DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS FOR SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Quality management in higher education has become an area of focus receiving attention both at national and at institutional levels. While the academic enterprise is subject to accreditation and reviews of its academic programmes, by contrast, the support services sector is not subjected to any mandatory reviews and self-assessment processes. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the extent to which quality management systems have been adopted by South African public higher education institutions' (SAPHEIs') support services, by examining the current practices of implementation. Interviews were conducted with quality directors and managers, support service sector unit heads, as well as senior academics from six purposefully selected SAPHEIS's. The findings highlight the variance in the SAPHEIs' development implementation of internal quality management systems as well as the absence of systematic approaches to the quality management of the support services sector. The study argues for the conceptualisation and operationalisation of quality management systems in the support services sector. The recommendations that emanate from the study include the need to: build an institution-wide culture of quality and continuous improvement; develop a systematic approach to quality management

that is grounded on well-designed systems thinking approach support sector service quality models, policies and procedure guidelines; and develop tools and processes for assessing quality of support services, feedback mechanisms and self-assessment systems.

Keywords: Higher education; quality management; support services; systems thinking.

INTRODUCTION

This article delves into the landscape of quality management within South African public higher education institutions (SAPHEIs), specifically focusing on the support services sector.

A noticeable absence of systematic approaches to quality management in this sector poses a significant challenge, as current regulatory frameworks primarily concentrate on academic functions, leaving support services somewhat overlooked. While frameworks like the Framework for Programme Accreditation, the Framework for Institutional Audits, and the Quality Enhancement Project (The Council on Higher Education 2017b, 4-5), concentrate on academic functions, the holistic student learning experience involves both academic and non-academic support services (Brits 2015, 163). However, the existing national quality assurance policy lacks dedicated provisions for managing and enhancing the quality of support services in SAPHEIs.

The central question this study aims to answer is the extent to which support services in SAPHEIs have embraced, developed, implemented, and monitored service quality principles, policies, and management practices. To guide this exploration, the study suggests applying systems thinking as a valuable approach to developing and implementing quality management systems in support services. By employing a systems thinking approach, institutions can align leadership strategies with the complexities of support service quality, including policy formulation and deployment, quality management processes, and the cultivation of an institution-wide culture of quality and continuous improvement.

The article is structured to comprehensively explore research on quality management in the support services sector of SAPHEIs. It starts with an introduction highlighting the current lacuna in quality management frameworks for support services in the broader national quality assurance policy. The literature review contextualises SAPHEIs within the framework of systems thinking, laying the foundation for understanding the complexities of the support services sector in higher education. The methodology section details the research approach, specifically the investigation into the adoption, development, implementation, and monitoring of service quality principles in support services. The study engages key stakeholders through interviews with quality directors, managers, support service unit heads, and senior academics across six selected SAPHEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Systems theory is regarded as a general theory of systems thinking and a significant tool that is critical for solving a multitude of problems (Broks 2016, 409). Systems theory can be traced back to its origins, whose exponents include Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Talcott Parsons, and Niklas Luhmann (Stichweh 2011, 2579). Brits (2010, 39) alludes to the environment being the supra-system within which organisations operate. For example, an education system is a complete system on its own, yet it remains a subsystem of the nation's educational system which itself subsists within the environment, with the environment being the greater social suprasystem that embodies the nation's political, economic, social, religious, and cultural systems (Oyebade 2001, 39).

Broks (2016, 409) refers to a system as "a totality of systems interconnected parts and as a whole, each system is a part of its surrounding medium, made from other systems". Shaked and Schechter (2020, 107) explain systems thinking "as the ability to see the whole beyond its parts and to see the parts in the context of the whole" thus being an enabler to handle increased complexities and change. It is a holistic and cohesive management approach that considers all significant processes as parts of a whole system and provides the opportunity to implement a systems approach in various practical areas (Abdyrova et al. 2016, 11153; Furst-Bowe 2011, 2; Shaked and Schechter 2020, 107. Thus, systems thinking encompasses the capacity to have an integrated view of a phenomenon (that is, as systems and their parts) in their multiplicity, veracity and interrelatedness whilst simultaneously being able to singularise specific phenomenon from the whole.

