and expectations in most cases after the service encounter rather than prior to the encounter. Most of the research does not capture the longitudinal and interactive process dimensions of the service experience due to cross-sectional and quantitative research designs.

### 2.3.3 The SERVQUAL perspective

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry developed the most widely applied model of service quality in 1985. In contrast to the Nordic School, but similar to the customer satisfaction perspective, the stream of research which has flowed from this paper is characterised by its positivist epistemological perspective. This does result in mainly positivist survey based research. However the stream of work from Parasuraman *et al., (*1985, 1988, 1994a and b) does incorporate both qualitative with quantitative research and does consider the diagnostic ability of any measure of service quality to be more important than predictive validity emphasised by other researchers, for example Cronin and Taylor (1992). That is the ability of the instrument to identify reasons for shortfalls in quality to aid management in the process of improving service quality rather than providing an extremely accurate predictive score (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1994a).

The researchers developed their conceptual model (see figure 2.5) via interviews with fourteen executives in four service businesses and twelve customer focus groups. The interviews with marketers resulted in the idea of four gaps which are potential hurdles for a firm in attempting to deliver high quality service:

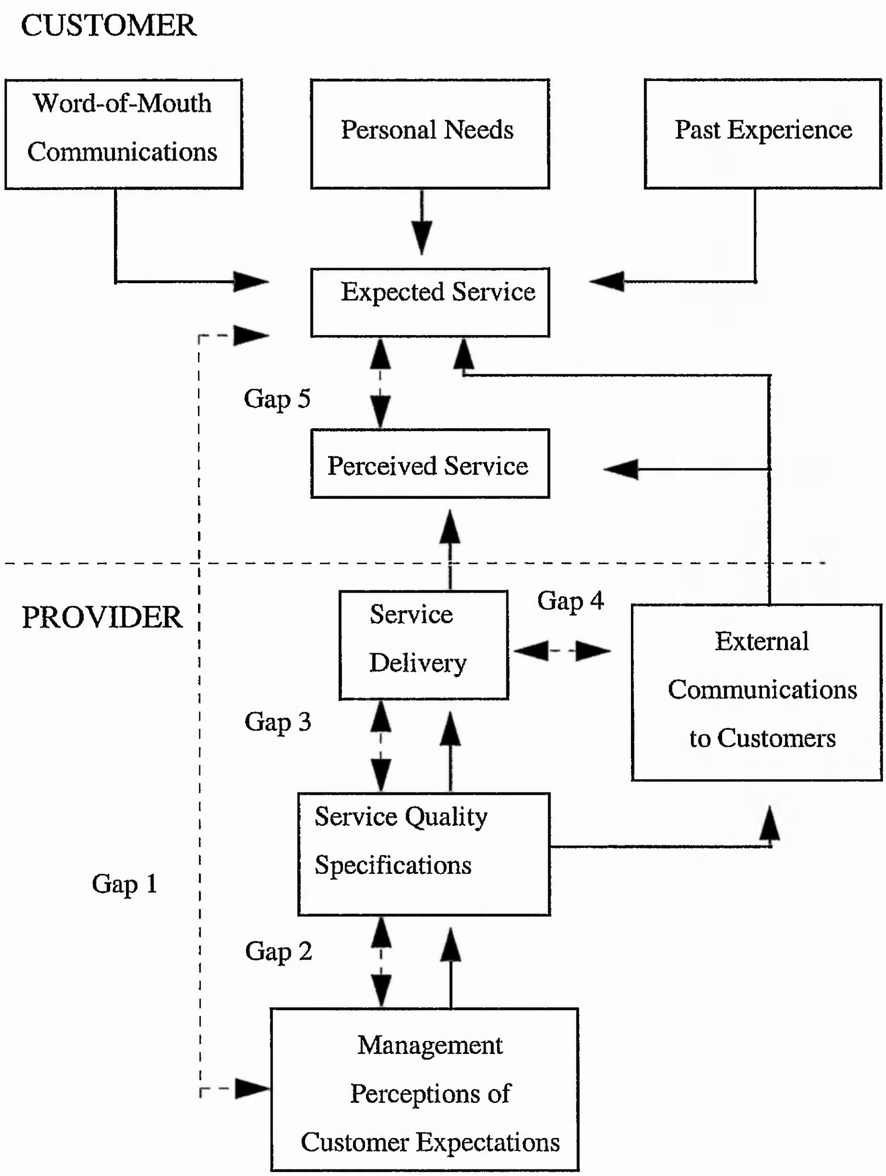
**Gap 1** - customer expectations and management perceptions gap.
Essentially managers may not know what features connote high quality, what features a service must have or what levels of performance customers require. This gap is affected by marketing research orientation, upward communication and the number of levels of management.

**Gap 2** - management perceptions and service quality specification gap.
The specifications managers set for the service often differ from customer expectations. The size of the gap can be affected by management's commitment to service quality, goal setting, task standardisation and perception of feasibility.

**Gap 3** - service quality specifications and service delivery gap.
Guidelines may exist but contact employees may not be willing or able to perform to the specified standards. Problems can occur in the areas of teamwork, employee-job fit, technology-job fit, perceived control, supervisory control systems, role conflict and role ambiguity.

**Gap 4** - service delivery and external communications gap
Exaggerated promises or lack of information will affect both expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1985, 1988).

**Figure 2.5 Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry's Conceptual Model of Service Quality**




Source: Parasuraman, P., Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, L., "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and its Implications for Future Research", *Journal of Marketing*, 1985, Vol. 49, p.44

Identification of Gap five resulted from the customer focus groups which supported the notion that the key to delivering quality is to meet or exceed customer expectations.

**Gap 5** - expected service and perceived service gap.

This gap was defined as service quality. The authors argue that gap five is the sum total of the preceding four gaps, thus if management want to close the gap between performance and expectations it becomes imperative to design procedures for measuring service performance against expectations.

Ten dimensions of service quality were specified in the 1985 paper and include; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication and understanding the customer. In 1988 Parasuraman *et al.*, developed the SERVQUAL questionnaire which purports to be a global measure of gap 5 across all service organisations. Considerable correlation among the original ten dimensions resulted in competence, courtesy, credibility and security being reduced to the single dimension of assurance via factor analysis. Access, communication and understanding the customer were also reduced to the single dimension of empathy (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988). SERVQUAL consists of an expectation and perception section with 22 pairs of Likert scales which is based on the five dimensions of service quality as follows:

1. **Tangibles**: physical facilities, equipment, appearance of personnel
2. **Reliability**: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
3. **Responsiveness**: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service

4. **Assurance**: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence
5. **Empathy**: caring, individualised attention

Respondents were asked first to give their expectations of the service on a seven point scale, then to give their evaluation of the actual service on the same scale. Service quality was then calculated as the difference between perception and expectations. Positive scores show better than expected service while negative scores show poor quality. A zero score implies that quality is satisfactory. A more recent version of the instrument (Parasuraman *et al.,*., 1991) includes an additional section that measures the relative importance of each dimension as assessed by customers. These scores are then used to weight the perceived quality measure for each dimension to give a more accurate perceived quality score.

The SERVQUAL instrument has attracted the most attention for its conceptualisation of service quality measurement issues (Fisk *et al.,* 1993, Berry and Parasuraman 1993). It has been applied in a number of sectors which include financial services, tourism, health care, utility companies, pest control, dry cleaning, fast food, professional services, libraries, information systems, management science projects and higher education (Lewis 1993, Caruana and Money 1997, Robinson 1999, Hill 1995, Ward 1996, Cuthbert 1996a & b).

#### 2.3.3.1. Criticisms of the SERVQUAL measurement instrument

Despite SERVQUAL's wide application,

*'the various replications undertaken have highlighted a number of areas of both theoretical and psychometric concern' (Caruana & Money, 1997, p.158)*

Robinson (1999) provides an excellent and up-to-date review of the main areas of agreement and disagreement in the service quality measurement debate. The only areas of agreement,

*'appear to be that service quality is an attitude and is distinct from customer satisfaction, that perceptions of performance need to be measured, that the number and definitions of dimensions depends on the service context, and that negatively worded statements should be avoided unless the survey is "short"'. (Robinson, 1999, p.29)*

Unresolved issues in the SERVQUAL literature are many and varied. They include the appropriate definition of service quality, the 'correct' model for service quality measurement, unresolved issues related to expectations, the format of the measurement instrument and the dimensionality of service quality.

A number of definitions of service quality are offered in the literature. It is generally agreed that service quality is an attitude, although the exact nature of this attitude is not agreed. Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988) suggest it stems from a comparison of expectations with performance perceptions (disconfirmation), while Teas (1993) argues that it is derived from a comparison of performance with ideal standards and Cronin and Taylor (1992) believe it stems from perceptions of performance alone. In addition, as discussed, there is also debate regarding its relationship with customer satisfaction and value.

Directly linked to the definition of service quality adopted is the measurement method. All researchers agree that a measure of perceived performance is vital in assessing service quality. However obtaining accurate data even on this may be difficult for services high in credence qualities such as higher education (Taylor and Miyazaki 1995). Few students will have the skills and knowledge sufficient to evaluate whether the academic content of a session is extensive and accurate. Their ability to assess the practical value of a session will be higher but this may only be assessed some time after the service encounter when they have had time to reflect and apply ideas at work.

A major criticism centres on the conceptualisation and use of the expectation side of the SERVQUAL questionnaire. A number of researchers suggest that performance only scores (SERVPERF) give a better measure of service quality (Cronin & Taylor 1992, 1994, Babakus & Boller, 1992). However, Bolton and Drew (1991), following empirical tests, conclude that although performance is a key determinant of service quality, disconfirmation has greater predictive powers. Teas (1993) also proposes an evaluated performance model because of difficulties with the expectations concept in SERVQUAL. Parasuraman *et al.,*'s own study (1994b) to compare alternative measurement scales found that,

*'contrary to criticisms of difference-score measures on psychometric grounds...difference-scores are by and large as sound as their direct-measure counterparts except in terms of predictive power' (Parasuraman et al., 1994b, p.220).*

A second issue is the role of importance in service quality measurement. The 1988 version of SERVQUAL does not measure the importance of the various features. Carman (1990), however, argues that expectations and importance of each item are distinct. Parasuraman *et al.,*. (1991) introduce importance weights and demonstrate the validity of the revised instrument. In contrast again Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Teas (1993) conclude that the weighted model performs worse. Other issues of disagreement relate to whether each item or dimension should be weighted and whether explicit or indirect methods for obtaining importance data are better (Robinson 1999).

If the expectations model is accepted there are still areas of disagreement relating to expectations. Teas (1994) argues that not all service providers will have the same expectations across all items and dimensions. This seems a fair criticism if a service high in experience qualities such as a restaurant is compared to a service high in credence qualities such as education. Managers should therefore consider the context dimensions of service quality when making cross-sectional comparisons. In addition, Teas suggests that a significant part of the variance in the expectations scale is due to differences in respondents' interpretation of the questions asked rather than to variance in attitudes. This is supported by Buttle (1996) in his statement that the word 'expectations' is polysemic. According to Teas (1994), Parasuraman *et al.,* themselves define expectations variously as: desires, wants, what a service provider should offer, normative expectations, ideal standards, adequate service and what the customer hopes to receive. Zeithaml *et al.,*. (1993) propose a detailed model of the nature and determinants of customer expectations of service and subsequently (Parasuraman *et al.,*. 1994a) make changes to the SERVQUAL instrument by distinguishing between desired and adequate service, introducing the concept of a zone of tolerance and including a measure on both sets of expectations. Boulding *et al.,* (1993) distinguish between 'will expectations', 'should expectations' and 'ideal expectations'. Teas (1993) also highlights the problem that positive scores do not necessarily imply good service (vector attribute model of expectations) because for certain attributes the customer may feel that higher performance is poorer quality, for example the friendliness of a bank clerk (ideal point attribute) becoming too much. Smith (1995) also highlights the tendency to obtain negative performance-expectations scores even when a customer's overall quality perception is high. She suggests this is possible because customers are unlikely to state they expect less than they already receive. Also performance above expectations may be seen as detrimental if associated with a price increase. The measurement of expectations and perceptions concurrently has also been challenged. Gilmore and Carson (1992) suggest expectations should be measured before consumption, since expectations are likely to change following the service encounter. Carman (1990) is critical of the process where respondents are asked to complete the questionnaire at a single sitting particularly where consumers are new to a particular service since expectations change with familiarity. Comparison of results between studies is also difficult since the timing of administration varies. The conclusions which can be drawn from this debate are summarised by Buttle,

*'more work needs to be done to test the relative validity and utility of the attitudinal and disconfirmational models of SQ, to make transparent the contextualised meanings of 'Expectations', and to find more efficient, valid and reliable ways to collect E scores' (Buttle, 1996, p.30).*

Several statistical shortcomings of the SERVQUAL questionnaire are addressed by Brown, Churchill and Peter (1993). They suggest that because performance and expectations are positively correlated then the gap measure will show poor reliability. The non-difference score approach is offered whereby expectations and perceptions are measured by one statement. Teas (1993) argues that a semantic-differential scale is more reliable and valid and Lewis and Mitchell (1990) propose a bipolar-semantic-differential-graphic scale. Smith (1992, 1995) and Lewis (1993) also discuss problems with the use of rating scales and unclear wording.

SERVQUAL has also been criticised for instability in the number of factors extracted and hence its dimensionality (Carman 1990, Cronin & Taylor 1992, Mels *et al.,* 1997). Carman questions the reduction of SERVQUAL from the original ten to the five dimensions since these are not always replicated. His findings show that seven of the dimensions are important depending on the context. Cronin and Taylor (1992) conclude that service quality is a unidimensional construct and Mels *et al.,* (1997) suggest that there are only two dimensions, extrinsic and intrinsic quality which are similar to Gronroos' (1984) technical and functional quality dimensions. Buttle (1996) criticises SERVQUAL for predominantly measuring the process of delivery and not the outcome of the service. Although SERVQUAL was initially developed for assessment of the financial service sector, the authors claimed it could be used generically across all service settings (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988). In reality several researchers have significantly amended the instrument to suit different service industries (Robinson 1999). Additional examples not discussed in Robinson's (1999) paper include Saleh & Ryan's (1990) hospitality industry study which extended the 22 items to 33. Finn and Lamb (1991) state that

SERVQUAL is not appropriate in retailing and should not be treated as an 'off the shelf' measure of perceived service quality. In an empirical study of service quality in the telecommunications market, Barnes & Glynn (1992) agree and conclude that,

*"..a single, standard instrument is unsuitable to the measure of service quality being delivered in different industries or different market environments. The measurement of service quality should be conducted using instruments which have been developed through the identification of those dimensions of service quality which are important to the customers of the company whose service is being measured." (Barnes and Glynn, 1992, p.500)*

Robinson (1999) also states that it is now generally agreed that the number and definitions of the dimensions varies depending on the service context. This is the situation advocated by Gronroos (1988, 1990) having studied service quality using qualitative methods. In partial defence of these criticisms, Parasuraman *et al.,* (1991) have suggested that the 'skeleton' can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific needs of the research setting. Adaptations of the SERVQUAL dimensions in higher education will be discussed in the next chapter.

Whilst recognising the significant contribution that Parasuraman *et al.,*'s original model and measurement instrument has made in developing our understanding of service quality, a final criticism of the SERVQUAL stream of research centres on the cross-sectional, quantitative and essentially repetitive nature of the research. The dominant positivist, quantitative research approach in the service quality and satisfaction literature has limitations. Firstly, the dominant approach treats the service user as an isolated individual without consideration of the role played by other consumers or any in-depth consideration of the provider-user interaction. Secondly, the positivist models and research methods see customers as 'attribute accountants' (Swan and Bowers 1998) who assess how a service scores on a series of attributes. Swan and Bowers argue that a more insightful interpretation may be derived from consideration of the social world of the service experience. Finally very few studies consider the service experience of consumers over time. This is a significant criticism and gap in the literature considering the longitudinal nature of many service experiences. Service quality evaluations are likely to change over time with accumulated experience.

## 2.4 Areas for Further Research

Taking these criticisms into consideration, clearly there exists a number of key areas for further research. As Buttle (1996) summarises, research is needed to understand further the role of expectations in service quality assessments. Parasuraman *et al.,* (1994b) encourage research into this area as well, especially exploring the reasons for the contrasting findings of various studies investigating the pros and cons of the use of difference scores. They also suggest research into the reliability and validity of administering subsections of the questionnaire to comparable subsamples to ease administration. Their concern is to raise the importance of practical considerations in assessing alternative service quality scales. They suggest incorporating,

*'practical criteria such as diagnostic value into the traditional scale-assessment paradigm that is dominated by psychometric criteria' (Parasuraman et al., 1994b, p.220).*

In an attempt to 'envision' future literature, Fisk *et al.,* (1993) predict that this recent interest in service quality will continue and assume broader and deeper dimensions. They expect more research on internal quality and its relationship to external quality measures. In addition, the dynamics of quality via studies of,

*'multiple exchanges over time and through a hierarchy of quality measurements ranging from individual service encounters to overall firm or even industry assessments' (Fisk et al.,1993, p.89).*

It seems likely that a merging of the previously independent research streams of customer satisfaction and service quality will occur so too the service quality and relationship marketing literatures will begin to draw more fully from each other. Caruana and Money (1997) have conducted exploratory research among customers of an audit firm to determine whether value plays a mediating role between service quality and satisfaction. They conclude that ensuring customer satisfaction should be of equal concern to service marketers as obtaining positive service quality judgements. They call for further research into the mediating role of price and therefore value and for clearer definitions of the three constructs and their interrelationships together with consideration of other variables such as expectations, reputation, purchase intentions and customer retention. Zeithaml *et al.,* (1996) are conducting research into the relationship between service quality, behavioural consequences, customer loyalty and ultimately profits. Chenet, Tynan and Money (2000) have redeveloped and tested the concept of the service performance gap with reference to the concepts of relationship marketing theory. The role of quality, value and satisfaction in establishing, retaining and building customer and employee relationships will generate significant research in the next few years.

In addition to areas for further research, the research design adopted provides opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of service quality. Gilmore and Carson (1992) suggest that,

*'maybe the way forward is to climb out of the SERVQUAL tunnel and look to broader horizons' (Gilmore and Carson, 1992, p.7).*

In a later paper, they argue that qualitative research designs are better suited for gathering data on dynamic, experiential processes and the interactive nature of the service experience (Gilmore and Carson 1996). Robinson (1999) concludes,

*'Perhaps it is time to recognise that SERVQUAL has been just one contribution, albeit an important one, in the evolution of an understanding of service quality and its measurement' (Robinson, 1999, p30).*

Adopting a relativist methodology and use of qualitative methods to build an alternative and deeper understanding of service quality will provide an alternative perspective and has the potential to develop new knowledge in this area.

Finally, service quality researchers have not significantly drawn on the insights and frameworks developed in other bodies of literature. Of specific relevance to this research, the educational quality literature is likely to offer alternative insights which may lead to original contributions. The synthesis and integration of service quality and educational quality literatures is an area that requires further research (Harvey, Burrows and Green 1992a, Rowley, 1996). As such, the next chapter will focus even more tightly on the issue of quality in the Higher Education context.

# CHAPTER 3

# THE RESEARCH CONTEXT:

# QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*"While the quest for service quality dimensions has an attractive simplicity, it is important to recognise that this is but a part of the complex jigsaw associated with managing and measuring service quality in higher education" (Rowley, 1997, p.7)*

## 3.1 Introduction

As educational quality is a unique type of service quality, this chapter reviews the context in which the research is taking place. Firstly a number of different definitions of educational quality and purposes of higher education are considered (Harvey and Green 1993, Melrose 1998, Barnett 1992). This is followed by an evaluation of three contrasting approaches to the measurement of quality in education; adaptations of the SERVQUAL instrument (Rigotti and Pitt 1992, Donaldson and Runciman 1995, Ward 1996, Cuthbert 1996a and b, Owlia and Aspinall 1996). Methods for assessing the quality of teaching and learning (Ramsden 1991, Entwistle and Tait 1990, Marsh and Roche 1993) and methods for assessing the quality of the total student experience (Roberts and Higgins 1992, Mazelan *et al.,* 1992, Hill 1995, Aldridge and Rowley 1998). This part of the chapter considers the conceptually driven research in the educational quality literature and highlights, in particular, those dimensions of quality that are important when researching student evaluations in higher education. The second half of the chapter highlights the significant quality assurance events in British Higher Education in the 1990s (Harvey, Burrows & Green 1992b, Green 1994, Lindsay & Rodgers 1998, Jackson 1998a & b) and discusses the effect these have had on quality assurance at the individual university level. The aim of this section is to situate the longitudinal research associated with this study within the context of national and local higher education quality developments. The dominant paradigm of quality adopted by external quality assessment agencies and the effects this has had on quality assurance within the University and Nottingham Business School will be considered.

### 3.2 Multiple Definitions, Stakeholders and Philosophical Positions

Within the service quality literature a dominant paradigm exists with a single definition of quality focused on the customer supported by a positivist research methodology (Robinson 1999, Grapentine 1999). This is not the case in the educational quality literature. Harvey and Green (1993) state that,

*'quality is a philosophical concept. Definitions of quality vary and, to some extent, reflect different perspectives of the individual and society' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.28).*

A number of authors discuss the different ways in which the term quality is used in education (Moodie 1991, Middlehurst 1992, Harvey and Green 1993, Melrose 1998). Harvey and Green (1993) provide a useful framework which summarises five different definitions; educational quality can be defined as exceptional, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money or transformation.

The *exceptional* definition equates quality with something 'special' (Harvey and Green 1993) or 'a particularly high level of performance' (Middlehurst 1992). There are three variations of this; distinctiveness, excellence and relative standards. The traditional, elitist view of quality in higher education is the notion of 'distinctiveness'. Quality cannot be defined or benchmarked but is instinctively known. As Barnett (1992) comments, just to be a university lecturer or professor was itself evidence of quality in days when a degree secured admission to membership of an exclusive social group. A second variation is the view that quality is 'excellence' in the sense of exceeding very high standards. So components of excellence can be identified but it is still an elitist view as quality is only attainable by the few. In this sense it focuses on excelling in input and output, it does not matter that teaching (the process) may be unexceptional, thus reputation and level of resource judge quality. As Harvey & Green (1993) state,

*'this would mean ensuring that what qualified as excellence, (say a first-class degree from Oxbridge) is not devalued as higher education faces continuing pressure on resources as the result of increased participation' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.13).*

This definition of quality assumes standards are objective and static rather than relative. The third variation defines quality as passing a set of required (minimum) standards and is the result of scientific quality control and conformance to standards. Quality enhancement is seen in terms of improvements in the design and content of courses and validation procedures. Under this definition it is possible to have a poor quality Rolls Royce and a high quality Mini. This view, unlike the traditional or excellence approach, can therefore cater for non-universal, relative standards in higher education. This then raises problems of comparability and the development of measurable standards.

Quality has also been defined as *consistency* (Ingle, 1985). This focuses on process rather than inputs and outputs. This is encapsulated in the ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time (Crosby, 1979). With this notion, excellence is concerned with conformance to specification rather than exceeding standards. Reliability becomes the basis for claiming excellence and the focus becomes prevention rather than inspection embodied in a quality culture. The emphasis is on 'democratising' quality by getting everyone involved. It is also a relativist conception of quality because a car delivered on time, without defects is quality but does not afford comparison with the specification of another manufacturer's vehicle. In the higher education context the problem is the sense in which zero defects and getting it right first time can be applied and the argument that critical appraisal and reconceptualisation of specifications is encouraged (Harvey and Green 1993).

Quality can be defined as *fitness for purpose* (Ball 1985, Moodie 1991, Middlehurst 1992, Melrose 1998) and thus is functional, developmental and inclusive in perspective. It raises the issue of whose purpose and how fitness is assessed. Two alternative priorities for specifying purpose are offered, the first identifies quality by meeting customer specifications, whilst the second identifies quality by meeting the institution's mission and objectives (Harvey and Green 1993). The notion that meeting customer requirements defines quality is an idealisation as specifications are likely to be mediated by cost, technology, time and communications. Unless tailor-made services are possible, some standardisation and anticipation of future requirements takes place by the producer as well as the delivery process. In the higher education context further issues arise with this definition of quality. A number of stakeholders can be viewed as the customer, for example students, employers, parents and the government. The customer is not always able to specify what is required due to entry requirements and lack of prior experience. Inseparability makes the process individual, which results in difficulty in stating and maintaining standards (Fry 1995, Rowley 1996a and 1997). The second view of meeting the institution's mission defines a quality institution as one which clearly states its mission and is efficient and effective in meeting the objectives it has set for itself. Quality assurance thus becomes centre stage, which is concerned with ensuring there are mechanisms and processes in place to ensure the desired quality is delivered. The main problem with this view is that consumers may have different conceptions of the quality of the service from the producer. For both definitions of fitness for purpose the difficulty of defining the purpose of higher education also becomes evident (Melrose 1998).

Quality has also been defined as *value for money* (Kogan, 1986). This introduces the notion of accountability and the idea that if the same outcome is achieved at lower costs or a better outcome for the same level of resources, then quality has been improved. Effectiveness is seen in terms of control mechanisms and quantifiable outcomes. Performance indicators become important to funders and accountability to the customer is encapsulated in customer charters (Harvey and Green 1993, Melrose 1998).

Finally, quality can be defined as *transformation* (Harvey and Burrows, 1992). This view of quality adopts the notion of qualitative change – both physical and cognitive transcendence. In the higher education context it is based on the view that education is not a service for a consumer but an ongoing process of transformation of the student. This leads to two notions of transformative quality, enhancing and empowering the consumer. Value-added notions provide a summative approach to enhancement and empowerment involves informants in decision-making that affects their transformation. Quality is thus judged in terms of the democratisation of the process, not just the outcome (Harvey and Green 1993, Melrose 1998).

Clearly there exist differences of opinion regarding the definition that should be used when considering the quality of the educational service experience. Barnett (1992) argues that the debate about higher education quality often takes place in a conceptual void,

*'Talk of quality in higher education is not fully honest. Those who use the language of 'quality' do not always make explicit the conception of higher education from which their approach to quality springs' (Barnett, 1992, p.28).*

To begin to access the philosophical and conceptual basis of the different definitions presented, Melrose (1998) provides an insightful paper and notes that,

*'a multitude of evaluation models have been developed by educational researchers', and that it is, 'possible to group models according to the underlying philosophy and beliefs about the body of knowledge and the purposes of education upon which they are based' (Melrose, 1998, p.38).*

She offers three alternative paradigms of curriculum evaluation and concepts of quality in higher education; functional, transactional and critical.

The functional (or technical) paradigm of curriculum evaluation sees the purpose of higher education as producing knowledgeable and skilled students as efficiently as possible verses other programmes. Evaluation is carried out by an external 'expert', judged against pre-stated goals and is believed to be value-free, quantifiable and a generator of comparative data. Ontologically there is a concrete truth to uncover about the worth of the curriculum and it is believed that evaluation will provide a correct answer. Evaluation is therefore output focused, based on standards, with context and process not seen as important. Funding bodies, the government and employers are seen as the most important stakeholders. This is similar to Harvey and Green's (1993) excellence as high standards definition of quality in higher education.

The transactional (or naturalistic) paradigm sees the purpose of higher education as meeting the needs and satisfying the requirements of informants. Each context is seen as unique so evaluation is formative, subjective and qualitative in nature and evaluators include a group of stakeholders (especially students and lecturers although all stakeholders are acknowledged). Ontologically this represents a relativist position focused on groups with shades of truth to obtain depending on the observer, interpreter and pluralistic values. Evaluation is therefore process focused. It equates with Harvey and Green's (1993) fitness for purpose definition of quality in higher education.

The critical (or emancipatory) paradigm views education as a social good for the future as well as the present. It is based on the idea of learning communities as self-evaluating and critically reflective entities empowered to set their own standards. Evaluations are conducted by the learners themselves, sometimes initiated by lecturers, through an on-going process of dialogue and collaboration. The organisational and societal context is seen as very important and changing. Ontologically this is a relativist position focused on the individual. Evaluation is therefore process and input focused and equates most closely to Harvey and Green's (1993) transformative view of quality in higher education.

Clearly, there is no single accepted definition or purpose of higher education. Harvey and Green (1993) state there is, 'no single correct definition of quality' (p.28) but rather quality should be seen as a 'stakeholder-relative' concept. Stakeholders with an interest in quality in Higher Education include students, employers, the government, funding councils, teaching staff, managerial staff, accreditation & validation bodies and assessment bodies (Harvey, Burrows & Green 1992a) plus parents, the local community and the local authority (Rowley 1997). Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992a) in their extensive work on the Quality in Higher Education project at the University of Central England acknowledge different definitions and concepts of quality in higher education and believe it is not possible to talk about quality as a unitary concept,

*'at best perhaps, we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken' (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992a, p.28).*

So whilst staff and students are likely to be most interested in the inputs and process of the educational experience, the government and employers are likely to weight more highly the efficiency of the process and the outputs in terms of what students learn and can do (Green, 1994, Barnett, 1992, Owlia and Aspinwall 1996). From the review of research on service quality discussed in the previous chapter, quality is defined by the customer which corresponds to the fitness for purpose definition used in the educational literature. In evaluating any research in this context, it is clearly important to clarify the philosophical position of the researcher as this will directly affect the definition of quality adopted, the associated criteria and evaluation methodology employed.

## 3.3 Contrasting Approaches to Evaluating the Student Experience

Work on approaches to the evaluation of the student experience can be divided into three bodies of research:

- Application of the Gap model and SERVQUAL instrument to education
- Methods that focus on assessing teaching and learning quality
- Methods that assess the quality of the total student experience

### 3.3.1 Application of the Gap Model and SERVQUAL Instrument to Education

A small number of studies have applied the Gap model and the original SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, 1988) in the education context or an adapted version (Rigotti and Pitt 1992, Donaldson and Runciman 1995, Ward 1996, Cuthbert 1996a and b, Owlia and Aspinwall 1996).

One of the first studies was conducted by Rigotti and Pitt in 1992. This is particularly relevant because it considers the applicability of the SERVQUAL questionnaire (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990 version) for full time and part time MBA students in a Business School (albeit set in Cape Town). The only amendments made are to the wording of the questionnaire to make it appropriate to the setting. In considering the dimensionality of the instrument from analysis of the 162 returned questionnaires, they conclude that 4 dimensions are reliable but that assurance is weak and sporadic. This conclusion is based on reliability alpha coefficients calculated for the study. In addition the gap recorded for the part time students was largest. Rigotti and Pitt suggest this may be caused by staff and managers supplying less care to the lower income generating course or because part-time students are in longer contact with the school which raises their expectations. They conclude that,

*'While some modifications to the instrument will obviously need to be made in the future, the reliability and validity of the instrument for this application seems to be acceptable' (Rigotti and Pitt, 1992, p.15)*

In a similar approach, Cuthbert (1996a and b) considers the applicability of SEVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988 version) to higher education applied to 3 undergraduate degrees with a response rate of 134. The results of the factor analysis again show the assurance dimension to be weak in relation to reliability but in contrast service quality is found to be a seven dimensional construct. He concludes that a new instrument should be developed that focuses on just the educational element for course level quality assurance, as these are the only elements under the control of the course manager. In a detailed masters dissertation, Ward (1996) aims to identify the factors that are important to undergraduate students in determining service quality at Nottingham Business School. Through the results of 7 group discussions, she develops a modified SERVQUAL questionnaire which increases the questions from 22 to 36. Based on analysis of 214 returned questionnaires, assurance again proved to be weak as a dimension and 9 factors were identified leading Ward to conclude that perhaps Parasuraman *et al.,*'s (1985) original 10 factors may be more appropriate for higher education. Reliability was the most important dimension to undergraduates followed by responsiveness, with tangibles being the least important. She questions the use of difference scores based on the group discussion results. Undergraduate students had very few expectations leading Ward to conclude that perhaps Cronin and Taylor's (1992) performance only measure of service quality may be better suited to higher education. She also concludes that,

*'the research findings suggest that there are other things besides service quality which impact on the overall student experience. Indeed, despite negative SERVQUAL scores across all five SERVQUAL dimensions over 86% of respondents rate their student experience as 'good' or 'excellent'' (Ward, 1996, p.122).*

In contrast to these quantitative studies, Donaldson and Runciman (1995) and Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) adopt qualitative methods. Donalson and Runciman (1995) conducted 120 interviews in 10 colleges of Further Education to investigate management perceptions of service quality and those of the actual service provider – gaps 2 and 3 of Parasuraman *et al.,*'s (1988) extended model. They concluded that dimensions of gap 2 and gap 3 can provide a useful framework for researching service quality in education. They found gaps in the colleges for all the factors with management's communication of quality standards and lecturers lack of time to meet to ensure consistency of delivery to be particular problems. Whilst the focus on gap 2 and 3 is not directly relevant to this study it does highlight potential causes of service quality shortfalls in the educational context. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) offer a useful literature review of the work on product quality, software quality and service quality dimensions for application to higher education. With reference to a number of studies (Garvin 1987, Watts 1987, Parasuraman *et al.,* 1985, Sasser *et al.,* 1987, Haywood-Farmer 1988, Stewart and Walsh 1989, Gronroos 1990, Schvaneveldt *et al.,* 1991) they propose a conceptual framework with 6 quality dimensions. These include; tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery and reliability. The characteristics of each dimension are focused on higher education which highlights the need to add context specificity to any research undertaken.

In summary if SERVQUAL is applied it needs to be amended and currently no consensus exists in relation to the dimensions of service quality or the importance of each dimension in the higher education context. The studies lend some support to the importance of reliability and the lack of reliability for the assurance dimension in the educational context. Owlia and Aspinwall's (1996) study particularly highlights the many different dimensions and characteristics of quality proposed in a variety of related literatures. They also highlight a number of specific educational characteristics which appear to be important in assessing quality in education. The following two sections expand on this issue and consider what insights can be drawn from the educational quality literature.

