A Comparison of Staff and Student Expectations of Service Quality in the UKZN Foundation Programme: Management Implications

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Abstract

Higher Education institutions have been called upon by Government and other stakeholders to address the injustices of the apartheid past through the implementation of access programmes. This, together with the need to increase science graduates, has resulted in access or foundation programmes operating in a more competitive environment. To achieve customer satisfaction in a foundation programme, which is an educational service, managers need to be aware of the beliefs staff have about what is needed for service delivery. What staff believe is important to customers (students in this case) will impact how they behave in the service delivery process. This will ultimately affect the service quality delivered by the University to access students. This research focuses on the Science Foundation Programme (SFP) at University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and takes a services marketing approach.

Staff involved in the service delivery at the point of entry and the SFP students were asked to complete the SERVQUAL questionnaire. The results were compared and showed that while overall the staff expectations met or exceeded those of students, there were 5 statements where the staff expectations of service quality were lower than those of the students. These statements were in the SERVQUAL dimensions of responsiveness, assurance and tangibles.

Overall the lower expectations of the staff indicate that they perceive these factors to be less important than customers do, and are likely to behave accordingly. This will affect perceived service quality on the part of students. There is thus a need to look at ways of addressing these gaps. This can be incorporated into staff training which should also include knowledge of student needs and expectations. Recommendations in the services context are made to the management of SFP at UKZN to ensure student needs are met.

Keywords: Service quality, staff and student expectations, foundation programme, university science access programme, services marketing, SERVQUAL.

Problem Statement, Objectives and Research Questions

De Jager and Du Plooy (2006: 11) state that traditionally, technikons and universities have competed indirectly, whereas they now compete directly, ostensibly for the same market. A number of tertiary educational institutions in South Africa, such as the UKZN, the University of Cape Town, the University of Witwatersrand, and the University of the North offer a variety of programmes to address the call to provide access to previously disadvantaged students. This increased level of competition in the tertiary education environment has led to institutions of higher education employing managerial techniques to improve the efficiency and quality of their provisions and switching from a passive, to a more active marketing approach (De Jager & Du Plooy 2006: 11).

The Science Foundation Programme (SFP) which is part of the Centre for Science Access (CSA) at the UKZN aims to address the needs of disadvantaged learners and provide access for them into science degrees. As a consequence of South Africa's past, these learners are faced with unique socio-economic difficulties. In ensuring customer satisfaction, especially at the point of entry to university which is when students are the most vulnerable, the CSA needs to be aware of the expectations of staff involved in the service delivery at this point and how these compare with their customers, i.e. the students.

The research objectives for this study were thus:

1. To determine the expectations of students in terms of service quality at the point of entry into the UKZN Foundation Programme
2. To determine staff expectations of what the students require for service quality at the point of entry into the UKZN Foundation Programme
3. To determine whether gaps exist between staff and student expectations**.**

Literature Survey

Service Quality

Cateora (2007: 338) states that the focus on quality globally, is driven by increasing competition and more choices which ultimately places the power in the hands of consumers rather than producers. He goes on to state that 'the reason often given for preferring one brand over another is better quality at a competitive price' (339). One of the major ways to differentiate a service firm is to deliver consistently higher-quality service than competitors (Walker & Mullins 2008: 228). Service quality is defined by customers, and relates to the organisation's ability to satisfy customers' needs (Palmer 2005: 261). Service quality dimensions include reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles (Mullins & Walker 2010: 444). According to Walker, Mullins and Larreche (2008: 231) 'the results of a number of surveys suggest that customers perceive all five dimensions of service quality to be very important regardless of the kind of service'.

Measuring Service Quality

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 135) a sound measure of service quality is necessary for identifying the aspects of service needing performance improvement, assessing how much improvement is needed on each aspect, and evaluating the impact of improvement efforts.

One of the first measures to be developed specifically to measure service quality was the SERVQUAL survey (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 135). McColl, Callaghan and Palmer (1998: 155) and Palmer (2005: 269) state that the SERVQUAL technique can be used by companies to understand the

expectations and perceptions of their customers better. 'It is applicable across a broad range of service industries and can be easily modified to take account of the specific requirements of a company. In effect it provides a skeleton for an investigatory instrument that can be adapted or added to as needed' (Palmer 2005: 269).

SERVQUAL is based upon a 22-item questionnaire covering the five dimensions of service quality (Palmer 2005: 269). The five dimensions covered are:

Table 1: Five Dimensions of SERVQUAL

Statements	Dimension	Description of dimension
1 to 5	Reliability	dependability, accurate performance
6 to 9	Responsiveness	promptness and helpfulness
10 to 13	Assurance	competence, courtesy, credibility & security
14 to 17	Empathy	easy access, good communications & customer understanding
18 to 22	Tangibles	appearance of physical elements

(McColl *et al.* 1998: 155; and Ziethaml & Bitner 2003: 136)

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 95) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1990, cited in Lovelock & Wirtz 2007: 421) say that reliability means that the company delivers on its promises, i.e. promises about service provision, problem resolution, delivery and pricing. Customers want to do business with companies that keep their promises, particularly their promises about the service outcomes and core attributes.