The SAPHEIs' organisational components interact with many other components, all with different competences (Lobato, Yoguez, and Huerta 2011, 487). Hence universities are complex institutes, constituted of diverse structures which are hierarchical and goal-oriented in nature (departments, divisions, units and sub-units), each possessing distinguishing cultures, and numerous system components (Lemke and Sabelli 2008, 115–6). The SAPHEIs' support services, that is, academic support units and non-academic support units, are included in the hierarchical structures, specifically to support the academic enterprise of teaching and learning. The systems approach emphasis is on every institutional level where there is interface and inter-dependence of system components (departments, division, units and sub-units), and seeks to determine whether the practices and systems of quality management are broadly understood, accepted, implemented, monitored and continually improved within each institutional level (Fourie 2000, 52). Whereas a system is a set of components that function, aimed at achieving a shared purpose, a subsystem is an element of a grander system (Zhu and Lu 2019, 208). As an

element of a whole system, each subsystem is similarly devised to achieve a purpose, where its achievement is imperative to the accomplishment of the overall system's purpose (Mizikaci 2006, 43). As systems are characterised by synergies, so too are its subsystems, since the correlation of its elements is value adding to the system (Patel 2013, 82; Zhu and Lu 2019, 208).

Brits (2011, 1292) posits that within an organisation, subsystems can be regarded as related individual systems that are form-fitting within the organisation as a "whole" and suggests that subsystems are therefore material parts of the whole. In the context of higher education support services, subsystems typically include the HEI's library and information services, its academic enterprise support units, student services and development units, human resources, information and communications technologies, administration units, finance functions, facilities and infrastructure management services. Table 1.1 classifies support service into two categories, namely academic support services and non-academic support services, each with its own functional units.

Table 1.1 Support Services

Support Services Sector Units	
Academic Support Services	**Non-academic Support Services**
– Academic Advising – Academic Planning (Curriculum Development) – Extended Curricular – Information and Communication Technology (Computer/IT Services) – Leaning and Teaching Center (Learner Support, Teaching Development) – Library and Information Services (Libraries) – Post-Doctoral Studies and Research – Quality Assurance – Recognition of Prior Learning – Reprographics – Short Learning Programmes and Continuous Education	– Administrative Student Support (Student Admissions and Registration; Examination and Certification; Student Finance) – Operations and Management Support Services (Audit and Risk; Campus Security; Community Engagement; Corporate Affairs and Communication (Marketing); Finance; Health and Safety; Human Resources and People Management; Information and Communication Technology; Infrastructure and Maintenance; Institutional Planning; International Relations; Quality Management) – Student Support Services (Accommodation and Catering; Career Guidance and Services, Financial Aid; Student Counselling; Student Health Services; Culture, Sports and Recreation; Students with Disabilities)

Source: Authors' own construction

The support services functional units and their influence on each other as subsystems, necessitate ongoing quality management arrangements and mechanisms that include the monitoring and evaluation of adequacy in the operation of the system, as a whole. Subsystems must thus be well integrated firstly, to benefit from "inter-functioning" and secondly, to enhance the effectiveness of the system (Zhu and Lu 2019, 208).

Liu (2016, 18) emphasises the need for a common understanding of quality management, particularly for its successful implementation. Whilst accountability, improvement and

compliance have been identified as necessary for a comprehensive quality management approach in higher education, accountability and continuous improvement are the two main purposes for quality management (Santiago 2008, 353). The literature argues that defining, planning and implementing quality management becomes somewhat impossible where there is a lack of common understanding on the part of those who share the responsibility for quality (Srivanci 2004, 383). O'Mahony and Garavan (2012, 18) emphasises that the scope of quality management should focus on the benefits and impact of the system and should thus result in evident continuous improvement. Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, and Seebaluck (2016, 14), proposes that the scope should give clarity to definition of support services quality management, its themes, approaches, methodologies, frameworks, programmes, activities, practices, principles, guidelines, criteria, standards and adopted or designed models.

