Service Quality's Role in Students' Decisions to Study at Further Education and Training Colleges

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper was to explore student expectations and perceptions about Further Education and Training colleges with specific reference to reasons for the students' choice of college. A total of 301 respondents participated in a survey which used a questionnaire based upon the SERVQUAL instrument. All the service quality dimensions measured in the students' survey contain negative mean gap scores, indicating a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of service received. From these findings, the authorities at the FETs can better understand the gaps in their service quality dimensions and how to close them in their attempts to improve on service quality. The reliability dimension, which emerged as the most important service quality predictor, needs the most attention.

INTRODUCTION

Many young South Africans and adults, on completing their education at high school level, consider studying at Comprehensive Universities or Universities of Technology rather than in the Further Education and Training sector. According to Ceza (2008), such students were probably rejected by the universities of their choice and Further Education and Training colleges (now known as TVET in South Africa) are their second alternative. This sector is regarded and perceived by students as a last option at which to pursue training. Ceza (2008) is of the opinion that it is because of their practical nature, which leads to them being viewed by parents as most suitable for students who are not mentally gifted but who are practically gifted.

In South Africa, 152 technical colleges, with 200 delivery sites across the country, merged in September 2001 to form 50 FET colleges. According to the Department of Education, this merger was decided on with a view to improving and

uplifting the standard of education, in order to meet the challenges of the labour market and for the enhancement of co-operative governance, co-operative management, co-operative leadership and co-operative education (Akoojee and McGrath 2008).

In 2007, the Department of Education (DoE) introduced the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC (v)) curriculum. These courses were regarded as being attractive to ambitious students (Department of Education 2007). The DoE wanted enrolments at FET colleges to increase to one million by 2014/15 (Department of Education 2007). However, one of the challenges that has to be dealt with is the poor public perception of FET college programmes (Department of Education 2008). In 2008, the DoE stated that there were 400 000 students enrolled at FET colleges (Department of Education 2008) and the 2010 Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) ministerial report revealed that this number had decreased to 220 000 students.

According to Akoojee (2009), the decrease in this number means that the one million target envisaged in ministerial speeches is unlikely to be achieved, despite the fact that as many as four out of five young people may want additional training (Myeza et al. 2010). FETs play an integral role with a view to improving and uplifting the standard of education to meet the chal-

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lenges of the labour market and to achieve the required co-operative governance, management, leadership and education (Akoojee and McGrath 2008). However, the phasing out of N4 to N6 certificates by FET colleges for the new National Certificate (Vocational) (NCv) has resulted in a decrease in enrolment intake from four hundred thousand to two hundred and twenty thousand (Cosser 2011).

The researchers believe that the perceptions and expectations that students have could be influential in this decline and so is worth researching. Unfortunately, little research has been done on FET colleges from a service quality perspective. Knowledge of how students of the FET Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) assess service quality will enable managers to track students' opinions over time and direct resources into important areas. Market research into market expectations and perceptions is important, as, without it, organizations may fail to fulfil customer requirements (Zeithaml et al. 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Though limited to only one province in South Africa, the findings are felt to be representative as this is the second largest province in terms of population, and a representative number of FET colleges were included in the sample. The findings of this paper will therefore be of relevance to all FET colleges in South Africa, and probably also to further education colleges, both in developing and developed countries. These findings will be beneficial for all FET management to identify weaknesses in their service quality and to identify ways to improve the quality offering to their target market, namely students, and therefore to ultimately increase the intake of students to FET colleges.

Objectives of the Study

This paper therefore aims to examine the different dimensions of service quality in terms of expectations and perceptions of, and then to identify the key aspects of service quality in, the service offering at FET Colleges. To achieve this aim the following objectives were set:
- To identify expectations and perceptions of students towards FET colleges.
- To identify positive and negative factors influencing perceptions of FET colleges.

Literature Review

Expectations and Perceptions of Service

According to Russell (2005) and Lim et al. (2014), education can be classified as a marketable service like any other service. Many authors and academic researchers recognise that marketing in the education sector has played a pivotal role and is paramount to student recruitment (Ivy 2001; Maringe and Foskett 2002). However, according to Incensu Education Marketing Resources (2015), the education sector is a very difficult sector to market to, owing to the busy nature of schools and the struggle in finding the right budget holder. 'Expectations' are what students ideally want: for example, what students wish for, what they expect from an excellent service provider, what they hope for and what they think should happen in the next service encounter (Lotz 2009). Therefore, educational institutions, such as FET colleges, who face the challenge of meeting student needs, should realise that all marketing activities must be geared towards students' needs (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; McDaniel et al. 2012). An overall positive perception regarding a higher education institution will empower students to make an informed decision as to which institution to choose, namely, the institution that they expect will best meet their desired needs.