Responsiveness is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service (Zeithaml 1990 cited in Walker *et al.* 2008: 230). This dimension emphasises attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customer requests, questions, complaints and problems. Responsiveness is communicated to customers by the length of time they have to wait for

assistance, answers to questions, or attention to problems. Responsiveness also captures the notion of flexibility and ability to customise the service to customer needs (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 97).

Zeithaml *et al.* (1990 cited in Mullins *et al.* 2008: 433) define assurance as employees' knowledge and courtesy and the ability of the firm and its employees to convey trust and confidence. Empathy is defined as the 'caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers' (Zeithaml *et al.* (1990 cited in Walker *et al.* 2008: 230). The essence of empathy is conveying, through personalised or customised service, that customers are unique and special. Customers want to feel understood by, and important to firms that provide service to them.

Tangibles are defined as the 'appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials' (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 98). All of these provide physical representations or images of the service that customers, particularly new customers, will use to evaluate quality.

Customers are asked to complete the 22 statements relating to their expectations and a perceptions section consisting of a matching set of company-specific statements about service delivery (McColl *et al.* 1998: 155). 'They are typically asked to score in each instance, on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree), whether or not they agree with each statement … the outcome from a one-off study is a measure that tells the company whether its customers' expectations are exceeded or not' (Palmer 2005: 269-270).

The People Element of Services

Services have characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability which distinguish them from products and require a different set of elements when marketing them (Palmer 2005: 16). In addition to the traditional marketing mix of product, price, promotion and place (distribution), the service marketing mix includes people, physical evidence and process (Doole & Lowe 2008: 265; and Palmer 2005: 11). To reduce the uncertainty associated with the intangible nature of services, buyers look for 'signals' of service quality, i.e. they draw conclusions about the quality from the place, people, price, equipment and communications that they can see

(Kotler & Armstrong 2004: 299). According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985: 42) in most cases tangible evidence is limited to the service provider's physical facilities, equipment and personnel.

Thus 'for most services, people are a vital element of the marketing mix' (Palmer 2005: 13). Both provider of the service and the customer, who is present as the service is being produced, affect the service outcome (Kotler & Armstrong 2004: 299). The quality of service and customer satisfaction will be highly dependent on what happens in 'real time', including actions of employees and the interaction between employees and customers (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 22). With manufactured goods, 'management can usually take measures to reduce the direct effect of people on the final output as received by customers' (Palmer 2005: 13). According to Palmer the buyer of a tangible product 'is not concerned with whether the production worker dresses untidily, uses bad language at work or turns up for work late, so long as there are quality control measures which reject the results of lax behaviour before the product reaches the customer' (Palmer 2005:13). On the other hand, in service settings the contact person e.g. a lawyer, accountant, lecturer or faculty officer *is* the service, and thus plays a major role in influencing customers' perceptions of the service (Du Plessis Jooste & Strydom 2005: 379). According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 318), service employees are the service, are the organisation in the customer's eyes, are the brand and are the marketers.

Front line employees and those supporting them from behind the scenes are thus critical to the success of any service organisation (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 318). Palmer (2005: 13) states that 'while the importance attached to people management in improving quality within manufacturing companies is increasing, people planning assumes much greater importance within the service sector .... For this reason, it is essential that service organisations clearly specify what is expected from personnel in their interaction with customers. To achieve the specified standard, methods of recruiting, training, motivating and rewarding staff cannot be regarded as purely personnel decisions – they are important marketing mix decisions'. In particular, front-line employees directly influence customer perceptions of responsiveness through their personal willingness to help and their promptness in serving customers. Individual employees with whom the customer interacts confirm and build trust in the organisation or detract from

its reputation and ultimately destroy trust (Zeithaml & Bitner 2003: 321). Zeithaml and Bitner (2003: 321) state that to build a customer-orientated, service-minded workforce, an organisation must hire the right people, develop people to deliver service quality, set appropriate service standards, provide the needed support systems, motivate and reward appropriate service behaviour and retain the best people.

Education as a Service

According to Shaik (2005, paragraph 6), education is a service and students are the prime focus of the institution. Shaik goes on to state that teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom are examples of the core service because it is critical to a successful learning experience. However for education, there are also a number of supporting services which include real-time information about courses, student advice, online registrations, orientation, student accounts, help-desk, complaint handling, and feedback in a friendly, trustworthy and timely manner (paragraph 6). Students regularly come into contact with the staff associated with these services during their stay at the institution. These services create added-value to the student and determine the quality of students' learning experience. The core education service is supplemented by the following categories of services, namely, applications, admissions, orientation, registration, finance, housing, counselling, security, educational resources and essential support services.