An extensive agenda and policy framework for South African higher education (SAHE) has been laid down and explicated by the state and its fulfilment has the "potential to create a higher education system that is congruent with the core principles of social equity and redress, social justice, democracy and development" (Badat 2010, 7). Since 2004 policies, mechanisms and initiatives for the implementation of institutional audits, programme accreditation, quality promotion and capacity development were introduced at national level, and in 2014, the quality enhancement project began (The Council on Higher Education 2017, 2-4). This broad policy framework establishes a national quality assurance framework. Non-academic support services are postulated to influence and enhance academic success but are not overtly academic, hence on many occasions they are underrated and unrecognised because of their non-academic nature.

SAHEIs are perceived as organisations comprised of various functions that institutional management frequently interpret as isolated or detached units and subunits (Brits 2011, 1293). This detracts from the edicts of systems thinking, thus perpetuating the proliferation of silos. As a system, all functional units should pursue complementing one another as interdependent elements in pursuit of building synergies (Smit et al. 2011, 64). Thus, to attain and achieve institutional goals and objectives the functions and operational activities of an organisation's subsystems should be subjected to continuous monitoring and evaluation in an endeavour to identify gaps and deficiencies in the system for remedial action.

The higher education system is a complex and by no means an isolated system in that it is entangled to organisational, technical, economic, political, and social structures that blend components of control, choice-making and autonomy (Furst-Bowe 2011, 2; Dhukaram et al. 2018, 3). The higher education system requires "systems-management approach" since it combines individual activities, technological interactions and social practices to ensure synch, alignment and integration of all organisational units and of their activities (Furst-Bowe 2011,

2; Dhukaram et al. 2018, 3), thus rendering systems thinking approach a necessity in higher education.

Systems thinking has been found to be applied in various spheres such as higher education leadership, decision-making, change management initiatives (Shukla 2018, 950-1), programme and curriculum design and reform, courses and learning support (Ison 1999, 107), administration of applications, registration and enrolment management system, timetabling and programme (Dunnion and O'Donovan 2014, 23–5), as a design approach has been used to solve complex systems of higher education provisioning including the understanding of the higher education ecosystems (such as people, organisation, regulations) embedded within the institutions sub-levels (such as leadership, staff, students, policies and procedures) (Bentley, Cao, and Lehaney 2013, 451; Dhukaram et al. 2018, 3). A study by Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015, 337–340) supports the application of systems thinking in higher education. The work examined the methodologies and processes employed in using systems thinking as an organisational intervention tool within a HEI's setting. Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015) made the observation that, despite advocacy for the integration and promotion for interdependencies in higher education systems, HEIs are still being criticised for operating in silos amongst their units, with cooperation, more often than not, thwarted by hierarchical and bureaucratic administrative structures (Davis, Dent, and Wharff 2015, 350).

Research Methodology

This study is grounded in a pragmatic research paradigm. Ngulube and Ngulube (2015, 4) explore pragmatism as a philosophical tradition that promotes the development of theory directly from practice (praxis). This study employed a qualitative research approach to enable an in-depth investigation into participants' perceptions on the development and implementation of quality management systems in the support services of SAHEIs. The qualitative nature of this study is consonant with the pragmatic paradigm (Creswell and Poth 2016; Creemers, Kyriakides, and Sammons 2010; Haq 2015; Kivunja 2018; Mertens 2019; Mohammed, Hafeez-Baig and Gururajan2019; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2018; Schoonenboom and Johnson 2017; Treharne and Riggs 2014).

