

Tourism Destination Quality

Attributes and Dimensions



Arthur Seakhoa-King,
Marcjanna M Augustyn and Peter Mason

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ARTHUR SEAKHOA-KING

Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, Dubai, UAE

MARCJANNA M AUGUSTYN

Bournemouth University, UK

PETER MASON

London Metropolitan University, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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About the Authors

Dr Arthur Seakhwa-King (PhD, MBA, HBS) is an Associate Professor and Director of Academic Affairs at The Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, Dubai, UAE. He is a member of the Member Relations Committee for the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (USA). Dr Seakhwa-King has over 15 years teaching experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He has taught at various universities in Europe, Africa and in the Middle East. Prior to joining academia, Dr Seakhwa-King worked as a Senior Business Analyst for an organisation which specialises in providing start-up capital and consultancy services to small and medium enterprises. Before joining The Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, Dr Seakhwa-King served as Dean of School of Business at the Australian College of Kuwait. Broadly, Dr Seakhwa-King's research interests are in the area of service quality, tourism destination quality and accreditation.

Professor Marcjanna Augustyn (PhD, MSc), Professor of Management and Head of Department of Marketing, Strategy and Innovation at Bournemouth University, is an internationally recognised expert in business management, strategy and performance. She specialises in researching impacts of management strategies, systems and practices on organisational performance and competitive advantage. Much of her research has been carried out in the context of tourism and hospitality industries. Her work has been published extensively, disseminated internationally and regularly cited by leading scholars. Professor Augustyn has led successful high-impact externally funded interdisciplinary research projects, involving diverse stakeholders from the public, private and nonprofit making organisations. She has advised various organisations on competitive management strategies and practices. Professor Augustyn is a member of editorial review boards for several academic journals and a member of the Strategic Management Society (USA), British Academy of Management (UK) and the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism (Switzerland).

Dr Peter Mason, who holds British and New Zealand citizenship, has taught for over 45 years. He has had published seven single authored books, including *Tourism Impacts, Planning and Management*, the fourth edition of which will be published in the summer of 2020, 23 book chapters and over 50 refereed publications. His first degree (BSc Economics) was from the University of London, and he also specialised in Geography. He has a Research Masters from Bath University and his thesis-based PhD was awarded by Plymouth University. He was

previously Professor of Tourism and Head of the School of Hospitality, Tourism and Marketing at Victoria University, Melbourne. Prior to that, he was Professor of Tourism Management and Head of the Department of Tourism, Leisure and Sport Management at Bedfordshire University for 9 years. In a career of teaching, supervising and researching in higher education spanning more than 30 years, in addition to lecturing in the United Kingdom, he has lived and taught in Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany and Dubai. His research interests and publications have evolved from a concern with tourism impacts to a focus on tourism planning and management. He has published articles in the top-rated tourism journals, supervised/examined over 200 Masters' dissertations, supervised British students to successful PhD completion and examined PhDs in the United Kingdom and Australia. He is one of the few tourism academics to have taught in, and then advised on, four levels of the education sector: primary, secondary, further and higher education.

In addition to lecturing and supervising, he has been involved in significant amounts of quality assurance work in the United Kingdom and other areas of the world and has worked extensively for EKKA, the Estonian Ministry of Higher Education and ASHE, the Croatian Ministry of Higher Education in the evaluation of their respective Tourism, Hospitality and Business curricula from undergraduate to PhD level. As Professor and Head of Department at Bedfordshire University, he was a member of the group submitted to the UK Research Assessment Exercise that achieved the highest rating (4/5) of any university entering Tourism separately. In 2010, as Head of School at Victoria University, he led his team to successful European Foundation for Management Development Programme Assessment Scheme accreditation for undergraduate courses in hospitality and tourism – the first Australian university to achieve this particular status. He is semiretired, but currently has a fractional position lecturing to Masters students at London Metropolitan University and is Visiting Professor of Tourism at London South Bank University. He also lectures and supervises regularly at the Luxury Hotel School in Paris.

Preface

For at least 50 years tourism, as a major socioeconomic phenomenon, has been steadily growing. During this period, there have been several temporary blips, in which growth has slowed, or numbers have actually fallen, but only for short periods. Some of the factors leading to a decline, or more typically a slowing in growth, have been as a result of natural causes, for example, volcanic explosions and tsunamis. However, others have occurred following human-induced changes, many of which have economic causes such as a sudden rise in oil prices, stock market crashes or the global recession of 2008/9.