### 3.3.2 Methods that Focus on Assessing Teaching and Learning Quality

An early review of the assessment methods used to assess teaching quality in US higher education was conducted by Tan (1986) in which he differentiates between three types of studies; reputational (subject evaluations from 'experts'), objective indicator and quantitative correlate studies. He concludes that,

*'the best way to measure quality is by the use of multiple variables. Yet little success has been gained. Part of the problem lies in the fact that there is little theory to guide researchers in their selection of the 'right' combination of variables to measure quality' (Tan, 1986, p.259).*

It is still the case today that the majority of universities use different variables, questions and evaluation methods many of which are developed internally without consideration of reliability or validity (Ramsden 1991, Rowley 1996a, 1997, Cuthbert 1996a). The literature on student learning reveals many well validated if contrasting questionnaires which highlight important dimensions of quality in education (Hattie and Watkins 1988, Pike 1993, Entwistle and Tait 1990, Ramsden 1991, Marsh and Roche 1993, Cuthbert 1996a, Rowley 1996a). Widely reported and applied methods that focus on assessing teaching and learning include Ramsden's (1991) Course Experience Questionnaire and Marsh and Roche's (1993) Students Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) instrument. Table 3.1 illustrates the non-ranked factors used. The CEQ was designed to measure differences between faculties, departments and courses rather than specific lecturers. Its limitations are that it does not identify specific areas of concern, qualitative constructive criticism that would indicate areas for improvement or evidence of how a department has responded to student evaluation data. In contrast, the SEEQ scale looks at the individual lecturer level and therefore cannot measure differences between faculties, departments and courses. Both lists of dimensions can be criticised for only focusing on the teaching and learning experience in assessing quality and so neglecting the wider

**Table 3.1 Factors in assessing the quality of teaching & learning**

| **CEQ Ramsden (1991)** | **SEEQ Marsh & Roche (1993)** |
|---|---|
| Concern for and availability to students | Individual rapport |
| Enthusiasm and interest of teachers | Instructor enthusiasm |
| Clear organisation and goals | Organisation/clarity |
| Feedback on learning | Learning/value |
| Encouragement of student independence and active learning | Breadth of coverage |
| Appropriate workload and assessment models | Group interaction |
| Provision of a suitably challenging academic environment | Workload/difficulty |
| | Assignments/readings |
| | Examination/grading |

student experience incorporating such aspects as accommodation situation and social life (Ramsden 1991, Marsh & Roche 1993, Rowley 1996a, Cuthbert 1996a). As Entwistle and Tait (1990) point out, the relationship between learning and teaching is neither simple nor direct, as much depends on the approach of the student and the student experience involves much more than lecturer-student interaction.

### 3.3.3 Methods that Assess the Quality of the Total Student Experience

Many higher education institutions evaluate aspects of the student experience beyond the quality of teaching and learning (Roberts and Higgins 1992, Mazelan *et al.,* 1992, Hill 1995, Aldridge and Rowley 1998). Figure 3.2 illustrates the non-ranked factors used in four UK student satisfaction surveys.

**Table 3.2 Factors in total student experience satisfaction surveys**

| **Roberts&Higgins (1992)** | **Mazelan *et al.,* (1992)** | **Hill (1995)** | **Aldridge&Rowley (1998)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Library service | Library service | Library service | Services/facilities |
| Computing/IT support | Computing service | Computing facilities | for students: |
| Bars/catering | Food outlets | Catering service | - accommodation |
| The Students Union | Accommodation | Accommodation | - careers |
| Course organisation/ | Course organisation & | Course content | - catering |
| efficiency | assessment | | - child care |
| Quality of lecturing/ | Teaching staff/ | Personal contact with | - campus cleanliness |
| Communication | teaching style | academic staff | - counselling |
| Subject content | Teaching methods | Teaching methods | - health care |
| Entertainment | Student workload & | Teaching quality | - recreation/sport |
| | assessment | | - students' union |
| Social facilities/clubs | Social life | Student involvement | - welfare rights |
| Private study facilities | Self development | Work experience | Teaching & learning |
| Resources & equipment | Financial circumstances | Financial services | Teaching & learning |
| Sporting facilities | University environment | Feedback | development |
| Involvement in course- | | Joint consultation | Teaching & learning |
| development | | Bookshop | support: |
| Overall learning experience | | Careers service | -library services |
| | | Counselling welfare | - mediaTech services |
| | | Health service | -general |
| | | Students' Union | - computing services |
| | | Physical education | Communication, |
| | | Travel agency | consultation |
| | | | feedback & |
| | | | complaint |
| | | | Equal opportunities, |
| | | | disability and |
| | | | environment |

One of the first large-scale UK surveys was conducted by Roberts and Higgins (1992) who surveyed 5,858 students from 100 HE institutions in their second year using questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Their objective was to further explain the decision making process applicants use when considering HE courses and to identify good practice in terms of customer-care and responsiveness within institutions. They state that,

*'when formulating higher education policy and practice, far too little effort has been made to canvass the ideas and opinions of the consumers of the service compared with the interests of academics, industry and government agencies." (Roberts & Higgins, 1992, p.3).*

In terms of students' experiences, gaps arise because of poor organisation, inappropriate module content and delivery level, variable lecturing quality, increasing class size and limited equipment and books. However most students would recommend their course due to the high levels of positive social interaction associated with studying in HE (Roberts and Higgins 1992).

Research by the Student Satisfaction Research Unit at UCE surveys student satisfaction each year. In 1992, the fourth large-scale annual survey (Mazelan et.al.,1992) 420 returned questionnaires were analysed based on the dimensions outlined in table 3.2 and by using satisfaction and importance ratings. By 1999 (Update, March 1999, UCE) approximately 12,000 students were surveyed. Each year a report is produced that identifies areas for management intervention with feedback to students on outcomes and action. Hill (1995) also uses similar dimensions, but with a particular emphasis on student support facilities. Rather than applying the importance/performance model, she adopts the expectations/perceptions approach from the service quality literature. Aldridge & Rowley's (1998) satisfaction survey adopts the factors used in the Student Charter and again similar criteria are highlighted.

### 3.4 Towards an Integration of the Approaches Adopted

In all the surveys, however, it is important to note that whilst there are similarities between the factors used, each has its own unique characteristics. As in the service quality literature, there is still no general agreement regarding the dimensions or measurement approach to assessing quality in education. Rowley comments that,

*'although significant work has been conducted on scales for assessing the quality of teaching and learning, it is difficult to map these scales on to one another or on to any scale in the service-quality literature' (Rowley, 1997, p.249)*

Table 3.3 illustrates possible relationships between three significant frameworks in the service quality, student learning and student experience literature. Parasuraman's *et al.,* (1988) generic dimensions can be related to the specific dimensions offered by both Entwistle and Tait (1990) and Mazelan *et al.,* (1992). Reliability in education is likely to be related to issues of course organisation and assessment. Responsiveness is more specifically about lecturer enthusiasm and the importance of teaching style. Relevance and interest of the material presented to the student is likely to impact on students' assessment of the knowledge and

**Table 3.3 Comparison of the Dimensions Used in the Service Quality, Student Learning and Student Experience Literature**

| **Service Quality**<br>**Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988)** | **Student Learning**<br>**Entwistle and Tait (1990)** | **Student Experience**<br>**Mazelan *et al.*, (1992)** |
|---|---|---|
| Reliability – consistency and dependability, performing the service right first time, honouring promises | Standard of organisation at unit and course level<br>Appropriateness of assessment procedures<br>Relevance of assessment to the course material | Course organisation and assessment<br>Student workload and assessment |
| Responsiveness - willingness to help and provide prompt service | Tutor enthusiasm and style of delivery | Teaching style |
| Assurance – knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence | Relevance and interest of the material to the student | Teaching staff<br>Self development |
| Empathy – caring individualised attention the firm provides its customers | Extent to which tutor is interested in the individual student | Financial circumstances |
| | Explanation, context setting and discussion of unit material | Teaching style |
| | Difficulty, pace and quantity of the workload | Student workload and assessment |
| | Willingness to allow and encourage class group interaction | Social life |
| Tangibles – physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel | | Computing service<br>Library service<br>Food outlets<br>Accommodation<br>University environment |

competence of lecturers and empathy will be demonstrated through the amount of individual attention tutors give to students, the recognition of financial circumstances and workload pressures which are likely to be very relevant to part-time students. Group interaction and social life are highlighted in the educational literature but not so clearly in the SERVQUAL literature. Finally product dimensions or tangible aspects such as support services are likely to have an impact on students' service quality ratings. The relative applicability of these dimensions and frameworks will be considered in the primary research associated with this study. Rowley (1997) suggests,

*'any attempt to measure service quality may focus on groups, such as staff and students who are intimately involved in the service experience, but such measurements must be undertaken in the wider context of the quality perspectives of all other stakeholders' (Rowley, 1997, p.9).*

Whilst this study focuses on the student, the following section of this chapter reviews the quality perspective of other significant stakeholders in higher education, namely the Government, assessment bodies and managers and staff in the research setting.

### 3.5 The Policy Background to University Quality Systems in the 1990s

Whilst much that has been written in the policy area is a-conceptual, more concerned with standards and auditing than a deep understanding of the process of quality evaluation, it is still important for this research because as Barnett (1992) highlights, *"definitions of quality at the institutional level and systems being developed for evaluating institutional performance can have their impact on what we take quality to be at the course level." (Barnett, 1992, p.10)*

Interest in quality and standards in higher education is not new. The emphasis on either external or internal quality control has varied over time. In the nineteenth century universities prepared students for externally developed and regulated examinations and many institutions were not allowed to confer their own degrees until after the Second World War. It is only since this date that universities have experienced short-lived independence to monitor their own standards and quality (Moodie 1986, Doherty 1994). This approach to quality was consistent with the Robbins Report (1963) and was based on the assumption that, 'academic standards were safe in the hands of the universities.' (Green, 1994, p.3). However, from the mid 1980s the demand for greater public accountability has grown (Middlehurst 1992, Fry 1995, Partington 1999). The drivers for the more recent change from internal to external quality monitoring are *political* – driven by custodial responsibilities in respect of the public purse, *economic* – the demands of funding a significantly expanded system, *consumerist* – the stronger voice of students and employers and *professional* – the constraints of disciplinary subject grouping (Middlehurst 1992, Fry 1995, Partington 1999). As Partington (1999) states,

*'whatever the factors, the existence of external monitoring is not new, although the nature of it may vary from its predecessor versions in both approach and implications' (Partington, 1999, p.3).*

Prior to the 1990s the DES (1987) White Paper: Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge and the 1988 Education Reform Act had a major influence on universities' approach to quality. The 1987 paper spelled out the Conservative

Government's objectives to expand participation ratios to one in five by the end of the decade. In the 1988 Act polytechnics and colleges were incorporated and the University Funding Council (UFC) and Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) were established with price and quality as the criteria for allocating resources (Lindsay & Rodgers 1998, Harvey, Burrows and Green 1992b).

### 3.5.1 Policy changes over the decade: 1990-1999

Following these policy changes a number of significant events have fuelled an increasing focus on quality in higher education in the 1990s. These are summarised in table 3.4. and are discussed in more detail in the next two sections of this chapter.

As Barnett (1992) indicates, these external policy changes coming from the Government and assessment bodies, have an effect on quality assurance approaches at the institution level which in turn affects individual faculty approaches to quality and ultimately specific courses and the student experience.

#### 3.5.1.1 The early 1990s: increasing quality monitoring

In May 1991 the Government issued a White Paper on Higher Education. The main proposals were a commitment to higher standards and a rapid, cost effective expansion of higher education by the year 2000. The relevant changes proposed were the:

**Table 3.4. Significant Quality Assurance Events in British HE in the 1990s**

| Date | Event | Purpose/Effect |
|---|---|---|
| 1990 | CVCP Academic Audit Unit established | To audit the quality assurance processes of the universities. |
| 1991 | DES: Higher Education: A New Framework | Pledge to expand participation to 1 in 3 by 2000 by abolishing the binary line (designating Polytechnics as Universities) and establishing single funding councils. |
| 1991 | National Vocational Qualifications Framework established | To recognise and equate vocational skills to academic qualifications. Followed creation of National Curriculum under 1988 Education Reform Act. |
| 1992 | Further and Higher Education Act | Binary line abolished. Quality assessment statutory responsibility of the HEFCs. HMIs and CNAA abolished. |
| 1992 | HEFC's Research Assessment Exercise | To assess quality of research output. Shifts focus of some institutions from teaching to research. |
| 1992 | HEQC established | Responsible for Audit previously resting with AAU and CNAA. |
| 1994 | HEQC Graduate Standards Programme | Enquiry commissioned by CVCP into academic standards in undergraduate programmes. Final report HEQC 1997. |
| 1996 | HEFC's Research Assessment exercise | To assess quality of research output. Shifts focus of some from teaching to research. |
| 1996 | Joint Planning Group Quality Assurance in HE Final Report | Recommended establishment of a single quality agency and an integrated process of quality assurance across the UK. |
| 1996 | Harris Report (HEFCE) | Review of Postgraduate education and recommendation to establish a national qualifications framework. |
| 1997 | Dearing Report (NCIHE, HMSO) | Review of both post and undergraduate provision. Nineteen recommendations made refocusing QA from subject based to academic standards underpinned by strengthened external examiner system, national code of practice, professional accreditation of teaching staff & a national qualifications and credit framework. |
| 1998 | QAA An Agenda for Quality | Taking forward the Dearing (and Garrick report in Scotland) recommendations. |
| 1998 | QAA The Way Ahead | Outlining the new approach to external QA reviews in subject, institution and collaborative provision. |
| 1999 | QAA Assuring Quality and Standards | Reporting on progress to November 1999 on implementing the new QA approach through trials and consultation with over 100 institutions |

(Source: Harvey, Burrows & Green 1992b, Green 1994, Lindsay & Rodgers 1998, Jackson 1998a & b, QAA http://www.qaa.ac.uk, HEFCE http://www.hefce.ac.uk & CVCP http://WWW.cvcp various publications)

■ Objective of one third of all eighteen year olds to enter H.E. by the year 2000 = 36% growth in student numbers (In 1992 the number of eighteen-year-olds increased by 28% and this level to remain steady until 1996).

■ Maintenance of institutional diversity with distinctive mission statements and objectives.

■ Establishment of a U.K. wide Quality Audit Unit for the scrutiny of quality control arrangements in all H.E. organisations.

■ Setting up of a Quality Assessment Unit.

The Further and Higher Education Act obtained Royal Assent on 6 March 1992. This act made it a legal requirement that funding councils should establish a 'Quality Assessment Committee' to assess quality in HE. Circular 3/93 from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) describes their assessment methodology. The stated purpose of quality assessment was:

■ To ensure that all education for which the HEFCE provides funding is of satisfactory quality or better, and to ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality.

■ To encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of assessment reports and an annual report.

■ To inform funding and reward excellence

Quality was assessed by an institutional self-assessment, assessment of this by the HEFCE and possibly an assessment visit by a team of assessors. Three quality ratings were possible; excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. At this time a stakeholder approach to quality was adopted,

*'Quality can be described or determined by reference to any number of dimensions, for example: the learning support facilities; the quality of staff and arrangements for staff development; scholarship and research; the ethos of the institution; the academic standards of graduates or diplomates; student and employer satisfaction; value added. The various stakeholders...will place greater or lesser emphasis on these and other variables' (HEFCE, Circular 3/93, p.8).*

The HEFCE's response to quality assessment was one which focused on an institution's own aims and objectives in order to recognise diversity in institutional missions. Thus the definition of quality as 'fitness for purpose', in this case the institution's, was adopted.

In addition to the powerful influence of the Government and the new funding body, the early 1990s saw students themselves beginning to formalise their expectations in a proposed Students' Charter. Rising expectations can be seen as a result of a broader social change towards expecting higher service generally and the Conservative Government's dominant ideology to increase efficiency and customer satisfaction in all areas of the Public Sector by introducing market-orientated reforms (Lindsay & Rodgers 1998, Jackson 1998a, Green 1994).

Key changes in the educational environment at this time were; a redefinition of HE still with the concern for intellectual development of individuals but with greater accountability to the government based on meeting the needs of society and the economy. Increased student numbers but with proportionately smaller increases in funding resulting in larger class sizes and greater diversity of starting points with widening access, a shift to managerial control of quality decision making and a shift in the status of students. As a consumer of Higher Education services in the 1990s each student is now expected to have views about the quality of service which is offered (Green, Brannigan, Mazelan and Giles, 1994).

These policy changes raised the more philosophical debate in higher education about the applicability of concepts and models of quality and marketing from the private sector. As Green (1994) comments, the reaction of most academics at this time to the notion that students might be seen as 'customers' was not a positive one. Evidence in the form of the Students' Charter, development of corporate logos, brochures and marketing departments at many universities indicated some transference and application of these business concepts. That stated, Lindsay and Rodgers's (1998) analysis of the influence on market orientation of the education reform process up until 1993 concludes that rather than policy changes leading to universities which have a marketing orientation it did in fact lead to institutions developing a selling orientation. Whilst student numbers increased from 640,000 to 1,130,000 from 1980 to 1993, funding allocated to teaching per student reduced from £2770 to £2363 at 1985 constant prices. In an attempt to maintain their income, universities added more places than the increase in demand resulting in a selling orientation. Market orientation was not developed because the role of the student in the resource allocation process was weak. The student consumed rather than paid and had imperfect information as to the quality of the institution they selected for their degree. Lindsay and Rogers (1998) conclude, *'in higher education, the interests of the student have been far from overriding during the period of educational reforms...the student is not being given the dominant role of 'customer' (as opposed to 'consumer') as would be required if higher education was to introduce a truly market-orientated approach' (Lindsay and Rogers, 1998, p.167).*

At the same time many institutions were voicing concerns about the heavy investment required to support, 'a plethora of overlapping control systems' (Green, 1994, p.11). These included course validation and review, external examiner moderation, accreditation, quality audit, performance indicators and quality assessment.

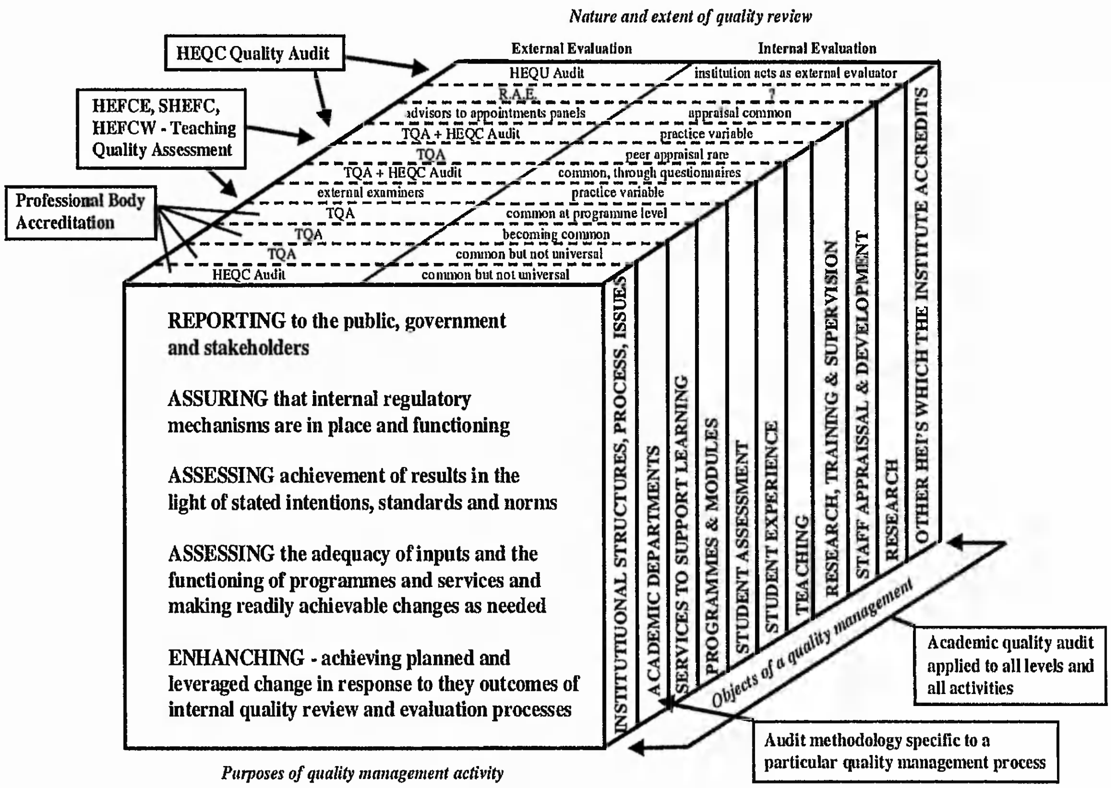
**3.5.1.2 The second half of the 1990s: the academic standards debate**

In 1994 the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) Graduate Standards Programme was commissioned by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and this marked the beginning of the refocusing of the quality issue around the academic standards debate. This was largely prompted by the development of more flexible credit-based modular programmes to facilitate the government's participation objectives. The Joint Planning Group (1996) final report recommended the establishment of a single quality agency and the creation of an integrated process of quality assurance. The new agency, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), replaced the HEQC and the main assessment functions of the funding councils. The quality assurance framework outlined in the report,

*'assumes that institutions will monitor and review their own provision, whilst the agency will manage a series of external reviews of that provision and the effectiveness of each institution's internal review procedures' (JPG, 1996, p.3).*

Jackson (1996 and 1997), Assistant Director at the QAA, provides a comprehensive review of internal quality audit which he sees as, 'a significant development in the evolution of quality assurance with UK higher education.' (1997, p.51). He proposes a conceptual model of a self-regulating UK higher education institution, illustrated in figure 3.1., which summarises the current collective arrangements in UK HE rather than an expectation that all the elements of the model will be present in any single University.

**Figure 3.1. Jackson's conceptual model of a self-regulating UK HE institution (Source Jackson 1997)**



The model attempts to depict the possible purposes (front face), objects of quality management (side face) and nature and extent of quality review (top face) in higher education in 1997. The move towards greater internal auditing of quality against external standards can be explained as a response to the rapid expansion in the diversity and ability range of students, rapid expansion in the types of academic programmes, the expansion of credit-based modular schemes and changes in the funding of teaching and research (HEQC 1996, Jackson 1997). The student experience is one of eleven objects for quality management on the model offered by Jackson. This indicates that whilst it is seen as important, the student experience is not central to the definition or processes of quality assurance in higher education. Current details of the assessment practices of quality assurance in UK Higher Education can be summarised (QAA 1998a) as:

- Institution's own internal quality assurance processes

External quality assurance processes:

- Academic quality audit which considers:
    - the design and review of courses and programmes
    - teaching, learning and the student experience
    - the recruitment, training, development and appraisal of staff
    - student assessment and examining including degree classifications
    - academic standards
    - feedback and verification systems
    - institutional promotional material
- Quality assessment
    - curriculum design, content and organisation
    - teaching, learning and assessment

- student progression and achievement
- student support and guidance
- learning resources
- quality management and enhancement

- Professional accreditation of vocational and professional subjects
- The research assessment exercise

Research and teaching assessment are directly linked to funding whilst audit, accreditation and external examination have an indirect impact on quality assessments. Quality assurance is defined as,

*'the totality of systems, resources and information devoted to maintaining and improving the quality and standards of teaching, scholarship and research, and of students' learning experience' (QAA, p.2,1998a).*

## 3.6 A Critical Appraisal of Current Quality Assurance Practices in UK Higher Education

Both benefits and criticisms can be made of the current approach to quality assurance in Higher Education. Preparation for Subject Reviews clearly generates a high level of activity in curriculum design, assessment and methods of teaching and learning. The framework and processes used by Reviewers does recognise elements of educational research by placing emphasis on the learning experience of students. The system has also influenced quality management systems for the better, including the exposure and use of External Examiners, the use of student feedback and the focus on staff development activity; over 3000 academics have been trained and acted as Subject Reviewers (Jackson, 1998a, Partington, 1999). In addition as Fry states,

*'In national arrangements there has been a high degree of concern with comparability, a market and customer orientation, student satisfaction, and considerable emphasis on process and outcome' (Fry, 1995, p.75).*

Developments in quality assurance in the 1990s have been a significant element in the gradual shift from producer dominated concepts of higher education towards consumer domination (Fry 1995).

On the downside the current procedures can be criticised for the time and cost involved. Partington (1999) provides an estimate of the cost of the last series of quality assessments (1996-98) at 2.2% of the total spend on higher education. A single assessment by the QAA costs approximately £10,000 and these figures do not take into account the internal costs borne by the university and their faculties in preparing for and hosting the visits. In addition the process can be criticised for the demotivational effects of publication of grade totals into 'emotively designated' categories driving senior managers to focus attention on the outcomes rather than processes of the exercise,

*'when the processes are in fact the most positively influential and the outcomes are – of necessity in a human and peer exercise – imprecise and unreliable. This focus on results threatens now to damage the essential fabric of the academic collegium – mutual respect, tolerance and trust – the essence of the learning triangle and of a community of scholars' (Partington, 1999, p.11).*

Harvey (1998) supports this criticism when he suggests that self-evaluation followed by,

*'an inquisitorial peer review encourages retrenchment rather that responsiveness...a lack of frankness makes dialogue difficult and the self-evaluative process becomes a defensive account rather than an opportunity to explore future developments and change' (Harvey, 1998, p.7).*

Rather than an improvement and transformative focus being adopted, the dominant quality model currently adopted is one of delegated accountability and as Universities get bigger and more complex, quality assurance systems have become more complex and bureaucratic (Jackson 1997). The defensive approach discussed by Harvey (1998) tends to focus time and attention on the necessary documentation for audit purposes rather than the ultimate goal of improving quality and encouraging an open, reflective and self-critical approach. This criticism is also made by Fry (1995) when she suggests that quality audit and assessment is unlikely to engender a great sense of personal or institutionally driven and owned improvement due to its focus on evaluation rather than improvement. Whilst the QAA's definition includes the idea of improvement many researchers criticise the current approaches for too much emphasis on generating volumes of paper to convince assessors of the 'worthiness' of those under review, the process reducing the quality of departmental operations by interrupting normal working practices and reducing the motivation of staff due to over-bureaucratic demands (Colling and Harvey 1995, Fry 1995, Harvey 1998).

Partington (1999, p.11) believes the next development in the quality process, the embracing of standards under Academic Review due to commence in January

2002, could 'deal the deathblow to higher education as we know it' by making a real incursion into academic freedom if the QAA plays the major part in defining standards over which academics have been the custodians to date.

**3.7 Academic Review: proposals for 2002**

The standards debate was taken forward by the Dearing Committee of Inquiry (Dearing Report, HMSO, 1997). This was commissioned to make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years. It involved a review of both postgraduate and undergraduate provision. Nineteen recommendations were made refocusing quality assurance from subject based to academic standards underpinned by a strengthened external examiner system, a national code of practice, professional accreditation of teaching staff and a national qualifications and credit framework. This significant report provides,

*'a blueprint for a strategic change in the national focus of regulation, from one concerned primarily with the quality of the educational process and the students' learning experience, to one concerned primarily with the quality of the outcomes of the educational process' (Jackson, 1998a, p.133).*

The main elements of the policy framework are illustrated in figure 3.2 and discused in the QAA (1998b) publication, 'The Way Ahead', and incorporate institutional, collective and national regulation. The proposed national qualifications framework is illustrated in figure 3.3. Jackson (1998b) states that these recommendations are intended to protect diversity but encourage greater

**Figure 3.2. Main Elements of the Policy Framework proposed by Dearing Report (Source: Jackson, 1998b)**

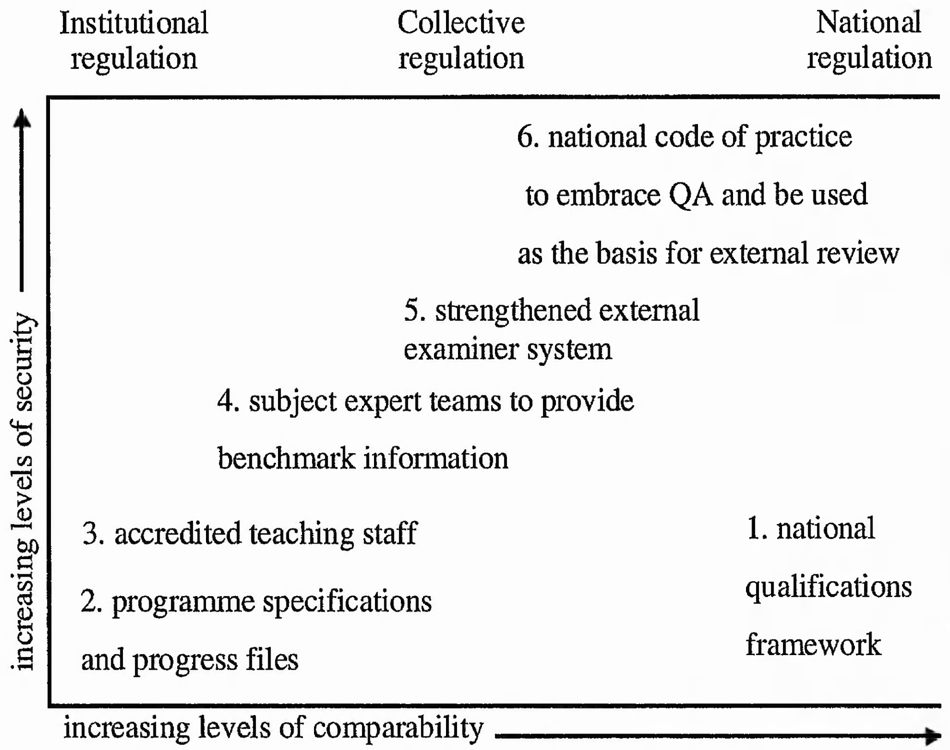
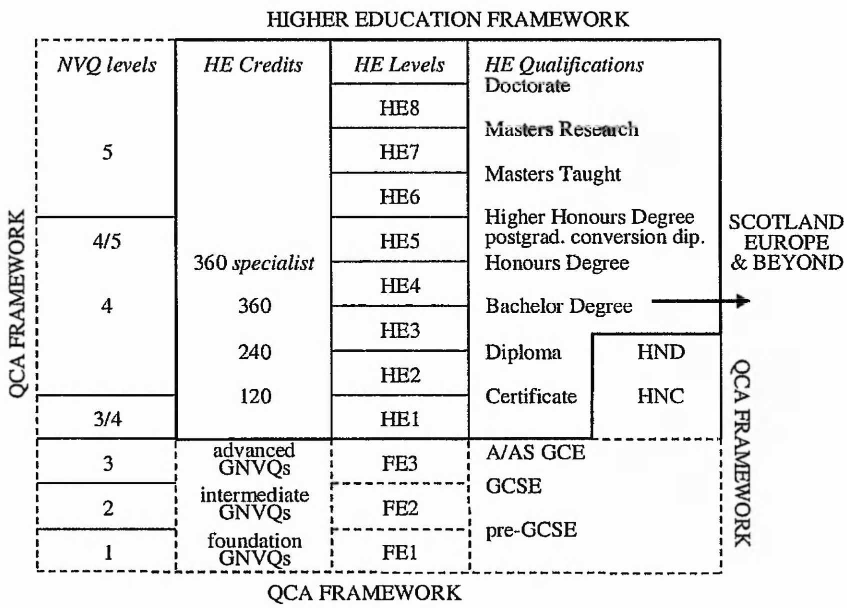



**Figure 3.3. HE Framework for qualifications and credit proposed in Dearing Report (Source: Dearing Report, HMSO, 1997)**



collective involvement in the creation and public assurance of institutional standards. With the move from an élitist to a mass system of higher education the definition of quality is changing to incorporate the concept of minimum acceptable standards. In a recent QAA (2000a) publication it is stated that the qualifications framework is being introduced as one of a number of measures designed to promote public understanding of, and confidence in academic standards. The qualifications framework is designed to provide:

- clear and accurate information about the purposes and outcomes of UK higher education in a form that will be useful to all of its stakeholders;
- a structure of shared, explicit reference points by which to distinguish the character, level and intended outcomes of higher education qualifications;
- the basis for a consistent use of qualifications titles within higher education.

Following consultation, a modified version of the framework (QAA 2000a) has been developed with six levels, four at undergraduate and two at postgraduate level, with a view to it being used by universities and colleges in designing and describing the courses they offer, and by the Agency in making judgments about the standards of provision. This proposed framework is clearly focused on aspects of outcome rather than process quality in higher education. As can be seen from figure 3.2, related measures include subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and progress files, a strengthened external examiner system and national codes of practice. Following nearly two years of consultation and trialing of the various proposals in the Dearing Report (QAA 1999), the proposed approach for quality assessment, termed Academic Review, is detailed in the Handbook for Academic Review (QAA 2000b) distributed to all HE institutions in the second half of 2000 and due to commence in January 2002. Seven, rather than six areas, will be the focus of subject reviews; aims and outcomes, curricula, assessment and enhancement. In addition, the quality of learning opportunity to achieve academic standards reviewed through teaching and learning, student progression and learning resources. The proposed approach is not simply an amalgamation of previous programmes of subject review and institutional audit. It approaches, from first principles, the assuring of overall standards of awards, the outcome standards of individual programmes, and the quality of learning opportunities (QAA, 1999). Specifically, reporting on programme outcome standards will be concerned with the fitness of purpose of programme objectives (in relation to benchmark standards and qualification levels); the fitness for purpose of curricula, and assessment arrangements (in relation to the programme objectives); and student achievement. Reporting, at subject level, on the quality of learning opportunities will address the effectiveness of teaching, learning resources, and personal academic support in promoting student learning and achievement. Reporting on institutional management of standards and quality will be concerned with the robustness and security of institutional systems relating to the awarding function. This will involve, in particular, reporting on arrangements for dealing with initial approval, review and re-approval of programmes; the management of institution-wide credit and qualification arrangements; and the management of assessment procedures. Where awards may be gained through programmes offered in collaboration with others, including overseas institutions, the management and effectiveness of the institution's collaborative arrangements will be addressed. At both subject and institutional levels the process will be centred on a self-evaluation document produced by the institution (QAA, 1999).

The proposed approach recognizes a number of stakeholders including employers, prospective students and overseas institutions who will benefit from reliable information about higher education qualifications. It provides useful information also to academic staff who design and approve programmes, and for those who evaluate standards(QAA 1999, 2000a). In addition, to be effective in the long run, quality monitoring, needs to be linked to an internal culture of continuous quality improvement that focuses on identifying stakeholder requirements in an open, responsive manner (Fry 1995, Colling and Harvey 1995, Jackson 1997, Harvey 1998). Clearly issues of quality in higher education sit in a complex, multidimensional external policy framework affected by philosophical, political, economic and social pressures. Each higher education institution develops its distinctive approach to quality within this external context.

### 3.8 The Nottingham Trent University

The Nottingham Trent University (TNTU) was founded in 1970 and the organisation today is structured into nine faculties serving 23, 989 students in 1999 (TNTU Annual Report 1999); Engineering & Computing, Construction & the Environment, Science & Mathematics, Economics & Social Sciences, Humanities, Art & Design, Education, Nottingham Law School and Nottingham Business School. The balance sheet for the year to 31st July 1999 shows total income of £107.2m All nine faculties are headed by a Dean who reports into the Directorate and Vice Chancellor, Professor R Cowell. In the forward to a recent annual report, Professor Cowell highlights the University's current focus on implementing the 1998-2003 Long Term Strategy which he sees as, 'a team effort – bringing together all our staff, partners and colleagues in a bid to deliver the highest possible quality services' (TNTU Annual Report, 1998, p.3).