The South African public higher education landscape is characterised by three institutional types, namely, a traditional university (twelve universities), a comprehensive university (six universities) and a university of technology (eight universities). While the population of the study represents all twenty-six South African public higher education institutions, the sample itself consisted of a selection of two public higher education institutions from each of the three institutional types, as case institutions. The selection of these institutions was purposive and was based on the Hopkin's (2004, 182) frame factor concept for the classification and selection

of the universities. The varied nature of the institutional contexts and their different levels of development is the primary focus of Hopkin's frame factor concept (Hopkin 2004, 182). The factors included in the concept are the country's population size, the size of the institution, the size of the national market, and the expectations of the government and society. Table 1.2 depicts overview of the research participants and the institutions in which they are employed.

Table 1.2 Description of Case Institutions and Participants

Institution Category	Selected Case Institution & Location	Institution Classification	Demographics (2017)			Participants
			Students	Permanent Staff		
				Academic	Non-academic	
Comprehensive University	NMU Urban	Previously Advantaged	27,621	607	1,504	• Chief Information Officer • Dean of Students • Director Quality Enhancement • Executive Dean
	WSU Rural	Previously Disadvantaged	30,517	580	775	• Campus Rector • Director of Human Resources • Director Special Projects • Manager Quality Assurance • Faculty Dean
Traditional University	UKZN Urban	Combination of both Previously Advantaged and Disadvantaged	49,096	1,341	2,942	• Director Teaching and Learning • Director Quality Assurance • Faculty Dean
	UFH Rural	Previously Disadvantaged	15,426	365	578	• Deputy Registrar • Manager Quality Assurance • Disability Unit • Faculty Dean
University of Technology	DUT Urban	Combination of both Previously Advantaged and Disadvantaged	29,787	581	890	• Director Quality Promotion and Assurance • Director Planning • Director Learning and Teaching • Executive Dean
	MUT Peri-urban	Previously Disadvantaged	12,665	205	374	• Registrar • Senior Director Teaching and Learning • Director Quality Management • Faculty Dean

Source: Authors own construction

Participants were selected based on their knowledge by virtue of the portfolios they occupied. Participants selection by their knowledge or experience on a subject is supported in literature (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016, 3; Noon 2018, 5; Patton 2014, 659). Twenty-four

participants were selected from across the six identified SAPHEs. Data was obtained through participants' views as expressed in interviews. The interview questions centred on the introduction and use of support services quality management mechanisms and instruments, the main support services activities encompassed in the internal quality management systems, the factors that impede implementation and the areas of the internal quality management systems that need further development.

Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed, coded and interpreted thematically. The interview transcripts were analysed for descriptions and patterns related to primary areas which included: (i) the concept of quality management as understood within HEIs (ii) the purpose of quality management within HEIs (iii) the scope of quality management within HEIs (iv) the structures supporting internal quality assurance processes for the support sector (v) the tools and processes for assessing the quality of support services within HEIs (vi) the role of senior management in support services quality assurance within HEIs and (vii) the stakeholder involvement in internal quality assurance processes.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The South African higher education quality management system was rolled out with institutional audits in 2004, comprising of mainly programme accreditation and institutional audit sub-systems (Council on Higher Education 2017a, 3). The CHE has expressed a degree of satisfaction with institutions' development of their internal quality systems despite expressing concerns about the unevenness in its full implementation (Council on Higher Education 2017c, 11). The findings of the study confirmed this phenomenon of variance in the development of internal quality management systems. Universities, which were classified as previously advantaged and those that were a combination of both previously advantaged and previously disadvantaged including urbanely located had more developed systems than their counterparts. The findings that emerged from this study are:

- Quality management was commonly understood and generally viewed more as a quality assurance compliance exercise rather than as a continuous improvement exercise which was primarily meant for the academic enterprise and extended, to a certain extent, to some academic support activities. Al-Ibrahim's (2014: 142) emphasis on the universal challenge of understanding quality management aligns with the findings. Brochado (2009: 175) and Oschman (2009: 86) also highlight the importance of clear purpose and continuous improvement in higher education

institutions.

