

An Investigation into Service Quality Delivery at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT As the global economy battles through the credit crunch, universities too, are under pressure to attract students. The way forward in these difficult economic times is for universities to become more market driven and position themselves using quality of their services as a major competitive advantage. In this paper researchers explore how service quality provided by the University of KwaZulu-Natal is perceived by staff, and strategies that may attract students using high levels of service quality offered. The study was conducted using a cross sectional design involving academic and support staff at the University of KwaZulu Natal. The main objective was to identify staff's perceptions of service quality offered at the university. Since academic and support staff are primary deliverers of the different aspects of the tertiary education service provided to the students, it is important to examine their views on service quality. Staff reported that the university needs to set itself apart from all others by strategically providing high quality service that is reliable, tangible, empathetic, assuring and responsive to students.

INTRODUCTION

As service marketing has evolved over time, more research has been conducted on the quality paradigm and how it impacts on the customer. Since tertiary education forms part of service marketing, it is important to identify its quality variables and understand how it affects students and staff within the university environment. Damme (2001) and Hoffman (2006) argue that service quality offers a way of achieving success among competing services. The other debate surrounding quality is that the university as an organisation needs to identify quality within its strategy. For instance, in order for the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) to be recognised as an institution of learning with high quality of excellence, it needs to have an organisation culture that embraces high service quality

at all levels within the institution. In order for both academic and support staff to deliver consistent satisfying experiences, excellent quality should form the building block to facilitate in providing these satisfying experiences to students. To deliver quality services and enhance the overall learning experience within the tertiary environment, management and their staff within the university need to understand the students and their expectations for the service being delivered (Welman et al. 2005; Asubonteng 2006). Here customer demographics, their behavioural patterns and understanding how to communicate the service experience to them effectively needs to be recognised by staff as they are the ones who interact with students during the delivery process of the service.

However this is not as simple as it seems because students are different in their perceptions and thus many times than not require individual attention by staff members. Also communicating to a diversity of students from different cultures, races and ethnicities adds to the complexity (Soutar 1996; Avdjieva and Wilson 2002). This study is crucial for a number of reasons. Interest in service quality has found its way into the higher education arena in South Africa and the University of KwaZulu-Natal is also affect-

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ed. The main reason for this interest is the fact that in many parts of the world, the environment within which higher education institutions operate has become increasingly competitive and difficult to cope with. The globalisation of markets has brought about an increase in the number of tertiary institutions in many countries, and this has resulted in intense competition for students among higher education providers (Abdullah 2006).

To make matters worse, many higher education institutions have to contend with reduced government funding and a system of funding that is linked to institutional performance. In addition, there have been calls by certain quarters for higher education institutions to employ the management practices of the private sector in order to become more efficient and competitive (Cameron and Tschirhart 1992; Lagrosen et al. 2004).

The escalation of tuition costs has also contributed to the problem as it causes fee-paying students to become more selective, critical and demanding. Dissatisfied students terminate their studies prematurely, switch institutions and/or impart negative word-of-mouth recommendations to potential students (Ford et al. 1993; Joseph and Joseph 1997). Of particular concern is the latter, as word-of-mouth recommendation plays a significant role in determining students' choice of institution. On the other hand, student satisfaction has been shown to have a profound influence on student motivation, student retention, the successful recruitment of potential students, and the ability to attract funds (Cheng 1990; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001). It is thus crucial for higher education institutions of higher education to focus on service quality as a form of strategic weapon in gaining competitive differentiation.

Thus, this study is an initial step towards achieving excellence in service quality by providing a practical basis for service quality investigation and by addressing the gap between expected service and perceived service that influence staff's perceptions of service quality. The Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model and GAP Model measure these gaps. The study will also provide the University of KwaZulu-Natal with the necessary information for studying its strengths and weaknesses in service quality provision, and in deciding on the type of quality improvement programme(s) to embark on.

In a nutshell, this study aims to highlight how staff perceives service quality within the University of KwaZulu-Natal by gaining insights into staff perception of quality service and compare academic and administrative staff's perceptions and thereafter identify any necessary gaps in service quality.