Despite these downturns in tourism, there has been significant growth since 1970. Hence, for the first time, there were more than one billion international travellers in 2012, according to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2014). By 2017, this figure had reached almost 1.4 billion international travellers, which amounted to over 15% of the world's population (WTO, 2018). Although some of this activity may result from the same travellers being involved in more than one journey per year, meaning the precise scale of tourism is difficult to gauge (Leiper, 1999), tens of millions of people globally work directly in the industry and many more are employed indirectly. Hundreds of millions of people are on the receiving end of tourism activity in tourism destinations, and it is in these locations that tourists and local communities meet and interact.

During this period of growth from the 1970s, the tourism industry has tended to view the world as one with unlimited natural and cultural resources, and these can be exploited for tourism activities. In the last 25 years or so, this view has changed to some degree, with the emergence of more environmentally friendly activities, although mass tourism is still a common feature of the industry.

Until the end of 2019, researchers, analysts, media commentators and many politicians and planners argued that a key contributor to changes in tourism activity, for the next 50 years, would be global warming. Although the great majority of scientists agree that global warming is occurring and there is still some disagreement about the cause, almost no one denies that it is happening. It will significantly affect tourism as sea levels rise, daily and monthly weather conditions change and climate zones shift. Coastal locations and mountain areas will be particularly badly hit. Some destinations most at risk had begun to prepare in the last two decades for the effects of global warming and were becoming involved in more environmentally or culturally sensitive, community-focused forms of tourism. However, those preparing to respond to global warming and those yet to do so believed it to be a gradual process and they had time to react. Just before the

end of 2019, a major change occurred that shook the world of tourism, as well as the global economic, social and political systems.

Since the end of the First World War, there have been outbreaks of diseases that have killed hundreds of thousands, and in some cases, millions of people. The ‘Spanish flu’ outbreak of 1918 was the worst case of an epidemic disease in recent history and, as many as 100 million people died, it is believed (Arnold, 2018). Its cause is still not fully understood, but it devastated countries already suffering as a result of the War. Tourism was not directly linked to the epidemic of 1918, although the movement of people involved in the War was believed to be a contributory factor (Arnold, 2018). In 2003, another epidemic disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), emerged from Southwest China and it spread along major tourism routes, initially by commercial passenger aircraft flying from Hong Kong not only to other parts of Southeast Asia but also to major tourism destinations around the world. Therefore, tourism was at the centre of the SARS epidemic, as not only did tourists help spread the disease but also the tourism industry was badly affected when many tourists died from the disease, others tried to leave affected destinations and yet more cancelled or postponed planned visits to destinations. Nevertheless, SARS was relatively short lived, although there were over 7,000 cases worldwide, occurring in 32 countries, with over 800 deaths (Mason, Grabowski and Du, 2005).

Several locations, particularly those in Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam, responded by establishing task forces to deal with any further SARS outbreak, or a similar type of virus-related disease. This preparation has put these locations in a strong position when confronting the cause of the shock to the global economic, social and political system of late 2019 – the COVID-19 pandemic. Like SARS, COVID-19 is a corona virus but as of late April 2020, when this prologue was written, has been far more deadly, as there have been almost three million recorded cases and over 200,000 deaths.

In terms of COVID-19 and this book, what is particularly relevant is the almost complete absence of a tourism industry anywhere in the world at the time of writing, and even more disturbing, little indication of how it will be possible to get out of the current situation and return to normality. COVID-19, like SARS, began in China but spread quickly to almost everywhere on earth. Once again tourism was involved in spreading the disease, and once again tourism as an industry has been hit badly. By late April 2020, the world’s airlines were almost all partially or completely grounded. Bars, restaurants, cafés, hotels and entertainment and sporting venues remain closed or are subject to extreme restrictions. Freedom of movement within and between countries has been severely curtailed in many continents – just about everywhere has been, either in lockdown, or slowly emerging from it, but with little idea of what the future will look like.