- Institutional leadership and governance structures within HE institutions were less effective in the enforcement of the actual development and/or implementation of internal quality management mechanisms for the support services. This depicts the lack of clear links between quality initiatives and institutional mission/vision, as well as potential impediments posed by leadership (Laurett and Mendes 2019: 270; Zabadi 2013: 54). The study resonates with Ali and Shastri's (2010: 14) insights on leadership impediments when there is a lack of authority in applying quality management principles and values, supported by existing literature emphasising the crucial role of leadership awareness, commitment, and strategic involvement in fostering a culture of quality in support services within HEIs (Alayoubi, Al Shobaki, and Abu-Naser. 2020: 22–23; Ferreira 2003: 85–86, 93–96; Kaissi, Jammal, Loutfi, and Chahine 2008: 32; Othman, Mokhtar, and Asaad 2017: 41; Tari and Dick, 2016: 14; Yeo 2008b: 155).

- There were low standards in the quality culture within SAPHEIs support services due to lack of understanding and promotion of quality. The finding corroborates with the literature highlighting the critical role of leadership commitment in fostering a robust institutional quality culture and promoting active employee participation for overcoming obstacles to quality management system implementation. (Rahnuma 2020; 56–57; Kaissi et al. 2008: 22–23; Silva et al. 2021: 4–6; van Schalkwyk 2011: 146).

- There was a general lack of structural arrangements, systems, and policies dedicated to the quality management of the support services sector. The findings align with the importance placed on comprehensive internal quality management systems, active senior management involvement, and dedicated personnel for support services quality – all make provision for structural arrangements, systems, and policies dedicated to the quality management of the support services sector in higher education institutions (Brennan and Shah 2000: 7; Kaissi et al. 2008: 16–18; Latif et al. 2019: 5, 17; Leiber, Stensaker and Harvey2020: 7; Muslim 2014: 34–35).

- There was a lack of processes, tools, standards and/ or requirements for assessing and measuring quality of the support services sector, as well as an absence of enabling structures for embedding quality. The study resonates with literature emphasising the importance of adopting quality assurance strategies, use of effective tools for assessing and measuring the quality of support services and implementing

comprehensive quality management systems with a focus on monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement is emphasised (Brits, 2011: 1292; Al-Ibrahim 2014: 133; Mohammed et al. 2016: 7,10; Ogunmokun et al. 2021: 2–3, 6; Tamrat, et al. 2022: 7,12; Sheikh et al. 2022: 4812).

The scope of SAPHEIs' internal quality management systems was found to focus primarily on quality management of the academic enterprise as opposed to support services quality management. Literature evidence that the effectiveness of the quality management system depends on the clarification of responsibilities and accountability lines and applies at all levels of the institutions' academic as well as support services procedures and processes (Teeroovengadum et al. 2016, 14). There seemed to be alignment between institutional quality arrangements and the CHE's quality frameworks, but this alignment seems to be biased towards the academic enterprise. The reason for this is that there seems to be a limit in the provision made by national quality management systems, in that the national quality assurance frameworks themselves make rather limited reference to the quality management of support services. It is recommended that SAPHEIs must be articulate about the purpose of internal quality management for the support services and be able to distinguish between the purpose, the approach, focus and methods in developing and implementing the chosen quality management system, in line with Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016) proposition. Due care should be exercised in the development of quality management systems paying specific attention to both non-academic and academic support services by adopting a systems thinking approach and establishing performance indicators for total student learning experience. This recommendation is in line with Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015, 17) and Shukla (2018, 950) who advocated for the use of systems thinking as a tool applicable for the alignment and coordination of the institution's support services towards student success, thus eliminating operational silos.

The institutional leadership and governance structures within SAPHEIs institutions were found to be less effective in the enforcement of the actual development or implementation of internal quality management mechanisms for the support services. The reason for this may be attributed to the institutional leadership's lack of awareness with the concept of quality management for the support services and that the quality assurance agenda for the support services sector was somewhat unclear, as attested to by some senior managers. It was found that there was a universal knowledge deficit pertaining to what quality management entailed as the different understandings and interpretations of the concepts of quality management within and across institutions featured throughout the interactions with the members of senior

management. It is recommended that SAPHEIs, in their individual contexts, should clearly and comprehensively define their quality management approach as it relates to their unique support services.