Recent and previous academic studies, internationally and in South Africa, point out that factors that influence student choice of an institution included an institutions' image, branding and reputation, quality of teaching, financial aid and scholarships, location of the institution, student support facilities, academic and administrations issues, admission requirements and Quality of College Life (QCL). These factors have been shown, amongst others, to contribute to prospective students' decisions as to which higher education institution to attend (Chapman 1981; Ivy 2001; Russell 2005; de Jager and du Plooy 2006; Yu and Lee 2008; Pillay 2010).

Customers perceive service quality in terms of multiple factors (rather than in a one-dimensional way) of which they have no previous knowledge but which are based on, and compared against, the customer's expectations. (Zeithaml et al. 2006; Bateman and Hoffman 2011). The SERVQUAL model is probably the most accepted method of assessing service quality,

measuring the 'Gap' between the expectations and perceptions of service quality in service organisations (Parasuraman et al. 1985). SERVQAL measures service quality in terms of five dimensions.

The Dimensions of Service Quality

A description and explanation of the five dimensions follows.

Tangibility

Tangibles relates to the "appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials" (Bateson and Hoffman 2011). Tangible and visual elements are critical to the overall perceptions of the firm and the brand. Service companies use tangibles to enhance their image and create a quality service image to customers. Many companies combine tangibles with other dimensions to create a service quality strategy.

Reliability

Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) define reliability as "the ability to perform dependably, accurately and consistently." Reliability is about performing the service right, the first time, and is the most important dimension to customers.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is a service firm's ability and commitment to provide its services in a timeous manner. The responsiveness dimension concerns the willingness and or readiness of the staff to provide a service (Bateson and Hoffman 2011).

Assurance

Arasli et al. (2005) identify assurance as an employee's knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust and confidence in the customer in situations where the customer faces high levels of risk or feels uncertain about their ability to evaluate service.

Empathy

Empathy involves treating a customer as an individual, being able to experience another's feeling as one's own. It includes features such as approachability, sensitivity and an effort to understand other's needs (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003). It includes access at any time, honest communication and understating of the customer's problem.

There has been extensive support for, and use of, the SERVQUAL instrument in the field of education. Ruby (1998) used SERVQUAL to study student satisfaction, Slade et al. (2000) used it to capture students' perceptions of service quality before they complete their studies, O'Neill (2003) used it longitudinally to understand students perceptions, Chua (2004) assessed attitudes of parents, faculty and employees, Sherry et al. (2004) assessed the perceptions of international students, as did Govender et al. (2012), and Veerasamy et al. (2013) applied it to sport in higher education. Furthermore Zafiropoulos et al. (2007) showed SERVQUAL as an appropriate instrument for measuring service quality in education and higher education institutions, supported by Shanin (2003) who verified the scientific basis of SERVQUAL.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the paper is to examine the different dimensions of service quality and then identify the key aspects of service quality in the current service offering at FET Colleges. The research, therefore, employed a cross-sectional, descriptive survey approach to investigate which factors influence the service quality and the resulting selection of FET colleges amongst FET students.

Sample

Three methods were applied to select respondents, namely census, quota sampling and convenience sampling. The study was based in the KZN province due to this province having the second largest population in South Africa and having a large number of FET colleges in rural and urban areas, offering both new and old curricula and giving a variety of respondents in terms of demographics. All FET colleges in KZN were therefore included in the study, in other words, a census was conducted, although three colleges eventually chose not to participate. Quota sampling was used to select the actual number of respondents per college and the split

between the new and old curricula, in proportion to the actual college populations. Convenience sampling was then used to select the actual students to participate, according to the quotas per college. Thus, the respondents were selected based on being accessible and available on the day of data collection. The resultant sample is shown in Table 1. College names are anonymous at the request of the colleges.

Table 1: Sample breakdown

FET College	Sample	NCv	Nated
College A	50	30	20
College B	50	25	25
College C	55	25	30
College D	52	30	22
College E	46	25	21
College F	48	25	23
Colleges G, H and I	Non-response	Non-response	Non-response
6 Colleges Participated	301	160	141

*New curricula: refers to National Certificate (Vocational) - NC (v) Level 2 – Level 4.
*Old curricula: refers to National Technical Education - (Nated) N4 – N6.