What has this to do with this book? When tourism returns, as it surely will, based on the experience of the past 50 years, what type of destinations will tourists want to visit? Just about anywhere, may be the response from those released after weeks in complete isolation, Perhaps, initially, but probably not for long! It seems very likely that tourist will seek places where they can find what they missed when confined in lockdown, such as quality accommodation, quality food and drink,

quality entertainment, quality activities and a quality environment – in short, quality places that provide what tourists require and that generate good experiences! This book has been written to indicate how to assess and measure where to find these ‘good experiences’, and what conditions for tourists exist there, or as indicated in its title, in quality tourism destinations. The COVID-19 outbreak has made the rationale for the book that much stronger, for after COVID-19, quality will matter more than quantity and entrepreneurs, businesses, planners and managers will need to create a significant competitive edge for their destination, to lure back inevitably reluctant, possibly worried and probably poorer visitors, whose attitudes to tourism experiences will almost certainly have changed, following the pandemic. A destination with quality attributes and dimensions may just have that competitive edge!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the era of mass tourism that began in the mid-1960s, the major strategy that appears to have been applied on a large scale by the tourism industry, almost everywhere across the world, can be summarised as ‘pile ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap’ (Mason, 2015; Mowforth & Munt, 1998). In this approach, it is clearly quantity not quality that matters. Initially it brought great benefits in terms of low-cost travel, meaning much greater access to cheap holidays for millions of people. However, this form of mass tourism has been challenged since at least the beginning of the millennium, in relation to the damaging effects it can have on local environments and socio-economic conditions in destinations. This has led to not only changes in conceptualisations of tourism, but importantly, in relation to this book, at applied levels in terms of strategic approaches in tourism planning and marketing of destinations (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2010).

Today, the ever-intensifying global competition among tourism destinations, combined with increasingly knowledgeable tourists, call for crafting robust strategies to enable destinations to compete effectively in the marketplace and to mitigate challenges facing them. While destination managers can choose from several strategic options to attract and retain loyal tourists and to outperform competing destinations, the growing importance of competing on quality has been recognised by both tourism practitioners and researchers (Augustyn, 1998a, 1998b). This is not surprising given that more experienced and sophisticated tourists are increasingly less willing to compromise and accept tourism products of mediocre quality (Anjos, Meira, Pereira, & Limberger, 2017; Lian & Denstadli, 2010). If tourists are not happy with destination quality, they are more inclined to visit or recommend competing destinations and to claim compensation for tourism products of inferior quality (Kindon, 2018; Laws, 2002; MacFarlane, 2018; Sharpley & Forster, 2003). Furthermore, unhappy tourists share their negative experiences with other tourists (Sahin, Gulmez, & Kitapci, 2017) through multiple communication channels, including powerful digital and social media. Unhappy tourists spread the bad news fast to multiple potential tourists who may create a negative image of a place they would otherwise visit (Yan, Zhou, & Wu, 2018). Because the negative opinions about a destination come directly from tourists, other tourists regard them as more credible, which can negatively impact tourist destination choice (Su & Teng, 2018).

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A strategy based on continuous quality improvements can yield several benefits for tourism destinations. One of the most often cited benefits of quality improvement is that it enhances tourist loyalty (Akroush, Jraisat, Kurdieh, AL-Faouri, & Qatu, 2016; Lenehan & Harrington, 1998; Wang, Tran, & Tran, 2017). By looking after visitors, a tourism destination can generate repeat visits and may attract new tourists from positive ‘word of mouth’ communication (Augustyn & Ho, 1998; Tian-Cole & Crompton, 2003). Given that it could cost as much as six times more to attract new tourists than to keep the existing ones (Evans & Lindsay, 2016), a strategy that enables tourism destinations to retain loyal tourists is certainly cost effective (Lenehan & Harrington, 1998). Moreover, by adopting a strategy based on continuous quality improvement, a tourism destination can differentiate its offerings and gain sustainable competitive advantage over rival destinations (Campos-Soria, González, & Roper, 2005; Garrigos-Simon, Narangajavana-Kaosiri, & Narangajavana, 2019; Manhas & Dogra, 2013). Competing on quality is known to be more effective in outperforming competitors than alternative strategies such as competing on price (Augustyn, 2002; Keane, 1996; Porter, 1985). The reason is that a strategy based on price can be easily copied, i.e. if a tourism destination lowers its prices, competitors can easily respond by cutting theirs. By way of contrast, because a strategy based on quality is concerned with the unique manner in which a tourism destination improves its products, such improvements and reputation for high quality are usually difficult for competitors to copy (Elshaer & Augustyn, 2016a; Gronroos, 2000).