The results also evidenced inconsistent levels of SAPHEIs' leadership motivation and commitment to quality management. This casts a negative impact on the capability of leadership in initiating and inculcating the culture of quality within SAHEIs' support services. Leadership has been identified as an enabler and an ingredient that provides guidance towards the creation of a clear and shared mission and vision, and a culture of quality in which all stakeholders contribute to the optimisation of quality (Othman et al. 2017, 41). In this study, no evidence of links between service quality and the institution's mission and shared vision to institutional planning existed. In addition, no link could be determined between the institutions' strategic planning and support services sector quality management, much less to the support sector units' familiarity with the concept itself. Leadership becomes an impediment when it fails to exert authority throughout institutional levels in the application of quality management principles, values, and goals (Zabadi 2013, 54). It is recommended that institutional leadership and the members of the senior management structures are provided with adequate training on a holistic management approach to support services quality. It is essential that training and information sessions should be conducted to ensure that all internal stakeholders, from top management to every staff member, understand the concept of service quality management.   This recommendation is in line with Shaked and Schechter (2020, 107) who saw the holistic management approach as an opportunity to apply and implement a systems thinking approach to in various practical areas of the institution such as the support services units. This notion was supported by Mensah and Graham (2019, 409) and Shukla (2018, 950–1) who all contend that the HEIs leadership approach to the application of quality management approaches should be underpinned by the systems theory approach.

Another finding was that there was a general lack of structural arrangements, systems, and policies dedicated to the quality management of the support services sector. Institutions were found to be characterised by an absence of enabling structures for embedding quality into their support services. The lack of integration was marked by an absence of set operating standards by which to monitor and evaluate processes and practices in the support services. What emerged was that quality management units in all case institutions predominantly focused on academic processes such as mechanisms for academic programme reviews, programme development, programme registration and accreditation. However, there was a growing awareness of internal quality management systems, which were inclusive of the support services sector in SAPHEIs and an acknowledgement of the need for further development of the implementation of quality

management systems for the support services sector. This includes, policies, procedures and processes, tools and mechanisms, and both governance and operational structural arrangements. SAPHEIs must continue to develop and strengthen these initiatives by adopting the principles of TQM and implementing quality management systems and models for the support sector, underpinned by systems thinking. This can be achieved by aligning, coordinating, and integrating all university services whilst also promoting faculty, staff, and administrator collaborations as suggested by Davis, Dent, and Wharff's (2015) use of systems thinking as an organisational intervention tool within an HEI setting. In developing these systems and mechanisms, SAPHEIs are urged to embrace an all-encompassing approach that is tailor-made, strategic, goal-driven, and relevant to the distinctive description of the institution, whilst simultaneously meeting external requirements.

Participants expressly pointed out that institutions need to have dedicated quality assurance personnel for support services' quality and for the promotion of service quality awareness. Quality improvement is a necessary, institution-wide activity not merely to be assigned to a special quality assurance select unit, implying the necessity to insist that senior management be actively involved in quality improvement activities by designing and developing systems for more effective performance of work by both management and non-management employees. The aim is to locate the responsibility for quality with everyone within the institution through coordinated and integrated participation of all employees at all institutional levels (Muslim 2014, 34–35). However, it remains the senior management's responsibility to develop and operationalise an effective quality management plan. It is recommended that structures are established (offices, units or centres) within the broader institutional quality management structure to support the development and implementation of internal quality management systems and processes for the support sector. A structure of this nature will facilitate the coordination and alignment of institutional substructures in line with Mensah and Graham's (2019, 409) view of optimising the whole system for institution wide efficiency and effectiveness.