All of the University's academic quality assurance and planning activities are co-ordinated by the Academic Planning and Quality Management (APQM) office that was established in autumn 1998. Priorities for APQM at present are devising new subject review and validation arrangements, implementing the recommendations of the modularisation review and developing a robust approach to modelling student numbers and resource allocation (Academic Quality Briefing, 1999). Appendices 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate the current procedures for validation and approval of new courses, on-going course evaluation & monitoring and review of existing courses. External assessment bodies audit these quality assurance processes. The former HEQC undertook a quality audit of the University's quality procedures in November 1994. In November 1999, QAA, having replaced HEQC, visited TNTU to undertake a continuation audit. The aim of this visit was to establish that the university's policies and procedures for assuring the standards of awards were operating effectively across all faculties. The University achieved a favourable outcome on both occasions and was commended for its 'quality culture' (QAA 2000c).

That stated, it is possible to criticise the current quality assurance processes. Student feedback is incorporated into all three processes, perhaps least obviously for validation of a new course. However at both stage 1 and stage 2 validation, market research is required to show potential demand and employer requirements in the Business School. However, a more significant input related to the important dimensions of service quality from consumers' feedback on related courses is likely to improve the customer focus of this process. In addition, the current approach to Course Reports does not directly include either module leader or student feedback.

In response to the QAA's The Way Ahead (1998b) paper outlining the proposed qualifications framework, programme specifications, subject benchmark standards and codes of practice, APQM is devising a new quality assurance framework driven by the following principles:

- strengthen quality management in the planning stages of academic programmes
- transfer the emphasis of quality review from courses to subjects
- expedite the process of course validation and make it more proactive by focusing on the course planning process
- enhance the effectiveness of external peer informants
- improve faculty systems of quality management
- integrate best practice developed through internal quality assurance, the validation service and the quality management of collaborative centres

- ensure comparability between the university's own quality management arrangements and those of the QAA. (Academic Quality Briefing, 1999).

Moving from course procedures to subject review will be a key change in emphasis, driven by the external policy changes outlined, together with closer attention to module and programme specifications and associated learning outcomes and assessment practices.

**3.9 Nottingham Business School**

Nottingham Business School (NBS) provides the University's focus for courses, research and consultancy on all aspects of accounting, business and management and is the largest faculty in TNTU. Appendix 3.4 contains the summary statement of the school's last claim for 'excellence' to the HEFCE in July 1993. NBS was one of only 19 out of 105 providers to be awarded an excellence rating by the HEFCE at that time (Bolton, 1997, p.2). The next round of Business and Management subject reviews are due to take place in the next two years when the retention of this rating will be a top priority for the Business School.

The courses and interviews associated with this research began in 1993 when there were approximately one hundred academic staff and fifty administration and support staff servicing 3500 plus students enrolled on one of over forty separate courses. Since then staff numbers have increased to approximately 180 organised into four teaching departments and two administrative offices looking after over 4000 students. The reporting relationships represent very much a matrix structure with lecturers to module leaders to course leaders to the Programme Managers and also lecturers and administrative staff to Heads of Department to the Dean.

As a member of the lecturing staff in the Strategic Management & Marketing department the easiest way to illustrate the researcher's role is to outline the official Lecturer Workload Model:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| STD | TRD | AMA | SDA |

STD : Scheduled Teaching Duties; (class contact)
TRD : Teaching Related Duties; (assessment, preparation)
AMA : Academic Management and Administration; (course leadership, course design and development, student admissions)
SDA : Staff Development Activities; (research, consultancy, scholarly activity)

Actual hours spent on these activities depends on where the individual lecturer and his/her Head of Department consider the emphasis should be placed. With the appointment of Head of Research and the change to University status at the beginning of the 1990s there is growing importance being placed on research which necessarily takes away some staff's focus on teaching. Due to the multiple functions performed - teaching, research, administration and consultancy, different members of staff hold differing views on the faculty's major objectives and the relative importance of the various activities. As Bolton describes,

*'discomfort is endemic, although it tends to be overlaid by a sense of excitement...the outsider's impression that business schools have it easy because they can always find lucrative work is mistaken: high prices have to be justified by the professional delivery of high quality. Customers, corporate or individual, are increasingly demanding; rival schools are numerous and energetic.' (Bolton, 1997, p.2).*

This is particularly reflective of the postgraduate area where students or their employers pay for the course. The biggest income generator for the school is the Integrated Management Development Programme which comprises three courses; the Certificate in Management, the Diploma in Management Studies and the Masters in Business Administration. Part-time students on these courses form the basis of the primary research for this investigation.

This research is therefore situated in a context of external and internal change. QAA assessments, increasing competition and consumerism make managing, maintaining and enhancing service quality all the more imperative, over and above a professional pride in a job well done. Internally, the University quality assurance processes have been audited and deemed to be good. In addition, Nottingham Business School currently boasts an excellence rating for the standard of its quality. From the external analysis of the HE environment the Business School operates its quality assurance processes against rising pressures in the form of the demands of increasing student numbers, increased programme complexity and changing priorities. Satisfied customers are vital to Business Schools who have to compete with both university and private sector competition and very demanding postgraduate corporate clients. Hence, service quality is likely to play an increasingly important role in the success of the Business School in the future.

### 3.10 Summary

Just as there exist different streams of research and perspectives in the generic services literature, this too is happening as the debate about quality in HE grows.

Much that has been written is a-conceptual, more concerned with standards and auditing than a deep understanding of the process of quality evaluation from any stakeholder perspective. A small number of recent studies have begun to explore the value of applying service marketing concepts and models to the HE sector. Other studies apply concepts from the educational literature and consider the quality of teaching and learning or the total student experience to be more valid. Many questions remain unanswered. What is the most appropriate definition, dimensions and measurement approach for service quality in education? Should researchers measure expectations or performance alone? Should researchers focus on the teaching and learning experience or total student satisfaction? What is the role of specific encounters and critical incidents? What effect does the highly interactive and longitudinal nature of the service experience in education have on all the questions above? Clearly a major opportunity exists to deepen our understanding, and ultimately inform improvements in practice, by applying service quality and educational frameworks thereby trying to integrate and synthesise these two distinct literatures. The next two chapters outline the philosophical position adopted by the researcher and the research design adopted in this study in order to exploit the opportunity highlighted above.

# CHAPTER 4

# INVESTIGATING SERVICE QUALITY IN A UNIVERSITY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCE

"There's glory for you!"
"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't-till I tell you. I meant, 'there's a nice knock-down argument.'"
"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
"When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean-neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all"

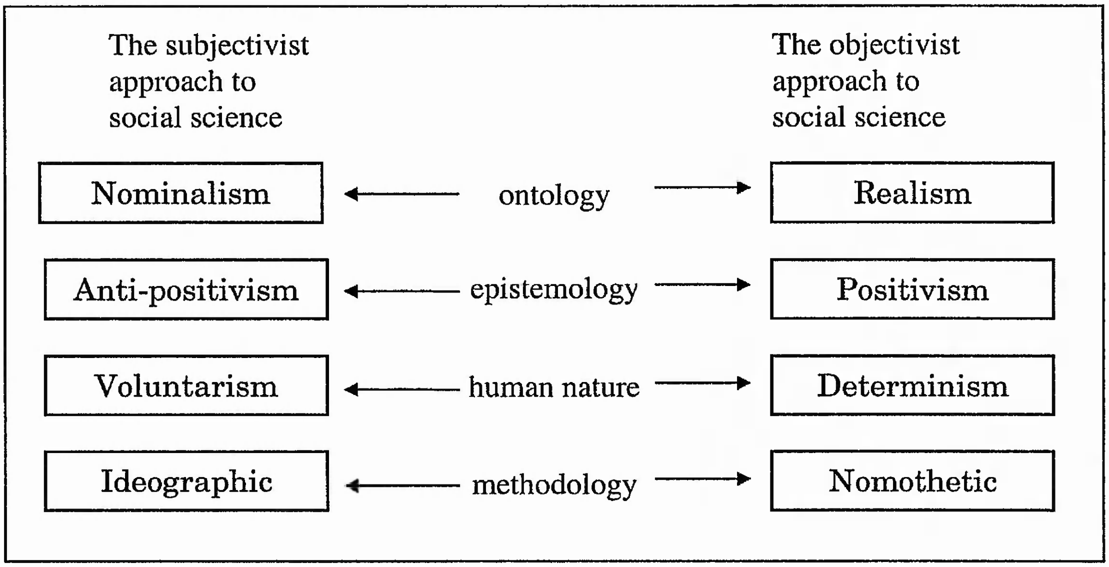
(Lewis Carroll, 1960, p.268-269)

## 4.1 Introduction

Chapters 2 and 3 have sought to make explicit the influence of the conceptual framework of service quality and the Higher Education context on the approach taken in this research. What remains to be elucidated are the researcher's assumptions about the nature of social science - the philosophical dimension.

The structure of this chapter follows the framework developed by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and illustrated in figure 4.1. This involves defining and presenting in detail the researcher's philosophical position on ontology (the form and nature of reality), epistemology (how the researcher might understand reality), human nature (relationship between people and their environment) and methodology (procedures used to gain warranted knowledge).

**Figure 4.1 A Framework for Analysing Assumptions about the Nature of Social Science (Source: Burrell & Morgan 1979)**




The combination of a researcher's position on these issues has been described by Denzin & Lincoln (1998a, p.5) as an 'interpretative paradigm' which will also be described in this chapter as the researcher's philosophical position. In chapter 5, the research design (aims, data collection method, sample frame and analysis method) is outlined. In brief, the research design involves in-depth interviewing of a small sample of informants over an extended period of time. This design represents the practical outcome of the conceptual, contextual and philosophical considerations which have shaped this study.

This chapter is important because every researcher brings their own ontological and epistemological assumptions to bear on their work and these beliefs shape how the researcher sees the world and aims to give a credible account of it. As Patton (1990) argues, *'these dilemmas cannot be simply "wished away" or contained within a form of philosophical quarantine so that empirical social scientists can be set free to get on with the business of research and analysis unencumbered by epistemological angst' (Patton, 1990, p.22).*

To be able to 'know our conversational partner' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.4), in other words the researcher's philosophical position, provides a more informed basis on which to assess the knowledge claims. So in the spirit of valuing and acknowledging the part played by philosophical concerns, the components of an interpretative paradigm are considered in the next section.

### 4.2 Components of an Interpretative Paradigm

The concepts and terms in the philosophy of social science are complicated, terms are used interchangeably and authors use different frameworks and taxonomies in their attempts to clarify the basic beliefs and approaches of each school of thought. As Miles and Huberman assert,

*'as comprehensive and clarifying as these catalogues and taxonomies may be, they turn out to be basically incommensurate, both in the way the different qualitative strands are defined and in the criteria used to distinguish them. The mind boggles in trying to get from one to another' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.5).*

Table 4.1 illustrates a selection of these contrasting categorisations discussed by prominent writers in this area. As Miles and Huberman indicate, each approach includes a different selection of interpretative paradigms ranging from the simple comparison of Positivism and Phenomenology provided by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991) to the much more extensive catergorisations provided by Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) and Tesch (1990). Any of the philosophical schools of thought outlined in table 4.1 can be defined and explained by using Burrell & Morgan's (1979) framework for analysing assumptions about the nature of social science (figure 4.1). The extreme positions on each of the four strands of ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology correspond to two distinct philosophical schools of thought; positivism and idealism (Burrell and Morgan 1979) but all of the other schools of thought identified in table 4.1. adopt various positions on each of these issues. Whilst recognising that this framework can be criticised on grounds of 'anthropocentrism' (Kavanagh, 1994, p.30), it usefully encourages researchers to think in an analytically distinct way about the four vital issues of ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. As the authors state,

*'in much of the literature there is a tendency to conflate the issues which are involved...considerable advantages accrue from treating these four strands of socio-scientific debate as analytically distinct' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.7).*

By treating each issue as analytically distinct, a confrontational approach is also avoided which is characteristic of much of the philosophy literature with authors defending their position via criticism of other positions. As Hirschman (1986) notes,

*'researchers are obligated to remain always aware that no one approach or paradigm is the 'only' approach or paradigm' rather that, 'one should do research consistent with one's personal beliefs about the nature of reality and that the research should be done well.' (Hirschman, 1986, p.248).*

The researcher's personal beliefs about the nature of reality are consistent with the interpretative paradigm of Transcendental Realism (Bhaskar 1975, 1979,

| Tesch (1990) | Holbrook & Hirschman (1992) | Denzin & Lincoln (1998a) | Guba & Lincoln (1998) | Easterby-Smith (*et al.*, 1991) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Characteristics of language** | **Empiricism** | Positivist | Positivism | Positivism |
| Content analysis | Common sense empiricism | Postpositivist | Postpositivism | Phenomenology |
| Discourse analyis | Logical empiricism | Constructionist | Constructionism | |
| Ethnography of communication | **Socioeconomic Constructionism** | Feminist | Critical theory | |
| Ethnoscience | Marxism | Ethic | | |
| Structural ethnography | Sociology of knowledge | Marxist | | |
| Symbolic interactionism | Ethnomethodology | Cultural studies | | |
| Ethnomethodology | Genetic Structuralism | | | |
| **Discovery of regularities** | **Interpretivism** | | | |
| Transcendental realism | Hermeneutics | | | |
| Ethnographic content analysis | Semiotics | | | |
| Event structure analysis | Structural Criticism | | | |
| Ecological psychology | **Subjectivism** | | | |
| Grounded theory | Phenomenology | | | |
| Phenomenography | Existentialism | | | |
| Qualitative evaluation | **Rationalism** | | | |
| Action research | Ideals | | | |
| Collaborative research | Innate Ideas | | | |
| Critical/emancipatory research | Archetypes | | | |
| Holistic ethnography | | | | |
| Educational ethnography | | | | |
| Naturalistic enquiry | | | | |
| **Comprehension of the meaning of text/action** | | | | |
| Phenomenology | | | | |
| Educational connoisseurship | | | | |
| Reflective phenomenology | | | | |
| Case study | | | | |
| Life history | | | | |
| Heuristic research | | | | |
| Hermeneutics | | | | |

**Table 4.1: Alternative Catalogues of Philosophical Schools of Thought**

1989, 1991, Miles and Huberman1994) identified in table 4.1 on Tesch's (1990) taxonomy and included in the post-positivist school identified by Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) and Guba and Lincoln (1998). The next section considers the meaning of the four components of an interpretative paradigm before going on to apply this framework to explain in more detail the philosophical position which influences the research design associated with this study.

### 4.2.1 Defining ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology

Ontology can be defined as the form and nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln 1998, Gill & Johnson 1997, Williams & May 1996, Kirk and Miller 1986, Burrell & Morgan 1979). According to Burrell & Morgan (1979), the basic issue is whether the researcher believes the 'reality' to be investigated is external to the individual and exists independently of an individual's appreciation of it (realism) or that 'reality' is the product of individual consciousness (nominalism, also referred to as relativism). Essentially, is reality external and objective or internal and subjective?

Epistemology can be defined as how the researcher might understand reality and communicate this knowledge to others (Guba & Lincoln 1998, Gill & Johnson 1997, Williams & May 1996, Kirk and Miller 1986, Burrell & Morgan 1979). Following Burrell & Morgan (1979), knowledge can be viewed as objective; hard, real, tangible which can be acquired (positivism) or subjective; based on experience and insight of a unique and individual nature which has to be personally experienced (anti-positivism)

In the context of social science, human nature can be defined as the relationship between people and their environment (Gill & Johnson 1997, Burrell & Morgan 1979). The two extreme perspectives are on the one hand a view of human beings responding in a mechanistic way to situations in the external world with the associated idea that people and their experiences are products of the environment (determinism). At the other extreme ‘free will occupies centre stage’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.2) and people are regarded as the creators of the environment - the controller rather than the controlled (voluntarism). Figure 4.2 shows Gill & Johnson’s (1997, p.35) illustrations of these different assumptions.

**Figure 4.2: Three Views of Human Nature**

(a) stimulus → response

(b) stimulus → experience & interpretation → response

(c) interpretation and meaning → action

In the first model we see the objective model of human behaviour which is based on cause and effect explanations. Positivists hold an 'etic' stance which means that they believe human behaviour can be explained via analysis of responses caused by external stimuli and that these 'cause and effect' relationships explain regularities in human behaviour. Subjective dimensions of human action are ignored so researchers ask 'what' is happening rather than 'why' is it happening

(Gill & Johnson 1997, Easterby-Smith *et.al.*, 1991). In the second and third model we see two subjective views of human nature. In (b) the person's subjectivity is taken to be an 'intervening variable' that mediates between the stimuli coming from external social reality and subsequent human responses. In (c) the person's subjectivity is 'accorded greater formative or creative power in its own right' (Gill & Johnson, 1997, p.35). In this view subjective human processes create reality in which action arises. Whilst holding different ontological assumptions, the first realist and the second relativist, these two views have significant methodological implications.

Methodology can be defined as the study of the methods or procedures used in a discipline so as to gain warranted knowledge (Gill & Johnson 1997, Burrell & Morgan 1979). Nomothetic (objective) methodology follows the approach adopted in the natural sciences, which focuses upon the testing of hypotheses and the use of quantitative techniques for the collection and analysis of data. 'Reductionism' and 'deduction' is favoured because these researchers do not believe interpretations of consciousness are reliable. Valid knowledge, the researcher's epistemological stance, comes from independent observation of a large number of cause and effect relationships to try to prove or falsify the researcher's hypothesised theory. In contrast, ideographic (subjective) methodology focuses on understanding how people experience and interpret what is happening which requires in-depth, qualitative, interactive investigation. 'Verstehen' and 'induction' are favoured which involve developing a sympathetic understanding of the frames of reference and meaning, out of which behaviour arises, and letting the nature of phenomena unfold during the process of investigation. Valid knowledge comes from openness in explaining research design and the part the researcher plays. Having defined the components of an interpretative paradigm, the final section explains the position adopted by the researcher on each of these issues.

## 4.3 The Interpretative Paradigm of this Study: Transcendental Realism

This study is situated within the qualitative research domain which,

*'is difficult to define clearly...multiple theoretical paradigms claim use of qualitative research methods'(Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, p.5).*

It is difficult to avoid using what a prominent Professor of Marketing has termed, 'postmodernist epistobabble' (Hunt, 1994, p.7) in defining the interpretative paradigm associated with this research. However, this section attempts to define as clearly as possible the interpretative paradigm adopted in this study – that of Transcendental Realism (Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 1989, 1991, Miles and Huberman1994). The ontological, epistemological, human nature and methodological dimensions of this philosophical school of thought are discussed in detail in the next sections but in brief, transcendental realist researchers hold a realist ontological position, an anti-positivist (relativist) epistemological position, believe in voluntarism in relation to human nature and adopt ideographic methodology.

### 4.3.1 The ontological position of the researcher

The researcher believes that service quality exists not only in the minds of individual students but also in the objective world and that some lawful and reasonable stable relationships exist among the dimensions of this social phenomena. This can be labelled as a 'transcendental realist' ontological position. Finding regularities and patterns enables the researcher to derive constructs that underlie social life (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This philosophical school of thought has shaped the aims of the present study. An important aim is to identify those elements of the postgraduate experience which have most effect on service quality evaluations, exploring why this might be the case (and if this changes over time) and drawing out implications for practice.

Realism is a complex body of ideas that takes many forms (Williams & May, 1996) but the essential idea is that the world has an existence independent of our perception of it. In relation to 'physical' things such as lightening the fact it would exist if people did not seems unproblematic. However, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of existence and reality. If we agree that lightening exists, how do we know that our ideas about what lightening is are real? The history of science is replete with examples of how theories of physical phenomena have changed. If we move to 'social' phenomena such as love or quality, the fact that they are intangible ideas makes the situation more problematic. But because people have different ideas about what quality is, this does not mean that quality does not exist. 'Naive realism' is associated with an empiricist or positivist paradigm. An apprehendable reality is assumed to exist, driven by immutable laws and mechanisms. Research through sense data (what you see is what you get) can produce the 'true' state of affairs (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). This type of realism can be contrasted with transcendental realism most often attributed to Bhaskar (1975, 1979, 1989, 1991). He states that,

*'things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions. Descriptions belong to the world of society and of men; objects belong to the world of nature' (Bhaskar, 1975, p.250).*

Bhaskar distinguishes between the intransitive, knowledge-independent, real objects of scientific knowledge and the transitive soci-historical processes of the production of the knowledge of such objects. A realist methodology must allow the researcher to postulate transitive objects with the overall aim being to achieve a correspondence between these and the intransitive objects of reality. Bhaskar distinguishes between the physical and social sciences on ontological grounds. Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of :

- the activities that they govern
- the agent's conception of what they are doing in their activities

and therefore may be only relatively enduring and cannot be identified independently of these activities (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 78). As such social structures are more open than physical ones. Social researchers have to contend with,

*'institutions, structures, practices and conventions that people reproduce and transform. Human meanings and intentions are worked out within the frameworks of social structures - structures that are invisible but nonetheless real' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4).*

Transcendental realists accept that knowledge is a sociohistorical and theoretically laden product but the aim is to,

*'transcend these subjective processes by building theories to account for a real world that is both bounded and perceptually laden'(Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4).*

This is a dualist position which separates mind from matter and leads transcendental realists to advocate a realist ontology but a relativist epistemology in order to firstly appreciate informants' subjective processes and then to 'transcend' this subjectivity in order to identify the intransitive objects of reality.

### 4.3.2 The epistemological position of the researcher

The researcher holds an anti-positivist, also referred to as relativist, epistemological position. This leads on from the ontological position outlined. So whilst the researcher believes that an external reality exists, it can only be apprehended imperfectly through transitive objects described by people. The key epistemological issue is the researcher's ability to successfully generate the transitive objects that represent aspects of social structures. This position has had a direct effect on the methods employed, questions asked in this study and the approach to analysis. In order to access the reality of service quality in the Higher Education context it is necessary to seek the personal, subjective descriptions of the important elements of student experience, to discover regularities in these descriptions and to see if any of these change over time and to understand why.

Bhaskar (1979) suggests the researcher should separate the meaning of an act from its intention, with meaning being socially constructed and intention being individually based on a process he terms 'retroduction' (Bhaskar, 1979, p.15). This is the continual process of comparing and re-describing our hypothetical model of reality with social reality which will have antecedents in individual realities, themselves shaped by social meanings. As Williams & May (1996) state,

*'this suggests that the strategy of a realist social science involves not only a description of social relations, but also accompanying explanations and re-descriptions; the overall aim is to uncover layers of social reality' (Williams and May, 1996, p.86).*

Miles and Huberman adopt a transcendental realist position and suggest the aim is to account for events, rather than just to document their sequence,

*'we look for an individual or a social process, a mechanism, a structure at the core of events that can be captured to provide a causal description of the forces at work' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4).*

So adopting a transcendental realist position means the researcher is interested in the 'why' as well as the 'what', the why of social meaning embedded in the particular doings of people conducted in a particular context. In this way the reality of service quality in postgraduate Higher Education may be better understood.

### 4.3.3 The researcher's view of human nature

The researcher views human nature as subjective yet adopting the middle position between determinism and voluntarism best depicted as:

stimulus → experience and interpretation → response

Thus the stimulus or the environment affects an individual's experience which, through socially mediated interpretation, affects their actions which in turn changes the reality of the environment in which the individual lives. The researcher believes people are a product of both nature and nurture. This position can be labelled as,

*'Post-Kantian Interactionism in which things-in-themselves ("noumena") operate in conjunction with pre-existing mental concepts (the "categories") to form experiences ("phenomena") that reflect an interaction between mind and matter' (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992, p.5).*

This subjective view of human nature, with importance placed on personal experience and interpretation, has direct implications for the methodology employed in this study.

### 4.3.4 The researcher's methodological approach

If one views human nature as subjective it is important to use in-depth qualitative methods to access informants' personal experiences and interpretation of events.

As such the researcher favours an ideographic methodology which leads onto method choices as indicated in Gill & Johnson's comparison of ideographic and nomothetic methodologies in table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 A Comparison of Nomothetic and Ideographic Methodology (Source: Gill & Johnson, 1997)**

| Nomothetic methods emphasise | | Ideographic methods emphasize |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Deduction | vs | Induction |
| 2. Explanation via analysis of causal relationship and explanation by covering-laws (etic) | vs | Explanation of subjective meaning systems and explanation by understanding (emic) |
| 3. Generation and use of quantitative data | vs | Generation and use of qualitative data |
| 4. Use of various control, physical statistical, so as to allow the testing of hypotheses | vs | Commitment to research in everyday settings, to allow access to, and minimise reactivity among the subjects of research |
| 5. Highly structured research methodology to ensure replicability of 1, 2, 3 and 4 | vs | Minimum structure to ensure 2, 3 and 4 (and as a result of 1) |
| ◄——— Laboratory experiments/quasi-experiments, surveys, action research, ethnography ———► | | |

Whilst not operating at either extreme and appreciating, 'that no study conforms exactly to a standard methodology' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.5), the researcher leans towards ideographic methodology with its focus on induction, subjective meanings and explanation by understanding, use of qualitative data and research situated in context. Some structure in the research method is favoured, derived from concepts and dimensions of service quality identified in previous research. The preference for semi-structured interviewing stems from the transcendental realist position and study aim to conceptualise the intransitive object of service quality from identifying consistencies in students' transitive description of various elements of this phenomena.

### 4.4 Summary

This chapter has identified the researcher's interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a and b) of transcendental realism and the explicit effect this has had on elements of the research design associated with this study. This study could simply be described as 'traditional qualitative research' with its use of in-depth interviewing of a small sample of informants over an extended period of time (Brown 1995). This latter design issue being derived from the particular context of the long-lived service experience associated with the educational process. From the more complex philosophical perspective this study is taking place from a transcendental realist position. The researcher believes that social reality exists independently of people's perception of it, but that the reality of service quality can only be imperfectly comprehended through accessing the individual's experience described in socially and contextually bound terms. From this, causal descriptions will be developed which try to capture the what and why of this reality. Because of the researcher's interest in 'why' it is better to use in-depth interviewing in order to account for particular quality evaluations rather than just measure what those evaluations may be.

Qualitative methods are also particularly suited to service contexts such as education (Swan and Bowers 1998, Gilmore & Carson, 1996). As such, the next chapter presents the research design associated with this study which has been developed as a result of the theoretical, contextual and philosophical influences outlined so far.

# CHAPTER 5

# FROM THE PHILOSOPHICAL TO THE PRACTICAL:

# THE RESEARCH DESIGN

"Statisticians try to measure IT.
Experimentalists try to control IT.
Evaluators value IT.
Interviewers ask questions about IT.
Observers watch IT.
Informant observers do IT."

- from Halcolm's Evaluation Laws

## 5.1 Introduction

The diversity and complexity of the philosophical dimension needs to be related to the practical problems that arise in 'doing' management research. Many researchers in the qualitative domain acknowledge the 'problematic' (Morgan 1983), 'incremental' (Gill and Johnson, 1997) and 'practical' rather than philosophical drivers,

*'as every researcher knows there is more to doing research than is dreamt of in philosophies of science, and texts in methodology offer answers to only a fraction of the problems one encounters' (Becker, 1965, p.602).*

Research design and the process of implementation are the focus of this chapter. Specifically the questions which guide the study, the characteristics of qualitative research design and its applicability to the services context, the research method adopted, sample frame and the approach taken to data analysis.

To reiterate, the questions which guide this study are:

i) to understand which aspects of the Higher Education experience are important to postgraduate part-time students' evaluation of service quality,

ii) to consider if and in what ways expectations change over the student's period of study,

iii) to consider how part-time students evaluate service quality and if this process changes over the student's period of study,

iv) to develop a student-centred model of service quality for the higher education context,

v) to make recommendations for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School.

### 5.2 Research Design: Qualitative Methods in a Service Context

A research design is,

*'the overall configuration of a piece of research: what kind of evidence is gathered from where, and how such evidence is interpreted in order to provide good answers to the basic research question.' (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991, p.21).*

At its broadest level the research design is qualitative, the recurring features of which have been described by a number of prominent writers in the field including Janesick (1998), Miles & Huberman (1994) and Silverman (1993). However as Silverman (1993, p.23) notes, 'there is no standard approach among qualitative researchers' or set of characteristics which will suit all studies. Qualitative design characteristics of particular relevance to this study include the fact that they are suited to studies which take place over time, they are suited to research where context is important, they deal with perceptions and words of both informants and the researcher, they are non-reductionist but rather develop themes and look for patterns to emerge which help with understanding rather than measurement. Appropriate methods and approaches are therefore ones that are flexible and adaptable. Consequently, qualitative designs and methods are particularly suitable for the characteristics of services discussed in chapter 2 as illustrated in figure 5.1 by Gilmore and Carson (1996).

**Figure 5.1 Suitability of Qualitative Research Methods for Services Marketing (Source: Gilmore & Carson, 1996)**

| **Service characteristics** | **Matching/suitability features** | **Qualitative research characteristics** |
|---|---|---|
| Integration of acts/ performances/ processes.<br>Interaction between people.<br>Predominantly intangible.<br>Importance of accessibility and timing. | Descriptive data.<br>Experiential knowledge and understanding.<br>Interpretive analysis of data.<br>Holistic perspective.<br>Scope of qualitative methods. | Adaptive, flexible.<br>Open-ended, not pre-ordained.<br>Phenomena studied within context of occurrence.<br>Researcher involvement. |

Services are acts, living processes and performances hence they are, *'difficult to study through traditional research methodologies as they exist only while being rendered and are living processes that cannot be dissembled' (Gilmore and Carson, 1996, p.21).*

Services also involve interaction, are predominantly intangible and inseparable. These characteristics increase the potential for ambiguity, misunderstanding and differing perceptions of the same phenomena. Particularly in relation to this study,

*'the importance of the time dimension in relation to accessibility of services, and the process and period of time taken for service delivery, may require a longitudinal, continuous study' (Gilmore and Carson, 1996, p.21)*

As the authors support, qualitative designs are ideally suited for gathering data on dynamic, experiential processes and the interactive nature of the service experience.

This is supported by Swan and Bowers (1998) who criticise the use of traditional quantitative methods in service quality research because they show very little about the experiences of people over time. In contrast,

*'qualitative methods, including extended, open-ended interviews and informant observation typically obtain a lot about the extended experiences of a few' (Swan and Bowers, 1998, p.3)*

A particular feature of this research, therefore, is its longitudinal rather than cross-sectional design. The main advantage to this approach is, 'that it can produce significant results from a very small number of cases', but, 'it is extremely time consuming' (Easterby-Smith *et al.,* 1991, p.35) and hard to maintain samples over long periods of time. These issues have resulted in very few longitudinal studies being conducted in the service quality area despite the fact that many services are long-term in nature. The longitudinal nature of the service experience in education means that,

*'we not only need to consider the cumulative effect of transactions in the measurement of quality, but that we also need to consider the changes in the students as learners' (Rowley, 1997, p.11).*

Hill (1995) conducted one of the few longitudinal studies of quality in HE which tracked the expectations and perceptions of a group of 62 accounting undergraduates over three years of study. The study highlighted the need to,

*'gather information on student expectations not only during their time at university, but at the point of arrival and, if possible, beforehand' and 'the need for the student evaluation process..to be dealt with in a much more detailed, comprehensive and multi-focused way then tends to be the case currently' (Hill, 1995, p.20).*

The study suggests that students may become more discriminating and demanding over time. Bolton and Drew (1991) also indicate the importance of longitudinal analysis of the impact of service changes on customer attitudes in 'continuously provided' services. They indicate that customer ratings of components of service quality are sensitive to service changes but, in contrast, average ratings of service quality are much slower to change. A more recent quantitative longitudinal study in the financial services context (Gwynne, Devlin & Ennew 1998) also points to,

*'some change in will expectations over time which may be a product of past service experiences', but that, 'the evidence for interdependencies or carry-over effects across time periods is weak, except perhaps in relation to loyalty' (Gwynne et al.,., 1998, p.190).*

Clearly the effect of time on service quality evaluations in any continuously provided service context is an area that requires further study.

### 5.3 Research Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

In a review of the interviewing method, Fontana & Frey (1998) discuss a wide variety of forms and uses of this technique. Interviews can be individual or group and range from face-to-face verbal interchange to telephone surveys. Interviewing can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured and can be used for measurement or gaining individual or group perspectives. It can be a one time brief exchange ranging to multiple, lengthy sessions spanning a number of years. As a process, Powney & Watts (1987) suggest seven stages are required for effective interview preparation; familiarity with research plan, structure of interview, piloting, calculation of time and costs, selection and briefing of interviewers (not applicable in this case), selection and contacting of interviewees, recording and analysis.

The 41 interviews in this study were individual, face-to-face and semi-structured, lasting for approximately one hour (the shortest taking 36 minutes, the longest 95 minutes). They took place 3 to 5 times over 1 to 3 years with each of the 11 informants. The semi-structured interview is regarded as a, 'better and more cost-effective' technique (Easterby-Smith *et al.,* 1991, p.79) because it enables researchers to focus on particular lines of inquiry whilst leaving flexibility for both interviewers and respondents to explore the issues. Similarly it avoids the researcher becoming, 'the hapless victim of a shapeless inquiry' (McCracken, 1988, p.22). Structure to interview questions also emphasises internal validity, generalisability and managability of data collection and is suited to this study with focused research questions and a well-bounded sample of cases, events and processes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It is suitable for when researchers want 'specific information' and requires the interviewer to , 'introduce the topic, then guide the discussion by asking specific questions' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p.5) whilst avoiding directional questioning (McCracken, 1988). An interview guide was developed for each interview and the five guides can be seen in appendix 5.1 to 5.5. Whilst the guides are similar there is some change, both in the forms used and the questions asked. This reflects the fact that the study was adapted by on-going analysis and experience of what the informants deemed more or less important.

The first interview took place prior to the commencement of the course in order to find out what expectations the informants were bringing with them. The first question was open, 'What are you expecting from Nottingham Trent University?' and was only then followed by prompts in the areas covered in previous course evaluation research discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Of equal interest in this interview was the informants' definition of quality and what this meant for them in relation to the educational context. The following four interviews adopted a similar format; firstly asking informants for their overall evaluation of the quality of service they had experienced and then prompted questions in areas of ancillary services, the course and staff. They were then asked to specify particularly satisfying and dissatisfying incidents (Bitner *et al.*,1985) and their expectations for the rest of the course. The second interview was conducted ten weeks into the first year to gauge initial experiences and later compare to end of year experiences. In this way any effect of 'reaction evaluation' rather than 'learning evaluation' (Hamblin 1974) could be detected. Easterby-Smith *et al.,* (1991, p.31) provide a relevant example concerned with the impact of the timing of interviews. Results of an end of course questionnaire favoured course B over course A but follow-up interviews a few months after the courses were completed showed a preference for course A over course B. The authors suggest this may be due to the fact that informants tended to be cautious when filling in multiple choice rating forms and that institution A emphasised longer term application of what had been learnt and institution B emphasised the immediate quality of sessions conducted. From the researcher's experience of a number of forms and times course evaluations are conducted, it is important to compare evaluations over time, as reaction verses longer term learning and behaviour evaluations given by students can be very different. Another important and related aspect of the research is how expectations and evaluation criteria may change over time with accumulated experience, so questions on this topic were included in the final three end of year interviews.