Instrument and Procedure

Data was gathered via a questionnaire administered to students across all campuses of the FET colleges in KZN. The SERVQUAL instrument was used to measure students' expectations and perceptions of service quality of the FET College of choice. It is a pre-existing, validated instrument by virtue of its extensive use in a variety of service quality settings, including educational institutions. The SERVQUAL model consists of a standardized questionnaire that includes two statements for each of the 22 items that represent the five dimensions described. An "expectations" section containing 22 statements is used to ascertain the general expectations of students concerning a service. A "perceptions" section containing a matching set of 22 statements is used to measure students' assessments of a specific service (Perez et al. 2007). Four of the 22 statements are used to measure tangibles, five for reliability, four for responsiveness, four for assurance and five for empathy (see Table 2). Statements in both sections use a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" (5) to "Strongly Disagree" (1) (Curry and

Sinclair 2002). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) and Kumar (2011), the concept of reliability in relation to a research instrument has a similar meaning: if a research tool is consistent and stable, thus predictable and accurate, it is reliable. The more the degree of consistency and strength in an instrument, the greater its reliability. Therefore, 'a scale or test is reliable to the extent that repeat measurements made by it under continuous situations will give an identical result.' Reliability can be seen as the consistency of the measuring instrument's performance. This means that, apart from delivering accurate results, the measuring instrument must deliver similar results consistently. The instrument's reliability has been confirmed in many previous studies, as indicated in the literature review.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed with the assistance of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 for Windows. A descriptive analysis of the expectations and perceptions of students was done as per the standard SERQUAL approach. A paired t-test was carried out to test the significance of differences between the means of expectations and perceptions. The reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, with a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher being considered acceptable (Introduction to SAS 2007).

RESULTS

The biographical profile of the achieved sample is presented in Table 2. As shown in Table 2,

Table 2: Biographical data of respondents

Total		N	%
Age	18-19	40	13.3
	20-21	104	34.5
	22-23	80	27.6
	24+	74	24.5
Gender	Male	84	27.8
	Female	217	72.2
Ethnicity	Black	293	97.3
	Other	8	2.7
Qualification	Grade 9	7	2.3
(Before Registering	Grade 10	10	3.3
at FET)	Grade 11	46	15.3
	Grade 12	226	75.1
	Other	12	4.0

34.5 percent (104) of the respondents were in the 20-21 age group, followed by 27.6 percent (80) in the 22-23 age group, 24.5 percent (74) in the 24+ age group and 13.3 percent (40) of the respondents were in the 18-19 age group. The age profile indicates that the 20 to 21 age group was the dominant group. The percentage of male respondents was 27.8 percent (84), while the percentage of female respondents was 72.2 percent (217). This bias was because female students were more amenable to participation than males. African students accounted for 97.3 percent (293) of the respondents, with only two percent (6) Asian, and 0.7 percent (2) colored. This apparent bias is an indication of the preference that white, Indian and colored students have for other institutions of learning. Regarding qualifications, 75.1 percent (226) of the respondents had a Grade 12 prior to registering at a FET College, followed by 15.3 percent (46) in Grade 11, four percent(12) Other, 3.3 percent (10) Grade 10 and 2.3 percent (7) of the respondents had a Grade 9. Students who had a Grade 12 qualification were the dominant group, which is to be expected in an institution focusing on post-school education.

Reliability

Reliability of an instrument refers to the suitability and consistency where the instrument measures the concept without bias and is error free. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the constructs included in the SERVQUAL questionnaire. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as 'acceptable' (Sekaran and Bougie 2010). Table 3 illustrates the coefficients for the five dimensions.

Table 3: Reliability of expected and perceived levels

Dimensions	Cronbach's alpha	
	Expectations	Perceptions
Tangibles	.664	.588
Reliability	.834	.808
Responsiveness	.783	.775
Assurance	.774	.722
Empathy	.848	.800
Overall	.936	.914

The overall reliability scores are high (0.936 for Expectations and 0.914 for Perceptions). This indicates a high degree of acceptable, consistent scoring for the different categories in this research. All of the categories have acceptable reliability values, except for Tangibles, which is in the vicinity of 0.6. Overall reliability was acceptable, which was the expected outcome since the questionnaire was based on the widely used, and reliable, SERVQUAL instrument.

Overall Service Quality

The scores for each of the questions for each of the five dimensions, and their gaps between expectation and perception are given in Table 4, as are the numbers for each question, which are used to simplify the figures that follow. It is interesting that all questions resulted in negative gaps, implying that for none of the questions did the FET colleges meet their students' expectations. Thus, it can be stated that FET students are, in general, dissatisfied with the quality of service that they receive from their colleges.

A paired 2-tailed t-test was performed to determine whether the differences between the overall Expected (E) and Perceived (P) scores were significant. A significant result was set at $p<0.05$. As can be seen from Table 4, all differences were found to be significant.

Each individual dimension will now be examined and discussed.

Tangibles

This dimension covers physical facilities, equipment, materials and appearance of the service environment. As presented in Figure 1, the smallest gap between expectations and perceptions was -0.34, for "personnel are neat in appearance". The other three factors resulted in relatively large gap scores, namely "materials are visually appealing" (-1.43), "modern looking equipment" (-1.82) and "physical facilities are visually appealing" (-2.47). Clearly, students are not satisfied with learning facilities, materials and equipment at their colleges.