Another finding was that that there was a lack of systems, processes, tools, standards, or requirements for assessing and measuring quality of the support services sector, as well as an absence of enabling structures for embedding quality. Internal quality assurance mechanisms and procedures for reviews and self-evaluation had generally been confined to the academic enterprise, to the exclusion of quality management practices of the support sector within SAPHEIs. When asked which tools and processes the SAPHEIs employ in assessing the quality of support services the participants disclosed that there was either a lack or shortage of mechanisms by which to assess service quality. The literature evidence that poorly designed

or inappropriate operating processes and programmes are barriers to improving internal service quality (Johnston 2008, 216–217). It could be deduced that with the lack of measurement, monitoring and evaluation in SAPHEIs, the result would be systems which are unresponsive to policy, consequently resulting in disintegrated student value chain systems. Participants who were directly involved with the processes of the support services have expressed a desire for the simplification of the concept of quality, the development of instruments and criteria for the quality management of the support services sector, including the documentation processes for self-assessment of support service units for continuous improvement. Participants suggested that institutions should adopt the quality assurance strategies of the academic enterprise towards the support services sector and thus develop collaborative support services sector strategy and policies supported by adequate allocation of resources.

The empirical findings corroborate existing theories on the importance of leadership, comprehensive quality management systems, and the need for clear structures, processes, and tools in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and quality in higher education support services. The study provides practical insights into the challenges and areas for improvement identified in the existing theoretical frameworks.

The following framework is recommended for support service quality monitoring:

- Based on each HEI's specific context and scale, establish adequate **internal controls and evaluation mechanisms** for support units' process improvement by developing strategic and operational plans, policies and procedures, design, and document operational processes for all segments of services tendered. Variations in institutional sizes, structures, support services levels of complexity, and available resources should also be acknowledged.

- Design **tools/ instruments and processes** for support sector quality to integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives through involvement and participation of everyone in the quality processes, particularly the primary stakeholder – the student. In this regard, the Higher Education Service Quality (HiEdQUAL) instrument recommended by Al-Otaibi, Yusof, and Ismail (2016, 51) would be useful as it is an instrument that covers various service quality dimensions which could be used with both qualitative and quantitative data. While the HiEdQUAL instrument may be useful, institutions should have the flexibility to choose or develop instruments that align specifically with their unique service quality dimensions and cultural contexts.

- Develop comprehensive **self-evaluation/ self-assessment criteria and minimum**

standards supported by guidelines for undertaking periodic reviews of support services comprised of a combination of self-reflection; peer evaluation and/or a soft/desktop review process. The deployment of the planned self-evaluation and review processes should necessitate adequate allocation of resources for the establishment of structures and the development and implementation of processes that will allow for interaction and synergy thus avoiding silo management. The self-evaluation and review of support services units must be followed by improvement plans outlining actions to be taken in response to the review findings/ results or weaknesses/ deficiencies identified and recommendations made during the evaluation process. Mechanisms should be developed to follow up on progress in the implementation of improvement plans. It is critical that the self-evaluation criteria is aligned with the unique characteristics and missions of different HEIs, considering the specific challenges and strengths of each institution in defining minimum standards.

The key is to provide a framework that is adaptable, scalable, and responsive to the diverse challenges and resources present in different higher education environments. Customisation, flexibility, adaptability, scalability, and consideration of specific contextual factors is deemed crucial for successful application of the framework in a way that aligns with their capabilities and goals across a variety of SAPHEIs including HEIs within the African continent.

IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE THE STUDY

The findings of this study suggest a need for further development and/or adoption and systematic operationalisation or implementation of support services quality management policies and practices at institutional level. The findings have significant implications for the understanding of how the systems thinking approach to HE leadership may be applied in the implementation of a quality management system for the support sector enabled by an institution-wide quality culture, supported by institution-wide information management system strategy and adequate allocation of resources. Although this study focuses on HEIs, the findings may well have a bearing on the national quality regulatory framework, thus stimulating the CHE to facilitate the development and implementation of institutional support services quality management systems within HEIs.