In summary, the topics which are covered to a greater or lesser extent in the interviews and which will therefore be used in the analysis and interpretation of the data include; definitions of service quality, expectations about the service, importance of different aspects including; library, computing, catering, social, course information and content, assessment, lecturers and other staff, the value of the experience, and change in any and all of these aspects.

### 5.4 Selection of a Site and Informants

The case for this study is a postgraduate business student's service quality experience before, during and at the end of each year of study, in the context of a business school setting. The sampling strategy was both purposively and conceptually driven,

*'the issue is not so much the quest for conventional generalisability, but rather an understanding of the conditions under which a particular finding appears and operates: how, where, when, and why it carries on as it does' (Miles and Huberman, 1998, 204).*

The course is a three year part time Integrated Management Development Programme (IMDP) starting October 1993 ending June 1996 (the course is potentially three years but could just be one or two years; Certificate in Management (CM) year one, Diploma in Management Studies (DMS) year two and Masters in Business Administration (MBA) year three). Whilst the potential choice of postgraduate courses was large, this sampling is justified by the fact that the course is the largest in the postgraduate area, is found in a similar format across many UK and international business schools and the subject content is understood by the researcher having completed the BA Business Studies full time course in the 1980s and having taught on the course. The target for the student sample was ten. This was selected via a balance between the problem of drop-out and the number that could be coped with in a study which would involve 5 interviews over 3 years and hence potentially generate 50 transcripts. Ten students interviewed 5 times would allow for successive testing over the series of 5 interviews of the single case and facilitate multiple-case comparisons at each time frame (Glaser & Strauss 1970, Yin 1991). Informants were recruited for the study by letter (see appendix 5.1) which was distributed in July 1993 to the 16 people who had accepted a place at that time. Of the 16, 11 agreed to participate. All were telephoned to agree a time and location for the interview. Details of dates and locations of all the interviews are contained in table 5.2.

**Table 5.2: Date and Location of Interviews**

| Informant | Interview 1 Aug/Sept. 1993 | Interview 2 Dec. 1993 | Interview 3 Aug. 1994 | Interview 4 Aug. 1995 | Interview 5 Nov. 1996 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A Jackie | 9/9/93 A's office | 16/12/93 A's office | 23/8/94 A's office | 22/8/95 A's home | 26/11/96 A's office |
| B Gary | 8/9/93 B's office | 17/1/94 B's office | 19/8/94 B's office | | |
| C Adam | 27/8/93 C's home | 13/12/93 My office | 19/8/94 C's home | 1/9/95 C's office | |
| D Andrew | 9/9/93 D's office | 16/12/93 D's office | 15/8/94 D's office | 17/8/95 D's office | |
| E Tony | 2/9/93 E's office | 8/12/93 E's office | 16/8/94 E's office | 14/9/95 E's office | |
| F Graham | 13/9/93 F's home | 14/12/93 F's home | 22/8/94 F's home | 17/8/95 F's home | |
| G Robert | 27/8/93 G's office | 8/12/93 G's office | 16/8/94 G's office | 14/9/95 G's office | |
| H Rob | 8/9/93 H's office | 14/12/93 H's office | 19/8/94 H's office | 25/8/95 H's office | |
| I Chris | 23/9/93 I's office | 14/12/93 I's office | 19/8/94 I's office | 25/8/95 I's office | 26/11/96 I's office |
| J Mervin | 16/9/93 J's office | 29/11/93 J's office | 15/8/94 J's office | 1/9/95 J's office | |

According to Morse,

*'a good informant is one who has the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study' (Morse, 1998, p.73).*

One of the 11 informants was Malaysian and was not very articulate due to language problems. As a matter of ethics the researcher interviewed this informant until she left the course at the end of the first year but these interviews were not 'information rich' (Patton, 1990) so have been excluded from the analysis. From the remaining 10 students, 9 were awarded a Certificate in Management and went on to complete the Diploma in Management Studies from which 2 went on to complete the Masters in Business Administration. In the first interview informants were assured that in no way were the interviews related to their assessment and success on the course, and that only their first name would be used in the reporting of the results.

The final section of this chapter presents the more fundamental data management techniques employed and the methodologically driven approach to data analysis.

**5.5 Qualitative Data Analysis**

A key decision of the research design was to tape record interviews rather than take notes. There are of course disadvantages to this approach,

*'..a tape recording under-represents the communication by providing only the sound component...tape based interviews are often skewed in favour of the most articulate...tapes take a lot of listening to and are difficult to scan, and, importantly, transcription is very slow and expensive of resources' (Powney & Watts, 1987, p.145).*

Powney and Watts (1987) also offer interesting words of warning that researchers can begin to believe that 'truth' lies on the tape, it becomes objective fact through transcription and the fact that the researcher's own understandings of what was happening in the interview should not be relegated to 'unreliable data'. There is also the issue of whether recording will bias the informants' responses. These issues recognised, a recorder was used for every interview in preference to taking notes because,

*'a tape recorder is part of the indispensable equipment of researchers using qualitative methods. Tape recorders do not 'tune-out' conversations, change what has been said because of interruption (either conscious or unconscious), or record words more slowly than they are spoken. In addition to increasing the accuracy of data collection, the use of the tape recorder allows the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee' (Patton, 1990, p.348).*

The next choice was whether to analyse these 41 recordings by listening to the tapes or by producing transcripts. Whilst transcripts take approximately four hours each to produce they were selected for reasons of accuracy, thoroughness and transparency.

In chapter 4 it became clear that many different interpretive paradigms underpin what questions are asked, what methods are employed and how analysis is conducted. Due to this variety,

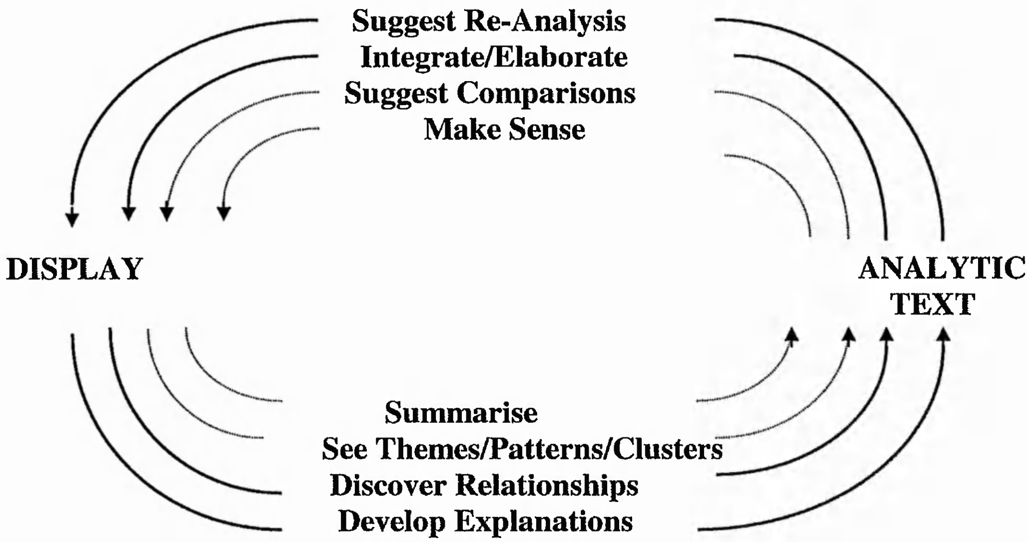
*'there are few universally accepted procedures and standards for qualitative data analysis' (Catterall & Ibbotson, 1997, p.17).*

Spiggle (1994) distinguishes between analytical and interpretive processes and suggests that the analytical process includes categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration and iteration. Whereas interpretation uses comparisons and contrasts to identify patterns and themes and is,

*'playful, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative, and representative' (Spiggle, 1994 p.500).*

Miles & Huberman (1994) suggest the use of a number of analysis techniques including; noting patterns/themes, seeing plausibility, clustering, counting and using metaphors to achieve more integration of data. Making contrasts and comparisons and partitioning variables to help understanding. Subsuming particulars into the general, factoring, noting relations between variables and finding intervening variables to see data more abstractly. Finally, building a logical chain of evidence and making conceptual/theoretical links to achieve a coherent understanding of data. Moving from specific analysis techniques, a broader view of the approach taken to data analysis in this study is shown in figure 5.2. The first stage involves producing transcripts and through listening to the tape and reading the resultant transcript the researcher will be summarising and making sense of each case. Through both single case and cross-case comparisons, themes, patterns and clusters will be identified. A third iteration will help to discover relationships to integrate and elaborate the data until a final explanation is offered and further re-analysis considered. At this stage data quality will be assessed by checking for representativeness and researcher effects, weighting the evidence, checking the meaning of outliers, looking for negative evidence, ruling out spurious relations and checking out rival explanations (Miles and Huberman 1998).

**Figure 5.2 Interaction Between Display and Analytic Text (Source: Miles & Huberman 1998)**




### 5.6 Summary: Studying Service Quality in HE

The research is qualitative and longitudinal in design, using the semi-structured interviewing method which is well suited to gathering data on dynamic, experiential, interactive service processes such as education. The case for this study is a postgraduate business student's service quality experience before, during and at the end of each year of study, in the context of a business school setting. Eleven informants were interviewed prior to the start of the first year, ten weeks after and at the end of year one. Eight continued with their study and were interviewed at the end of the second year and two informants were interviewed when they completed three years of study. This has resulted in 41 transcripts which will be analysed using an iterative process to summarise, develop themes, discover relationship and develop explanations of the phenomena under investigation.

The study has its limitations which include its narrow focus on one stakeholder in HE - the student. It also only considers postgraduate, part time student perspectives and not undergraduate or full time student experience and only two informants completed three years. It is a longitudinal, single method study rather than a cross-sectional triangulated study. It also inevitably suffers from the incremental development of the novice researcher. In defence of the design adopted, more structured qualitative designs are suited to studies where,

*'the researcher has good prior acquaintance with the setting, has a good bank of applicable, well-delineated concepts, and takes a more explanatory and/or confirmatory stance involving multiple, comparable cases' (Miles & Huberman, 1998, p.185).*

Qualitative designs provide an open, flexible, experiential and alternative perspective from the mainstream quantitative approach to the study of complex long-lived service situations such as Higher Education (Gilmore and Carson 1996, Swan and Bowers 1998). In addition, the longitudinal studies conducted to date have been quantitative (Gwynne *et al.,* 1998, Hill 1995, Bolton and Drew 1991, Swan & Tarwick 1981, Oliver 1980) so a qualitative longitudinal study should contribute an original perspective and is a particular strength of the research design.

So on final reflection, the results, conclusions and recommendations that follow do approach the subject of service quality in Higher Education from a marketing perspective (which is lacking in mainstream HE literature) and from a longitudinal, qualitative perspective (which is lacking in marketing literature). In these two senses this research can be seen to contribute to the body of knowledge in these two fields.

# CHAPTER 6

# FINDINGS: EXPECTATIONS, EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES - THE CASE OF THE PART-TIME POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENT

"If your data is mainly qualitative, it is essential that you intersperse your text with quotations. This will give your text authenticity and vibrancy, and will enable the reader to share the world you are analysing"
(Hussey & Hussey, 1997, p.294)

## 6.1 Introduction

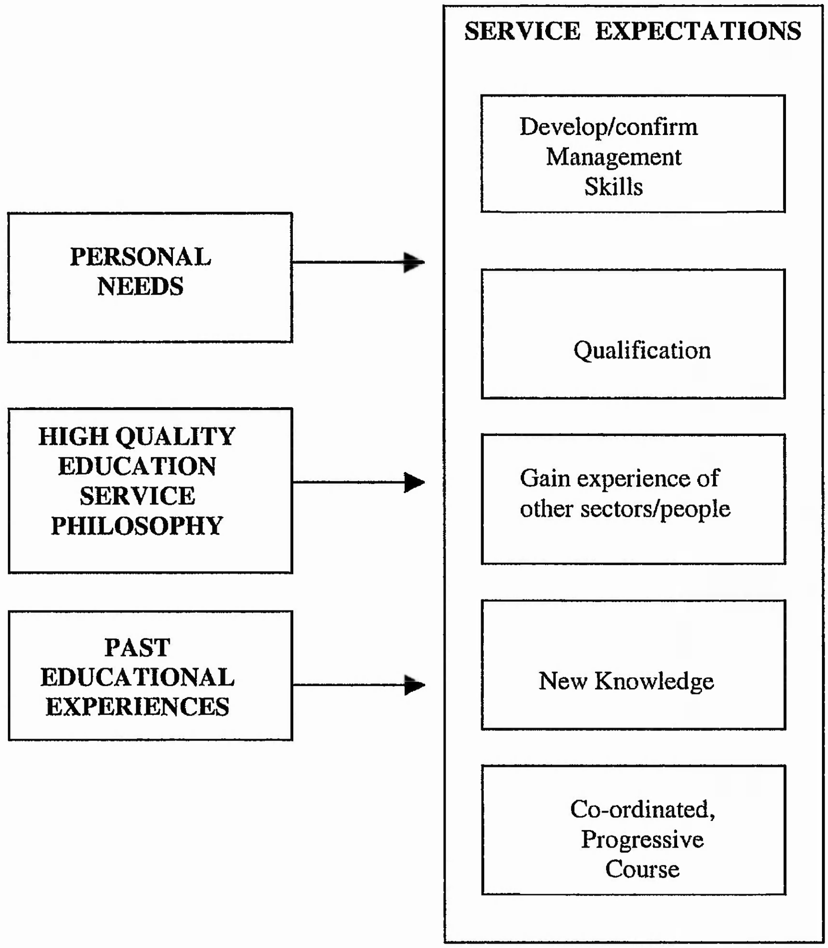
The experiences and responses recorded in the 41 transcripts are extensive, individual and unique. This chapter contains the researcher's attempt to stand back from these individual accounts in order to look for regularities and patterns that cut across the specifics of persons and circumstances. While some perceptions about educational service quality were specific to the individual, commonalities among the postgraduate part-time students were evident. The links between these findings and the service quality and educational quality literatures will be explored in this chapter. The contrasts and commonalities reported here, should provide a deeper understanding of the needs, expectations and important aspects that underlie the postgraduate service quality experience and evaluation process.

The chapter takes its structure from the insights generated through reading, analysing and reflecting upon the 41 interviews conducted. Appendix 6.1 provides a summary of the important aspects discussed by each informant over time. Three clearly differentiated stages in the service quality experience emerged. These stages are linked and evolve over time. The first stage is the student's 'pre-course position' which are the inputs to the process and centre on the student's service expectations. The second stage is the 'in-course experience' which is the educational process where students highlight particularly satisfying and dissatisfying service experiences in their assessment of overall process quality. The third stage is the outcome of the service process which results in the students' assessment of 'post-course service value'. The first section of this chapter discusses the part-time students' pre-course position, the second section considers the part-time students' in-course experience and the third section presents the part-time students' post-course service value assessments. The final section of the chapter presents these stages as an overall process in a student-centered model of service quality and explores the post-graduate part-time students' service quality evaluation process.

### 6.2 Pre-Course Position

The first interview with the students took place before they had started the Certificate in Management. The objective of the interview was to explore what the students were expecting from the course. A number of common expectations were evident, influenced by three factors, illustrated in figure 6.1. The factors influencing service expectations; students' personal needs, high quality education service philosophy and past educational experiences are consistent with the findings of previous research (Parasuraman *et al.*,1985, Zeithsml *et al.,* 1993). However an important finding of this research is that part-time students' initial

**Figure 6.1 Pre-Course Position: the Inputs**




service expectations are very poorly formed in relation to process aspects of the service experience. Informants talked predominantly about outcome-related expectations including the development of management skills, attaining the qualification, gaining experience of other sectors and developing new knowledge. The only process dimension discussed was the expectation to experience a co-ordinated, progressive course. The following two sections discuss these findings in more detail.

### 6.2.1 Factors that influence service expectations

Three factors, illustrated in figure 6.1, are significant in influencing service expectations; personal needs, high quality education service philosophy and past educational experiences. Initial expectations appear to be influenced by just two of these factors; each individual's personal needs and high quality education service philosophy. The relationship between stated expectations and personal needs is very strong. In fact for management skills, the qualification, experiencing new people/sectors and new knowledge, these are more accurately defined as Personal Needs. In the absence of clear expectations, students talk about what they want to achieve from the course experience.

An additional factor that influences expectations is the student's view of what a high quality education service should be. This is referred to in figure 6.1 as 'High Quality Education Service Philosophy'. A summary of the ways in which the informants define a high quality education service is illustrated in figure 6.2. Process aspects related to lecturers and the University support services were mentioned but more was offered in relation to outcomes for both the student and their employer. Producer-led and process aspects mentioned include the approach of the lecturer with words such as 'challenging', 'interesting', 'easily understandable', and 'professional'. In addition, two informants mentioned wider

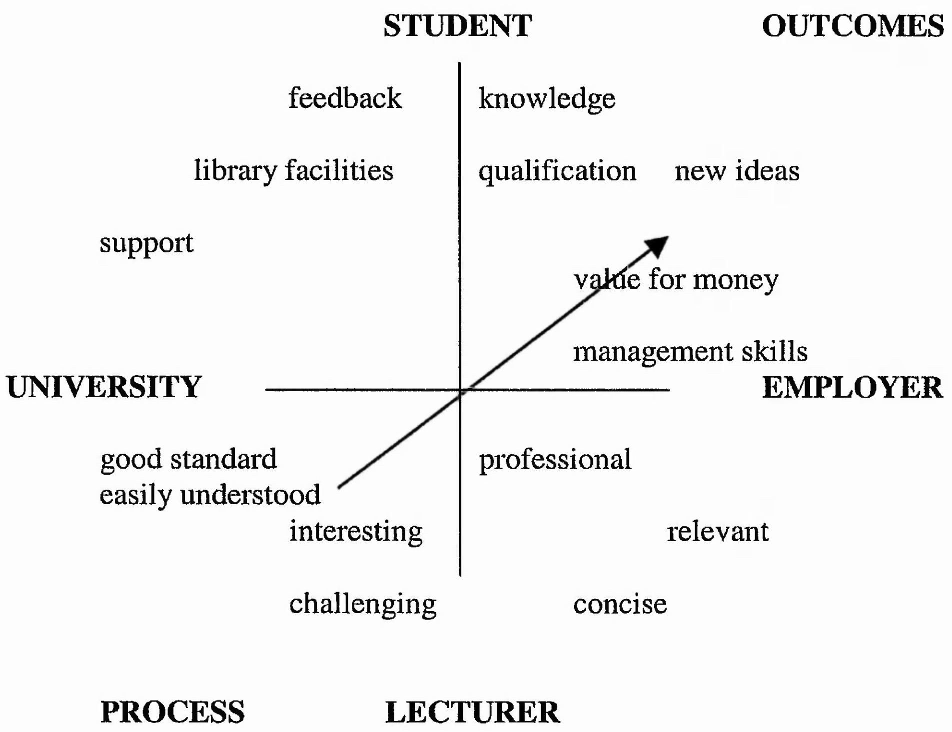
University support including the library facilities, feedback mechanisms and 'support that you get',

*'Provision of training that actually meets a need…it needs to be interesting and relevant..concise, together, easily understandable and challenging' (Andrew I1)*

*'The quality of the lecturers and whether they are professionally based..the support that you get' (Rob I1)*

*'First of all that the lecturer is prepared to give you some time and talk to you about it not just tow the line like the books say…lots of facilities like the library' (Gary I1).*

**Figure 6.2 Important Aspects in Students' Definitions of High Quality**




Lecturers are central to the quality of the process in the students' opinion.

However, similar to stated expectations and clearly related, students define high quality far more in terms of outcomes, centred on their need for the qualification and those that will benefit their employer including management skills, knowledge, new ideas and value for money,

*'focused and applicable to the workplace and something which I can actually take back to my employers and I can work better and produce more for them..and therefore force them to pay me more salary' (Graham, I1)*

*'it depends on what your expectations are when you go in…but my expectations are that I come out knowing more than I did when I went in, and that I feel that it was worth my time, money, whatever to be involved, and to come out with the qualification that I want' (Jackie I1)*

*'obtaining the results and the qualifications that you come out with.. but also I would expect them to stir my opinion probably rattle my ideas or ideals' (Chris I1)*

*'I'd say value for money, quality is getting something, what you ask for..to get some insight into the skills required to be an effective manager; (Tony I1)*

Education is considered to be high quality if the student acquires new knowledge and feels that they 'come out knowing more than I did when I went in'. Linked to the idea of knowledge acquisition is also a change in perspective or way of thinking about management for some informants with the use of words such as 'challenging' and the phrases 'rattle my ideas', 'not just tow the line'. These comments are all related to the style of the lecturer and the theory that they present to students. Perhaps stronger for this group is the imperative that high quality education relates to the ability to apply this learning to the workplace. This aspect is clearly related to the nature of the sample – postgraduate but more importantly part-time students. As they are at work for the majority of their time, links to the workplace are important. Graham's definition of a quality higher education service above best encapsulates this theme with the idea of 'taking back' something to his employers, which will allow him to 'work better' and 'produce more'. From this quotation it is also possible to see another theme found in many of the transcripts, the idea ultimately of progression – attaining the qualification, advancing in ones career and thinking style.

In summary, part-time students define a high quality education service as one where students graduate with new knowledge and management skills that will benefit their employers via application in the workplace. The learning process should take place in a university with good facilities and lecturers who are challenging and relevant.

Whilst past educational experiences are also highlighted as influencing service expectations, only experiences related to the current course of study seem to be particularly influential. As such, this factor is only mentioned and therefore becomes important when the students have completed the first year and are asked about their expectations for subsequent years,

*'More of the same really, I don't think in terms of my commitment and that it's going to be more daunting. I think I'm tuned in now to the time commitment' (Robert I3)*

*'I think it will be more of the same really and I'd like stimulating but I don't know whether with those class numbers whether it is very easy to do?' (Chris I3)*

*'To some extent more of the same probably. I hope that the, because I'll be doing the public sector options, I hope that some of the work will be far more applicable to my job and that I will be able to use it..'(Jackie I3)*

*'A lot harder. I hope its going to be harder in the depth of information given and the actual overall end of the course. I mean everybody, every lecturer really has said this is the information we're going to give you, it will be in great detail in the DMS and I think that's what everybody's going to be looking for now, the DMS to challenge your abilities and to push you almost to the limit, where the*

*MBA will take you further than your limit, I think that's what I expect now from the DMS, to push me' (Adam I3)*

*'Well if I get the same lecturers I just hope they are more focused, more direct and it's forward at a better pace.' (Graham I3)*

The expression 'more of the same' clearly illustrates that students are thinking about last year's experience when considering their expectations. Also 'I hope' indicates they are expressing desired expectations (Zeithaml *et al.,* 1993, Buttle 1996). In relation to these responses, when informants' initial stated needs are tracked through the two or three years, the areas remain very stable over time but, not surprisingly, each year part-time students expect a progression and development from last year. For example, as Adam's quotation above illustrates, his expectations are still about new knowledge and management skills, but these should be deeper and more stretching compared to the first year. Whilst past educational experiences have a greater influence as the course progresses, expectations are still predominantly outcome related. This leads to the conclusion that expectations may not play a large role in service quality evaluations related to process or technical dimensions in the educational service context. However expectations are likely to be relevant to outcome or functional dimensions of the service experience (Lehtinen & Lehtinen 1982, Gronroos 1984). The factors highlighted by Parasuraman *et al.,* (1985, 1993) affecting service expectations are very consistent with the findings of this study. Personal needs, past experiences and service philosophy all influenced students' expectations. Word-of-mouth communications also had an effect in the sense that students commented on the fact that feedback given by students on more advanced courses did influence their expectations for the following year, *'Other people that I know who have done the course have said, the second year really gets harder and it worries me in a sense..'(Mervin I3)*

*'Well this year I have been the course rep as well so talking to people who have done the MBA this year, they are groaning and rolling around and things like that so you expect a fair amount of hard work..' (Jackie I4)*

and certain lecturers commented to students that the material would develop in the subsequent year. This type of word-of-mouth communication, however, takes place during the in-course experience which then feeds into past experiences which influence expectations for the subsequent year. The lack of consideration of the role played by expectations in the educational quality literature is clearly an area where the marketing literature can contribute additional insights.

### 6.2.2 Service Expectations

The very first question asked was purposefully open, 'what are you expecting, if anything, from Nottingham Trent University?' The objective was to elicit unprompted answers and, by inference, factors that are likely to affect initial service quality evaluations. The initial responses to this question for each student are included in appendix 6.1. These responses and the subsequent discussion were reduced to key words and phrases and from this five expectations emerged, part-time students expect to:

1. Develop/confirm management skills
2. Obtain the qualification

3. Experience other sectors and people

4. Acquire new knowledge, learning

5. Experience a co-ordinated, progressive course

Stated expectations are viewed in terms of what the students believe using the service will accomplish for them and are thus predominantly outcome related. The one exception is the expectation to experience a co-ordinated, progressive course.

The discussion of management skills related to the idea of becoming 'a better manager' was a significant expectation for many informants. This was linked closely with the desire to be able to apply skills acquired on the course back in the workplace,

*'Well what I'm expecting to get from the course are skills in management and that's it really' (Tony I1)*

*'I know that what I want to get out of it is better writing skills for myself and also some better organisation skills for myself because I'm not particularly well organised as you might notice if you look round in here!' (Jackie I1)*

In addition to acquiring new management skills some informants want to judge their skills against the course,

*'It's very difficult to describe particularly what I was expecting…what I'm really looking for from the course is 1) to see if I've got these skills..that are being taught out there and 2) to learn extra skills that will help me in what is a difficult and quite changeable job' (Andrew I1)*

*'I think that it's really I would like to judge my competence against the course and see If I am as competent as I feel I am' (Chris I1)*

Assessing competence is related to the desire to have increased confidence as Adam indicates,

*'..just so I feel better in myself, more competent in the job that I do' (Adam I1)*

When asked what they were expecting, a number of students talked about getting the qualification which is similarly driven by an instrumental orientation to advance their career,

*'The other thing that I do know that I need in order to progress is a qualification in management studies' (Jackie I1)*

*'I do see a qualification as an advantage, to advance me in my career' (Andrew I1)*

Rather than or as well as management skills, some informants talk about expecting to acquire new knowledge and ideas. Again this is related to application in the workplace,

*'An education and a broadening of knowledge, hopefully what I'd expect in a focused way to my job so it relates to my profession' (Graham I1)*

*'..give me ideas to pass on to my colleagues' (Chris I1)*

*'..on a personal level I'll be targeting particularly financial areas, an area I believe I'm weak and information technology' (Robert I1)*

*'Good standard of education at the end of the day..feeling that you've learnt what you haven't already known..that's going to forward my management skills' (Adam I1)*

A strong expectation for a number of informants was to gain experience of other sectors and learn from other people on the course who were working in different functions but particularly different industries. Gary's and Mervin's comments,

*'A lot of personal benefits. I'm expecting to get the chance to actually see how a business fully runs..to get the chance to talk to people in other environments and to learn from them' (Gary I1)*

*'I don't see it necessarily as the lecturers giving it to us, the people on the course actually contributing to the end product' (Mervin I1)*

succinctly illustrate this theme. This is not focused on making new friends or socialising but related to the expectation Jackie expresses as, 'broadening my own experiences'.

The vast majority of questions on survey instruments used to assess service quality, ask consumers about their expectations related to process dimensions of the service experience. Buttle's (1996) criticism of the SERVQUAL questionnaire for predominantly measuring the process of delivery rather than the outcomes of the service appears to be extremely relevant in the higher education context. Very little discussion centred on what the part-time students' expected the process to be like. The exception was the expectation of a co-ordinated, progressive course illustrated by Mervin and Robert,

*'I'm expecting a well organised co-ordinated course that leads me step by step forward in my management career'(Mervin I1)*

*'Coordinated course of study, progressive study' (Robert I1)*

Rob was the only informant, unprompted, to mention lecturers and the library which he considers are 'the basics'. However, very few unprompted expectations from interview one relate to the University facilities, course content and assessment or staff (administration and lecturers). Jackie and Andrew's first response when asked what they expected,

*'I don't know yet' (Jackie I1)*

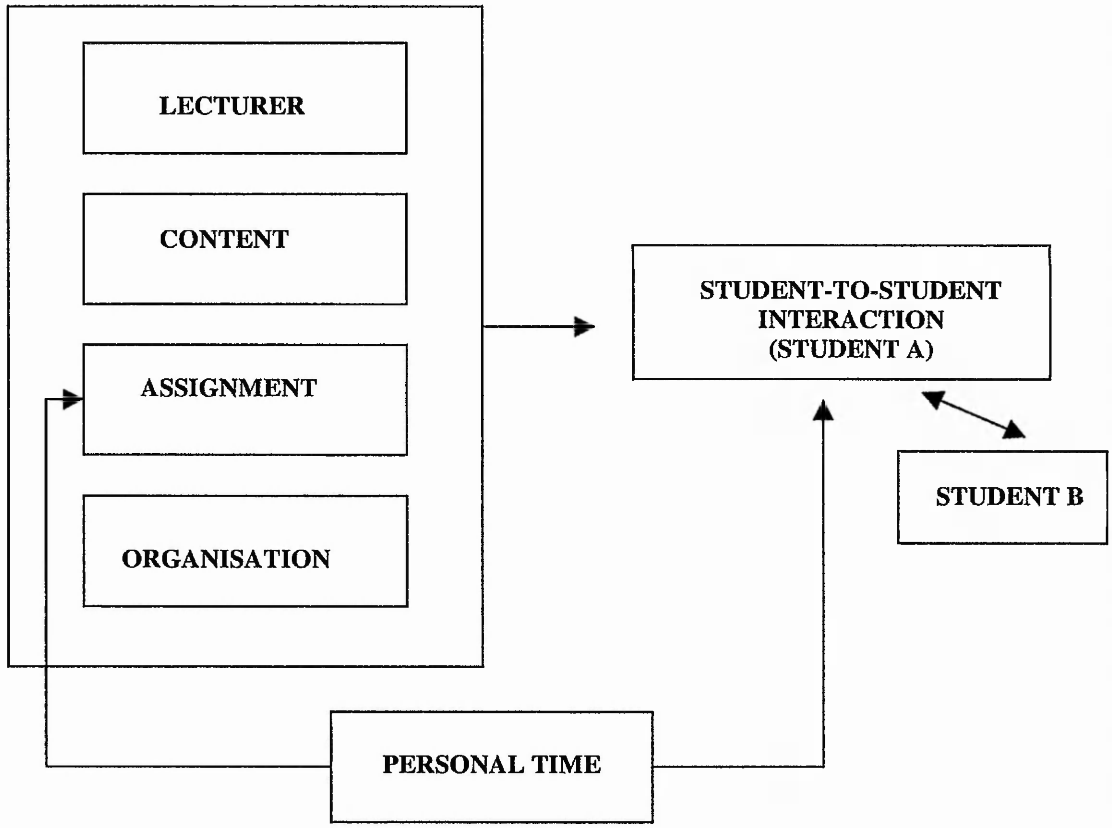
*'It's very difficult to describe particularly what I was expecting' (Andrew I1)*

also help to support the contention that expectations in relation to the process aspects of an educational service experience prior to the commencement of the course are not strong. Additional support for this also comes from other interviews conducted by the researcher with younger, full time undergraduate students (not reported in this study) and in Ward's (1996) research, where expectations for process dimensions were practically non-existent.

### 6.3 The In-Course Experience

Following the pre-course interview, informants' experiences were captured three months into the first year and at the end of each year of the course. Very many positive and negative dimensions of the experience at Nottingham Business School were discussed in-depth as we covered aspects highlighted in previous studies included on the interview schedules. Illustrated below in figure 6.3 are the experiences and aspects that are reflected upon by a number of the informants and hence the strong themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts.

**Figure 6.3 In-Course Experience: The Process**




From all the areas prompted, memorable service experiences revolved around lecturers, course content, assignments and organisation. Two further factors, student-to-student interaction and personal time arose as important aspects of the service experience. This model of the important factors in the in-course experience has similarities with Langeard *et al.'s,* (1981) Servuction System model which is one of the few models to highlight the central role played by customer-to-customer interaction in the service evaluation experience.

### 6.3.1 The Lecturers

A lot of time was spent talking about the quality of lecturers on the course. Informants were asked about support staff as well but they were not seen as important in the informants' overall quality ratings. Had administration and other staff been unhelpful this may not have been the case. Lecturers, whether good or bad, play a vital role because,

*'you tend to judge a lot on the quality of the actual lecturer simply because, that is what you feel as though you are paying for' (Jackie I4).*

Many unprompted as well as prompted discussions centred on either very good or very poor lecturers. Two lecturers were frequently offered as examples of high quality,

*'she had a way of putting things across, she obviously knew her subject. I think they all knew their subject, but she could lecture and relate to the students. It was interesting over the two years, how she progressed from a very practical based thing into getting more academic and more theoretical. I think that was important for us, a lot of people hadn't been on any management training before and these theories and models, had never heard of them. So she started off with lots of practical examples, things you could tie things into and you could relate to that. There was a lot of group discussion, group-work, she would give you a project and get you to fire back and if she didn't like your answers, she would challenge them and get you to justify them. So you could see how the arguments built up and people brought in experiences - it was very good, very interesting.' (Andrew I4)*

According to the informant, being able to relate to the work of the part-time students through practical examples is regarded as very high quality together with sensitivity to the academic level and abilities of the students. Lectures interspersed with group work through case studies, discussions, and short activities help part-time students relate theory to practice and add variety to the learning experience thus maintaining interest and engagement. Challenging students' contributions is rated as very high quality if done in a way that helps them to make links and really think about how they are approaching the topic at present. It helps students see other perspectives and start to question their current mind-set.

The second lecturer had a somewhat contrasting style, less directly work-related (which was a very important aspect for all informants) but was still considered to be high quality,

*'..they just wouldn't stand there and reel out all the standard stuff, they would question and get you thinking about it. She was a clear lecturer, she explained her stuff well, where as he was a bit more controversial and went off the line, but he was very entertaining with it.' (Rob I4)*

The key differentiation for this lecturer, linked to the previous point, was that he challenged the way students thought, he presented new ideas and was engaging,

*'...he was very good because his ideas and his approach was very good and his ideas were very unusual and the way he was coming at you was unusual, it sort of.. the idea crept up on you, so that you didn't think suddenly, you thought what on earth is he going on about and then you see the light.' (Chris I4)*

*'..he challenged other lecturers' comments, he challenged what we were being taught, he didn't just stand at the front and reel it off ... he got you talking, challenging things. He just had a very good style.' (Rob I4)*

*'..particularly good bits were certain tutors who challenged the way you thought.' (Jackie, I4)*

Clearly challenging the way students think and presenting new ideas or the same ideas in a different way is regarded very highly by postgraduate part-time students. Going deeper into the assumptions upon which models and theory are based and highlighting contradictions, criticisms and weaknesses is mentally stimulating for many students. It helps students identify their own ontological position on management issues and appreciate other people's perspectives more explicitly,

*'I find that I do tend to use the stuff that I am getting from the course to challenge either the way I am working or the way other people are working, so consequently you do become more aware, more critical.' (Jackie I4)*

The lecturers who can help students do this are generally rated very highly and this influences students' overall ratings of the experience as they stand out as particularly satisfying aspects of the course.