Reliability

This dimension measures timeous solving of, and giving attention to, student problems. Figure 2 shows that three statements had almost the same expectation scores ("staff promise to do something by a certain time", "staff perform

Table 4: Expected and perceived scores for each question

| Dim	Question		E	P	Gap	Sig E vs. P
Tangibles	Excellent FET college will have modern looking equipment	Q8	4.84	3.02	-1.82	.000
	The physical facilities at excellent FET college will be visually appealing	Q9	4.68	2.21	-2.47	.000
	Employees at excellent FET college will be neat-appearing	Q10	4.29	3.95	-0.34	.000
	Material associated with the service (e.g. pamphlets) will be visually excellent	Q11	4.95	3.52	-1.43	.000
Reliability	When excellent FET college promise to do something by certain time, they do	Q12	4.45	2.41	-2.05	.000
	When student has a problem excellent FET college shows sincere interest in solving it	Q13	4.47	2.89	-1.57	.000
	Excellent FET college will perform the service right the first time	Q14	4.46	2.99	-1.48	.000
	Excellent FET college will provide the service at the time they promised	Q15	4.07	2.57	-1.50	.000
	Excellent FET will insist on error free records	Q16	4.36	2.99	-1.37	.000
Response	Employees of excellent FET college will tell students exactly when services will be performed	Q17	3.73	2.31	-1.42	.000
	Employees of excellent FET college will give prompt service to students	Q18	3.70	2.22	-1.49	.000
	Employees of excellent FET college will always be willing to help students	Q19	3.85	2.43	-1.42	.000
	Employees of excellent FET college are never too busy to respond to students	Q20	3.52	2.15	-1.38	.000
Assurance	Behaviour of Excellent FET college employees will instil confidence in students	Q21	4.69	3.43	-1.26	.001
	Students of excellent FET college will feel safe in their transactions	Q22	4.56	2.27	-2.29	.000
	Employees of excellent FET college are consistently courteous with students	Q23	4.57	3.28	-1.30	.000
	Employees of excellent FET college will have knowledge to answer students	Q24	4.89	3.47	-1.43	.000
Empathy	Excellent FET college will give students individual attention	Q25	4.50	3.15	-1.35	.000
	Excellent FET college will have operating hours convenient to all their students	Q26	4.26	3.36	-0.90	.000
	Excellent FET college have employees who give students personal attention	Q27	3.90	3.17	-0.72	.000
	Excellent FET college will have their students' best interest at heart	Q28	4.41	3.02	-1.40	.000
	The employee of excellent FET understand the specific needs of their students	Q29	4.19	3.02	-1.17	.000
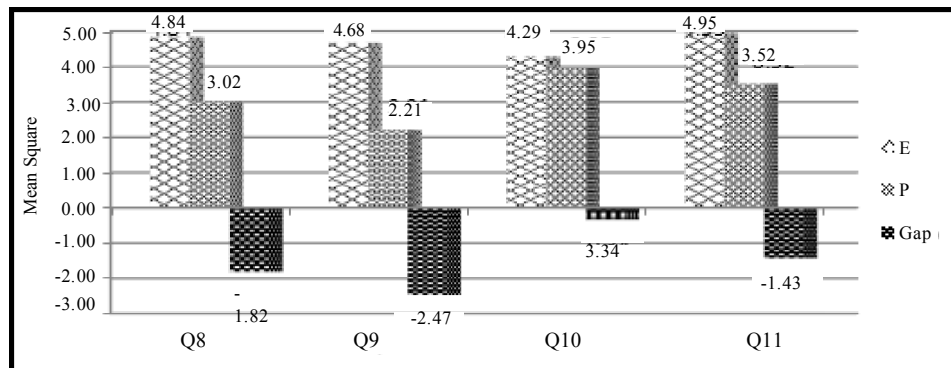
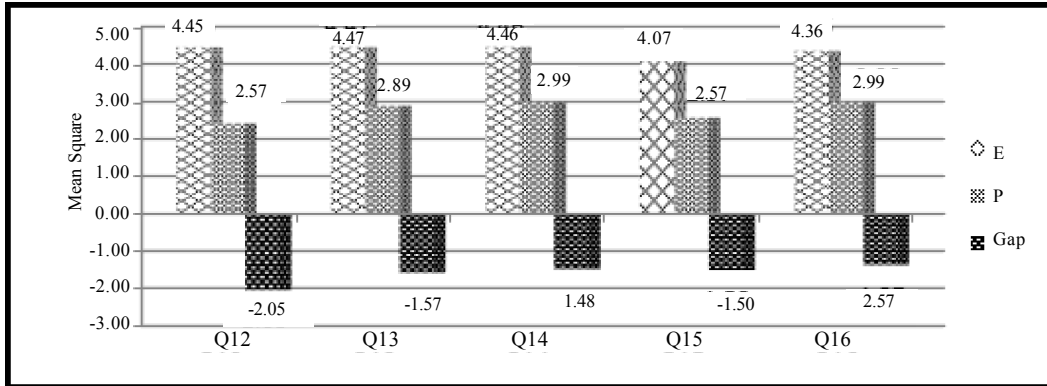**Fig. 1. Expected and perceived tangibles**