Research Objectives

In light of the above, this study sought to examine whether high levels of service quality within a tertiary institution such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal contribute to making this institution marketable, desirable and attractive to perspective undergraduate and post-graduate learners. Of particular concern were the research objectives:

- To assess the University of KwaZulu-Natal's service quality and its ability to make the service offering marketable, desirable and attractive to its students.
- To identify models of service quality that may apply to tertiary institutions.
- To assess the SERVQUAL model and identify gaps in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's service delivery.
- To ascertain how staff perceive their quality of service offerings delivered to students in their campuses.
- To analyse the results of an empirical survey undertaken amongst staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and to report thereon.

Theoretical and Conceptual Roots of Service Quality

The concept of quality has different meanings and this has created the debate surrounding the area of "quality" research. Quality dimensions within the tertiary institution gives rise to several issues. For instance, quality is viewed in terms of well skilled academic staff, programme offering and its value and relevance to the labour market, good facilities, equipment and lecture and recreational venues (Lovelock et al. 2007). The debate includes the issue of quality in terms of good administration staff, safety of the students at campus, research output, scholarships and funding facilities available to students within campuses, ranking of the university within the country, and global recognition of

the university and the universities commitment to international student enrolments (Fisk et al. 2004).

Universities compete for the same top students both nationally and internationally each year. In order for a student to choose that university, the university needs to set itself apart from all the others. Universities can do this strategically by providing top quality services. A student should be viewed as a service receiver (Ford et al. 1993). Service quality therefore to a "service receiver" can mean many things, namely, by the university being a world ranked tertiary institution of learning, having a well-established faculty, being well recognised within South Africa and the community within which it resides, providing degrees and diplomas that are market related and in tune with the labour force requirement within the economy, and providing adequate funding and scholarships to students. The institution should also have well recognised and highly skilled academics and efficient administration staff that have the students best interests at heart and should be able to provide a safe learning environment with well-equipped lecture venues and laboratories. All these are but a few distinguishing characteristics of high quality service that can set a university apart from others (Naidoo 2011).

If looked at closely, quality should permeate through the whole service experience students have during their time at campus. When looking at quality within the tertiary institution, Harvey (2003) argued that quality can be viewed as exceptional, perfection, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative. Lovelock et al. (2007), state that the word quality means different things to different people and discusses several perspectives on quality. According to Lovelock et al. (2007), the transcendent view of quality is synonymous with innate excellence: a mark of uncompromising standards and high achievement. This viewpoint is often applied to the performing and visual arts and argues that people learn to recognise quality only through the experience gained from repeated exposure. From a practical standpoint, however, suggesting that managers or customers will know quality when they see it is not very helpful.

From the product-based approach, Lovelock et al. (2007) view quality as a precise and measurable variable. Differences in quality, they ar-

gue, reflect differences in the amount of an ingredient or attribute possessed by the product. Since this view is totally objective, it fails to account for differences in the tastes, needs, and preferences of individual customers.

In their user-based definitions, Cheng (1990) and Bateson (1991) argue that quality lies in the eyes of the beholder. These definitions equate quality with maximum satisfaction. This subjective, demand-orientated perspective recognises that different customers have different wants and needs. On the other hand, Lovelock et al. (2007)'s manufacturing-based approach is supply-based, and concerned primarily with engineering and manufacturing practices. This approach focuses on conformance to internally developed specifications, which are often driven by productivity and cost-containment goals.

The conformance approach is followed by the value-based definitions that describe quality in terms of value and price. By considering the trade-off between performance and price, quality comes to be defined as "affordable excellence" (Lovelock et al. 2007:411). However, Bateman (1992:494) argued that service quality is more difficult to evaluate than goods quality. The actual fact that a good can be physically seen, tasted or touched makes it easier for the service user to ascertain its quality. Therefore, the intangible nature of university service makes it difficult for students to immediately conclude on whether the service is of a high quality or not. In agreement, Fisk et al. (2004) said that customers evaluate services differently from physical goods because services tend to be inherently low in search characteristics but high in experience and credence characteristics. Search characteristics are attributes we can evaluate before a purchase, for example the colour of a car and its engine capacity.

Thus, experience characteristics are attributes that can be evaluated only during or after consumption for instance, registration into university the student can only comment about the experience during and after the consumption process. To add to the complexity of evaluating services, Kurtz et al. (1998) argue that credence characteristics are difficult to evaluate even if after the service is complete. Consumer services such as funeral services and education are examples.