In contrast, when asked what one thing NBS could do to improve quality one informant's response was,

*'Get rid of a certain lecturer' (Jackie I2).*

All informants, except one, highlighted the poor quality of one particular lecturer. Lecturing style was the main criticism with a perceived lack of clarity in communication through using confusing terminology, unanswered questions and a generally dismissive approach of student challenges and questions, *'The whole approach was this superior, I am the guy at the front so you will listen to what I have to say. And quite often he would skate over what other people wanted to say because perhaps their opinion didn't agree with his.' (Adam I2)*

In addition, students experienced a problem with poor handouts so copious notes had to be taken and the assignment did not appear to relate to the majority of the material covered in the lectures. Other aspects of poor quality lecturing included unenthusiastic style, giving the appearance of being bored with the material, getting models wrong, material that was difficult to relate to the work situation and a lack of thought for student's background, for example,

*'Being someone who likes to look after people..as a customer I didn't feel that maybe my needs had been thought of, like there was a lot of public sector...so if someone said with all this content, most of the books are around private sector but I have had a little look at it and this is how it could fit into the public sector, some forethought there would have helped, it would have made me feel better.' (Mervin I2)*

The opposite characteristics were not surprisingly highlighted for lecturers who were considered to offer a high quality service. Table 6.1 provides the detail behind the lecturer label in figure 6.3 and summarises the main characteristics of high quality and low quality lecturers from the students' perspective. The words used to describe low and high quality are taken directly from the student transcripts and so are expressed in the students' own words.

A comparison of the high quality characteristics of lecturers with previous research reinforces the importance of tutor enthusiasm, style of delivery, explanation, context setting and discussion of material (Entwistle and Tait 1990, Ramsden 1991, Roberts and Higgins 1992, Mazelan *et al.*, 1992, Marsh and Roche 1993, Hill 1995, Aldridge and Rowley 1998).

**Table 6.1 Characteristics Associated with High and Low Quality Lecturers**

| High Quality Characteristics ← Lecturers → | Low Quality Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Challenge thinking, new ideas | Superior attitude, dismissive |
| Clear communication | Lack of clarity, confusing terminology |
| Enthusiastic presentation, entertaining | Hard to read, follow, boring handouts |
| Know their field/subject | Gets models wrong |
| Answers questions well, concise | Skates over questions |
| Relevant, links theory and practice | Difficult to relate to |
| Gets interest from start | Bored with subject |
| Involving | Unenthusiastic |
| Gets students to justify thinking | No thought for student background |
| Encourages group interaction | Assignment unrelated to material |

These characteristics do relate to responsiveness and assurance (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) but the specific nature of the educational context makes these generic dimensions less useful in forming a detailed understanding of the important dimensions of the service experience in higher education. A particular contribution of this research is the importance of challenging students' thinking. This can be achieved in a number of ways by lecturers including criticising established theory, presenting new ideas and by getting students to explore and justify their current thinking. Tutors who can do this are remembered and highlighted as providing a high quality service experience.

### 6.3.2 Content of modules

Linked closely to how lecturers deliver is what they deliver which was an important aspect of the overall experience. The overriding determinant of high quality for part time postgraduate students is the degree of relevance of the material. Relevance for the informants was defined as their ability to be able to apply the ideas, concepts and models within their work environment,

*'..the actual information that is coming over, it is good, you can relate it to work. Obviously you have to take it away and think about it, and so you should, but the contents is interesting and challenging.' (Andrew I2)*

*'..well the actual course content, I found, the kind of learning experience has been fantastic as far as I'm concerned. I really feel as though I've been able to apply that kind of experience within my work situation. It's been good in that respect.' (Tony I3)*

Other stated positive consequences of the substantive content of the course have been to broaden student's thinking and stimulate wider reading. On the first year of the course, the Certificate in Management, one module was highlighted as good quality by all informants – the Residential Weekend at the beginning of the course. This stood out as a particularly satisfying experience because it generated group cohesion and thus provided an excellent opportunity for social interaction,

*'the weekend residential thing was absolutely superb, in terms of enjoyment and getting to know other people on the course' (Gary, I2).*

Equally popular was the Team Consultancy Project on the second year of the course. This was rated as high quality because it combined both business relevance in the sense of an applied project to a specific client organisation and team working, *'For me, the consultancy project was the best bit of the course. I really enjoyed it... It was a really good experience, we were a good team, we worked well together, we get on well together, as a consequence of that we go out.' (Jackie I4)*

*'I particularly enjoyed the consultancy week, I found that extremely beneficial, that was practical management, in application in industry if you like, I thought that was very good.' (Robert I4)*

Both positive and negative comments were made about the module guides supplied to support each module. Inconsistency is evident here with some module guides being used by the lecturer whilst others were not used or had content that students found hard to follow.

On the negative side, certain module content was criticised for lacking relevance, having a private sector bias, being confusing and not providing any new learning for the informants,

*'I am thinking about how I felt at the end of each session, whether or not I felt it was worthwhile to me whether I learnt something from it...One week I would think yeah that is really good I enjoyed that, I learnt something new.... other days, I would at the end of the evening, I would think, I can't wait until I finish, it is so boring I just want to get away.' (Tony I4)*

*'My key factors are getting in there, the level of teaching, the quality of teaching and what I've come away to think, have I developed from the beginning of the course or from the beginning of the session to the end of the session, if I've come away with something, no matter how small, then the quality, obviously the more I've learnt the better the quality.' (Adam I4)*

Both quotations illustrate the importance of learning something new in relation to a high quality educational experience. Considering and reinforcing the learning outcomes of each session for each individual is an important aspect of achieving a high quality rating. They also relate to the importance of 'knowing the customer' (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) and the reduction in the students' perception of service quality when lecturers do not take students' level of prior knowledge and understanding into account. Table 6.2 provides the detail behind the content label in figure 6.3 and summarises the main characteristics of high quality and low quality module content from the students' perspective.

**Table 6.2 Characteristics Associated with High and Low Quality Content**

| High Quality Characteristics | ← Content → | Low Quality Characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| Applicable to work | | Lack of relevance, examples |
| Informative, useful module book | | Module book not use |
| Broadened thinking | | Bias to one sector |
| Interesting & challenging content | | Confusing material |
| Links from CM to DMS | | Some sessions no new learning |
| Stimulates wider reading | | Repeated material |
| Social Residential Weekend | | |
| Practical Team Consultancy | | |

A number of the characteristics indicate the importance of judging part-time students' prior knowledge and developing an understanding of each individual's learning objectives. In comparison with previous literature the importance of relevant and interesting material to the student (Entwistle and Tait 1990, Robberts and Higgins 1992, Hill 1995) is reinforced. In particular, content in the form of models and processes that can be applied in the student's workplace and courses that are structured to facilitate group interaction are regarded highly.

### 6.3.3 Assignments

Another significant and related theme, which is important in students' overall quality ratings, is assignments. This incorporates the assignment brief, grading and feedback. The quality rating of the first year experience for all informants was negatively affected by confusion over the Storyboard concept related to the Personal Effectiveness assignment,

*'I think the biggest criticism would be the business about story boards and assignments, although I am sure from the tutor's point and view and from our point of view at the end of the year, it will all be crystal clear, but coming in to the new course, it was very confusing.' (Mervin I2)*

*'It started off, I thought very good, I thought this is going to be very good and all the rest of it, then it got into the concept of things like Storyboards which totally threw me, I haven't written one yet, I just can't get into this storyboard idea.' (Gary I1)*

The Storyboard concept is based on the idea of capturing reflections on learning after each module. This clearly caused confusion and a sense of unease early on in the course. In addition, the first assignment caused concern as many informants were unclear from the brief from the Residential Weekend exactly what they were expected to do and whether it would be graded. Students also complained about legibility and detail of feedback comments,

*'At every one, I've looked at it and thought "What does that say, what does that say" I can't read it, which is a bit of a nonsense because we're handing in typed work and the least we should get is legible stuff back' (Chris I3)*

*'I don't feel as though I got enough feedback, when I compare it to the amount of sheer effort that I put into that work, I was a little disappointed, I mean some of it I couldn't even read so that's one major criticism, so from a quality aspect that was something that was lacking' (Tony I3)*

A number of comments were made about students passing assignments without attending and the lack of penalties being applied for lateness, *'It got to the stage towards the end of the course when one or two people said well what's the point of even trying to make the deadline because it doesn't appear to be serious in the sense of the word, and one comment by one person was that it makes the course a bit "Mickey Mouse"' (Mervin I3)*

and how this affected the overall impression of importance placed on marks, quality standards and the value of the Certificate in Management qualification. Related to this issue, the quality of the second year of the course was also affected by doubts over grading consistency and fairness,

*'There doesn't seem to be consistency in the way they mark... the other thing is time scales, right at the beginning at the outset of the course on the CM and on the DMS if it is not in on the day then you get penalised for it...but that never happened.' (Adam I4)*

*'I think the negative comments that people had given about it being everyone will get B average because they need everyone to get a B because they need to get everyone through the course onto the MBA.' (Mervin I4)*

The only positive quality aspects mentioned in relation to assignments were when they were very relevant to an informant's work situation, for example,

*'Part of the positive benefits were to do with the fact that year 2 assignments were based much more on the work that I am doing at the moment.' (Jackie I4)*

and the Team Consultancy Project (TCP) was rated as high quality by most of the informants for the practical nature of the task,

*'I think the consultancy week was particularly good. It was very practical and allowed you to apply the theory taught on the course in a useful way – relevant and interesting.' (Graham I4)*

Table 6.3 provides the detail behind the assignment label in figure 6.3 and summarises the main characteristics of low quality and high quality assignment experience from the students' perspective.

**Table 6.3 Characteristics Associated with Low & High Quality Assignments**

| **Low Quality Characteristics** | **← Assignments →** | **High Quality Characteristics** |
|---|---|---|
| Unclear requirements | | Able to apply at work |
| Lack of link to lectures | | Practical nature of TCP |
| Hard to read feedback | | |
| Inconsistent grading between lecturers | | |
| No penalties applied for lateness | | |
| Pass without attending lectures | | |
| B average doubts to allow MBA | | |
| Tedious assignment | | |
| Feedback needed before next module | | |

Unlike lecturers and module content, most discussions around assignments focused on poorer quality aspects of the course highlighting the importance of clear assessment criteria, the application of assessment regulations and detailed, readable and consistent feedback to students. This finding reinforces much of the previous research in this area which has also highlighted the importance of assessment in students' evaluation of a high quality education service (Entwistle and Tait 1990, Ramsden 1991, Mazelan *et al.,* 1992, Marsh and Roche 1993, Hill 1995). Specifically for Nottingham Business School much of the criticism revolves around perceptions of reliability (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988) in grading and the quality of communication in relation to feedback and legibility. This is an area that needs attention in order to avoid poor quality ratings in the future.

### 6.3.4 Organisation

Similarly to assessment, discussion of organisational issues only negatively impacted on the quality of the student experience. Two memorable incidents were mentioned by a number of informants which are related to the organisation of the course; room double booking and the large size of the group (over 40 students). The room double-booking incident was memorable because it was seen as a waste of valuable studying time,

*'We had a double booked room and we lost an hour - now between 2-3pm in one afternoon - I had a lot I could have done at the office - a lot.' (Graham I2)*

Whilst service failures in this area are remembered by students, for example if rooms are booked incorrectly or projecting equipment fails, smooth service delivery is not commented upon. Organisational issues appear to impact only negatively on quality evaluations. For a number of informants, group size impacted on the quality of their experience,

*'I think the room, although it is one of the better rooms that we have on the fifth floor, with 40 of us, it is a little bit cramped... we are all twisting and turning to try to see the lecturer.' (Rob I2)*

*'..it is a very difficult task to get 40 odd people clear about what's required..I was confused for the first couple of weeks and I went away thinking it was me because with so many people it is difficult to get any time alone with the tutor to ask questions.' (Mervin I2)*

*'For me case study work was overdone and took up to much time in feedback because of the large number of groups...it became very tedious at times.' (Graham I3)*

*'Not particularly satisfied because I wasn't able to speak to various lecturers that often because of the sheer number of people on the course.' (Tony I3)*

The large group size resulted in discomfort, difficulty getting any personal attention and time alone with lecturers and long feedback sessions which became repetitive thus losing the interest of a number of students. Table 6.4 provides the detail behind the organisation label in figure 6.3 and summarises the main characteristics of low quality organisation from the students' perspective.

**Table 6.4 Characteristics Associated with Low Quality Organisation**

| **Low Quality Characteristics** | ← **Organisation** → | **High Quality Characteristics** |
|---|---|---|
| Room double-booking<br>Too many people on course, little one-to-one with tutors, cramped space, slow feedback | | |

Course organisation has been highlighted in previous research by Entwistle and Twist (1990) and Mazelan *et al.,* (1992) and large group sizes clearly impacts on empathy– caring individualised attention the firm provides its customers (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988). Organisational issues appear to be a hygiene factor in the sense that when the Business School gets this right (smaller class sizes, available rooms and equipment etc.) it is not highlighted by part-time students as particularly high quality.

Two factors not specifically included on the interview guides were talked about in detail by students. The first, 'student-to-student interaction', was seen as a particularly satisfying aspect of the service experience by the majority of the informants. The second, 'personal time', was highlighted as a factor that negatively affected the quality of the experience in a number of ways.

### 6.3.5 Student-to-student interaction

Similar to Langeard *et al.'s* (1981) proposition in their Servuction System model that customer interaction effects the 'bundle of benefits' received from a service experience, student-to-student interaction has a significant impact on overall service quality evaluation. In the higher education context customer interaction can be defined as the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge with other course members through class discussions, learning set activities, group work and informal communication. A number of dimensions of this aspect of the service experience are evident including both purposive, lecturer directed and structured class interaction and more informal student instigated interaction. The more informal interaction takes place both in class time when, for example, discussions are instigated and led by students, at breaks and outside set class time. This was a very important and essentially positive aspect in relation to the quality of the experience for all but two of the informants. Robert's preferred learning style was to,

*'..sit back and listen to the theory and listen to case studies, that sort of thing. I think when we actually get involved in feeding back from interpreting a case study it is sometimes restrictive, in so much as people's experiences are so wide ranging that contributions they make might not always be in the right direction. Sometimes it needs a bit of focus on the feedback.' (Robert I1)*

Similarly, Graham derived more value from lectures rather than learning from other course members' experience, *'The class kind of fragments into little buzzing groups of people having their own conversations, some relevant, some not to the lecturing. I would rather listen to the lecturer.' (Graham I3)*

Given these two exceptions, all the other informants discussed the positive value of interaction with the other course members. Jackie and Chris's response when asked what they considered was the highest quality aspect of the experience are typical,

*'It was the other people on the course, the group work that we did together, that kind of thing was quite a strong influence, certainly for me, working with the other people more closely, that's what made the experience as useful as it was.' (Jackie I3)*

*'Things like meeting other people from private and public sector, meeting people and an exchange of ideas was very very good.' (Chris I5)*

Phrases such as 'broaden my experience', 'learning other people's experience of work', 'team spirit' and words such as 'camaraderie', 'support' and 'network' were used to express dimensions of the student-to-student interaction that resulted from enrolling on the course. For example, Rob valued the fact he now knew other Environmental Health Officers whom he could contact for support on work related problems,

*'Well, I suppose I have got a certain amount of theory that I have learnt that at some point I will use in my career, but the main thing has to be the qualification and the new network of friends which was good. Which includes colleagues as well because there was a number of EHOs on the course, so that has opened up some information networks if you like.' (Rob I4)*

A more general example is that in the first year Adam believed he derived more value from the other course members rather than the content of the course,

*'The main benefit that I see of the course this year was not so much what I got from the course itself but from the people on the course. I see that as more beneficial, learning other people's experience of work. I see the course really through the year now, looking back on it, as just a way to pull everyone's experiences together and just build the theory into that, that's what I see.' (Adam I3)*

Interestingly here, social interaction is viewed as separate from the course itself, a perspective also supported by the following quotation,

*'From my personal experience with other course members, I'd probably go for an eight or nine, if we just went from the course itself, and tuition and what have you, it would probably be a six or seven.' (Jackie I3)*

Jackie is rating the quality of the experience out of 10, and she is differentiating between the 'course itself' and her 'personal experience'. In addition to specific course input from lecturers, Jackie felt she derived a lot of value from interaction with other course members, particularly from discussing their jobs which were outside of the Health Service where Jackie was a General Manager. Therefore in relation to achieving high quality ratings from postgraduate part-time students, providing social interaction opportunities and linking these clearly to what the Business School and course provides is important. This also has implications for the organisation of group formation. Working closely with other students made the experience very positive for most informants. Quality evaluations were dominated by an overall feeling of value from sharing experiences with other course members. Table 6.5 summarises the main aspects of student-to-student interaction from the students' perspective and provides the detail behind this label in figure 6.3.

**Table 6.5 Characteristics Associated with High and Low Quality Student-to-Student Interaction**

| High Quality Characteristics ← | Student-to-Student Interaction | → Low Quality Characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| Experience other perspectives, sectors | | Unfocused discussion |
| Broaden experience | | Long feedback |
| Stimulating group work, interaction | | Subjective personal opinion |
| Interesting discussion | | |
| Varied input from course members | | |
| Team spirit, camaraderie | | |
| Support through shared experience | | |
| Meeting socially outside course | | |
| Information network for work | | |

Social processes and user-to-user interaction, have a significant positive influence on the quality of the service experience for many students. This finding reinforces Swan and Bowers' (1998) suggestion that a more insightful interpretation of the service experience may be derived from consideration of the social world of the service user. Similarly, in the education literature, Rowley (1996b) has argued that student satisfaction may be significantly influenced by their experience of other students and that higher education institutions should therefore devote time to 'customer compatability management'. Student-to-student interaction has a number of dimensions including broadening experience of other managers' approaches and working contexts. Making the learning experience more stimulating through group work and discussions. Also generating a positive atmosphere in which learning takes place and extending this interaction outside of the course experience through meeting socially and using contacts for work-related issues. In considering previous research, this aspect of the service experience is considered under the labels of 'social life' in Robert and Higgins (1992) and Mazelan *et al.,*'s (1992) studies and services/facilities for students in Aldridge and Rowley's (1998) research. It is presented as separate from the educational process. In figure 6.3 student interaction is shown to be affected by the previous four factors, the lecturer, module content, assignments and course organisation. All of these factors can either encourage or discourage positive student interaction. For example, certain lecturers were criticised for, 'standing at the front and droning on' (Chris I4) rather than interspersing their lectures with group activities. The Residential Weekend, Team Consultancy Project and International Project were all highlighted as high quality aspects of the course partly because they provided the opportunity to work in teams which facilitates student-to-student interaction,

*To start with, we had a good group. We had an interesting project - we chose our own project we made our own contacts and everything else. It was really good fun ' (Jackie I5)*

and ultimately makes the experience more enjoyable for most students. Also the assignment for the TCP and International Project were group based which obviously requires students to meet up outside of class time. In relation to class size, too small a number or too large a number of students will negatively affect student interaction. As previous quotations have illustrated, the large numbers on the course each year caused problems with case study feedback and makes the formal lecture rather than group work an easier option for lecturers to manage. This research therefore indicates that the design of the educational process directly affects opportunities for student-to-student interaction and the resultant satisfaction derived from the service experience. Rowley (1996) similarly suggests that customer-to-customer interaction can be controlled in higher education through customer compatibility management techniques.

The final factor that affects student-to-student interaction and other aspects of the service experience is personal time.

### 6.3.6 Personal time

Many students mentioned time pressures. Considering the part-time nature of the course this should come as no surprise because these students have to fit a full-time job into their week as well as a personal life and the course demands. It is an important theme to consider in relation to the negative effect this has on the quality of the student experience,

*'It became very survival - it just was, get enough reading, library and work study and lecturing to do well enough to get through. The job took on extra responsibility, so I just found myself not being able to expand, make the most of the course, just kind of survival.' (Graham I4)*

*'I think a lot of work, with a job, family life and everything..' (Chris I4)*

*'At the moment I am finding it heavy going, purely because I am probably not putting as much time as I would like to do .... into the assessments, that is purely a personal thing, with family commitments.' (Robert I2)*

Both work and personal commitments make part-time study less satisfying for many students. Words such as 'stamina', 'going the distance' and 'staying power' were used to describe how studying felt at times, *'I think year two was more a case of going the distance, it was a stamina test more than anything.' (Tony I4)*

*'I think it was about staying power and commitment really rather than perhaps academically more challenging than the first year.' (Robert I4)*

Time pressure is also related to the issue of assignment deadlines not being met and the overall quality of the student submission,

*'It might affect the quality of the work that I produce because I might rush something because I know I've got to spend some time at home with the family and therefore I'll set myself a time limit and say "alright I'll work all day Saturday and leave Sunday to do something else" whereas I know that if I had Saturday and Sunday I could really produce something and I would want to do that, but the pressure's on you see.' (Tony I3)*

Clearly this time pressure detracts from the satisfaction derived from the experience and the likely outcome in terms of results and personal development – points discussed in more detail in the next section. In addition to assignments, Tony makes the point that student-to-student interaction is reduced for him which has a negative effect on how much he enjoys the course,

*'Well like I say there's two sides to it, the enjoyable side and the useful side. In terms of the useful side it was very, very good, in terms of an enjoyable side I didn't enjoy it that much because I didn't have time to socialise outside of the course' (Tony I3)*

Table 6.6 summarises the main aspects discussed by part-time students in relation to personal time and its affect on the quality of their experience. Similar to organisational issues, students only talked about the negative impact that part-time study places on overall quality. In relation to previous research, this specific dimension is not highlighted other than indirectly through Entwistle and

**Table 6.6 Effects on Course Experience of Personal Time Invested**

| Negative Effect | ← Personal Time → | Positive Effect |
|---|---|---|
| Heavy going due to family needs<br>Hard to do background reading<br>Going the distance, stamina test<br>Survival test due to job pressures<br>Rushed assignments<br>Hard to socialise outside of class time | | |

Tait's (1990), Ramsden's (1991) and Marsh and Roche's (1993) inclusion of appropriate workload issues. Course design issues (related to number and size of assignments) and the facility to have extensions due to work pressure are important aspects, particularly for part-time students. The amount of time invested also affects students' evaluation of post-course service value but in this case it is a factor that can have either a positive or negative effect. Before moving on to a discussion of this and service value, one final point regarding personal time is important. It is placed outside the central box in figure 6.3 because it is highly student dependent rather than in the control of the service provider, in this case Nottingham Business School.

### 6.3.7 Additional insights

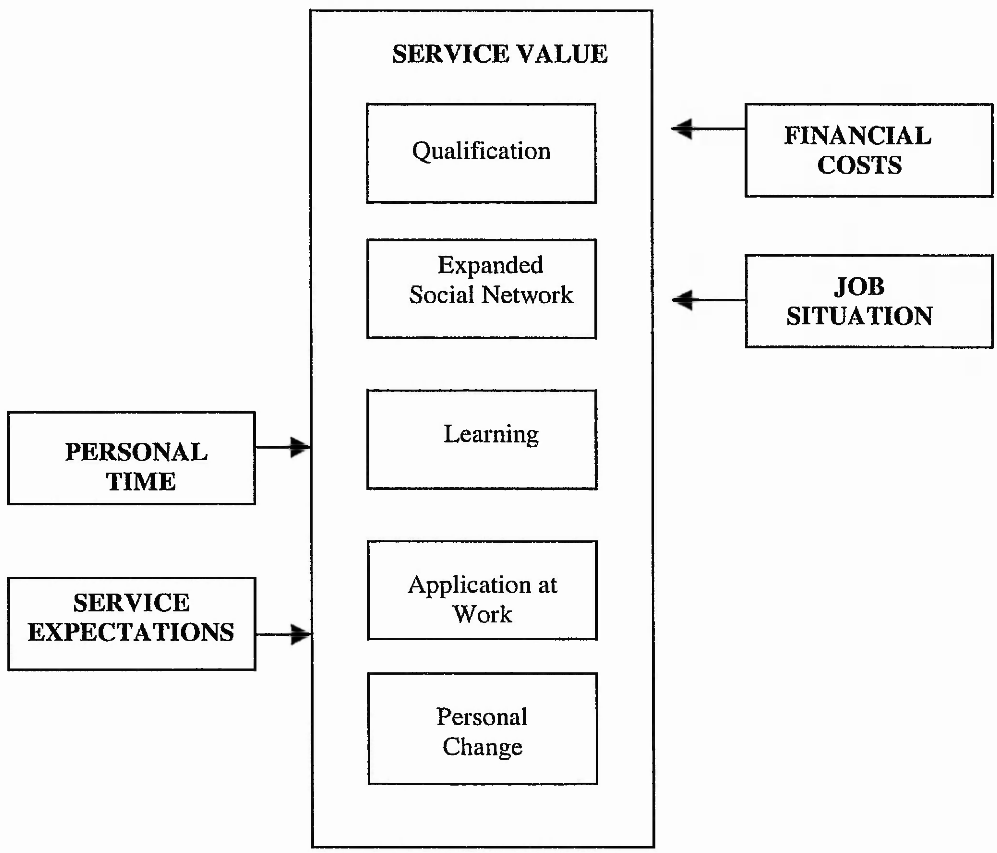
The factors that informants highlight as being important; lecturers, module content, assignments, organisation, social interaction and time pressures, do not change from interview to interview. Whilst each year there are different satisfying and dissatisfying experiences due to changes in lecturers and personal circumstances, informants do not think that certain aspects become more or less important as their experience increases. An analysis of the factors highlighted as important at each interview supports this contention.

In addition to the aspects identified, what is also important to note is the lack of mention of certain factors included in many other questionnaires assessing quality in Higher Education (Roberts and Higgins 1992, Mazelan *et al.,* 1992, Hill 1995, Rowley 1996, Aldridge and Rowley 1998). It might be expected that the administrative staff and ancillary services such as the library, computing facilities and student support services would be important in student evaluations of quality. However only one informant briefly mentioned administrative staff and another the library as being important. Other support services were not seen as important determinants of quality by any of the part-time students. This supports the focus in the student learning literature and Cuthbert's (1996b) suggestion that research should focus on the educational element for course level quality assurance. However, not only the educational process but also the outcomes of the process are important in students' evaluation of service quality.

### 6.4 Post-Course Service Value – The Outcomes

Outcomes of the service process are a key component of service quality evaluation in higher education. In the three end of year interviews, five important outcomes for students were discussed which together make-up overall service value. The value placed on each outcome is influenced by a number of other factors illustrated in figure 6.4. Value is derived from the service experience in one or more of the following ways; by gaining the qualification, by learning, by being able to apply new learning back in the workplace, through an expanded social network and from a sense of personal change and progression. The level of perceived benefit resulting from the service process is influenced by the student's pre-course expectations, the amount of personal time invested in the course, financial costs incurred and the student's job situation.

**Figure 6.4: Post Course Service Value: The Outcomes**



### 6.4.2 Factors that affect service value

The level of value derived from the service experience can be affected by four factors illustrated in figure 6.4; service expectations, job situation, financial costs and personal time.

Service value is considered to be low where service expectations are not met. For example, Gary expected the course would be easier to apply at work than he found it to be,

*'I don't think it has met my expectations, but to be totally honest, how much of that is my own problem it's a bit difficult to say - I think I probably expected to be more involved in it and I thought this competence thing - I thought I would be able to use more at work, which was probably me overestimating things.' (Gary I2)*

Equally where the course had exceeded students' expectations the experience was deemed to be highly valuable. For example, in the second interview Robert felt the course had exceeded his expectations in terms of providing ideas, theories and processes for application at work,

*'I think it has probably gone beyond my expectations...It has been so relevant, is the overriding factor. I have been able to relate well to the course. That has been the most important aspect. And it is developing...' (Robert I2)*

and Jackie by the end of the first year thought the social interaction had been better than she had expected,

*'I think it certainly met my expectations and bits of it surpassed them, you know, it's back to the groupwork the stuff like that, I think we were particularly fortunate that we had a good group to work with and that, it does enhance the experience.' (Jackie I3)*

Most of the attention in the service quality and customer satisfaction literatures has been on understanding service expectations and this is clearly important (Berry and Parasuramna 1991). In addition, Pitt and Jeantrout's (1994) recommendations for the management of customer expectations via 'keeping promises' in relation to providing a realistic picture of what customers' can expect and 'employee skills' in relation to training lecturers to deliver a little more than customer expectations are important considerations.

A number of informants' assessment of service value was also affected by their job situation. For example, Gary was a supervisor rather than a manager and Rob had a job where he felt there were few opportunities to apply the theory presented to his work situation. In contrast Jackie thought year two was more valuable because she did not have to put so much effort into the course due to a better job-course fit,

*'I honestly think I haven't worked as hard this year but in some respects that is because a lot of what has been going on has been at the level I am working at or maybe slightly below the level I am working at now because of the job I am doing and that has made life a lot easier.' (Jackie I4)*

The ability to apply material at work is clearly linked to the type of job and management level of each student. Where there are close links value is increased. Financial costs can also affect service value assessments, particularly where students are funding themselves or where they have budget responsibility. In both cases this increases the desire for significant and tangible outcomes,

*'I think my judgements are being more tempered by value for money that's one of the things that is very much a part of my job now but I have to consider what kind of benefits there are going to be for the organisation far more than I might*

*have done before because I now have to find the money to foot the bill..'(Jackie I4)*

*'When I started the budget was somewhere else, so I didn't necessarily look at value for money, seriously, because it wasn't my money. When it becomes your own budget, when it becomes that you start thinking am I justified in spending that money. You start looking at if you are getting value for money, am I getting the return that I should be getting.' (Adam I4)*

*'I am paying for this course myself and whereas other people might not feel the need to attend I do because I want to get as much out of the course as possible.'(Mervin I3)*

From Jackie and Adam's quotations it is very clear to see that when their job changed to a more senior management position this brought with it budget responsibilities which focused their attention on the 'value' they were deriving from the course experience. Where financial investment is not so important to the student, a final factor that can affect the level of value perceived is the amount of personal time invested. This was discussed more than financial investment and affects service value in a number of ways. Similar to financial investment, the more time students invest, the more value they expect to achieve. For example,

*'good structure, good presentation and the mark was 50%, now I don't spend hours at the weekend doing work to get 50%, I would try to get a B at least and I didn't think the comments on the sheet justified the mark.' (Tony I4)*

Clearly Tony is dissatisfied with the result due to inconsistency between feedback comments and the mark, but also because he invested a lot of time in the assignment. As illustrated by Jackie's experience of year two discussed earlier, she put less time into that year compared to year one and consequently believed the experience to be more valuable. However where students perceive limited time availability this can reduce the value of the experience due to the stress it places on the individual,

*'I was coming in 7.30pm in the evening and what I really don't want to do is do reading. So you are into that vicious circle and I never expected there would be that sort of emotional turmoil - real worry. I am tired from work so I don't want to do it, I can't go out because I should do it ....'(Graham I4)*

Linked to this aspect of time, many students felt they could have achieved better grades if they had been able to invest more time,

*'I always felt that I did the work so I would get the MBA. The one thing I wish I had done, was if I had more time with work and family to get a better grade. I got a B+ - a bit more and I would have got the A, its just the time, I do not have the time.'(Chris I5)*

Whilst Chris achieved the MBA qualification, he still felt disappointed by not getting the A result. This does not relate to the quality of the course but it does relate to the level of satisfaction associated with the level of outcome he achieved. Not being able to invest time reduces the value of the experience for some students.

### 6.4.2 Service value

Value is derived from the service experience through gaining the qualification,

*'Well, I have come away with a diploma which is what I wanted' (Rob I4)*

Students believe this will enable them to gain promotion with their current employer,

*'One of my reasons for doing it was that I needed the qualification to progress here, but what it has also done is changed how I think and how I evaluate things..'(Jackie I5)*

and improve their external job prospects,

*'I have just got a couple of possible job moves where agencies have contacted me to say that they have heard my position is going fine and they hear from people from other businesses that I am successful in getting my diploma, a DMS, so they are saying can I send you briefs for jobs.' (Graham I4)*

Gaining the qualification is an obvious valuable outcome for students but this can be devalued if it appears too easy to achieve. For example, Mervin was concerned about the lack of adherence to hand-in dates on the first year which he felt reduced the quality of the final qualification. In the second year he also had concerns, as did other informants, about the validity of some of the B averages that were achieved,

*'You know, Bs were being handed out because the course for next year needed to run, that devalued my effort' (Mervin I4)*

For many part-time students an easier course is not a higher quality course. The qualification is a tangible outcome for successful students, so too is an expanded social network. This incorporates a new network of friends and business contacts as well,

*'..the main thing has to be the qualification and the new network of friends which was good. Which includes colleagues as well because there was a number of*

*EHOs on the course, so that has opened up some information networks if you like. I think they are the main things I got out of the course.' (Rob I4)*

Student-to-student interaction was seen as an important contributor to a high quality course experience and for many students this extends outside of class time and continues when the course has finished. The research did not continue for long enough to assess if long term friendships had been established or if contacts had generated business related opportunities, but drawing on personal experience, if significant friendships result from the course this has a positive effect on one's assessment of the value of the experience.