Fig. 2. Expected and perceived reliability

service right first time", and "staff show sincere interest"). However, the perception score for "staff promise to do something by a certain time" was considerably lower than the other perception scores, resulting in the worst gap of -2.05. Regarding the other two statements ("staff will insist on error-free records" and "staff provide their services at the time they promise"), although the levels of expectation were lower, they still had large negative gap scores. Therefore, it can be concluded that, overall, students are unhappy with the service that they get from college staff.

Responsiveness

This dimension relates to the willingness of FET college staff to help students, providing prompt service through the employees' skills and abilities. As shown in Figure 3, the expectation

scores were low, ranging from 3.52 to 3.85, indicating the students do not expect much in the way of service from the FET college staff. Despite these low expectations, perceptions were even lower, resulting in large gap scores for all the statements. The largest gap was for "staff always give you prompt attention." Clearly students must be very dissatisfied with the quality of service that they receive from the colleges' staff.

Assurance

Assurance relates to the organisation's capability to deliver the required output in terms of knowledge, politeness, and trustworthiness of employees, and inspiring trust and confidence in students. The expected scores were high, all well above 4.5 as shown in Figure 4, which indicates that students expect to be able to rely on
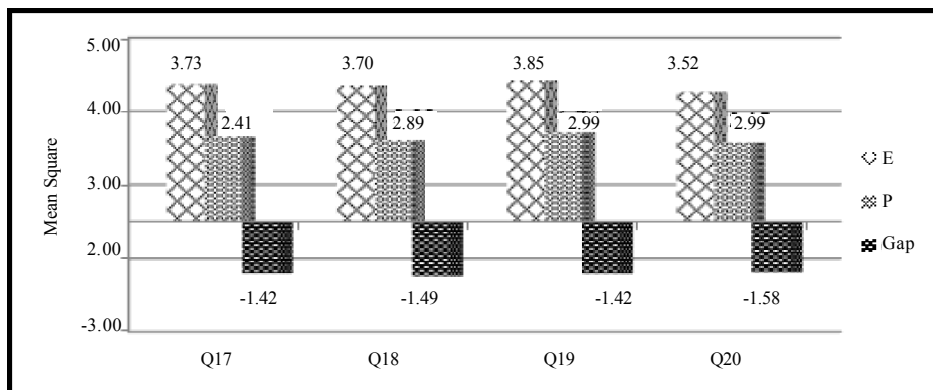

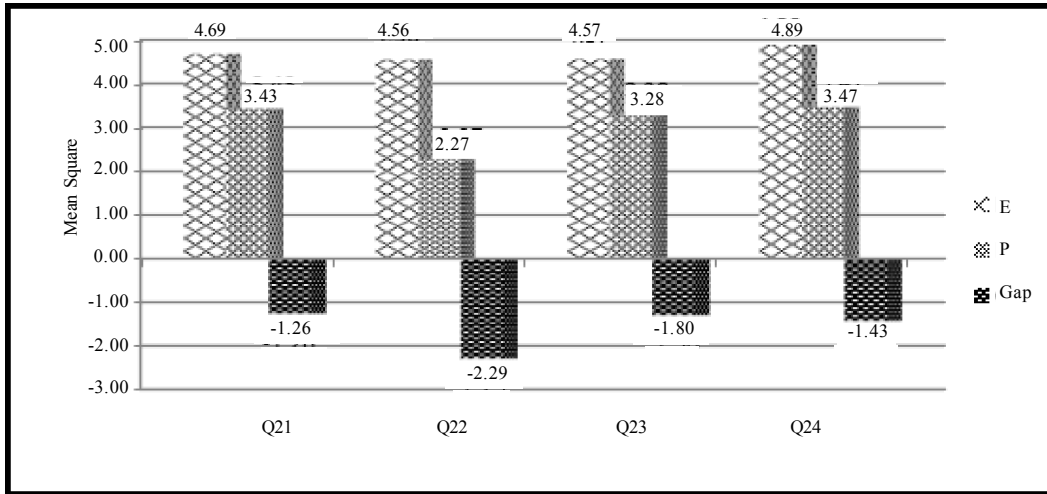**Fig. 3. Expected and perceived responsiveness**

Fig. 4. Expected and perceived assurance

and trust the college staff. The average scores for the perceptions are slightly higher than the middle value of 3.0, indicating that there is some degree of satisfaction with the manner in which FET college employees conduct and deliver service, but that it is not up to students' expectations. The largest gap (-2.29) was for Question 22 ("students feel safe in their transactions"), which refers to the safety levels that respondents feel when dealing with the FET College staff. It is important to note that this dimension was the second largest gap across all five dimensions.