Lovelock and Wirtz (2007), state that service quality is a measure of how well the service level

delivered matches customer expectations. Delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis. According to Kurtz et al. (1998), to evaluate the quality of services customers compare the service they received with the service they expected. If service quality were to be calculated mathematically, the formula would be P-E, with P being the customers perceived level of service received and E being consumer expectations prior to the service encounter. A negative number would indicate that expectations were not met. A zero would indicate consumer expectations were met. A positive number would indicate consumer expectations were exceeded.

Another important debate put forward by theorists is the link between quality and customer satisfaction. According to Fisk et al. (2004), quality creates a chain reaction with regard to loyalty and customer inclination to establish enduring relationships with service providers. Therefore, it seems the greater the level of customer satisfaction, the stronger the link between the customer and the provider. In the case of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, if it were to provide high quality services to students then the service delivery link between customer and service organisation would be established. If staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal understands their loyal customers, this thus puts them in a favourable position to provide high quality services thus strengthening the service delivery link between the loyal student population and the university.

Zeithaml et al. (2009) argues that customer satisfaction is influenced by specific product or service features, perceptions of product and service quality, and price. From the above argument put forward by Zeithaml and her colleagues it can be clearly seen that perceptions on service quality does have a direct bearing on the end result of customer satisfaction.

According to Kasper (2006), quality in simple terms refers to some attribute of what is offered, provided, produced whereas satisfaction or dissatisfaction refers to a customers reaction to that offer. In this sense they are separate; quality is something that an organisation is responsible for, whereas satisfaction is in the customer's domain, an experience. However, these two concepts are clearly related in that customer response, satisfaction or dissatisfaction might be used as a means of assessing whether quality has been delivered.

Hoffman and Bateman (2006) argue that customer satisfaction is a short-term, transaction-specific measure, whereas service quality is an attitude formed by long-term, overall evaluation of performance. Hoffman and Bateman (2006:33) further state that customer satisfaction and service quality are intertwined. Some believe that customer satisfaction leads to perceived service quality, while others believe that service quality leads to customer satisfaction (Fisk et al. 2004; Kasper 2006). For the purpose of this study service quality leads to customer satisfaction.

According to Brink et al. (2004) customers perceive services in terms of quality of services provided and the satisfaction attained. These two concepts, service quality and customer satisfaction, are the focus of attention of organisations because they want to quantify or measure it. The reason for the focus on quality of service and customer satisfaction is the belief that organisations can differentiate themselves by means of providing better service quality and overall customer satisfaction.

There are various models of service quality which include; the Disconfirmation of Expectations Model developed by Oliver (1997), the Nordic Model developed by Gronroos (2007); the SERVQUAL and Gaps Model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1991, 1994) and the Three Component developed by Rust and Oliver (1994). However, for the purposes of this study only the SERVQUAL and Gaps model will be discussed.

Zeithaml et al. (2009) developed the SERVQUAL Model to measure customer satisfaction with various aspects of service quality. According to Lovelock et al. (2007), in its basic form the SERVQUAL Model contains a scale of 22 perceptions items and a series of expectation items, reflecting the five dimensions of service quality namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Tangibles

These are the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of staff (Rasli et al. 2012). According to Bennett et al. (2002) strategies relevant to managing the tangibility of services include: considering the impact of the servicescape, including buildings, interior, exterior, furniture, equipment, and colours; and giving customers tangible items as a record of the service

transaction, for example brochures, business cards, receipts and documents.

Reliability

A study by Rasli et al. (2012) refers to reliability as the firm's ability to deliver a promised service dependably and accurately. According to Bennett et al. (2002) useful strategies for ensuring reliability of the core service include; understanding customers' needs and wants through market research, developing systems and procedures that standardise service production to ensure that the core service delivered are reliable and consistent to ensure that the promises made in marketing communication are realistic and achievable, and managing customer expectations of the reliability of the service.

Responsiveness

This is the service provider's willingness to help customers and provide prompt service (Rasli et al. 2012). Bennett et al. (2002) argue that strategies aimed at increasing responsiveness include: individualising the service as much as possible; determining how the service process and outcome are viewed by the customers; implementing standard procedures to maximise responsiveness to service situations that may occur reasonably regularly; training staff well so that they can respond when necessary; developing procedure manuals to help staff respond to customer questions, complaints and requests; and ensuring that customers do not have to wait too long for assistance or to receive the service.