Informants talked even more about the value of the learning that takes place,

*'I am thinking about how I felt at the end of each session, whether or not I felt it was worthwhile to me whether I learnt something from it...whether, the way it was presented was understandable to me' (Tony I4)*

*'It's what I actually get out of it and not actually what I'm given, what I feel in the actual lectures I'm developing, personally getting benefit out of it.' (Chris I3)*

*'It's reasonable, if you think back and you think, what have I learnt..' (Gary I3)*

Not surprisingly, learning is an important dimension of service value in higher education. From the quotations it is possible to see that learning is assessed at different points, after each session, at the overall module level and for the course experience as a whole. The inseparable nature of learning is highlighted in Chris's statement, learning is not simply the theory that is presented, but how the student relates to this material and makes connections with current knowledge, their work situation and any area where perceived benefit is derived. Those sessions where students learn a lot will be valued highly; equally the opposite is likely to be true,

*'The worst - I think it was the lecture theatre and the arrangements there. I didn't get much out of it actually - I could have got more out of reading a book, than actually doing that.' (Chris I5)*

The idea of investing time and expecting a return is evident here. For many informants the most valuable return is learning that can be applied at work,

*'I don't think you can achieve perfection, but I think so long as you feel you are getting value for money, everything that you are doing feels beneficial and I think it is satisfying to go home at 9 o'clock, yes I have learnt something tonight and maybe tomorrow I can put that into practice.' (Adam I2)*

*'Things like meeting other people from private and public sector, meeting people and an exchange of ideas was very very good. Gaining knowledge and the theory, which I was not completely aware of, and putting that into practice' (Chris I5)*

At each interview a number of informants discussed the value derived from applying ideas introduced on the course at work. From the quotes above, for example, after ten weeks Adam was indicating that application of ideas at work was valuable and Chris at the end of three years pinpointed the application of theory to practice as being one of the most important outcomes of the experience for him. This is linked to the fact that for many informants their employers are completely or partially funding the course. Gary was dissatisfied with the outcome of a number of modules, including Meeting Customer Needs, because he could not find direct links between the theory presented and his job, *'I was expecting some of the assignments to be more, for me to be able to tailor them a hell of a lot more to what I was doing in here, for this place to get some benefit. For example the thing we did on Meeting Customer Needs, one of the ways I sold the course to my company was look there's a whole seven weeks here on meeting customer needs, this is going to be quality related type stuff, quality circles and TQM which I'm a little bit interested in, so we'll use that as a way for me to learn a lot more about it, write up some kind of system and we can implement it into the factory plant and see if it works, that's how I sold it to this lot..and got them to pay.' (Gary I3)*

Clearly prior expectations have a significant impact on the value of the course experience for Gary which will be discussed in the next section, but also from this quotation the idea of financial investment from an employer and the need to 'payback' this investment through application in the workplace is evident.

Learning and application of this in the student's job is closely linked to the final dimension of service value discussed by all the informants, personal change. A range of expressed change is evident with Gary and Rob feeling essentially unchanged as a result of the experience. Neither felt they could apply course material in their jobs and both expressed a lack of interest, as a result, in the course material,

*'I think that is why you go to college to know more than you knew, but I am not convinced that I do and I am not saying that because I knew it already, I am saying that I don't think I have taken a lot of the information in. To some extent it was a practical based course as well, you apply what you learn at work ...I often don't get that opportunity so I didn't get to put it into practice.' (Rob I4)*

All the other informants did express feelings of personal change around one or more of the following themes; becoming more analytical, self confident, challenging & critical and having a broader view of management.

Becoming more analytical involves taking longer to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of alternative courses of action, taking longer to make decisions rather than just jumping to conclusions and so becoming more reflective. It involves a more ordered thought process and more logical structuring of reports,

*I think I've changed in that I, I've found myself thinking more about decisions..my thought processes are more ordered now than two years ago.' (Tony I4)*

*'I feel far more relaxed about the whole course having gone through this process...I am far more analytical.' (Robert I4)*

*I am able now to structure things in a logical way on paper, which was something I couldn't do...I gained a lot of knowledge... I have gained confidence in my ability to produce reports that are credible, taking time to consider alternatives.' (Mervin I4)*

Linked to this is the idea of new students to Higher Education progressing to become experienced users through feeling more relaxed about the academic process which requires an analytical rather than descriptive approach. Self-confidence is a strong theme running through many of the informants' discussions,

*'I am certainly using the learnings, they have given me a bit more authority in my own business which means I am maybe a little bit more of a confident person talking about strategic issues.' (Graham I4)*

*'I challenge things a lot more, I think I am a lot more confident. I think I am more confident because I feel I know more.' (Adam I4)*

Greater self confidence is expressed in a number of areas including feeling more competent as a manager, the ability to speak to and deal with senior managers particularly in relation to talking about strategic issues, suggesting new approaches and in the confidence to apply for new jobs. Interestingly a number of the informants got job changes or applied for jobs whilst on the course. As discussed, Graham felt a number of job offers had arisen due to having the qualification whilst Andrew felt the experience had opened up job opportunities due to his improved ability to complete application forms and perform in interviews and Jackie stated the course gave her the confidence to apply,

*'…being prepared to apply for it because its quite a substantially better job…yeah, I think I've changed quite a bit really.' (Jackie I3)*

Many informants also talked about becoming more challenging and critical,

*'The job that I am doing gives me the opportunity to challenge other people and challenge their beliefs and expectations, so I find that I do tend to use the stuff that I am getting from the course to challenge either the way I am working or the way other people are working. So consequently you do become more aware more critical …In the last three years I know that I have changed a great deal as an individual.' (Jackie I5)*

*'Talking to my colleagues, I had a chat with them a few weeks ago, ...had they noticed any change and they said that I keep coming up with more new ideas and they were struggling to keep pace with me.. I am being quite a lot more critical, and not accepting the status quo so much, realising that I think that you have got to continually change and you have got to keep the momentum going.' (Chris I5)*

This involves questioning and wanting to change the standard ways of working, coming up with new ideas and not accepting current levels of performance but striving for improvements. The fourth clear area of change for many was the ability to see the 'bigger picture' as Robert expresses it,

*'I feel sharper altogether, I feel more conscious of my role as a manager if you like and the aspects that go with that.. I understand management far better now.. whereas before I was reasonably narrow, I am far broader now and can see the bigger picture.' (Robert I4)*

which involves a broader view of the management role. He, as with others, feels more conscious of his role as a manager and what that should involve. Chris also feels he has a broader perspective on management brought about both by the various content covered on the modules and through the experience of studying with people from different backgrounds. Linked to this idea of change in perspective is the value students place on being able to think differently.

Service value from the consumer's perspective is clearly linked to change which could be thought of as transformation (Harvey and Burrows 1992). Perhaps more helpful are the ideas of improvement and progression. Progressive quality can be applied to students' skills (analysis), feelings (self-confidence), approach (challenging) and perspective (broader view, new ideas). Progression is linked to value. Informants derive value from progression in these areas, and from improving their qualifications to help them progress in their careers and from positive social interaction. The greater the value perceived, the higher the service quality rating.

### 6.5 A Student-Centred Model of Service Quality in Higher Education

Many dimensions of the postgraduate part-time student experience have been presented, divided into the three stages. These stages in the service quality experience are illustrated together overpage in figure 6.5. in order to provide an holistic picture of the postgraduate higher education service experience. When students evaluate service quality they make links between the stages. Figure 6.6 proposes a model for the process of student service quality evaluation.

Figure 6.5 A Student-Centred Model of the Service Quality Experience in Postgraduate Higher Education

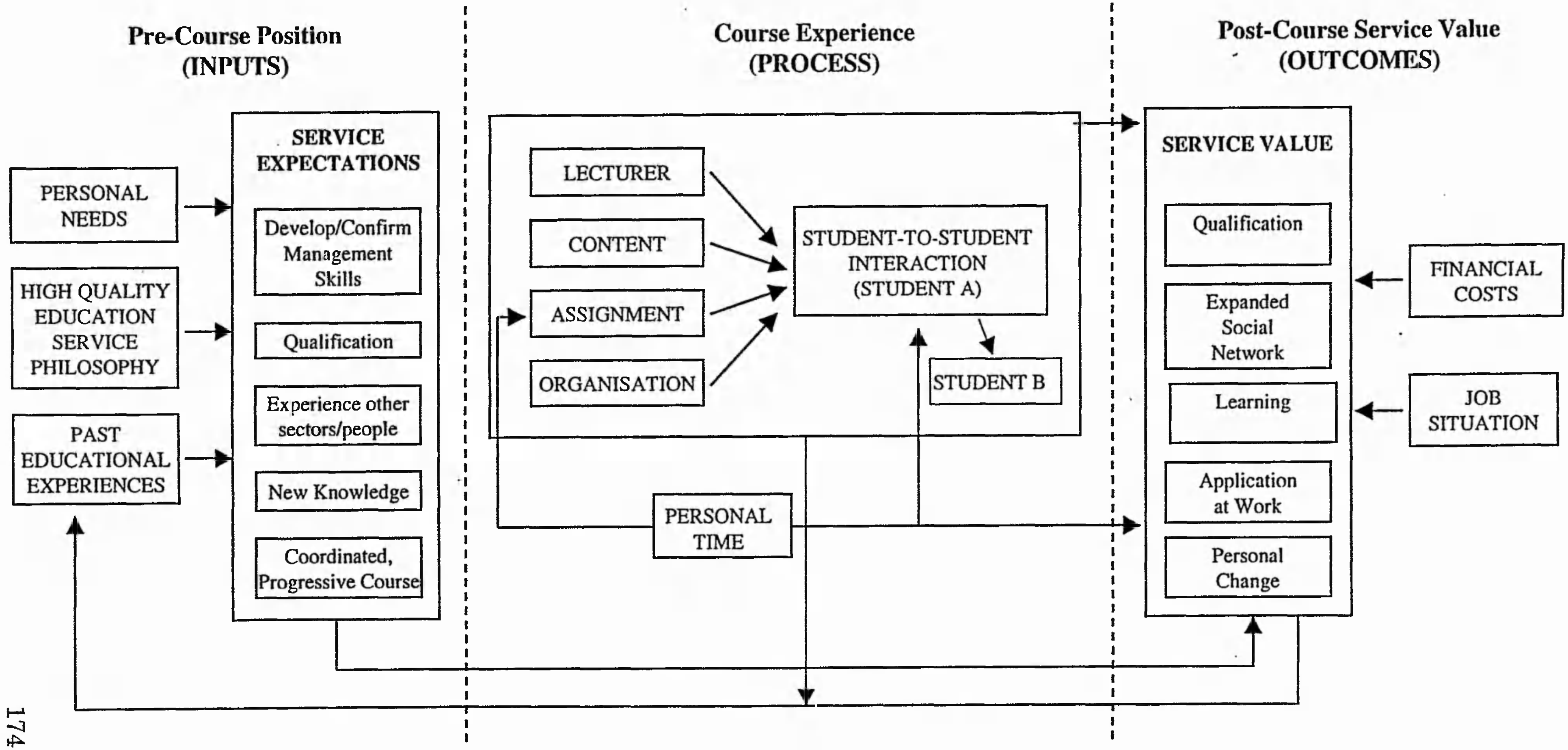
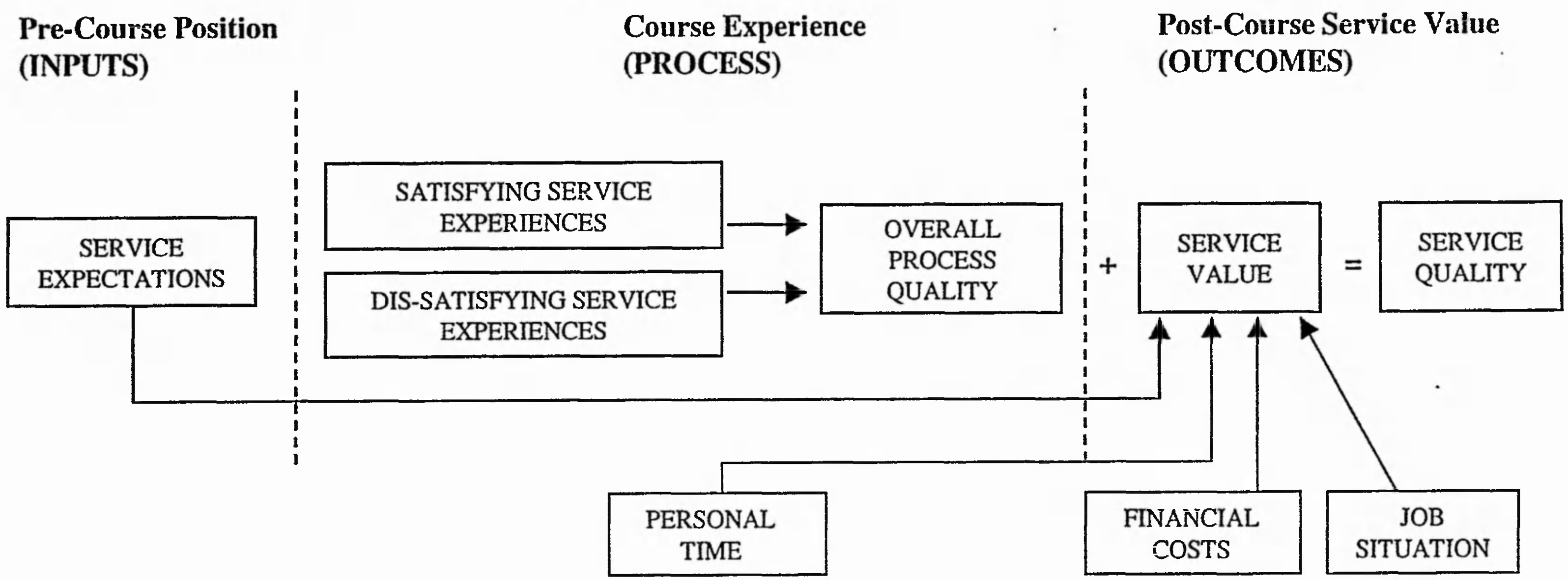


Figure 6. A Student-Centred Model of Service Quality Evaluation in Postgraduate Higher Education



Whilst it is possible to consider the inputs, process and outcomes of the higher education service experience in isolation and at points in time, for example at the end of each year, the actual experience for students is individual, holistic, long-lived, changing and complex. The two models attempt to represent this complex process and propose commonalties in the student experience.

Each of the aspects highlighted in figure 6.5 has been discussed in the previous sections of this chapter with its inclusion supported by the data. However, by considering the stages together, a more complete picture of the service experience is achieved. In addition, the model in figure 6.5 proposes certain links between the stages. Firstly service expectations are shown to have an effect on service value. Service expectations do change each year, not in relation to the factors that make up these expectations (management skills, qualification, experience other sectors/people, new knowledge and coordinated/progressive course), but the level of expectation in each area is affected by the previous year's education experience. The course itself (lecturers, content, assignment, organisation and student-to-student interaction) has an indirect effect on service expectations through students' consideration of past educational experiences related to the current course of study. When forming expectations for subsequent years the previous year becomes the benchmark. Dimensions of the course experience also feed forward into students' assessment of service value. Overall service value, in turn, feeds back into the students' past educational experiences and so links between the stages are established as time moves forward.

It is proposed that service quality evaluation is composed of a student's assessment of overall process quality and the student's assessment of the value of the experience, identified as service value in figure 6.6. Overall process quality is assessed by students taking both satisfying service experiences and dis-satisfying service experiences into consideration and averaging the result,

*'It is difficult - because there were bits that were 9s and there were bits that were 4s, but I suppose overall a 6ish or 7ish.' (Mervin I4)*

*'I would have to say, balancing it all, the good and the bad and again this will all come back down to lecturers because they are at the forefront of this service, I would grade it as an average service.' (Rob I4)*

Process quality is one aspect of service quality in higher education. In addition to averaging 'the good and the bad' aspects of the process, the value of the outcome of the process also affects evaluations. Taking Jackie as an example, her initial unprompted evaluation after eleven weeks was that the course was, 'quite good'. Her rating out of 10 was '6 or 7'. She explains her rating as follows,

*'I've said 6 or 7 as my rating because I've thought of it as being quite good, I've got something out of it. I'm not sure what an average actually is but I've enjoyed what I've been doing so I would rate it at 5 and above you know.' (Jackie I2)*

*'Well, the sort of overall outcome, I suppose, rather than, not just the teaching but the overall experience of being with the course members and everything else as well ..' (Jackie I3)*

Value in Higher Education is centred on how much informants feel they are 'getting out' of the 'overall' experience, in Jackie's case the value of the social network has been very positive. For Chris, what he learns is key,

*'It's what I actually get out of it and not actually what I'm given, what I feel in the actual lectures I'm developing, getting benefit out of it.' (Chris I3)*

Service quality evaluation is based on an overall, holistic evaluation of the personal value derived from the experience, taking particularly positive and negative experiences into account. It is proposed that service expectations play an indirect role in service quality evaluation through the effect they have on students' service value assessment discussed previously. Value assessments are affected by students' initial expectations in relation to what they want to get out of the experience plus their job situation, the financial and time investments they make.

The findings detailed in this chapter and the proposed models of service quality reinforce the findings of certain studies, contradicts others and offers some original insights. The early concepts of process quality and output quality introduced by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) and functional quality and technical quality proposed by Gronroos (1984) are similar to the concepts of process quality and service value proposed in this study. However the importance of 'corporate image' included in Gronroos (1984) service quality model did not appear as an important factor in this research. The Servuction System model developed by Langeard *et al.,* (1981) is also similar to the in-course section of the proposed model.

In the second interview, informants were asked to highlight critical incidents in their service quality experience in an attempt to replicate Bitner, Booms and Tetreault's (1990) research. However this was dropped for subsequent interviews because informants generally found it very hard to pinpoint specific incidents for service quality evaluation, Graham's comment is typical,

*'Critical incidents are difficult to highlight, it's difficult to dip back in and pick things out because a lot of it was a general melee of going in, learning, putting back in bits and then this whole thing keeps rolling along so it's difficult to highlight critical specific times.' (Graham I3)*

Clearly from the previous sections, when prompted, informants considered certain aspects of the experience to be high quality, others to be low quality. However the critical incident technique does not seem to offer an effective method for learning about the details of an extended process such as Higher Education. The broader concept of a service experience offered in figure 6.6 is more appropriate in higher education where transactions take place over an extended period of time – be that 3 hours for a single session or at the module level which comprises a number of sessions. Considering Bitner's (1990) model of service encounter satisfaction, its applicability to the postgraduate context has to be questioned due to of the previous point and because expectations in relation to process dimension of the service experience in higher education are not clearly formed.

Aspects of Parasuraman *et al.*,'s (1985) model of service quality clearly apply in higher education. Donaldson and Runciman's (1995) research highlighted the applicability of gaps 2 and 3; management perceptions and service quality specifications, and service quality specifications and service delivery. The importance of high quality service delivery from lecturers is a key finding of this study. The factors highlighted by Parasuraman *et al.,* (1985) and Zeithaml *et al.,* (1993) affecting service expectations are very consistent with the findings of this study. Personal needs, past experiences and service philosophy all influenced students' expectations. Word-of-mouth communications also had an effect in the sense that students commented on the fact that feedback given by students on more advanced courses did influence their expectations for the following year and certain lecturers commented to students that the material would develop in the subsequent year. This type of word-of-mouth communication is subsumed in the course experience which feeds into past experiences in figure 6.5. The five dimensions of service quality offered by Parasuraman *et al.,* (1988) lack the necessary specificity for the educational context. Whilst examples illustrating the importance of reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy can be found, the dimensions offered in the teaching and learning literature are most similar to the important dimensions identified in this study. In reviewing Marsh and Roche's SEEQ and Ramsden's CEQ, the nine dimensions of teaching and learning quality identified by Entwistle and Tait (1990) and illustrated on page 63 of this dissertation, are extremely close to the important dimensions of service quality identified by the informants in this study. The dimension of personal time identified is not directly highlighted in Entwistle and Tait's (1990) dimensions but ensuring an appropriate quantity of workload is related to this dimension. The total student experience studies expand on teaching and learning dimensions to include other factors including many support services. This study indicates these are not important dimensions of service quality for postgraduate part-time students. However, those additional factors of financial circumstances and social life related to service outcomes included on the Mazelan *et al.,* (1992) survey do appear to be relevant. The process of teaching and learning is central to part-time students' evaluation of service quality. However the teaching and learning literature can be criticised for its lack of inclusion of teaching and learning outcome dimensions. Buttle (1996) makes a similar criticism of the SERVQUAL questionnaire for predominantly measuring the process of delivery and not the outcomes of the service. Ward's (1996) conclusion that her research findings suggest that there are other things besides service quality which impact on the overall student experience can perhaps be explained by the fact that the research instrument used, SERVQUAL, does not measure outcome quality. Despite negative scores across all five dimensions over 86% of the respondents, undergraduate students at Nottingham Business School, rated their student experience as good or excellent. This may be due to positive outcomes of the experience.

The findings in chapter 6 do not confirm Parasuraman *et al.,* (1988), Teas (1993) or Cronin and Taylor's (1992) definitions of service quality. Parasuraman *et al.,* (1988) suggest it stems from a comparison of expectations with performance perceptions (disconfirmation), while Teas (1993) argues that it is derived from a comparison of performance with ideal standards and Cronin and Taylor (1992) believe it stems from perceptions of performance alone. This study proposes that educational service quality stems from perceptions of process quality plus perceptions of service value (outcome quality). Expectations are expressed as desired service (Zeithaml *et al.,* 1993) prior to any course experience.

Subsequently expectations are influenced by past educational experiences and it is proposed that these have a mediating influence on service value perceptions.

### 6.6 Summary

In summary, the proposed student-centred model of service quality and service evaluation contains aspects of both the service quality and educational quality literatures. Service expectations and service outcomes have a basis in the service quality literature but the dimensions of these concepts have been developed directly from the students' experience at Nottingham Business School and thus adapted for the higher education context. Student learning literature is closest to the dimensions of process quality proposed. However the results of this study suggest that the importance of student-to-student interaction is underplayed in this literature. In addition both the service quality and educational quality literatures appear to underplay the importance of service outcomes, referred to as service value in figure 6.5. The dimensions of the service value offered (the qualification, application at work, learning, expanded social network and personal change) represent an original and context specific contribution to the literature. The model of service quality proposed is also unique and attempts to rise to Rowley's (1996a) challenge to go someway to integrate the literatures of service quality and educational quality.

The next and final chapter of this dissertation draws conclusions in relation to the original objectives of this study and offers recommendations both for practice and further research.

# CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"The two distinct literatures, those of educational quality and those of service quality, each have some insights to contribute, but each has its own inherent debates. Exploring and integrating these issues for application in the measurement of educational quality is a considerable challenge". (Rowley, 1996, p.237)

## 7.1 Introduction

This study began with five clearly defined aims as detailed on page 12 in chapter 1. Whilst aspects of the first four aims have been considered in the previous chapter, this chapter seeks to provide conclusions in relation to these research questions. Also, as a result of the insights generated by the literature review and research, to make recommendations for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

## 7.2 Important Aspects in the Students' Evaluation of Service Quality

The first aim of this research was to understand what aspects of the Higher Education experience are important to postgraduate part-time students' evaluation of service quality. It is proposed that postgraduate part-time students evaluate service quality based on their overall perception of quality of the service process and the value of the service experience. Important aspects of process quality include lecturers, module content, assignments, organisation of the course, student-to-student interaction and personal time invested in the course. To ensure that students' evaluation of the service provided is as high as possible within resource constraints, lecturers and student-to-student interaction should be prioritised for attention. These aspects are likely to generate the most significant differences in quality ratings. This assertion is based on the quantity and quality of unprompted and prompted discussion of these aspects by the informants. Lecturers also directly affect the content of modules and the assignment set, other important determinants of service quality ratings. A number of characteristics of lecturers who are judged to offer a high quality service have been highlighted, the most important of which is their ability to present new and innovative ideas and challenge students' current thinking.

Encouraging positive student-to-student interaction through formal group work, discussions and activities and informal social interaction is also likely to improve quality ratings.

The most important aspects of module content are that it is relevant to the student's work and offers the student an opportunity to progress their learning in the area. The Course Leader could ensure that each Module Leader is given a profile of all the students on the course to include the student's most recent educational experience and the company and sector in which they work. The module guides should be reasonably consistent in layout and approach, updated on an annual basis and used by the Module Leader. Where more than one lecturer deliveres the module, module team meetings need to take place to ensure consistency in the use of supporting module documentation.

Each assignment, wherever possible, should be marked by one lecturer based on clear and explicit marking criteria and they should provide clear feedback and apply course assessment regulations fairly and consistently. Typed, rather than hand-written, feedback should also be standard practice. The Storyboard brief should be made clearer. A possible improvement would be to rename this as a 'Reflection on Outcomes Record'.

Course organisation in relation to class size and room booking needs to ensure that interaction is not detrimentally affected. In relation to personal time it is important to make part-time students aware of the realistic time commitment required prior to starting the course and to ensure that course demands are reasonable in relation to assignment scheduling and workload. Overall it is proposed that the greater the number of satisfying service experiences compared to dissatisfying service experiences the higher the evaluation of process quality.

These aspects highlighted, directly affect the value derived by students from the service experience. Service value is evaluated in relation to the results and qualification achieved, the amount of learning achieved, how much of this learning can be applied at the student's place of work, the degree to which the student has expanded their social network and the amount of personal change experienced. It is difficult to place these aspects of service value in any order of priority because different students value different aspects more highly than others. However from the findings it is possible to propose that the value of these five aspects is affected by the course process itself and also the time invested by the student, their job situation and degree of financial investment and their pre-course service expectations. The first aspect, the course process, is the main aspect that can be influenced by members of staff at Nottingham Business School and should therefore be the priority for attention in relation to quality assurance processes.

### 7.3 Service Expectations and Change over Time

Aims two and three of this research were to consider the role played by expectations in service quality evaluation and to consider if the longitudinal nature of the higher education experience affected expectations and service quality evaluation. In the service quality literature, the most widely applied definition of service quality is how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations (Parasuraman *et al.,*1985, 1988). The areas of disagreement and debate regarding this definition and the role of expectations have been outlined in chapter two. This study also suggests that the expectations-perceptions model of service quality is not appropriate in the higher education context.

The findings of this study support a number of propositions. Firstly it is proposed that expectations are initially very poorly formed in relation to process aspects prior to the course experience itself. Initial expectations relate predominantly to desired outcomes of the experience in relation to the development of management skills, the qualification, gaining experience of other sectors and people and developing new knowledge. This leads to the second proposition that expected outcomes in these areas are compared to actual outcomes and this comparison affects students' evaluation of the service value derived from the experience.

A third proposition is that expectations do change over the period of study. The process quality experienced and service value experienced in each year form the basis of the students' past educational experience, which in turn influences expectations for the subsequent year. Whilst the level of expectation changes according to prior experience, the five aspects of service expectations are stable over time. This leads to the conclusion that the student's experience of the learning process is dynamic and changes according to what happens each year. Therefore the service provided in subsequent years needs to be at least as good as the previous year in the important areas identified and the value derived from the experience needs to increase from the previous year. It is therefore important that at least one member of staff has responsibility for ensuring the three individual courses are linked, progress from each other and offer a suitably challenging learning experience for each student within an environment of positive social interaction.

In addition, the proposed service quality evaluation process illustrated in figure 6.6, does not change over time. Students evaluate the Certificate in Management course in the same way that they evaluate the Diploma in Management Studies and the Master of Business Administration courses. The longitudinal nature of the educational service results in evaluations based not on critical incidents or specific service encounters but on service experiences which take place over a period of time. It is proposed that overall process quality is based on an averaging of satisfying and dissatisfying service experiences. Overall process quality plus service value forms the basis of students' service quality evaluation.

These conclusions in relation to the first three aims of the research feed directly into aim four, the proposed student-centred models of the service quality experience and evaluation process illustrated in figure 6.5 and figure 6.6 in the previous chapter. These models represent an original perspective on service quality in the Higher Education context. The final aim of this research is to provide recommendations for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School.

### 7.4 Recommendations for Improving Service Quality

Quality improvement has to be an on-going strategic priority for Nottingham Business School driven by an increasingly demanding student population, greater competition and external quality assessment. Maintaining the excellence rating is vital if the school does not want to lose this point of competitive differentiation and become one of many business schools fighting to recruit postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Context in any qualitative study is very important. As such, recommendations are presented in two parts. Firstly important principles are outlined that should guide future quality improvement initiatives. These principles are derived from a consideration of the changing context of quality assurance in Higher Education outlined in chapter three. Secondly, processes are recommended for improving the quality of the student experience at Nottingham Business School. These are consistent with the principles outlined and are based on the findings considered in the previous chapter.

### 7.4.1 Principles to guide quality improvement at Nottingham Business School

Consideration of the distinctive characteristics of the higher education context are important when establishing principles to guide quality improvement (Middlehurst 1992, Colling and Harvey 1995, Rowley 1997, Michael, Sower and Motwani 1997, Jackson 1998a and b, Partington 1999). Multiple stakeholders mean that in addition to the needs of students, both the needs of staff and the Quality Assurance Agency should be satisfied by the principles adopted. Multiple stakeholders results in certain barriers to quality improvement in higher education including the different conceptions of quality (Harvey and Green 1993, Melrose 1998) and associated difficulty in achieving consensus in defining what it is, how to improve it, where the judgement of quality should rest, what kind of judgements should be involved and whose perspective should take priority. An additional significant barrier to quality improvement in higher education is the prevailing culture of individual autonomy for academic staff. This can result in lecturers rarely talking to each other in detail about their teaching and learning practice, very little monitoring of the teaching process or acknowledgement and reward for excellent service delivery. The findings of this research clearly highlight the effect that the minority of lecturers who provide a poor service have on service quality ratings. Encouraging change towards greater accountability, more collective responsibility for professional action and service orientation is likely to be a difficult and long-term task even in times of high support (Zeithaml *et al.,* 1990, Colling and Harvey 1995). Against the conditions of constraint and declining resources identified in chapter three, staff attitudes are likely to be even more against initiatives which require additional effort. The distinctive characteristics of the education process including exclusivity of access, the student as an agent in the service process and the longitudinal nature of the experience (Rowley 1997) are also important considerations in any quality improvement recommendations. Given this context the author recommends that any quality improvement process at Nottingham Business School is consistent with the following equally important principles:

1. Accountability
2. Quality Enhancement
3. Practicality
4. Degree of Autonomy
5. Relevance
6. Market Orientation

Accountability requires that the Business School is open to both external and internal scrutiny and that the outcomes are published. This is a clear requirement of the Quality Assurance Agency but should also be a feature of internal peer review and student review. Quality initiatives should have transparent aims, objectives and implications and responsibilities of the various stakeholders need to be unambiguous.

Quality Enhancement requires that any process should generate quality improvement. Fulfilling the requirements of external scrutiny should not be seen as sufficient in itself as a means of improving quality. Criticism of university quality assurance to date (Colling and Harvey 1995, Harvey 1998, Partington 1999) suggests that there is too much emphasis on generating volumes of paper for retrospective reporting. This detracts from normal working practices and reduces the commitment, enthusiasm and motivation of many staff. The focus should be on quality improvement in the future.

Practicality requires that the demands of the different processes do not put an overburdening load on managers and service providers. It is important that the demands of one process do not duplicate those of another. The costs should not outweigh the benefits. Reporting should be on an exception basis highlighting excellent and poor quality only, thereby reducing the demands for paperwork and highlighting critical issues.

Due to the prevailing culture of autonomy in higher education, it is important, if the processes are to be meaningful, that some degree of autonomy for lecturers be included. The need to debate and agree processes and generate a sense of individual and team ownership for enhancing the quality of the student experience is vital.

Linked to the previous principle, the processes adopted need to be relevant to staff, students and external assessment bodies. Quality improvement should have clearly identified and understood pay-offs. Staff should see improved quality as beneficial to their working lives as well as the service they provide. Benefits could include the stimulation and enjoyment of working with colleagues, the satisfaction of positive feedback from peers, managers and students, improved profile, position and pay.

Market orientation requires a focus on customer needs, inter-functional co-ordination and profitability (Kohli and Jarworski 1990, Narver and Slater, 1990). The importance of the people directly involved, students and staff, matter most together with the resource situation of the Business School. The principles of developing a greater market orientation in education share many similarities with the principles of total quality management and service quality enhancement (Payne 1988, Zeithaml and Bitner 1996, Michael, Sower and Motwani 1997, Gilmore 1997). These include regularly researching current levels of performance, senior management commitment and standard setting, appointing a champion to drive through initiatives, encouraging team work and relationship building, conducting a management and employee development needs analysis, designing a training and development programme, ensuring regular communication, recognition and reward. As Gilmore (1997) states,

*'There are many reasons why effective implementation of service marketing plans fail to happen...This is often inevitable if management simply assumes that the plans will be implemented without taking account of how they will be executed, who will take responsibility for the operational aspects of the plan and what resources are required.' (Gilmore, 1997, p.185)*

Gilmore highlights four quality improvement implementation problems; separation of strategic and operational planning, poor communication, incrementalism and resistance to change with a tendency to adhere to past practices rather than adopt new ones. Consistent with this study, Gilmore (1997) recommends considering the, 'pre-purchase, the during-purchase and the post-purchase experience of each customer' (p.186), a focus on participation and ownership of all levels of staff involved in service delivery and intangible aspects of service delivery including time given to customers, manager-staff-customer interactions and proactive communications in order to improve service quality.

Based on the principles outlined and the findings of the empirical research the following recommendations are made for improving service quality at Nottingham Business School.

### 7.4.2 Processes to improve service quality at Nottingham Business School

Improving the service quality culture at Nottingham Business School requires a number of linked activities from people at different levels in the school. Some of the following recommended activities are already in place however their effectiveness should be considered on an on-going basis.

Senior management, including the Dean, Heads of Department and a Quality Improvement Manager, need to lead the process through communicating and demonstrating their commitment. A mission statement and strategic plan for improving quality is required which includes service delivery standards based on a clear understanding of student expectations and perceptions of the quality of provision (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988, Zeithaml *et al.,*1990). This requires a consistent approach to gathering student feedback on an annual basis, the dissemination of this feedback and any action taken in response to this market research information. A suggested format for this student research is suggested later in the chapter.

A commitment to the necessary resources for far more effective appraisal and training related to teaching quality is important (Ramsden 1991, Marsh and Roche 1993). Staff should be able to demonstrate excellence in teaching quality through peer and student review processes discussed at the annual appraisal. In addition, the appraisal process should be linked to support activities co-ordinated by the Quality Improvement Manager. Many of the necessary support activities are already available and include peer review of teaching, teaching enhancement courses, a Postgraduate Good Practice annual publication, a Learning and Teaching annual conference and central budget allocated to release staff to work on educational development projects.

Quality processes should also be improved at the Course Leader and Module Leader level. Course teams responsible for the delivery of postgraduate programmes do not always behave as teams. An agreed process for reporting and meeting should be agreed at course level and co-ordinated by the Course Leader. A degree of autonomy is required, however a suggested process is offered in tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 centred around three key recommended quality improvement reports. Table 7.1 contains a recommended process for considering the quality of the student experience at course level each year.