Empathy

Zeithaml et al. (2006: 195) and Phiri and Mcwabe (2013) maintain that empathy is the ability to experience another's feeling as one's own. Empathy is the organisation's ability to provide caring and personalised attention, and includes features such as approachability, sensitivity and the ability to understand another's needs (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003: 193). The provision of this dimension includes access at any time, honest communication and understanding of students' problems. Figure 5 shows that,
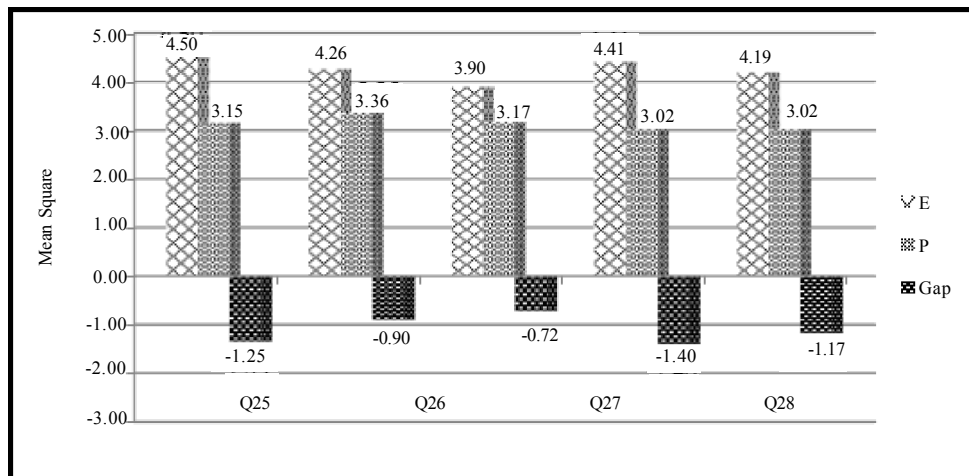

Fig. 5. Expected and perceived empathy

again, expectations are reasonably high (only "have employees who give students personal attention" scored below 4.0) and considerably higher than perceptions. However, this dimension has the smallest average gap at -1.11, across all five dimensions. This implies that respondents believe that employees show some empathy, but there is still some level of dissatisfaction in the employees' approach towards the respondents.

Comparison of Dimensions: Overall Expected and Perceived Gap Scores

Table 5 indicates that the expectations of the offerings at FET colleges rate Tangibles and Assurance as the highest, with scores of 4.69 and 4.68, while Responsiveness is lowest at 3.70. For the dimensions relating to perception, Tangibles is highest with a score of 3.18, while Responsiveness is lowest with a score of 2.28. Looking at the gap scores, Reliability had the highest gap of -1.59, while Empathy has the lowest gap of -1.11. The low Reliability may not be due to lack of staff competence but to inconsistency between what is externally communicated (promised) and what the service delivery system is actually able to provide. It should be noted that the gaps for all dimensions are negative and relatively high, indicating an overall lack of satisfaction and therefore a need for management action.

Table 5: Overall expected and perceived gap scores

Dimensions	E	P	Gap (P-E)	Rank
Tangibles	4.69	3.18	-1.51	3
Reliability	4.36	2.77	-1.59	1
Responsiveness	3.70	2.28	-1.42	4
Assurance	4.68	3.11	-1.57	2
Empathy	4.25	3.14	-1.11	5

This overall lack of satisfaction is not unexpected as much of the literature on service quality in higher education has shown similar negative gaps between expectation and perceptions, especially in developing countries such as India (Palli and Mamilla 2012), Singapore (Min and Khoon 2014), South Africa (Govender et al. 2012; Veerasamy et al. 2013) and Ghana (Anwowie et al. 2015). This generally negative attitude to FET colleges is also reflected in the declining numbers of students registering at these colleges in South Africa (van Rensburg 2016).

DISCUSSION

The study set out to meet two objectives, which will be discussed below:

Objective 1: To Identify Expectations and Perceptions of Students towards FET Colleges

As presented in Figures 1 to 5 and Tables 4 and 5, the measures for expectations and perceptions for each dimension, and their related gap scores, reflect high levels of expectations, but mediocre levels of perception. It thus appears that colleges are being "oversold" to potential students, and that their experiences at the colleges are not meeting what was promised: possibly in advertising, promotional material, career days, etc. The largest gaps are where the biggest "wins" in terms of improvements can be achieved. These are highlighted in the following conclusions relating to each dimension.