Assurance

This construct signifies the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence (Rasli et al. 2012). According to Bennett et al. (2002), strategies useful for assuring customers and reducing the perceived risk associated with the purchase and consumption of services include: creating trust and confidence through the knowledge and skills of contact personnel; creating continuity of service staff; creating an organisation-wide image that reflects the core values of the organisation; building a strong corporate brand image; and using cues such as employee dress,

appearance of the interior and exterior of the firm, employee attitudes, visible qualifications and credentials, and pleasant surroundings to reassure the customer.

Empathy

This construct is demonstrated by giving caring, individualised attention to customers (Rasli et al. 2012). Bennett et al. (2002) states that strategies that can be used by service firms to show empathy include: tailoring service offerings to individual customers; making customers feel important by developing long-term relationships; making customers feel important by responding to their needs and understanding their concerns; training staff to be empathetic towards the needs of customers; and training staff to know customers by name and by their service needs.

Even with criticisms of using the SERVQUAL instrument, Hittman (1993) strongly suggests that there is merit in using this model as it not only evaluates the teaching component of the tertiary institution, but includes aspects of the total service environment experienced by the student.

According to Solomon (1993), total quality within tertiary institutions is much wider and deeper than a quality assurance system. It involves a change of mindset. Soutar (1996) indicates that there would appear to be merit in evaluating the performance of tertiary education institutions with a service marketing instrument such as SERVQUAL. Hittman (1993) suggests that the SERVQUAL Model would seem rational to use as it does not only evaluate the teaching component of a tertiary institution, but also includes aspects of the total service environment as experienced by the student.

The GAP Model was developed by Zeithmal, Berry and Parasuraman and identified four potential gaps within the service organisation (Zeithmal et al. 2009). Metters (2006) and Rasli et al. (2012) conducted studies in several industry sectors to develop and refine SERVQUAL to quantify customers' global assessment of a company's service quality. Their model is commonly known as the GAP Model. Their scale involved expectations-perceptions gaps scores along five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. When Zeithmal et al. (2009) asked more than 1,900 customers of

five nationally known companies to allocate 100 points across the five service quality dimensions, they averaged as follows: reliability 32%, responsiveness 22%, assurance 19%, empathy 16%, and tangibles 11%. Though customers consistently reported that their most important quality dimension was reliability, this area seems to be where many service companies fail. The SERVQUAL Model conceptualizes service quality on the basis of the differences between customer's expectations with respect to the five dimensions and their perceptions of what was actually delivered. When a difference exists, it is characterized as a 'gap'. The model was fashioned after remarkably consistent patterns emerged from the study's interviews. Though some perceptions about service quality were specific to the industries selected, commonalities among the industries prevailed. The commonalities suggested that a general model of service could be developed. The most important insight obtained from analysing the responses was that a set of key discrepancies or gaps exists regarding perceptions of service quality and the tasks associated with service delivery to customers.

Kasper et al. (2006) discuss in detail the GAP Model as follows:

- **GAP1:** refers to consumer expectation-management perception gap. In formulating its service delivery policy management does not correctly perceive or interpret consumer expectations.
- **GAP2:** this is management perceptions-service quality specifications gap. Management does not correctly translate the service policy into rules and guidelines for employees.
- **GAP3:** is the service quality specifications-service delivery gap. Employees do not correctly translate rules and guidelines into action.
- **GAP4:** refers to service delivery-external communications gap. External communications promises made to customers-do not match the actual service delivery.

Bennett et al. (2002), says the GAP Model emphasises that managers must understand what customers expect from the service experience. They must also understand the barriers that prevent the firm meeting the needs of its customers.

Researchers in this current study agree with Bennett et al. (2002) that within tertiary institutions if one were to identify the gaps in the service delivery process one may then draw valuable insight into improving overall service quality within the tertiary institution environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was mainly guided by the quantitative paradigm as it was interested in numbers and measuring service quality and gaps. Researchers were interested in service quality variables and endeavouring to show the difference in the service quality gaps scores in the population of academic and administrative staff. Thus, the nature of the research problem determined the methodology used. Variables of service quality needed to be measured for the purpose of quantitative analysis. Data concerning research variables were collected using secondary and primary research methods; literature review and questionnaire, respectively.