**Table 7.1 Course Leader Quality Improvement Report Proces**

| ACTION | REQUIRED BY | RESPONSIBILITY | NOTES |
|---|---|---|---|
| Book Course Committee meeting | Middle of November | Administrator | agenda to include review of Course Report |
| Collect Quality Improvement Session minutes | End September | Administrator | Pass on to Course Leader for appending to Course Report |
| Prepare Course Statistics | End September | Administrator | pass on to Course Leader for inclusion in Course Report |
| Collect External Examiners Report | End September | Administrator | pass on to Course Leader for appending to Course Report |
| Collate Module Leaders' Quality Improvement Reports | End September | Course Leader | Append to Course Report. Keep note of any actions taken at time of feedback |
| Collect Summary End of Course Student Quality Improvement Report | End September | Administrator | Pass on to Course Leader for appending to Course Report |
| Prepare draft of Course Quality Improvement Report | Date of Course Committee | Course Leader | additions/amendments to be agreed at Course Committee |
| Produce final Course Leader Quality Improvement Report | End December | Course Leader | Pass to Head of Postgraduate Programmes to incorporate into Annual Report |
| Use as basis for Course Team Event | Before start of next course | Course Leader | Copy to Course Team |
| Place hard copy in Course Box | End December | Course Leader/ Administrator | copy to be saved as html file for viewing on Intranet |

It is recommended that the traditional Course Report is enhanced by a change in name to Course Leader Quality Improvement Report which should bring with it an associated change in emphasis. In order to link clearly to the external quality assessment process, the structure of the report should follow the assessment categories outlined by the QAA (2000b). Appendix 7.1 contains a suggested guideline document for Course Leaders when preparing their Course Leader Quality Improvement Report. In order to encourage greater teamwork and discussion, Module Leader Quality Improvement Reports should be written and appended to this report. The final report can then be used to form the basis of discussion for an annual team event focused on quality improvement. Through having a central Course Box and Intranet site dedicated to quality issues, access of information for all stakeholders will be enhanced. On paper this process could be criticised for appearing somewhat bureaucratic and sterile. To minimise this, by drawing on the principles already outlined, the report should be focused on quality improvement, be written on an exception basis highlighting excellent and poor quality and used as a living document to form the basis of research for the annual course team event prior to the commencement of the next course. The debate around cases of excellent and poor quality needs to focus on the pay-offs highlighted earlier and feed into a course action plan that is owned by the course team. The importance of the selection, training and motivation of each Course Leader, with the support of Senior Management, is vital for this process to reap results.

Module Leader Quality Improvement Reports feed into this process and allow for reflection and improvement of quality at the module level which has direct relevance to students as highlighted strongly in the findings of this study. Suggestions for the format of this report are illustrated in appendix 7.2. Again the suggested content of the report directly links into the QAA assessment process, is informed by student feedback, and the insights and actions for quality improvement suggested are taken directly from the findings of this research. A recommended process for compiling this report is provided in table 7.2. A two-side summary of all student feedback for

**Table 7.2 Module Leader Quality Improvement Report Process**

| ACTION | RESPONSIBILITY | NOTES |
|---|---|---|
| When all/most assignments received, send to Module Leader together with module report form and student quality improvement report summary | Administrator | |
| After assignments are marked, prepare module report and pass back to administrator along with marked assignments. | Module Leader | if module report not received, Administrator to inform Course Leader |
| Retain copy to attach to annual appraisal documentation for discussion with Head of Department | Module Leader | |
| Place hard copy in Module Box | Module Leader | copy to be saved as html file for viewing on Intranet |
| Send to Course Leader | Administrator | |
| Course Leader to read, action if necessary, retain and append to Course Report | Course Leader | |

the module should be produced by the Course Administrator when the student feedback forms are received with module assignments. This adds to the Administrator's workload so it is vitally important that they are included in the course team process and duly rewarded for the part they play in quality improvement. The Module Leader should complete the module report once they have marked the assignments and therefore have an understanding of the learning outcomes achieved by the students. It is important that this process is not regarded as just another administrative job on top of a busy schedule. The link to the Course Report and team event should make the report more relevant together with the opportunity to use the report and student feedback as a basis for recognition and reward during the appraisal process and the Postgraduate Good Practice annual publication. Equally the principle of accountability requires that the Module Leader, Course Leader and Head of Department takes actions where student feedback highlights less than satisfactory service quality performance. Tackling poor quality service delivery is an area of weakness at Nottingham Business School which arises partly from the culture of lecturer autonomy discussed earlier and a lack of performance management linked to student feedback during the appraisal process. As such the reports should be used by the Module Leader's Head of Department in the appraisal process to highlight training and development needs in this area.

Student feedback is the foundation of a market orientated quality process therefore three forms of feedback are recommended; Student Quality Improvement Reports, End of Course Quality Improvement Reports and face-to-face qualitative feedback at a Course Committee Meeting. Appendix 7.3 and 7.4 provide a suggested format for the feedback reports. As can be seen, the findings of this research have directly informed the design of these reports. Student feedback should be gathered after each module on the five important aspects of the lecturer, module content, assignment, organisation and student-to-student interaction. Due to the importance of assignment feedback and service value in students' evaluation of service quality, annual research is needed after the course has finished. The End of Course Report in appendix 7.4 has been designed to assess the quality of feedback provided, the student's overall view of process quality and service value in the areas of the qualification, learning, application at work, expanded social network and personal change experienced. It finally asks the student to highlight the best and worst aspect of quality of the experience for them which will be useful in highlighting exceptional issues for the Course Report. Table 7.3 documents the process for managing Student Quality Improvement Reports and End of Course Reports.

**Table 7.3 Student Quality Improvement Report Process**

| ACTION | RESPONSIBILITY | NOTES |
|---|---|---|
| On Launch Day, distribute Student Quality Improvement Reports with assignment submission sheets | Course Leader/ Administrator | Emphasise value of students feedback |
| On completion of assignment complete Student Quality Improvement Report and assignment submission sheets | Student | |
| Hand-in or post completed assignment, Student Quality Improvement Report and assignment submission sheets to Postgraduate Course Administrator | Student | |
| Prepare summary of student quality improvement reports | Administrator | If assignment posted without report, ask student to complete form. |
| When all/most assignments received, send to Module Leader together with module report form and student quality improvement report summary | Administrator | Assignments only accepted from students with the student quality improvement report |
| Send summary of student quality improvement reports to Course Leader | Administrator | |
| Distribute End of Course Quality Improvement Report | Course Leader/ Administrator | Prepare summary and append to Course Report |
| Place hard copy of summary and students' original reports in module and course box | Administrator | |

To ensure that student feedback is received the Course Leader needs to emphasise at the beginning of the course that student feedback is valued and relevant to improving their experience. To avoid students being worried about the possible effects of their feedback on assignment grades, rather than handing feedback to the Module Leader it should be handed to the Course Administrator at the time of assignment submission. The Course Administrator should then provide a summary of all the student responses on one master report which can be sent to the Module Leader together with the Module Report Form and to the Course Leader for information.

A hard copy of the summary and students' original reports should be retained in the appropriate module box. The third type of student feedback should be face-to-face and qualitative in the form of a revised Course Committee Meeting. Rather than Course Representatives attending a somewhat formal and academic meeting the functions of the Course Committee can be achieved at a Quality Improvement Session run by the Course Leader and Administrator in the middle of the course. This should be scheduled into one of the 3 hour slots and employ nominal group techniques or other relevant qualitative methods to gather student feedback on high quality and low quality aspects of the course experience. A formal record of the feedback needs to be recorded for inclusion in the Course Quality Improvement Report.

It is also important that students are encouraged to take some responsibility for the quality of their service experience. Two areas are likely to be particularly effective in this regard; influencing student expectations and managing student-to-student interaction. Firstly, the Course Leader needs to influence student expectations through external communications and the open day before the beginning of the course. All communications need to present a realistic view of the level of service quality the student should expect together with establishing the principle that the service experience is a joint responsibility. Inviting current part-time students to present to prospective students will help set realistic expectations, especially in relation to time management issues which were highlighted as important in this research. Service promises prior to the course need to be communicated to lecturers and administrators who serve the students. The concept of joint responsibility can be further developed via the formation of Learning Sets where students can be encouraged to support each other. Group membership should be selected by the students themselves some time into the course once they have had sufficient time to identify those fellow students with whom they feel most compatible. There should also be the opportunity to feedback on the learning set experience and change groups if students turn out to be incompatible with each other. Students can be encouraged to participate in quality improvement by providing feedback on their requirements and experience through the student feedback mechanisms proposed and also by offering mutual support to other students. In addition, the physical environment needs to facilitate positive student-to-student interaction so class and room size should be compatible with syndicate rooms made available for smaller group work. Organising social events where staff and students can interact on a more informal basis is also important to gether with encouraging the students to organise such events themselves.

In summary, both longer-term strategic and more operational recommendations have been made which should improve service quality at Nottingham Business School. In making these recommendations, potential implementation barriers have been considered. In the final analysis, the principles and processes of quality assurance recommended only make sense in the context of higher education if the link to continuous improvement is clear. As with any case for quality improvement it is the people directly involved that matter most and for students that means the lecturer delivering the module. The purpose therefore of any quality process, in the final analysis, is to encourage and motivate staff and students to take ownership and responsibility for the quality of the service experience.

### 7.5 Limitations of the Study

To reiterate, the study has its limitations which include its narrow focus on one stakeholder in HE - the student. Additional stakeholders including staff and managers in Higher Education, Funding Bodies and Employers could have been interviewed to provide alternative perspectives on the issue of service quality. The study also only considers postgraduate, part-time student perspectives and not undergraduate or full time student experiences. It is possible that the time pressure imposed by part-time study has an effect on the factors deemed important by students. In addition, undergraduate students who are usually younger and not in permanent employment may also have an alternative perspective on the higher education experience. The fact that this research is longitudinal means that it suffers from the inevitable fall-out of informants as the study progresses. This has resulted in only two students progressing onto the third year of study. Finally the data gathered and the discussion of this data has been restricted, to an extent, by the nature and scope of the requirements for an MPhil rather than a PhD. It would be possible to take a number of the insights generated from this research further and this is the topic of the final section of this chapter.

### 7.6 Suggestions for Further Research

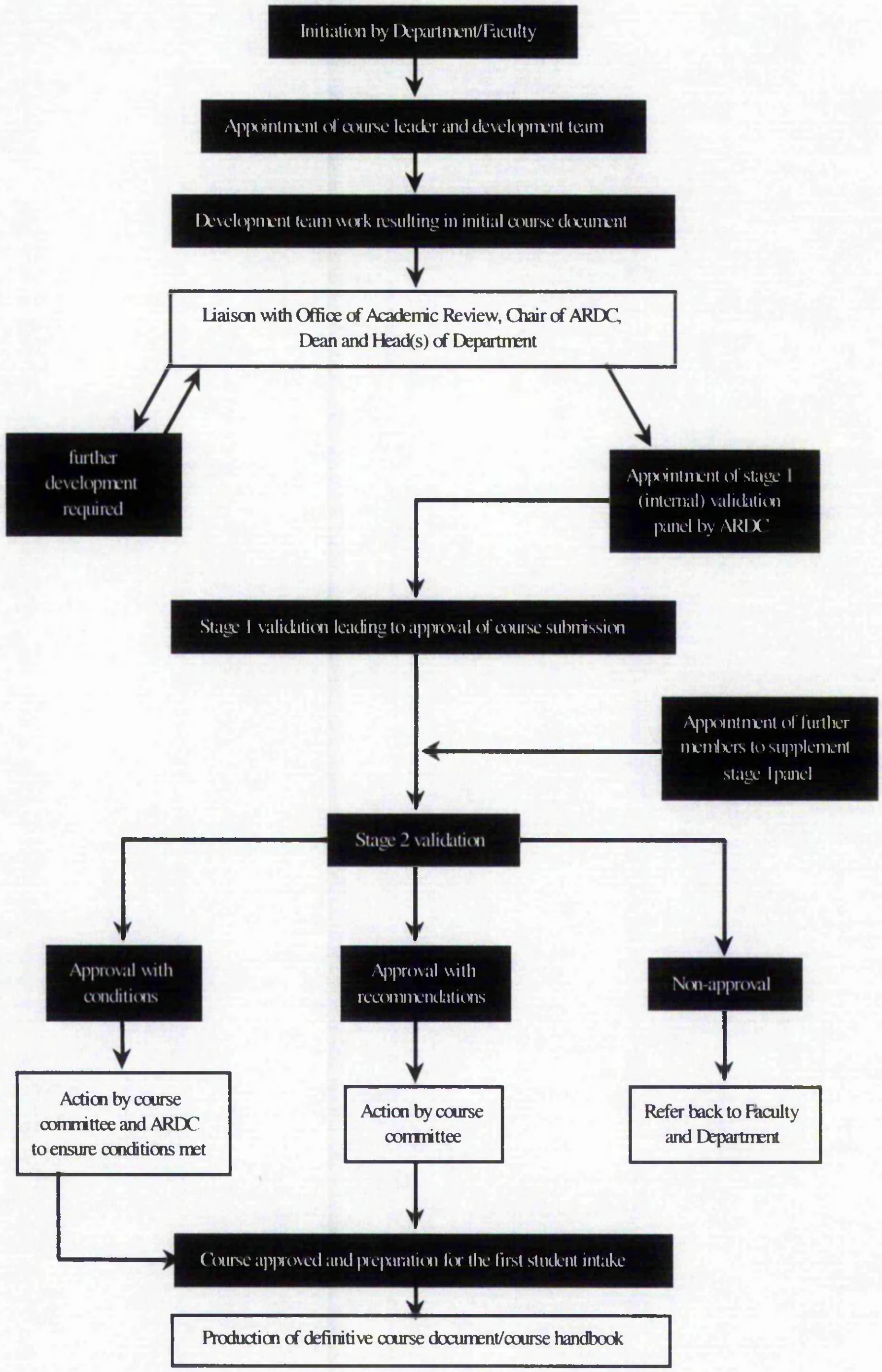
In arriving at the final section of this dissertation an important consideration is what are the questions that remain unanswered? In a sense this also represents, in part, a critical appraisal of the research undertaken As such further research is required to consider the perspectives of other stakeholders in Higher Education, in particular, the experience of lecturers in relation to delivering service quality has been highlighted as a vital aspect in achieving a high quality service. Given the significant influence of the few lecturers who can really challenge the way students think, additional qualitative research which provides a deeper and richer picture of what these lecturers actually do would be valuable research. A replication of this study on other postgraduate course at Nottingham Business School and other business schools would facilitate reflection on the general usefulness of the service quality model proposed. Consideration of whether the dimensions highlighted are important to full time students and undergraduate students would also be another avenue of further research. The importance of student-to-student interaction and the time invested by students themselves were particularly important aspects of process quality highlighted in this study and areas where little research has been conducted to date. Equally research is needed to extend our understanding of the importance of service value in service quality evaluation and the area of personal change seems a particularly important and rich area for further research.

The longitudinal, qualitative design that forms the basis of this research has allowed the author to get close to the post-graduate student experience at Nottingham Business School. However this did suspend other concerns and resulted in three years of data gathering which has extended the process of research submission. In addition, the time commitment involved in data gathering for the many interview transcripts makes maintaining interest and motivation and managing the data analysis process a challenge. Adopting a quantitative, cross-sectional research design for future research holds many advantages, certainly in terms of time commitment.

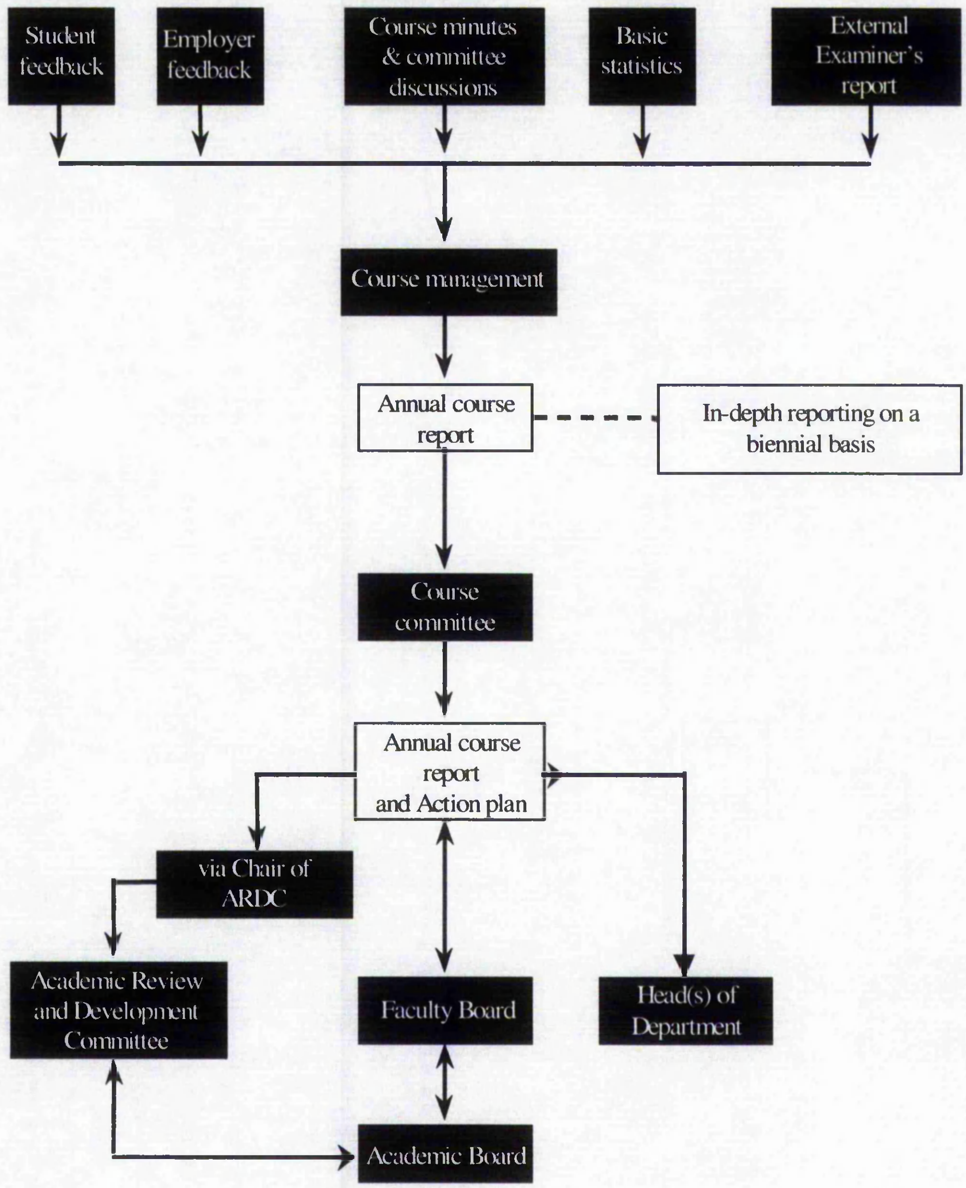
That stated, through combining reflections on the analysis with ideas and theories developed in the two distinct literatures of service quality and educational quality, a new context specific service quality model has been proposed in this dissertation. The research design has enabled the researcher to contribute an original perspective by approaching the subject of service quality in Higher Education from a marketing perspective, which is lacking in the mainstream educational quality literature and from a longitudinal, qualitative perspective, which is under-represented in the marketing literature. In these two senses this research can be seen to contribute to the body of knowledge in these two fields. The quality and value of this contribution is left for others to judge.

## LIST OF APPENDICES

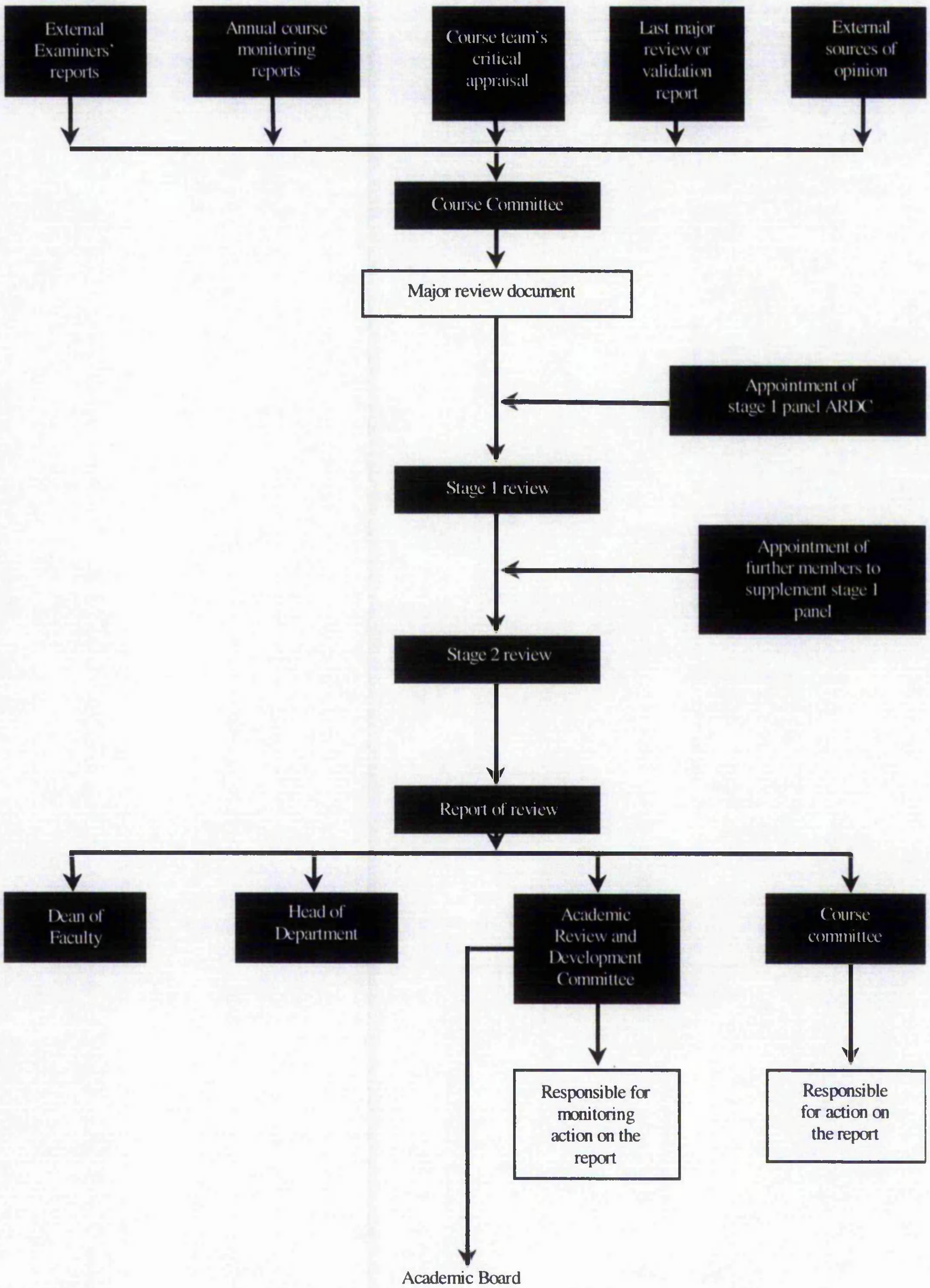
## Appendix 3.1: TNTU process for validation and approval of a new course



**Appendix 3.2: TNTU process for course evaluation and monitoring**



## Appendix 3. 3: TNTU process for review of an existing course



**Appendix 3.4**

**THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY**

**Assessment of the Quality of Education in Business and Management Studies: July 1993 Claim for Excellence**

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## Introduction

The Nottingham Trent University has the fifteenth largest number of students enroled on HEFCE courses in ASC 7. Together these courses compose a balanced portfolio which offers potential students a coherent range of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional qualifications delivered in modes of study designed to suit the different requirements of the University's different clients - students and employers. The portfolio gives students the opportunity of progressing from one award to another: all undergraduate and postgraduate courses offer staged awards; many articulate within one another to facilitate flexibility across the curriculum.

All the University's courses in ASC 7 carried an "outstanding quality" flag throughout the period of assessment undertaken by HMI for PCFC.

This claim for excellence is based on evidence of continuing improvements achieved by the University in the period since the last HMI Visit in 1991.

The University welcomes an HEFCE Assessment Visit in order to share with HEFCE how excellence can be achieved in the design, delivery and assessment of Business and Management Studies.

Claim for excellence

The claim for excellence is based on the following observations and evidence.

<u>Context: Business management</u>

1. The design, delivery and assessment of Business and Management Studies at Nottingham Trent University is informed by advances and best practice in management and education.

2. To reflect best management practice, the University has adopted a devolved management model whereby academic and managerial decisions are devolved to faculties and other responsibility centres in accordance with the University's policies and procedures. The faculty which is responsible for the majority of the provision in business and management studies is Nottingham Business School (NBS).

3. Consistent with the integrating cross-functional approach being adopted by many businesses, NBS has adopted an integrated approach to the provision of ASC 7. In organisational terms, the School has chosen to manage business and management studies through a matrix structure where *Heads of Department* are accountable for the quality of modules on the School's courses, and associated staff and subject development, and *Programme Managers* are accountable for the quality of the learning

experience associated with approved course routes and programmes. The four Heads of Department and the two Programme Managers are accountable to the Dean.

4. This integrated holistic approach means that:

- effectively only one faculty (Nottingham Business School) is accountable for the design, delivery and assessment of modules, courses and programmes contained in ASC 7;

- the faculty itself (Nottingham Business School) operates as an integrated entity where corporate or school-wide objectives, policies and processes take precedence over departmental or individual course ones;

- the School's structure and conduct are consonant with the structure and processes which are to be found among the School's business clients.

Context: educational developments

5. To reflect the twin objectives of accessibility and flexibility, virtually all courses are based on a route-modular system which gives students the possibility of module choice and course identity. This design feature has the advantage of giving students choice, without causing alienation. A route-modular system also gives course designers improved flexibility to offer new modules and describe new routes which better reflect the needs of employers and the market.

6. All first degree and postgraduate courses continue to value and adopt modules or projects which require students to integrate their knowledge, learning and experience.

7. Nottingham Business School has an established, coherent and embracing educational philosophy which requires students to confront theories, models, concepts and experiences which are intellectually challenging, and to develop attitudes, behaviours, skills and competences which are vocationally relevant to business and management.

Excellence...

8. Quality is the first priority of the Business School, and continues to be pursued and achieved through the continuous improvement culture which the School espouses and practices in its day-to-day activities.

9. The culture and systems adopted by the School and the University also celebrate and encourage other sources of excellence. For example, the School is regarded as one of the most Innovative in the England and Wales. In the undergraduate curriculum, the School has developed an innovative route-modular degree programme; in the postgraduate curriculum it was one of the first to validate and implement the three-tier hierarchy of management awards leading to the MBA. It was one of the first to offer a European Business Degree.

10. The School has enduring partnerships with commercial clients including Bass, BP, CCN Systems, and TSB. These partnerships include the delivery of in-company programmes leading to the awards of the Certificate in Management and DMS.

<u>Core values... including pluralism</u>

11. The strategic intent of the University is for NBS to be a leading international business school. This is being achieved by recognising and building on existing values and strengths, including the School's extensive work in Europe.

12. The School will exploit its core values of access, innovation, flexibility, partnership and continuous improvement. It will continue and extend its partnerships and joint ventures with education, industry, commerce and the professions to develop and achieve this vision.

13. In the short-term the overall balance and shape of the School will not change. The School's commitment to part-time education and to the admission of large numbers of undergraduate students has and will survive changes in funding policy (eg. reduced funding for Band 1 fees). However, the School does not expect to grow significantly: in general it aims to stay within HEFCE contract numbers, and thereby sustain the unit of resource and the quality of the learning for future students.

**Conclusion**

14. The claim for excellence is based on a systematic, coherent and behavioural approach to the quality of education in business and management studies at Nottingham Trent University.

15. The approach permeates all aspects of the School's work. The approach affects the quantity and quality of resources supporting the provision of education, and most importantly, affects the very attitudes, behaviours and performance of staff and students who develop, deliver and experience excellence in business and management studies at The Nottingham Trent University.

**Appendix 5.1 Interview 1: Expectations**

**<u>RESEARCH INTO SERVICE QUALITY AT</u>**
**<u>NOTTINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL</u>**

Dear

As part of a personal research project, which I hope will contribute to better service between the Business School and its students (i.e. you!), I am asking a number of our new students if they would be prepared to take part.

The project will span 3 years, 1993-1996, and I will be looking at students' expectations and actual experiences of studying at Nottingham Business School on the Integrated Management Development Programme.

If, *as I hope,* you would like to take part I will need to agree with you a time and date for the first interview, I would like to visit you for half an hour to an hour at your home, or somewhere convenient to you, in September. After this, one interview will take place in the Business School before the end of the first semester and then one at the end of each year of the course.

Please return the reply slip below, by return post if possible, in the envelope provided. If you do decide to take part I will then telephone you to organise the first interview.

Thank you, and welcome to the Business School!

Yours Sincerely,

Debbie Clewes
Marketing Lecturer
Nottingham Business School

---

Name:

Address:

Please delete and complete as appropriate:

*I would like/am not able to take part in this research.*

Contact telephone no.:
Best time to ring:

# SERVICE QUALITY IN H.E.
# INTERVIEW 1: EXPECTATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

Thanks for agreeing to take part. My background.

The research is looking at what factors are important to students in terms of having a satisfying, high quality experience.

5 interviews in total over 3 years. In no way are they related to your assessment/success on the course, this research is completely separate and at no point will your surname be used in the reporting of this research.

This should be about 40 minutes, 30 minutes for the interview, 10 minutes for 1 form I would like you to fill in at the end. I would like to tape record it, but I will turn it off at any point.

What is really important is that you know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, that it is your own views and ideas that I am really interested in.

If you want to stop me and ask any questions please do so.

Be as open as you feel comfortable to be, the more detail the better.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we begin this first interview?

## UNSTRUCTURED - OPEN QUESTION ON EXPECTATIONS

Often researchers introduce ideas by a questionnaire and so suggest things that are not **really important to you**. I don't want to suggest anything to you so the first question is completely open, you may want to take some time to think about it.

1. What are you expecting from NTU?

PROMPT AFTER INITIAL REPLY

1.1. Course content
1.2. Assessments/amount of work
1.3. Lecturing staff and how they will treat you
1.4. Organisation and administration
1.5. Facilities (books, computers, lecture theatres)
1.6. Other students/social life/students union

PAST EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

2. When I say, 'past educational experiences' what experience comes to mind most easily? (school, college, short course etc.)

3. Thinking back to your time there, can you tell me about:

i) any positive experiences?

ii) what was good about the institution?

4. Again thinking back to your time there, can you tell me about:

i) any negative experiences?

ii) what was bad about the institution?

5. Now thinking about NBS, what factors influenced your decision to study at NBS?

Prompts:(WOM/recommendations, external communications/price)

DEFINITIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY

6. Can you think of any service you used recently?

What level of quality was the service?
Can you tell me what factors were important in making that evaluation of service quality?

(If good quality, ask for an example of poor quality and vice versa)

7. Therefore what does QUALITY mean to you, can you define it?

8. Thinking about higher education - what does QUALITY mean in HE?

What do you think NTU is offering to give you?
In what ways is it similar to the service you just outlined
In what ways is it different to the service you just outlined
Do you see yourself as a customer of NBS or a student? Is there a difference?

PERSONAL NEEDS

9. What do you hope to get out of your time at NBS?
   Anything else?

Thanks for that, it was very interesting.

FORM TO FILL IN

Thankyou very much.  Good luck in October.  I would like to interview you next in December to find out how the first few weeks went, will that be O.K.?

## SERVICE QUALITY IN H.E.

---

**Directions**: Listed below are five features pertaining to Nottingham Business School (NBS) and the services on offer. I would like to know how important you think each of these features will be when you come to evaluate NBS's quality of service. Please allocate a total of 100 points among the five features *according to how important each feature is to you* - the more important a feature is likely to be, the more points you should allocate to it. Please ensure that the points you allocate to the five features add up to 100.

---

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | The appearance of NBS's physical facilities, equipment, personnel, rooms and prospectus etc. | ------- points |
| 2. | NBS's ability to perform promised services dependably and accurately. | ------- points |
| 3. | NBS's willingness to help students and provide services in the right place, at the right time. | ------- points |
| 4. | The knowledge and courtesy of NBS's employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. | ------- points |
| 5. | The caring, individualised attention NBS's provides its students. | ------- points |

**TOTAL points allocated** **100**

Which one feature is likely to be *most important* to you and why?

Which one feature is likely to be *least important* to you and why?

## QUALITY CRITERIA IN H.E.

**Directions:** Overall, how would you rank the importance of the 9 broad statements below in assessing the quality of a programme of study. Please rank the following list of issues in order of importance. Score the most important issue 9, the next most important 8, and so on, down to 1 for the least important.

**The programme of study**

| | |
|---|---|
| adopts a rigorous approach to the *admission* of students | |
| adopts a rigorous approach to the *induction* of students | |
| has a flexible *structure* enabling a variety of modes of study and points of entry | |
| has a coherent and up-to-date *content* | |
| is effectively *managed* and responds to student views | |
| has effective and varied *teaching* | |
| develops a wide range of *skills* in addition to providing specialist knowledge | |
| uses a range of methods of *assessment* to support student learning | |
| shows good *results* and high rates of graduate employment | |

**The institution has:**

| | |
|---|---|
| well established and effective course approval and *review procedure* | |
| a committed *academic staff* with varied opportunities for development | |
| a strong *research and consultancy* record | |
| an effective *management* working to a clear set of objectives | |
| a pleasant and supportive *general environment* | |
| an adequate level of *resourcing* across the institution | |
| adequate and accessible *student support and welfare* services | |
| a commitment to *equal opportunities and widening access* | |
| well established *collaborative links* with employers or other institutions | |

There are a number of proposed ways of thinking about quality in higher education. Please rank the following statements in the order that you think most appropriate when considering the quality of higher education. Score the most important issue 9, the next most important 8, and so on, down to 1 for the least important:

| | |
|---|---|
| Meeting the requirements of the student | |
| Enhancing the knowledge of the student | |
| Empowering students to effect changes in their education | |
| Fulfilling the stated intention (or mission) of the institution | |
| Providing mechanisms to ensure that students get what has been offered | |
| Striving for excellence in all aspects of the institution and programme of study | |
| Making efficient and cost effective use of educational resources | |
| Checking that standards have been met | |
| Providing a distinctive, special and 'high-class' education | |

**Appendix 5.2**

## SECOND INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Dear

Thanks for agreeing to this second interview:

---

To give you a little more time to think about this interview let me outline the sort of questions I'd like to ask you. If you have any other feedback please let me know at the interview. One of the areas I'd like to cover will be based on your responses on this form so **please bring this form with you to the interview.**

I propose that we begin by discussing your views and rating of 'overall service quality' and then go on to look at the specific areas we discussed in the last interview. We will then look at any suggestions you may have for improvement in each area.

I would like then to cover the issues that you have found either satisfying or dissatisfying since you've been here. It would be helpful therefore if you could note these incidents on the form below.

Finally I would like to know what your expectations are for the rest of the course and ask how and why these have changed, if at all.

Please consider and outline incidents during your studies over the past 3 months which you have found particularly **satisfying**.

- When did the incident happen?
- What happened?
- What resulted that made you feel the incident was satisfying?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Please consider and outline incidents during your studies over the past 3 months which were particularly **dissatisfying**.