Competing on quality requires assessing and measuring current quality levels to identify areas needing improvement and to design winning strategies (Augustyn, 1998b; Canalejo & del Río, 2018; Deming, 1982; Ryan & Cliff, 1997). However, a review of the existing literature indicates that as yet no adequate tool for measuring tourism destination quality has been developed; a tool that would aid tourism destination managers in their identification of strategic areas for quality improvement and opportunities to compete on quality. This may be due to insufficient knowledge of what to measure as regards tourism destination quality. Indeed, there seems to be no published prior study examining how tourists understand destination quality. Yet, establishing attributes and dimensions of tourism destination quality from the tourists’ perspective is a pre-requisite step for developing tools for measuring destination quality because tourists, as consumers, are and should be the main judges of tourism destination quality (Augustyn, 1998b; Seakhwa-King, 2007; Weiermair, 1997).

This book aims to bridge these important gaps in theory and practice. Specifically, this book investigates what tourists associate with tourism destination quality in terms of its attributes and dimensions, using results from the authors’ primary sequential qualitative and quantitative research study (hereafter called the ‘TDQ study’). Furthermore, this book examines whether there are any meaningful significant differences among various groups of respondents based on their socio-economic and travel characteristics. It explains reasons why tourists strongly associate dimensions identified in the TDQ study with tourism destination quality and why some tourists may differ in what they associate

with destination quality depending on their gender, age, income, tourist activity, last destination visited (domestic or international) and travelling with or without children.

In addition, the book also compares dimensions of tourism destination quality established in the TDQ study, with dimensions of product quality, service quality, place quality, destination service/product quality, which are reviewed and critically discussed in the following chapters of the book. What 'Tourism Destination Quality' is from the tourists' perspective and relative to other conceptualisations of quality found in the literature is indicated in the book. To illustrate the applicability and varying importance of dimensions established in the TDQ study, case studies of actual tourism destinations are also discussed. Finally, based on the results of the TDQ study, this book proposes a diagnostic tool for tourism destination managers and planners, designed to help identify strategic quality improvement areas and to compete on quality in various tourism destination contexts.

The process of establishing the attributes and dimensions of tourism destination quality from the tourists' perspective that this book presents follows a robust methodology. A sequential mixed method research approach is adopted to collect and analyse data. The qualitative phase of the TDQ study explores what tourists associate with tourism destination quality in terms of its attributes and dimensions. Qualitative data from 41 in-depth interviews conducted in the TDQ study are analysed using a constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The findings from the qualitative phase of the TDQ study are subsequently used for designing a quantitative research instrument for the second phase of the research. Using a sample of 806 tourists, the quantitative phase of the TDQ study examines whether the emergent attributes and dimensions of tourism destination quality identified in the qualitative phase of the TDQ study are representative of the whole population of tourists. Following an analysis of descriptive statistics, validity, reliability and internal consistency of each study construct, the attributes and dimensions tourists most strongly associate with destination quality are identified. Finally, using parametric and non-parametric tests the TDQ study examines whether there are any meaningful, significant differences in what tourists associate with tourism destination quality among various groups of respondents based on their socio-economic and travel characteristics. Eta squared (η^2) is used to assess the meaningfulness of statistically significant findings.

As far as the authors are aware, this is the first book that establishes attributes and dimensions of tourism destination quality from the tourists' perspective. This is also the first book that proposes a diagnostic tool for destination managers and planners based on the findings of a major original empirical study (the TDQ study) that this book presents.

The empirical evidence provided in this book extends our knowledge about the impacts of socio-economic factors and travel characteristics on tourists' perceptions and evaluations of destinations. The findings of the TDQ study also extend our knowledge about quality as a concept in relation to the established quality management, services marketing, and geographical perspectives on what quality is and how to measure it.

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The original findings presented in this book have significance for both academic researchers and practitioners (tourism destination managers, planners, consultants) interested in measuring tourism destination quality. The findings could be used in designing scales for conducting evaluative and benchmarking studies aimed to ascertain and/or compare levels of tourism destination quality. Furthermore, the findings could be used by researchers who examine relationships between tourism destination quality and other phenomena such as the quality of tourist experience, tourist satisfaction, tourist behavioural intentions, destination image, performance and competitiveness.