Literature Review

Researchers collected literature study of the most recent texts, papers, journals articles, University of KwaZulu-Natal documents and Government Acts. The literature survey provided a foundation on which researchers developed a theoretical framework for looking at the problem in a more useful and creative way (Cavana et al. 2002). This, in turn helped to develop testable research questions that substantiated the theory underpinning this study.

Quantitative Methodology

A survey was designed with the purpose of collecting information from staff on their perceptions of service quality within the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A self-administered questionnaire was administered to staff within all five campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, namely, Westville campus, Nelson Mandela Medical School, Howard College, Pietermaritzburg campus and Edgewood campus.

Questionnaire Design

A 5 Point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire design. This scale was named after the

originator, Renis Likert, who developed this scale in his doctoral thesis. Hair et al. (2008) argues that the Likert scale is best for research design that is used in self-administered surveys, personal interviews or online surveys. Researchers in this study used the Likert scale because it was compatible to the research design used in the self-administered survey.

After taking into consideration the various arguments on closed and open-ended questions, when designing the questionnaire for the study, researchers opted to use closed-ended questions. The questionnaire used was also adapted to the quality dimensions peculiar to tertiary education environment. Naidoo (2013) in her study developed the questionnaire by adapting it to the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1998). The five quality dimensions formulated by Parasuraman et al. (1990) were adapted to the study. Five quality dimensions adapted are:

- **Tangibles:** that included the physical components of the service. For example the seating, lighting of lecture venues and so on.
- **Reliability:** dependability of service provider and accuracy of performance.
- **Responsiveness:** promptness and helpfulness of staff at the university.
- **Assurance:** knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence in the students at the university.
- **Empathy:** caring, individualised attention the firm gives its students.

Target Population

Researchers identified the population as all staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This included academic and non-academic, permanent and contract staff totalling 4170 staff at the five campuses (UKZN Annual Report 2007). According to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Human Resources Office, total full time and part time academic staff were 1494 and total support and administrative staff were 2676 (UKZN Human Resource Office 2010).

Sampling Method

Convenience sampling technique was employed to determine the study sample. The researchers had the freedom to choose staff that

were willing to participate in the survey. Hence the term “convenience sampling”. The researchers went campus to campus and door to door and asked staff from both academic and support if they would like to participate in the survey. The survey was run at all five campuses. Since issuing the questionnaire to staff proved difficult, staff were also telephoned and when they agreed to participate in the survey, the questionnaire was then e-mailed or posted to them respectively.

Sample Size

The sample size for the study was arrived at using Krejcie and Morgans tables. There were 354 academic and non-academic staff from Westville, Howard, Edgewood, the Medical School and Pietermaritzburg campus that made up the sample. The figure 354 was arrived at using Krejcie and Morgan’s tables. According to Krejcie and Morgan’s tables, for a population of 4170 staff at the university, the sample size drawn was 354 (Cavana et al. 2002). A total of 290 (82%) questionnaires were collected. Out of this, 31 questionnaires (9%) were spoilt and could not be included in the survey. The remaining 259 (73%) of the completed questionnaires were included in the survey. The response rate for the survey on staff was good, it being 73%.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics techniques. The mean was used to measure central tendencies and the standard deviation used to measure variation of the responses of the subjects. To ascertain whether the parametric or non-parametric tests should be used in the study, a Normality test was first conducted by researchers. The test 1 Sample Kolmogorov Smirnov was used and showed that the data did not follow a normal distribution. Thus the reasoning behind the researchers choosing non-parametric statistics was because the distribution scores were excessively asymmetrical. Therefore, the following non-parametric statistics were employed in the study, namely the Man Whitney U test.