The *tangibility* dimension is used by students to evaluate the quality of services. Tangibles include a wide variety of issues such as carpeting, desks, lighting, wall colours, brochures, correspondence and staff appearance. The gap for this dimension of -1.51 indicates dissatisfaction with the tangible aspects of the colleges. The largest gap (-2.47) in this dimension was related to inadequate physical facilities, which were seen as unappealing and failed to attract students. This could be caused by unprofessional management of the tangibility aspects on the campus.

The *reliability* dimension refers to the ability to deliver on the service organization's promise and to resolve service problems experienced by students. Reliable staff perform the promised service dependably and accurately. However, this dimension had the largest gap (-1.59), indicating the highest level of dissatisfaction with FET colleges. The largest gap (-2.05) in this dimension was related to the colleges' failure to provide the service promised, at the time they promised. This implies that staff did not perform the service dependably and accurately, as promised. This might be due to deliberate, or unintentional, overpromising by college advertisements.

The *responsiveness* dimension refers to the willingness and readiness of staff to attend to students' requests, questions, complaints and problems. Responsive staff make an effort to help students and provide a prompt response.

This dimension had the second lowest gap score (-1.42), with the largest gap (-1.49) in this dimension related to the failure of staff to give prompt attention and service to help students. This implies that staff were viewed as ineffective in providing service and generally failing to respond promptly. This might be due to poor working procedures and/or ineffective supervision by managers.

The *assurance* dimension refers to the knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to inspire confidence in the students. It is a critical aspect of services in which students face a high level of risk or feel uncertain about their ability to evaluate the service, which is a key aspect of selecting an educational college. In the case of FET colleges, trust and confidence can be built during recruitment, selection and registration, and during lectures. This dimension had the second highest gap score (-1.57), with the largest gap (-2.29) in this dimension relating to the level of safety that students feel when dealing with their college. This implies that an acceptable level of trustworthiness and confidence was not achieved by the colleges.

The *empathy* dimension refers to the ability to experience another's feelings as one's own and includes features such as approachability, sensitivity and understanding the needs of others, and providing access at any time, honest communication and an understanding of students' problems. The overall gap for this dimension was the lowest at -1.11, implying that there are some good relationships between staff and students. The largest gap in this dimension (-1.40) revolved around students feeling that the college did not have their best interests at heart. Overall, students believe that FET colleges show some empathy but there is still some dissatisfaction with the colleges' approach towards students.

Objective 2: To Identify Positive and Negative Factors Influencing Perceptions of FET Colleges

All 22 of the factors identified from the literature review, and included in the SERVQUAL questionnaire, returned negative gap scores, and so it can be concluded that all factors that influence students' perceptions about FET colleges are negative. From this point of view, FET college management should pay attention to im-

proving all aspects of their customer service. However, this is not very helpful, and it would be worthwhile to identify which are the worst, and which are the best, factors in terms of their gap scores. The 'worst factors' have already been highlighted and discussed relative to Objective 1 above. The 'best factors', although having negative gap scores, are the 'least bad', and in some cases are quite good, despite not meeting expectations (maybe the expectations are unreasonable?) These more 'positive factors' are:

For *tangibles*, 'an excellent college will be neat-appearing' has a relatively high score of P = 3.95, with a gap score of only -0.34. It is comforting to note that two other factors are also above the mid-point in this dimension.

For *reliability*, all perceptions were below the mid-point (3.00), but 'on error free records' and 'perform the service right the first time' were best at P = 2.99, with gap scores of -1.37 and -1.48 respectively. The majority of respondents really have nothing good to say about this dimension.

For *responsiveness*, all factors were well below the mid-score of 3.00, and so there is little positive that can be said about this dimension. The highest score of only P = -2.43, with a gap of -1.42, was 'college will always be willing to help students', but it must still be noted that the majority of students would not agree with this statement.

For *assurance*, three factors were above the mid-point, with 'college will have the knowledge to answer students' scoring highest with P = 3.47 (gap score of -1.43). Although perceptions are reasonably high, expectations are very high for this dimension.

For *empathy*, all perceptions were above the mid-point, with 'operating hours convenient to all their students' having the highest score of P = 3.36 (gap of only -0.90). This may imply that staff are 'trying their best' in difficult circumstances.

Overall, it appears that the most positive aspects of the FET colleges are their people and their relationships with students, but the most negative aspects revolve around their efficiency and ability to provide a timeous and accurate service in practice

Actions to Convert Negative Gap Scores to Positive Gap Scores.

To Close the 'Tangibility' Gaps

Since the tangible and visual aspects of a college are essential to efficiency as well as to

overall perceptions of the college and the brand, colleges should use tangibles to boost their image and communicate quality service to students. Facilities should be modern, with well-equipped lecture halls and attractive, updated equipment. Employees should have uniforms because the image of the college is also created by staff appearance. Staff should understand the importance of the tangible elements as students are attracted by visual appeal.