The original findings of the TDQ study may inform policy makers on destination quality standards. They may also encourage destination practitioners to review their approaches to measuring, improving and managing tourism destination quality.

In terms of its structure, this book consists of eight chapters and several appendices. This introductory chapter has discussed the rationale for the book, as well as its aims and objectives and outlined the research approach, key findings, contributions and implications for research practice. The objectives and key topics discussed in subsequent chapters are presented below.

Chapter 2, Approaches to Conceptualising and Measuring Quality, sets the scene for the rest of the book by investigating the major perspectives on conceptualising and measuring quality: the quality management, services marketing and geographical perspectives. It discusses the major theoretical contributions within each field, focusing on what quality is and how to measure it. It critically discusses the merits and limitations of each perspective. The chapter also compares the three perspectives and notes the major similarities and differences in quality conceptualisation and measurement. The knowledge gained from the critical review of the key perspectives on conceptualising and measuring quality informs the interpretation of the results of the empirical TDQ study presented in this book. It also informs the formulation of implications of the TDQ study's findings for the measurement of tourism destination quality and for the design of the tool that is intended to assist destinations in achieving quality, and that this book proposes.

Chapter 3, Conceptualising and Measuring Quality in Tourism, critically discusses major approaches to conceptualising and measuring quality in tourism studies and in the context of tourism destinations in particular. It notes that to date the services marketing perspective has been most influential in the study of quality in tourism. This chapter then addresses the question of whether the services marketing perspective provides an adequate basis for conceptualising and measuring tourism destination quality. Chapter 3 also discusses limitations of prior studies that attempted to measure destination service quality or destination product quality and provides a rationale for the need to conceptualise tourism destination quality from the tourists' perspective. Finally, Chapter 3 discusses factors that could affect what tourists associate with destination quality.

Chapter 4, Methodology of the TDQ Study, introduces the overall methodology of the empirical research and discusses its philosophical underpinnings. The

chapter provides a detailed account of two distinct sequential phases of the TDQ study that comprise a qualitative exploratory phase and a quantitative descriptive and explanatory phase. The chapter also explains reasons for the methodological choices made in this study, including the choice of the overall research approach, data collection techniques, sampling procedures and analytical techniques.

Chapter 5, Findings of the Qualitative Phase of the TDQ Study, presents findings from the qualitative phase of the empirical TDQ study that explores what tourists associate with tourism destination quality in terms of its attributes and dimensions. Based on the results of this exploratory study, tourism destination quality is defined as conformance to tourist requirements. 75 attributes of tourism destination quality are categorised into 12 dimensions of tourism destination quality. The definitions of each dimension are provided at the end of Chapter 5.

Chapter 6, Findings of the Quantitative Phase of the TDQ Study, presents results from the quantitative phase of the empirical TDQ study that tests the results obtained in the preceding qualitative phase presented in Chapter 5. Specifically, this chapter examines whether the emergent attributes and dimensions of tourism destination quality are representative of the whole population of tourists. It also establishes which attributes and dimensions tourists most strongly associate with destination quality. Furthermore, this chapter presents results of statistical tests aimed at establishing whether there are any meaningful significant differences in what tourists associate with tourism destination quality among various groups of respondents based on their socio-economic and travel characteristics, such as gender, age, income, respondent origin, main tourist activity (sightseeing, sporting, entertainment and culture), and length of stay, travelling with/without children, last destination visited (domestic or international), and length of time since visiting last destination.

Chapter 7, Discussion of the TDQ Study's Findings, considers the qualitative and quantitative findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 and the wider theoretical context. It explains reasons why tourists strongly associate dimensions identified in the TDQ study with destination quality. It also explains why some tourists may differ in what they associate with tourism destination quality depending on their gender, age, income, tourist activity, last destination visited (domestic or international) and travelling with or without children. Chapter 7 also compares dimensions of tourism destination quality established in the TDQ study, with other dimensions of quality reviewed and critically discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. It also specifies what 'Tourism Destination Quality' is from the tourists' perspective and relative to other conceptualisations of quality found in the literature. Finally, to illustrate the applicability and varying importance of the dimensions that have been indicated in this primary research, case studies of actual tourism destinations are presented in Section 7.6.

Chapter 8, Conclusions and Recommendations, highlights the original contributions of this book, acknowledges its limitations and makes recommendations for further research and practice. It also proposes a tool for tourism destination

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managers designed to help identify strategic quality improvement areas and to compete on quality in various tourism destination contexts.