Ethical Considerations

All standard ethical procedures were followed, with particular sensitivity to issues of

confidentiality and anonymity, given the focus on staff's perceptions of service quality. Ethical clearance was obtained through the University of KwaZulu-Natal research ethics committee. All participants were provided with information sheets detailing the aims of the research and the research process. These information sheets were provided to the participants directly. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and were aware that they could withdraw from this research at any time without negative consequences. There were no existing power relations between the researcher and participants that could be perceived as coercive. Written consent was obtained from participants before commencement of data collection. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in the research reporting and by changing specific contextual details that could have revealed the identity of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The measures of central tendency (Means= M) and dispersion (Standard Deviation= SD) for the service quality dimensions (expectations and perceptions) in respect of staff are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows low level of Reliability ($M=3.3751$). Reliability refers to the firm's ability to deliver a promised service dependably and accurately (Parasuraman et al. 1991). The reliability service quality dimension had the lowest ranking by staff in the study. This could be so because staff does not understand students' needs and wants so well and this requires management to have a more thorough market research

conducted on its students. This may also be attributed to lack of systems and procedures developed that standardise service production to ensure that the core service, academic teaching, is delivered as reliably and consistently as possible. This would ensure that the promises made in marketing communication are realistic and achievable. Since academic freedom is valued, forcing academics to conform to a standardized curriculum is unacceptable as learning should be explored in all its forms. Secondly, having standardized courses across all degrees is not possible, because medicine and management require different assessment and teaching methods respectively.

The ranking of the variations in responses from the highest to the lowest showed the following; Reliability ($SD=1.03411$), Responsiveness ($SD=0.90706$), Empathy ($SD=0.82404$), Tangibles ($SD=0.79209$) and Assurance ($SD=.75747$). Whilst the highest variation was recorded for the Reliability quality dimension, the minimum and maximum scores indicate that for all the dimensions some subjects strongly disagreed that these service quality dimensions were present (Min=1.00 for all quality dimension variables except Assurance Min=1.07), others strongly agreed (Max=5.00) for all quality dimension variables except for Assurance (Max=5.33). Table 2 indicates the Gap scores for staff respondents.

The Gap scores for staff are indicative of the difference between their respective perceptions and expectations of UKZN's service quality in respect of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. Table 2 illustrates that the Gap scores for the staff respondents are all negative. This indicates that staff respondents' expectations far exceeded their perceptions.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics-staff dimensions

<i>Staff respondents</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Tangibles expectation	257	2.53	5.00	4.3582	.54135
Reliability expectation	257	2.20	5.00	4.4000	.59948
Responsiveness expectation	257	1.00	5.00	4.4066	.60559
Empathy expectation	257	2.20	5.00	4.2498	.59635
Assurance expectation	257	2.53	5.00	4.5764	.57537
Tangibles perception	257	1.00	5.00	3.5274	.79209
Reliability perception	257	1.00	5.00	3.3751	1.03411
Responsiveness perception	257	1.00	5.00	3.4689	.90706
Empathy perception	257	1.00	5.00	3.6047	.82404
Assurance perception	257	1.07	5.00	3.8283	.75747

Source: Naidoo 2013:140; article published by one of the authors.

Table 2: The gap scores for staff respondents

<i>Staff respondents</i>	<i>Gap scores</i>
Tangibles GAP score (P-E)	-0.8309
Reliability GAP score (P-E)	-1.0249
Responsiveness GAP score (P-E)	-0.9377
Empathy GAP score (P-E)	-0.6451
Assurance GAP score (P-E)	-0.7481
Overall GAP score (P-E)	-0.8374

Source: Naidoo 2011:10; article published by one of the authors.

The negative Gap scores are an indication that the staff are very dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by the UKZN. The findings concur with the argument put forward by Kurtz et al. (1998) who explained that to evaluate the quality of services; customers would compare the service they received with the service they expected. If service quality were to be calculated mathematically, the formula would be P-E, with P being the customers perceived level of service received and E being consumer expectations prior to the service encounter. A negative number would indicate that expectations were not met. A zero would indicate consumer expectations were met. A positive number would indicate consumer expectations were exceeded. From Table 2 the highest Gap scores rated by staff was Reliability (-1.0249); followed by Responsiveness (-0.9377); Tangibles (-0.8309); Assurance (-.7481); and Empathy (-0.6451).

Implications for Management

It was important that high levels of service quality permeate within all levels of the University of KwaZulu-Natal structures. Since service quality can be a major determinant in attracting students then management have to take the concept of service quality and apply these dimensions to all levels of the service delivery processes (Naidoo 2011). This is a complicated task as staff at various levels within the University of KwaZulu-Natal is involved in the delivery process. From processing new student applications, to registration, orientation, teaching, library services, and residential services staff within all these service structures need to understand what is required of them in the delivery of high levels of quality services.