- When did the incident happen?
- What happened?
- What resulted that made you feel the incident was dissatisfying?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

End of course: _______________ End of year interview contact no. ____________

## SECOND INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE OUALITY ASSESSMENT

## OVERALL SERVICE OUALITY RATING

1. What are your overall views on the quality of the service you have experienced over the last 3 months of study?

   How would you rate the quality of service experienced?

## SPECIFIC AREAS

2. ANCILLARY SERVICES

2.1. How satisfied are you with the LIBRARY facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

2.2. How satisfied are you with the COMPUTING facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

2.3. How satisfied are you with the CATERING facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

2.4. How satisfied are you with the SOCIAL (places to meet, sporting, bands, clubs, common rooms) facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

2.5. Are there any other services (accommodation, careers, chaplency) you would like to comment on?

3. THE COURSE

3.1. How satisfied are you with the INFORMATION you've been given about the course (syllabus, timetable, assessment procedures)?

Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

3.2. How satisfied are you with the CONTENT (SYLLABUS) of the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

3.3. How satisfied are you with the ASSESSMENT on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

## 4. THE STAFF

4.1. How satisfied are you with the LECTURERS on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

4.2. How satisfied are you with the LECTURING METHODS on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

4.3. How satisfied are you with the OTHER STAFF you may have come into contact with at the University?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

## 5. VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE

5.1. Is your experience so far satisfying your needs?
5.2. Is the experience valuable?
5.3. How important are your peers in this process?

## KEY VARIABLES

6. What are the key variables that determine your evaluation of the quality of the service provided at NBS.

## SATISFYING AND DISSATISFYING INCIDENTS

7. Can you run through the incidents you have outlined as particularly satisfying for me?

8. Can you run through the incidents you have outlined as particularly dissatisfying for me?

9. How important do you think specific incidents are in your overall evaluation of the quality of service offered?

## EXPECTATIONS

10. What are you expecting from the rest of your time at NBS?

11. Do you think your expectations have changed in any way from the expectations you had before starting the course? If yes, why?

## ANY OTHER FEEDBACK

12. Do you have anything else to say about your experience so far that we haven't covered?

Thanks a lot! When does your course finish this year?

Can I contact you then for an end of year interview?

**Appendix 5. 3**

## THIRD INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT AT THE END OF YEAR 1

Dear

Thanks for agreeing to this third interview on:

________________________________________________________

To give you a little more time to think about this interview let me outline the sort of questions I'd like to ask you. If you have any other feedback please let me know at the interview. One of the areas I'd like to cover will be based on your responses on this form so **please bring this form with you to the interview.**

I propose that we begin by discussing your views and rating of 'overall service quality' and then go on to look at the specific areas we discussed in the last interview.

I would then like to explore with you the idea of 'critical incidents' in service experiences - have there been any 'critical incidents' (good or bad) that stand out and have particularly affected your service quality rating? It would be helpful therefore if you could note any of these incidents on the form below.

An important aspect of this research is how your expectations and service evaluations change. Do you think your view of the service is changing? Are you looking at different things in your evaluation? Have you changed?

Finally I would like to know what your expectations are for the rest of the course and explore with you how these may have changed from one year ago.

**Please consider and outline incidents during your studies over the past 3 months which you have found particularly satisfying.**

- When did the incident happen?
- What happened?
- What resulted that made you feel the incident was satisfying?

1.

2.

3.

**Please consider and outline incidents during your studies over the past 3 months which were particularly <u>dissatisfying.</u>**

- When did the incident happen?
- What happened?
- What resulted that made you feel the incident was dissatisfying?

1.

2.

3.

Progression to next year? ______________
If no, why?

End of second year interview contact no. ___________

**As always, thankyou very much for your time and sharing your HE experience with me.**

## THIRD INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT - END OF YEAR ONE

## OVERALL SERVICE QUALITY RATING

1.1 What are your overall views on the quality of the service you have experienced over the last year of study?

1.2 How would you rate the quality of service experienced?

1.3 How satisfied are you with the service you have experienced over the last year of study?

1.4 Is there a difference for you between overall service satisfaction and service quality?

## KEY FACTORS

2. What are the key FACTORS that have influenced your evaluation of the quality of the service provided at NBS.

## SPECIFIC AREAS

### 3. ANCILLARY SERVICES

3.1. How satisfied are you with LIBRARY facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

3.2. How satisfied are you with the COMPUTING facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

3.3. How satisfied are you with the CATERING facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

3.4. How satisfied are you with the SOCIAL (places to meet, sporting, bands, clubs, common rooms) facilities?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement

3.5. Are there any other services (accommodation, careers, chaplency) you would like to comment on?

3.6 How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

## 4. THE COURSE

4.1. How satisfied are you with the INFORMATION you've been given about the course (syllabus, timetable, assessment procedures)?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

4.2. How satisfied are you with the CONTENT (SYLLABUS) of the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

4.3. How satisfied are you with the ASSESSMENT on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

4.4 How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

## 5. THE STAFF

5.1. How satisfied are you with the LECTURERS on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

5.2. How satisfied are you with the LECTURING METHODS on the course?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

5.3. How satisfied are you with the OTHER STAFF you may have come into contact with at the University?
Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

5.4 How important is this area in your overall evaluation of the service quality of this institution?

## VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE

6.1. Is your experience so far satisfying your needs?

6.2. How important are your peers in this process?

## SATISFYING AND DISSATISFYING INCIDENTS

I would like to explore with you the idea of 'critical incidents' in service experiences.

7.1 Have there been any 'critical incidents' (good or bad) that stand out and have particularly affected your service quality rating?

7.2 How important do you think specific incidents are in your overall evaluation of the quality of service offered?

7.3 Does the length of the service encounter affect the influence of critical incidents?

**CHANGE OVER TIME**

An important aspect of this research is how your expectations and service evaluations change.

8.1 Do you think your view of the service is changing?

8.2 Are you looking at different things in your evaluation now from a year ago?

8.3 Have you changed from last year?

**EXPECTATIONS**

9.1 Do you think you have different levels of expectations for different aspects of your experience this year?

9.2 Has the service experience met your expectations so far?

9.3 Do you think your expectations have affected your service quality assessment?

9.4 What are you expectations for the rest of your time at NBS?

9.5 Where do your expectations come from?

9.6 Do you think your expectations have changed in any way over your years experience?

**ANY OTHER FEEDBACK**

10. Do you have anything else to say about your experience so far that we haven't covered?

Thanks a lot!

Can I contact you then for an end of second year interview?

**Appendix 5.4**

**FOURTH INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT - END OF YEAR TWO**

Dear

Thanks for agreeing to this fourth interview on:

___________________________________________________________

To give you a little more time to think about this interview let me outline the sort of questions I'd like to ask you. If you have any other feedback please let me know at the interview.

I propose that we begin by discussing generally your experience of year 2 of the course. Then more specifically discuss your views and rating of 'overall service quality' and what specific factors have most influenced your assessment.

An important aspect of this research is if, and in what ways, your expectations and service evaluations change. Do you think your view of the service is changing? Are you looking at different things in your evaluation? What are your expectations for the rest of the course and have these changed from one year ago? Have you changed?

Finally, are your needs being satisfied and how 'customer' orientated is Nottingham Business School?

Will you be progressing to next year? ____________
If no. why?

**As always, thankyou very much for your time and sharing your HE experience with me.**

**FOURTH INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT - END OF YEAR TWO**

1. I propose that we begin by discussing generally your experience of year 2 of the course.

**OVERALL SERVICE QUALITY RATING**

2. What are your overall views on the quality of the service you have experienced over the last year of study?

3. What was the process you just went through to make that assessment?

4. On a scale of 1 - 10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate the quality of service experienced?

**KEY FACTORS**

5. What are the key FACTORS that have influenced your evaluation of the quality of the service provided at NBS?

ANCILLARY SERVICES library, computing, social THE COURSE information, content, assessment THE STAFF

**EXPECTATIONS**

6. Do you think you have different levels of expectations for different aspects of your experience this year?

7. Has the service experience met your expectations so far?

8. What are you expecting for the rest of your time at NBS?

**CHANGE OVER TIME**

An important aspect of this research is how your expectations and service evaluations change.

9. Do you think your view of the service is changing?

10. Are you looking at different things in your evaluation now from a year ago?

11. Do you think your expectations have changed in any way over your years experience?

12. Have you changed from last year? In what ways

## VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE

13. Is the experience so far satisfying your needs?

14. How 'customer' orientated is Nottingham Business School?

15. What factors make a 'customer orientation' difficult?

## ANY OTHER FEEDBACK

16. Do you have anything else to say about your experience so far that we haven't covered?

Thanks a lot!

**Appendix 5.5**

## END OF COURSE INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT AT THE END OF YEAR 3

Dear

Thanks for agreeing to this fourth interview on:

---

To give you a little more time to think about this interview let me outline the sort of questions I'd like to ask you. If you have any other feedback please let me know at the interview.

+I propose that we begin by discussing generally your experience of year 3 of the course. Then more specifically discuss your views and rating of 'overall service quality' and what specific factors have most influenced your assessment in this final year.

An important aspect of this research is if, and in what ways, your expectations and service evaluations change over a long-term service experience. Do you think how you viewed and assessed service quality changed from year 1 to year 2 to year 3? Have you changed? How has coming to the end of the course affected your view of quality?

Have your needs been satisfied and how 'customer' orientated is Nottingham Business School? How do you think we could improve, are there any obvious barriers?

**As always and finally, thankyou very much for your time and sharing your HE experience with me.**

**FIFTH INTERVIEW: YOUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY ASSESSMENT - END OF YEAR THREE**

1. I propose that we begin by discussing generally your experience of year 3 of the course.

**OVERALL SERVICE QUALITY RATING**

2. What are your overall views on the quality of the service you have experienced over the last year of study?

3. What was the process you just went through to make that assessment?

4. On a scale of 1 - 10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate the quality of service experienced?

**KEY FACTORS**

5. What are the key FACTORS that have influenced your evaluation of the quality of the service provided at NBS?

ANCILLARY SERVICES library, computing, social THE COURSE information, content, assessment THE STAFF

**EXPECTATIONS**

6. Do you think you have different levels of expectations for different aspects of your experience this year?

7. Has the service experience met your expectations?

**CHANGE OVER TIME**

An important aspect of this research is how your expectations and service evaluations change.

9. Do you think how you viewed the service changed as you progressed through it? If no, why not? If yes, how?

10. Do different things become more important as you progress through the course?

11. Do you think your expectations changed in any way over the three years?

12. Have you changed from last year? In what ways?

13. In what way has the final result affected your view of the service?

**VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE**

14. Has the experience satisfied your needs?

15. How 'customer' orientated is Nottingham Business School?

16. Do you think we could improve? In what ways?

17. Are there any obvious barriers?

**ANY OTHER FEEDBACK**

18. Are there any other important aspects of your experience we haven't covered?

Thanks a lot!

## Appendix 6.1: Summary of 41 transcripts: Important Aspects over Time

**KEY:**

**I2** = Interview 2 **I3** =Interview 3 **I4** =Interview 4 **I5** = Interview 5

Rating out of **10** for overall service quality of the course experience

**+** = positive quality aspects discussed

**-** = negative quality aspects discussed

**Initial service expectations** from **I1**

**Service Quality definition** from **I1**

| | **Rating and important aspects I 2** | **Rating and important aspects I 3** | **Rating and important aspects I 4** | **Rating and important aspects I 5** | **Change over time** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A Jackie** | 6/7 quite good, enjoyed and got something out of it: + Broadened thinking, good camaraderie (esp. weekend) - Dissatisfied with one lecturer, lack of clarity & inconsistency on first assignment | 8/9 very important year course/people /new job – overall outcome (6/7 for tuition) + Groupwork and interaction One very good lecturer - Time pressures Lack of relevance in finance module | 6/7 range of quality, easier as better course/ job fit +Tutor who challenged way of thinking Consultancy project – team Good admin. -Marking concerns Finance not learned much | 6/7 range of quality +International good – group and interest - less impressed, less individual attention (dissertation problems) Harder to apply, admin. problems Less time put in due to job | Fellow students and application were important all the way through. Personal change: Broadened thinking Taking on greater responsibility at work More challenging of beliefs and expectations more critical, confident, demanding |

| | |
|---|---|
| A<br>Jackie<br>Expectations | I don't know yet. I know that what I want to get out of it is better writing skills for myself and also some better organisation skills for myself because I'm not particularly well organised as you might notice if you look round in here! The other thing that I do know that I need in order to progress is a qualification in management studies |
| Service Quality Definition | it depends on what your expectations are when you go in…but my expectations are that I come out knowing more than I did when I went in, and that I feel that it was worth my time, money, whatever to be involved, and to come out with the qualification that I want |

| | **Rating and important aspects I 2** | **Rating and important aspects I 3** | **Rating and aspects I 4** | **Rating and aspects I 5** | **Change over time** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **B Gary** | 6/7, 'just above average' Hot and cold;<br><br>- lots of confusion over storyboard idea; whether marked or not, lack of lecture handouts, confusing IT module content.<br>+Relevant HR content and delivery, good module booklets<br><br>Overall pitched above his work level (supervisor\| not manager) so below expectations on application | **Not completed CM – last interview.**<br><br>6/7 'reasonable' 'what I got out of the course'<br>-Expecting more NBS contact at his work.<br>Disappointed with 3 day event, Managing Information and MCN,– not relevant to work.<br>Did not do storyboards<br>+Handout material good, Weekend away excellent as a laugh and got to know others, some excellent lecturers 'bouncy', EM, HR and MF linked to work | | | Does not believe he has changed, 'possibly a bit more reflective' but does not feel he has learnt 'a massive amount' or that it has improved his chances of a better job as 'I don't feel it has made me any better than I was 12 months ago' |

| | |
|---|---|
| B<br>Gary<br>Expectations | A lot of personal benefits. I'm expecting to get the chance to actually see how a business fully runs..to get the chance to talk to people in other environments and to learn from them |
| Service Quality Definition | first of all that the lecturer is prepared to give you some time and talk to you about it not just tow the line like the books say…lots of facilities |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **C Adam** | 7/10 – odd thing to work on<br><br>-needs quiet room for chat, storyboard requirements not clear, some room double-booking, MT lecturer superior and skated over questions feedback needed before next assignment<br>+level of knowledge attained, assignments applied to work, learning sets to allow discussion, meeting socially outside | 7-8/10 – fairly good<br><br>-people getting passes without attending, no penalties applied for lateness, different approaches to module books, hard to read feedback, consistency of grading?<br>+learnt most from finance module, feels course helped him get a promotion, 'not so much what I got from the course itself but from the people on the course', first weekend, 3 day event team experience, 'team spirit that's created through the course' | 8/10 - Overall it was very good (got the qualification)<br><br>-feedback poor, inconsistent marking of assignments, lack of penalties for lateness, return times, break times too long<br>+best certain lecturers who knew their field practically and linked theory and practice, excellent library, links from CM to DMS | '..as the course goes on you develop as a person..'<br><br>Became budget holder then asked, 'are you getting value for money'<br>'tend to look deeper as times goes on because your research technique has improved, searching questions become apparent'<br>challenge things more, lot more confident because feels he knows more – also what others have done |

| | |
|---|---|
| C<br>Adam<br>Expectations | Professionalism. Good standard of education at the end of the day..that's going to forward my management skills |
| Service Quality Definition | good standard of education…feeling that you've learnt what you haven't already known and that it has been beneficial to you and that you can also give feedback to them..so I think learning |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **D Andrew** | 6/7 the course I find very good, presentation and delivery could be better<br><br>-variable handout quality, lecturers 10 minutes late, misunderstood brief for first assignment – confusing, terminology for MT difficult, double room booking IS incident, hard to read feedback comments +useful course books, lecturer in industry, good information you can relate to work, interesting and challenging content, broadening his experience | 7/8 good worthwhile experience<br><br>+ weekend away, personnel management useful at work, information packs, library good support, could link assignments into work, good discussions with other course members<br><br>-double room booking, early stages for those coming back into education hard to understand storyboard requirements, certain modules confusing | 4/5 worse than the first year – disappointed<br><br>+course books, timetable OK, admin. fine, TW and LH very good: knew subject, could lecture and relate to students, progressed from practical into more academic, examples, discussions challenge answers and get you to justify them so you could see how arguments built up, very interesting<br><br>-later on quality of lecturing desperate, down to six people: sat out at front and droned on, boring handouts difficult to read, difficult to relate it, tedious assignments, might be a challenge there but difficult to see, bored of the thing | Does not think what he expects from the experience has changed – a structured learning package to develop and use experience to gain opportunity<br><br>Personal change making him sit back and think more, better or other ways of doing things, more knowledge in management and more confidence to speak on things, broader perspective from talking to other course members (applied for promotion) |

| | |
|---|---|
| D<br>Andrew<br>Expectations | It's very difficult to describe particularly what I was expecting...what I'm really looking for the course is 1) to see if I've got these skills..that are being taught out there and 2) to learn extra skills that will help me in what is a difficult and quite changeable job, to give me some direction, ideas, ways I can do things better..and I do see a qualification as an advantage, to advance me in my career. |
| Service Quality Definition | provision of training that actually meets a need...it needs to be interesting and relevant. concise, together, easily understandable and challenging |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **E Tony** | 8/9 – good<br><br>-too many people on the course, little one-to-one with tutors, more time than expected, confusion over getting marks for first assignment, overuse of case method<br><br>+all professional lecturers, good content, assignments related to class material and work making him think, input from other members of the group | 7/10<br><br>+ course content being able to apply it, finance interesting as not normally involved in this<br><br>- not enough feedback on assignments compared to effort put in, some comments hard to read, not enough time to speak to lecturers, confusion over storyboards, IS hard to find relevance, not knowing how everyone else is doing, learning set did not work (one-upmanship) | 7/8 - Going the distance, a stamina test more than anything<br><br>-feedback comments not reflecting grade, some sessions did not feel he had learnt anything from, learnt less new things – same depth, less structure, unease over entry standards<br><br>+some worthwhile sessions, lecturers who involved the group, got people interested from the beginning, debates to listen to others views, TCP good (diplomatic/sensitivity skills developed) | Feels he can think how his managers are thinking, takes more time in making decisions and solving problems, greater analysis ability, more ordered thought processes<br><br>Tools now that he can use in the work situation |

| | |
|---|---|
| E<br>Tony<br>Expectations | Well what I'm expecting to get from the course..are skills in management and that's it really. |
| Service Quality Definition | I'd say value for money, quality is getting something, what you ask for..to get some insight into the skills required to be an effective manager |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **F Graham** | 7/8 generally good, happy I am learning<br><br>-car parking, rather long time getting assignments back, detached lecturing style for MT, assignment not related to lectures, lack of handouts so lots of writing, double-room booking wasting time, too small a room for 40 people<br><br>+ plenty of prior information on what is coming-up, timely, pretty stretching course content and relevant to work, making him think wider than narrow work role, Lakeside weekend generated good team spirit | 5/6 reasonable, didn't find the year a great enlightening experience,<br><br>-class fragments and lecturers not willing or able to draw class in together, 'wishy washy' not as good after Christmas, IS module discussion and debate, fragmented, lacked detail and link to indicative content, room problems, poorly copied notes. Feedback hard to read, learning set not that helpful, 3 day event a waste of time, feedback that questioned authenticity of his work - disappointing<br><br>+ relevant content to work, wider and deeper knowledge of what I was trying to do at work, finance module interesting (lots of relevance, real life stuff and it made sense, links to assignment clear), EM lecturer good notes, enthusiastic | A good 6 but it became very survival due to greater job responsibilities<br><br>+ lecturing fairly high standard, good handouts, better than first year as he was more FOCUSED and clearer on what was expected and what to expect, stepped up a pace going into greater depth, solid subject matter (not detached from reality), Strategy good as you could see the thread and enjoyable, library good, TCP good<br><br>- finance as woolly, picked off bits and bobs | After year one looking more at the big picture.<br><br>End of year two being contacted for new jobs, using learnings at work, given him a bit more authority, bit more confidence when talking about strategic issues |

| | |
|---|---|
| F<br>Graham<br>Expectations | An education and a broadening of knowledge, hopefully what I'd expect in a Focused way to my job so it relates to my profession. |
| Service Quality Definition | focused and applicable to the workplace and something which I can actually take back to my employers and I can work better and produce more for them..and therefore force them to pay me more salary |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **G Robert** | 8 - I have been really pleased<br><br>+ happy with course content, can relate with material and apply theory, feels far more sharp<br><br>- confused initially on what was required with first assignment, too many people – long feedback from learning set activities, needs focus on case study feedback | 8 – very good, a grounding in very wide aspects of management<br><br>+general environment, presentation and content of modules, EM, MT and finance best modules, stimulated wider reading, being able to transfer learning into the workplace, portfolio useful to put together CV and look back on experience<br><br>- one or two woolly areas, storyboards to start with, need more authoritative assignment sources, slight bias to private sector, IS module least good as confusing, inconsistency in marking, some module books not used | 7 – staying power and commitment rather than more academically challenging<br><br>+ TCP practical management<br><br>- finance too much of an overview, lacked practical applications, second year more disjointed due to more lecturers on some modules, too much use of case studies, regurgitation of old material at times, underlying feeling that standards were lowered so people could move onto the MBA, more predictable in year two | From year one feels sharper, more conscious of his role as a manager, more relaxed about the academic process and requirements, feels he has gone up a level<br><br>Moved on in year 2, feels he has changed a lot – far more analytical, understands management far better, far broader now, feels more confident particularly dealing with senior people, feels he has developed in a broad sense |

| | |
|---|---|
| G<br>Robert<br>Expectations | Coordinated course of study, progressive study..on a personal level I'll be targeting particularly financial areas, an area I believe I'm weak and information technology |
| Service Quality Definition | personally fulfilling my preconceived ideas of the course..IT and the financial side of it, I know they are my weaknesses..and I can relate that to a work situation and I can show some benefit from that |

| | **Rating and important aspects I 2** | **Rating and important aspects I 3** | **Rating and important aspects I 4** | **Change over time** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **H Rob** | 5 – average, not too bad<br><br>-MT was hellish – not related to booklet, got lost with what he was saying, lots of big words, confusion over style to present first assignment, not yet applying ideas at work, enrolment forms and student cards taking time<br><br>+ supportive learning set, meeting with people who do a similar job, two out of three lecturers fine | 6 – average, it was alright<br><br>-lack of consistency between lectures and assignments, markers who have not lectured on IS module, too much content in HR module, MT worst as hard to understand, bit woolly rather than facts and figures which he is used to<br><br>+good lecturer on HR knew what she was talking about, answered questions well, concise, good presenter, finance interesting | 5 - Not too bad, weighing up good and bad lecturers<br><br>-some poor lecturers, poor presentation, getting models wrong, being spoken to as if at school<br><br>+ Tony Watson good, enjoyed him, challenged things and was not a typical lecturer, he is an entertainer, got information across well, TCP good as got to put into practice what he had learnt<br><br>Got qualification and new network of friends including other EHOs so information network | From year one does not feel changed, as not applied knowledge at work as he has not thrown himself into the course, wants qualification as peers have it.<br><br>Not sure he learnt a lot from year 2, did not take a lot of the information in as little opportunity to apply it at work. |

| | |
|---|---|
| H<br>Rob<br>Expectations | From the University itself it would have to be support, from the lecturers and in terms of probably the library, that type of thing, the basics |
| Service Quality Definition | The quality of the lecturers and whether they are professionally based..the back up that you get..how many students pass |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Rating and important aspects I 5 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I Chris** | 7/10 enjoyable and stimulating<br><br>+ good course content, admin. good, participation, teamwork, Lakeside<br><br>- content sometimes unstructured, lack of an overview, unclear on grading levels and hard to appreciate assignment brief, lecturer not answering questions, too big a group, not much time for reading or reflection | 7 – hit and miss depending on lecturers<br><br>+ finance good, lecturers who relate to real life, committed, enthusiastic, Lakeside and 3 day event best, meeting other students, discussions<br><br>- lecturers who talked down to you, dismissed questions, some module books illogical, storyboards difficult, IT module, vague assessments, fizzled out | 8/10 more relevant year<br><br>+ Tony Watson good as lateral thinker, leads you along, enthusiastic lecturers, fresh new ideas<br><br>-some lecturers harder to relate to, some case studies used not helpful | 8/10 best year<br><br>+ variety and choice of subjects, International project, meeting other people, knowledge and theory on new ideas, lots of information<br><br>- strategy lecture theatre with 50 people too crowded, lacked interaction | No changed perceived early on, focus on end result. End of year two; thinking more, made him look at things around and question things, more reflection, new ideas, more critical. Feeling the need to keep changing and moving. Final year, no additional personal change perceived rather additional information and ideas. |

| | |
|---|---|
| I<br>Chris<br>Expectations | I think that it's really I would like to judge my competence against the course and see if I am as competent as I feel I am. |
| Service Quality Definition | obtaining the results and the qualifications that you come out with.. but also I would expect them to stir my opinion probably rattle my ideas or ideals |

| | Rating and important aspects I 2 | Rating and important aspects I 3 | Rating and important aspects I 4 | Change over time |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **J Mervin** | 5 - not tailored to public sector, fast and lots of work<br><br>+ good content, enjoyable weekend away, good group dynamics<br>- confused first two weeks as lots of information, confusion over storyboards, too big a class for meaningful discussion, copying rather than handouts, private sector focus, sarcastic lecturer who uses jargon, needs more personal tutor time | 7 - Enjoyed it.<br><br>+balanced and good grounding, mapping out of each module, HR lecturer stimulating, gave practical examples, got students to justify their statements, good feedback comments, learning sets gelled at Lakeside event<br><br>-deadlines not adhered to so not a seriousness taken about the course, does not seem to be consistency through the marking, less committed lecturers, felt tagged on rather than mainstream, IT unclear assignment and inconsistent marking, finance assignment material not available, drifted away at end, lack of thought about where students came from such as public sector, 3 day event poor | 7 –enjoyable, more comfortable<br><br>+more practical – been given the building blocks we are now going to play with them, lecturers who encouraged you to think and go forward, feel stretched, making the person feel good but keeping to the point<br><br>-some lecturers plugging their books and articles, did not integrate new and old students, went into parenting mode, everyone getting B average so they could be allowed onto the MBA, dismissive lecturers | From year one a greater awareness of when he is doing things wrong, better report writing, more managerial and theoretical<br><br>End of year two sees himself as more skilled, more structured, considers strengths and weaknesses, gained confidence in writing reports, more structured in dealing with his staff, more reflective |

| | |
|---|---|
| J Mervin Expectations<br><br>Service Quality Definition | I'm expecting a well organised co-ordinated course that leads me step by step forward in my career management, and the course content will hopefully meet my expectations…I don't see it necessarily as the lecturers giving it to us, the people on the course actually contributing to the end product.<br><br>a service that's efficient, that meets the need its supposed to meet to the satisfactory level of the person that's using the service |

## Appendix 7.1 Guidance notes for the Course Quality Improvement Report

### Postgraduate Programmes Annual Course Reports

This document sets out a series of guidelines for the preparation of the School's annual course reports.

**PURPOSE**: to inform discussions and debate about the course in operation and its future development. It is not intended to be a lengthy document but a succinct presentation of issues bearing on the quality and future of the course.

**RESPONSIBILITY**: The Course Leader is responsible for leading the preparation of the report but it is vital that the course team makes a significant contribution. The report should be structured around the seven aspects of provision specified by QAA and detailed in note 1 below (the detailed questions which academic reviewers are likely to ask at the time of subject review under these seven headings can be accessed on the QAA web site: www.qaa.ac.uk in annex E of the Handbook for Academic Review. This handbook is also available from the Departmental Offices).

**THEMES**: Each year, specific themes may be identified across the School which need to be addressed in more detail.

**DRAFT REPORT**: The course report should be considered at the first Course Committee in the subsequent academic year. It should be presented as a draft and any additions and amendments arising out of the discussion should be agreed and incorporated into the final version. Key issues and recommendations from the reports which are of wider significance in the School are then incorporated into the School's Annual Report and are taken forward to the Postgraduate Board of Studies and thence to Faculty Board and the University's Academic Review and Development Committee.

*Briefly, the report should include the following:*

1. **Review of Course Operation supported by relevant statistical information.**

   This should be based upon the QAA headings:
   - aims and outcomes
   - curricula
   - assessment
   - enhancement
   - teaching and learning
   - student progression
   - learning resources

It is essential that the Course Review is not solely retrospective. It should take a forward-looking approach. It should express the course team's vision of developments, related course opportunities, staff development needs, and teaching and learning strategies for the future. The focus should be on quality improvement.

Statistics will normally be prepared by Course Administrators and should include:

- admissions - number enrolled against targets; breakdown of students by gender, ethnicity, geographical location, public/private sector, qualifications on entry, sponsored status
- progression and completion rates (including reasons for withdrawal), success related to qualifications on admission

All statistical information should be presented to show trends over several years. Additional information may be added as appropriate for a particular course.

2. **External Examiners' Reports** must be appended and commented upon. Actions to be taken in response to external examiner comments must be clearly stated.

3. **Module Leader Reports** are now required for all courses starting from September 2000. Module reports must be appended and commented upon. Actions in response to Module Leader comments should be clearly stated.

4. An **Action Plan** for the course should be included showing actions required, who is to carry the action forward, and by when. This will be drafted in advance of the Course Committee which considers the Annual Report, amended if necessary and agreed at that Course Committee, then reviewed and updated at subsequent Course Committees. The resultant outcome of each action should be added to the Action Plan prior to each Course Committee.

**Appendix 7.2 Module Leader Quality Improvement Report**

*THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY* NOTTINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL

## MODULE LEADER'S QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT

**Module** ______________________ **No. of Students**______
**Course** ______________________ **Latest Assignment Return Date**

**Module Leader** ______________________ ______
**Module Deliverer** **(if different from above)** ____________ **Date** ______

| Comments on the students' performance | | |
|---|---|---|
| For example: | ▪ | the profile of grades |
| | ▪ | the differences between courses |
| | | |

| Consideration of the overall fitness for purpose | | |
|---|---|---|
| For example: | ▪ | the coherence of the curriculum |
| | ▪ | whether the module provides/is provided with appropriate underpinning |
| | ▪ | issues concerned with teaching, learning and assessment appropriateness for student cohort |
| | ▪ | students' views and overall comments |
| | | |

| Comments on how the resources affected delivery and assessment | | |
|---|---|---|
| For example: | ▪ | the use of part-time staff |
| | ▪ | innovations in the use of teaching and learning packages |
| | ▪ | innovations in the use of the timetable, in teaching or specialist accommodation |
| | ▪ | implications for research or staff development |
| | | |

| Insights and actions for quality improvement when the module next runs | | |
|---|---|---|
| For example: | ▪ | amendments to the content |
| | ▪ | the balance of teaching and learning approaches, encouraging student-to-student interaction |
| | ▪ | the timing, number and nature of assessments |
| | ▪ | organisation/administration issues |
| | | |

ATTACH: COPY OF MARK SHEET
STUDENT QUALITY IMPROVEMENT SUMMARY REPORT

**A copy of this report to be retained in the Module Box**

**Appendix 7.3 Student Quality Improvement Report**

THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY NOTTINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL

## STUDENT QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT

**We really value your feedback. It helps us improve the quality of our provision which in turn helps to improve the quality of the process and outcomes for you. A summary of students' feedback for each module is given to your Module Leader and Course Leader. Thank-you for your time.**

**Module** ______________________ **Name** ______________________

**Course** ______________________

**Lecturer** ______________________ **Date** ______________________

**Please Tick Appropriate Box**

| **Lecturer** | Excellent<br>1 | Satisfactory<br>2 | Poor<br>3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Was the lecturer enthusiastic? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Was their explanation clear? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Did the lecturer show interest in you? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Did the lecturer encourage group interaction and discussion? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Did the lecturer answer questions well? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Did the lecturer present relevant, new ideas? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Did the lecturer challenge your thinking? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate the overall quality of the lecturer? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above:

| Content | Excellent 1 | Satisfactory 2 | Poor 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How relevant was the content to your workplace? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How interesting was the content? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the pace/quantity of information presented? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How appropriate was the level of the content presented? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the quality of support material? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate the overall quality of the content? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above:

| Assignment | Excellent 1 | Satisfactory 2 | Poor 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How relevant was the assignment to your workplace? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How relevant was the assignment to the course content? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How interesting was the assignment? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How appropriate was the level of the assignment? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate the overall quality of the assignment? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above:
(your comments on the feedback, consistency and fairness of grading will be gathered on the end of course questionnaire)

| **Organisation** | Excellent<br>1 | Satisfactory<br>2 | Poor<br>3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How would you rate the administration associated with this module? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate the room? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above:

| **Other Students, You and Overall** | Excellent<br>1 | Satisfactory<br>2 | Poor<br>3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How would you rate the quality of your interaction with other students on this module? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate the quality of your time input on this module? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How would you rate this module **OVERALL?** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further overall quality improvement recommendations not covered above you would like passed on to the Module Leader or Course Leader :

**Appendix 7.4 End of Course Student Quality Improvement Report**

THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY
NOTTINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL

## END OF COURSE STUDENT QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT

**We really value your feedback. It helps us improve the quality of our provision which in turn helps to improve the quality of the process and outcomes for you. As you have now completed the course we would like to collect your overall assessment of the quality of the process and outcomes of your experience. Thank you for your time.**

**Name** ____________________
**Job Title/Company** ____________________
**Course** ____________________
**Date** ____________________

**Please Tick Appropriate Box**

| **QUALITY OF THE PROCESS** <br> **MODULE 1, 2, 3 etc** | Excellent <br> 1 | Satisfactory <br> 2 | Poor <br> 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How do you rate the Module Leader? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the module content? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the quality of the assignment task? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the quality of the feedback? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the consistency and fairness of grading? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the organisation associated with the module? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate student-to-student interaction on the module? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the module overall? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above:

| QUALITY OF THE OUTCOMES | Excellent 1 | Satisfactory 2 | Poor 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How do you rate the value of the qualification? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the value of your learning? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the value of application at work? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the value of an expanded social Network? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the value of personal change in the Following areas? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| • Becoming more analytical | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| • Becoming more self-confident | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| • Becoming more critical and challenging | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| • Having a broader view of management | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Please add any further quality improvement recommendations not covered above: | | | |

| OVERALL QUALITY ASSESSMENT | Excellent 1 | Satisfactory 2 | Poor 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| How do you rate the OVERALL quality of the process? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| How do you rate the OVERALL quality of the outcomes? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| What is the best aspect of quality of the experience for you? | | | |
| What is the worst aspect of quality of the experience for you? | | | |
| **HOW DO YOU RATE THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE?** (any further comments please use reverse of this sheet) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

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