The study contributes to the understanding of the application of the systems thinking approach on the development and implementation in the support services sector quality management systems, which may prove useful in expanding the understanding of how leadership may apply and implement a systems thinking approach to support services quality

for the purposes of policy formulation and deployment, developing quality management processes and practices, and in inculcating an institution-wide culture of quality and continuous improvement. The findings shed light on to the extent of development and implementation in the support services sector quality management systems and provided insight into the level of maturity of service quality within the SAPHEIs. The recommendations are intended to improve service quality at all institutional levels, thus strengthening the current quality management systems.

The implications of the study extend beyond individual SAPHEIs, offering valuable insights and recommendations that can contribute to the advancement of higher education in the broader African context by promoting a culture of quality, efficiency, and continuous improvement in support services. Adapting support services quality management practices across different African countries with varying educational systems requires a nuanced and context-specific yet flexible approach. Collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to local needs are key principles for successful adaptation and implementation.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND GENERALISATION

One of the limiting elements of this study was the resource constraints in conducting the study at a countrywide level covering all SAHEIs as the constraints of time and funding which limited the scope of the study, confining it to six public HEIs. However, this limitation is not deemed to pose a serious threat to generalising the findings. The sample covered the three SAPHE institutional types, namely traditional universities, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities which are drawn from rural and urban-based institutions as well as considering unique SAPHEIs' characterisation of whether an institution may be described as historically advantaged or disadvantaged. The findings of the study gave a fair picture of the development and implementation of internal quality management systems and noted an absence of systematic approaches to the quality management of the support services sector. A generalisation can be made about services quality in the South African HE sectors as whole because, as Twining et al. (2017, 11) suggest, the research setting of this study was deemed to be similar to other SAPHEIs, thus, making it possible to transfer these findings to HEIs with similar phenomena and contexts.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The findings afford SAPHEIs and researchers usable baseline information on the development and implementation of quality management systems for the SAPHEIs' support services sector. The finding that leadership lacks familiarity with the pertinent concept of support services

quality management provides insights for future research to examine how quality literacies can be built to support institutional leadership and senior managers towards the institutionalisation of service quality within the SAPHEIs and HEIs in general, particularly at the level of support services. Considerably more work will need to be done to determine applicable tools and processes that can be employed for assessing the quality of support services and to provide self-evaluation criteria and standards for the review of SAPHEIs' support services. Further research needs to examine more closely the links between the institutions' academic enterprise and the support services sector, focusing on how synergies could be built, the aim of which would be to develop integrated internal quality management systems that would ultimately enhance the quality of the whole student learning experience.

CONCLUSION

The primary question that this study attempted to answer was: To what extent has the support services, at SAPHEIs, adopted, developed, implemented, and monitored service quality principles, policies, and management practices? The findings of this study suggest that there are numerous previously unresearched and missing aspects or system deficiencies, practices, and conditions which, if corrected or improved, may enable the development and implementation of the internal quality management systems in the context of the support sector in SA public HEIs. These include how HEI leadership can be capacitated in the understanding of the construct of support services quality to be able to inculcate the culture, principles, policies, and management practices of service quality within their respective institutions. The findings shed light on to the extent of development and implementation in the support services sector quality management systems and provided insight into the level of maturity of service quality within the SA HEIs. The SA public HEIs might benefit from an in-depth analysis of its support sector, notably because the results of this study provided a deeper insight into current challenges and problems for policy and systems development and implementation. The analysis of challenges and problems may engender a better understanding that will assist in the development of more appropriate and more effective quality management policies and systems. The necessary integration, presented in findings and recommendations, within the support sector is intended improve service quality both at all institutional levels, thus strengthening the current quality management systems.

The findings and recommendations collectively contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the status of support services quality management in South African public HEIs. The study's insights provide a basis for refining policies, addressing challenges, and ultimately enhancing the quality of support services across HEIs. The focus on leadership

awareness and capacitation, development and implementation of quality management systems' challenges, maturity levels of service quality, and on fostering integration for improved service quality underscores the multifaceted approach needed for effective quality management in the higher education support services sector. Overall, the recommendations offer practical steps towards enhancing the service quality landscape within South African Public Higher Education Institutions, aligning with the initial research objectives.

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