To Close the 'Reliability' Gaps

According to Bebko (2001) and Phiri and Mcwabe (2013), reliability is a key dimension used to evaluate the quality gap between service received and service promised during delivery. Staff should understand how important keeping promises is and how dangerous over-promising is. Staff need to use modern communication methods to identify students' needs, and provide these needs consistent with students' expectations of value and quality. Systems should be created to ensure that all the facilities are checked regularly by staff.

To Close the 'Responsiveness' Gaps

Zeithaml et al. (2006) and Phiri and Mcwabe (2013) suggest that service providers should be active, flexible and prompt in volunteering to help the students. Colleges should customize their services for dealing with their students' special needs. Procedures should be established to help staff understand their job responsibilities and their managers' expectations. Staff appraisals should be conducted regularly and any gaps in performance identified – this should assist the college to improve service quality delivered to their students.

To Close the 'Assurance' Gaps

Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2006) stress the importance of politeness, respect and effective communication in building trust and confidence. To counter the dissatisfaction with this dimension, indirect, or non-personal, communication methods such as computer portals would help. Students could view their fees, account balances, examination results and year marks without having to queue for these enquiries. Communication would be improved by being on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Suggestion or complaint mechanisms would enable the voicing of student concerns, which staff currently do not hear.

To Close the 'Empathy' Gaps

FET employees need to improve their approachability and understanding of students' needs, as well as provide open communication to students to boost perceptions of empathy. Training is needed for all staff about programme details such as duration, qualification verification and articulation between Universities and FET colleges. Such courses should be for both lecturing and administration staff. This will enable staff to answer students' questions more effectively. Regular research should be conducted to identify students' changing needs

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the dimensions of service quality at FET colleges in terms of expectations and perceptions, and has identified the key aspects of service quality in terms of the positive and negative factors influencing the perceptions of FET colleges as held by students at these colleges. Although varying 'gaps' have been measured, it was found that in all the factors in all the dimensions, students' expectations exceeded their perceptions of the quality of service received. In other words, none of the service quality factors were deemed to be satisfactory. To overcome these weaknesses and to achieve an acceptable level of student satisfaction, recommendations are provided for system and procedural improvements, staff training, in terms of knowledge and attitude to student requirements, and on-going monitoring and evaluation to ensure continual staff commitment to improvement of service quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FET MANAGEMENT

In order for the above suggested actions to be more than a wish list, specific implementation actions should be instituted. Recommended actions are:
·   A training course for all staff on all aspects of the service quality dimensions to make them aware of their impact on the image of

their college and what they can do to maintain acceptable levels of satisfaction
- Inclusion, as discussion and reporting points at staff meetings, of topics on tangibles and all systems and procedures that impact reliability, responsiveness and assurance. This is necessary to keep these items 'top of mind' and to ensure that staff continually try to improve.
- Review all systems and procedures relative to the 22 questions in the SERVQUAL questionnaire to ensure that current systems and procedures are not unintendedly promoting low levels of service quality.
- Develop modern communication methods such as computer portals and use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) to enable students to indirectly find the information they seek.
- Induction training for new staff, and regular refresher training for established staff, on the day-to-day issues and queries raised by students. This is to ensure that all staff are knowledgeable and skilled in answering questions about the problems that students experience. It will result in students receiving fast, accurate and helpful advice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although the sample covered a number of different FET colleges, it is recommended that similar research be conducted in other provinces in South Africa to confirm these findings and to be able to generalize the results to the whole of South Africa. This research should also be repeated in the KZN province as students' expectations and perceptions are constantly changing. It is also important to note that, during the data collection, students wanted to express their feelings more appropriately, and thus a qualitative study, involving in-depth interviews, would be valuable.

Future studies that will consider other factors and other types of colleges are also recommended, for example, part-time students, distance-learning students, Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) students and students with disabilities, which were excluded from this study. Future research could also approach the service quality problem from a different angle, namely researching FET college employees' (particularly administration and lecturing staff)

perceptions and expectations towards FET college management. This could be important in assessing internal communication breakdown with the aim of improving the service quality dimension in the FET sector.

LIMITATIONS

As with all empirical research, the present study had certain limitations. Since data was obtained from only six FET colleges in only the KZN province, the information and results cannot be generalised to the whole of South Africa. However, the researchers are confident that the findings are representative of the KZN province. This is because the colleges included were located both in urban and rural areas, they have a variety of types of respondents, they offer both new and old curricula and each campus differs in terms of delivery sites or campuses (some have a larger numbers of campuses and some have less). A further limitation is that the study was restricted to full-time students of 18 years and older - therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all FET students, as the opinions of younger students could be different.

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