Appendices contain additional information, including the research questionnaire, detailed data analysis tables and a list of tourism destination dimensions with associated attributes established in the TDQ study.

Chapter 2

Approaches to Conceptualising and Measuring Quality

2.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates how quality has been conceptualised and measured from the quality management, services marketing and geographical perspectives. It discusses major theoretical contributions within each field as well as the merits and limitations of each perspective, especially with regard to each perspective's stance on what quality is and how to measure it. This chapter also compares the three perspectives and notes the major similarities and differences in quality conceptualisation and measurement.

It is important to review literature within these domains for several reasons. Firstly, conceptualising and measuring quality originates from the quality management field (Umble, 2000). Although this perspective has been widely applied in a range of industries, it has received less attention within tourism. Consequently, a review of quality management literature is essential to gaining knowledge about core quality definitions and dimensions and to understanding why these may or may not be applicable to tourism destination quality. Secondly, although literature on quality management has not been used extensively in tourism studies, it is the services marketing literature that has mainly informed the debates and studies on various aspects of tourism quality. Therefore, a review of the services marketing approaches to conceptualising and measuring quality is also essential to understanding the origins of quality attributes, dimensions and measures widely used in examining quality of individual tourism services. Thirdly, conceptualisation and measurement of quality within both the quality management and services marketing fields mainly concerns organisations as units of analysis. Given that tourism destinations are places where tourist activities occur, it is essential to consider how quality of place has been conceptualised and measured in geographical literature.

The knowledge gained from the critical review of the key perspectives on conceptualising and measuring quality informs the interpretation of the results of the empirical TDQ study presented in this book. It also informs the formulation of implications of the TDQ study's findings for the measurement of tourism

destination quality and for the design of the tool that is intended to assist destinations in achieving quality, and that this book proposes.

2.2 Conceptualising and Measuring Quality: The Quality Management Perspective

At its most basic, quality means ‘excellence’ (Oxford University Press, 2011). Yong and Wilkinson (2002) indicate that this definition derives from the Greek word ‘arete’, meaning ‘superiority’ or being the ‘best’. Meanwhile, for Sebastianelli and Tamimi (2002) this definition of quality originates from philosophy, especially from the work of Plato. Sebastianelli and Tamimi (2002) draw a parallel between Plato’s description of beauty and the meaning of quality. Plato argued that to understand ‘beauty’ one has to be exposed to a succession of objects that bear its characteristics. Similarly, to understand quality one has to be exposed to a product that bears its characteristics (Garvin, 1988).

However, from the management viewpoint, defining quality as ‘excellence’ has several disadvantages. According to Yong and Wilkinson (2002, p. 102), defining quality as ‘excellence’ is synonymous with saying that whatever quality is, ‘you will know it when you see it’. Defining quality as ‘excellence’ thus encourages an individualistic and hence subjective approach and is not very helpful for organisations to produce and manage quality (Reeves & Bednar, 1994).

Major advancements in defining quality have been made within the quality management field by leading scholars widely known as ‘quality gurus’ (e.g. Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1986; Feigenbaum, 1951; Ishikawa, 1985; Juran, 1974; Shewart, 1931; Taguchi, 1986). They proposed several definitions of quality, which are discussed in the next section.

2.2.1 Contribution of Leading Quality Management Scholars

Early researchers within the quality management field (e.g. Shewhart, 1931) defined quality as ‘conformance to specifications’. Specifications are targets and tolerances determined by designers of products (Crosby, 1979). The origins of this definition of quality can be traced to the manufacturing industries of the eighteenth century’s industrial revolution and the growing demand for interchangeable parts for mass production (Reeves & Bednar, 1994).

A major advantage of defining quality as ‘conformance to specifications’ is that it makes quality monitoring a relatively straightforward process (Yong & Wilkinson, 2002). The extent to which quality objectives are met can be checked easily by assessing the extent to which products meet predetermined quality specifications (Zhang, 2001). The main weakness of defining quality as ‘conformance to specifications’, however, is that it fails to clearly state whose specifications should be met (Yong & Wilkinson, 2002). Consequently, quality specifications are mostly set by manufacturing organisations, based mainly on managers’ understanding of the meaning of quality (Sebastianelli & Tamimi, 2002). This results in products that meet