To improve service quality staff need to first understand what is required from them in terms

of quality aspirations. Proper guidelines on quality need to be drawn up by management and sent to all levels within the university. Putting the students first, being professional in the service encounter, understanding students' queries and dealing with their complaints in an amicable manner should be included in staff's job descriptions.

The five dimensions of quality must be included in staff training to improve service quality across all levels of university structures. Applying Bennette et al.'s (2002) strategies to managing services within the University of KwaZulu-Natal, researchers in this study propose the following strategic recommendations for the five dimensions of quality:

Strategies to Ensure Tangibles Management

The University of KwaZulu-Natal should consider the impact of the service scape, including campus buildings, interior, exterior, furniture, equipment, colours, lecture venues, computer lanes and library facilities. Students should be given tangible items such as a record of the service transaction, for example the University of KwaZulu-Natal brochures, business cards, receipts, documents and timely statements of account.

Plans to Ensure Reliability of the Service

There is need to understand student's needs and wants by conducting up to date market research. Systems and procedures standardise service production should be developed to ensure that the service is delivered as reliably and consistently as possible. This could be implemented in the support and administration service sector of the university.

The University of Kwa-Zulu Natal should ensure that promises made to students in marketing communication are realistic and achievable to help students make informed decisions. This will help to manage students' expectations of the reliability of the service. It is imperative that the University should have up to date information on the degrees and curriculum at hand. The University management should also work with government and other trade agencies to understand the needs in the economy and structure their degrees and for these jobs in the South African and global economy respectively (Naidoo 2011).

Strategies to Increase Responsiveness

It is important for the University to individualise or customise the service offered to students as much as possible. This is not possible for academic services, but support and administrative services can adapt this paradigm. There is also need to establish how the service process and outcome are viewed by students. This can be done by implementing standard procedures to maximise responsiveness to service situations that may occur reasonably regularly. This should be accompanied by effective training of staff so that they can respond when necessary. Procedure manuals should be developed to help staff respond to student questions, complaints and requests. This will ensure that students do not have to wait too long to receive service.

Strategies to Promote Assurance

There is need to foster assurance among students and reduce the perceived risk associated with the purchase and consumption of services at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This may be achieved by creating trust and confidence through the knowledge and skills of contact personnel and continuity of service staff (Naidoo 2011). This may be augmented by creating an organisation-wide image that reflects the core values of the university and building a strong corporate brand image. The University should deliberately use cues such as employee dress, appearance of the interior and exterior of the university, employee attitudes, visible qualifications and credentials, and pleasant surroundings to reassure the customer.

Strategies to Show Empathy

The University should tailor service offerings to individual students. This could apply well to the post-graduate masters and doctoral students. This may make students feel important and help to develop long-term relationships with the University (see also Naidoo 2011). It is important that students should be made to feel valuable by responding to their needs and understanding their concerns. Staff should be trained to be empathetic towards the needs of students. For example, staff should be trained to know students by name and by their service needs.

CONCLUSION

When marketing its programmes the University of KwaZulu-Natal should place service quality as an integral part of its service offering made to its students. If taken a step further, excellent service quality could be the university's competitive advantage as it sets it apart from other universities and makes it more distinguished and highly in demand by the students. This study found low levels of perceptions in terms of service quality assurance including competence, courtesy, credibility and security; and very low perceptions of service quality of physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel. There were considerable high levels of perceptions in terms of reliability and responsiveness of the service quality offered. Even then, there is still need for the University of KwaZulu-Natal to enhance its ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, and to be more willing to help students and provide prompt service, respectively.

The staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal should also be on par with the university's service marketing strategy, by providing high quality services to the students at all levels of the service delivery process. One of the potential benefits from a high quality service is that it creates a competitive advantage for the organisation by insulating customers from competitors. If the service delivered is perceived to be equal or higher quality than that of competitors then there is no motivation for customers to defect regardless of poaching tactics.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was only conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's five campuses namely, Edgewood, Howards, Westville, Nelson Medical School and Pietermaritzburg campuses and the researcher used convenience sampling, so the results of the survey could not be generalised and only pertains to the University of KwaZulu-Natal. These constraints did not deter the researcher from ensuring that data collected was accurate and reliable.

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