In business, strategic planning and management have long been known as effective tools for creating a competitive edge, taking advantage of particular market conditions and distinctive competencies, and forging a niche that a company can dominate (Rowley & Sherman 2001: 17). According to Rowley and Sherman (2001: 17) learners and other consumers of higher education's products and services want to be assured of receiving higher levels of quality, timeliness and responsiveness. Similarly Shaik (2005, paragraph 14) states that students are demanding quality services and are less willing to make compromises in the quality of educational services. Should one campus refuse to meet these needs, learners and consumers simply go to the next campus, whether it is the college or university next door or the one in cyberspace. Farrington (1999 cited in Rowley & Sherman 2001: 17) states that competition exists and campuses really have no choice

but to confront it head-on. Universities thus need to ensure that they provide service quality as a basis for differentiating themselves from competitors.

One of the primary stages where service quality is critical is at the point of entry into the university which is when students are most vulnerable and where they experience a major adjustment. Fisher (1994) states that the transition to university will be stressful for many, particularly if this involves leaving home, due to the requirement of taking on new responsibilities (cited in Robotham & Julian 2006: 112).

In addressing the service quality at the point of entry it is important to look specifically at students in access programmes as their needs differ from other students because of their educational, economic and social background. Callender (2003) states that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have parents who attended university (cited in Cooke, Barkham, Audin & Bradley 2004: 409). Grayson (1996: 993) also states that the gap between high school and university is wider for students coming out of black schools, where the problem has been compounded by issues such as severe lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and unstable and sometimes dangerous social environments.

The focus of this particular research is the Science Foundation Programme at the UKZN. The UKZN rises to Government calls for transformation and redress, and for increased numbers of science graduates, by offering such programmes as the Science Foundation Programme (SFP). The SFP is a one year, alternative access programme which provides an alternative route for underprepared students to enter the Faculty of Science and Agriculture. The programme is aimed at increasing the number of black graduates in science thereby addressing the inequalities of the past. 'The aim of the SFP is to enable black students to overcome the gap between school and university and prepare them for entry into a science (or science-related) degree programme' (Grayson 1996: 993).

The socio-economic background that SFP students come from is associated with a number of difficulties (SFP 1998: 6). Students come from fragmented families and societies; and they struggle with identity and family support, both personal and financial (SFP 1998: 6). They have often come from traumatised communities and some are personally the victims of violence and abuse (SFP 1998: 7). Often the level of poverty is extremely

high and shortages of resources like food, water, transport and housing are not unknown amongst these students. Many students experience high levels of anxiety about finance (SFP 1998: 7).

In achieving its goals it is important for the University to understand the expectations of this specific target market for its access programmes i.e. previously disadvantaged scholars and to determine whether staff involved in such programmes understand their target market. Because the staff play such an important role in service delivery and thus service quality determination, it is critical that their perceptions of what customers expect match those of the students.

Research Methodology

An exploratory research approach was used in this study. Exploratory research was deemed appropriate by the researcher as the objective of this study was to gain insight and perspective into the research problem as advocated by Kinnear and Taylor (1996: 29). In other words the aim of this research was to identify problems and gain perspectives about the expectations of the staff and students on the service quality and the gaps between them. A census of students on the programme in 2006 (99 students) as well as the 10 staff who provide services to students at the point of entry which included the SFP Administration, SFP Counselling, Student Fees, Financial Aid Services and Student Housing.

Data Collection

The SERVQUAL questionnaire was used to obtain information from the students and staff. The SERVQUAL instrument is a 22 item questionnaire designed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (Zeithaml *et al.* 2003: 137). The first part of the questionnaire asks customers to reflect on the level of service they would expect from excellent companies in a sector. The second part of the questionnaire obtains the perceptions of customers of the service delivered by a specific company within that sector. For the purposes of this article, only the expectation scores were used as the study sought to compare the expectations of staff with those of students.

Student Sample Profile

The full population of SFP students, which was 99 students, was used in this study. A 96% response rate was achieved. 71% of the sample was male and the majority, i.e. 86% of the students were between 17 and 20 years old. A large proportion of students (42%) came from a rural area where 'Rural' was defined as a village that is further than 50km from the nearest town or city and 'Urban' was defined as a town, city or township.

Staff Sample Profile

9 of the 10 respondents completed the questionnaire thus giving a 90% response rate for this survey.

Data Analysis

Each item on the SERVQUAL questionnaire consists of a seven point Likert scale. A score was generated by the researcher as follows: for each item the average was calculated based on respondents' scoring on the Likert scale. The gaps were defined to be the differences between the averages of the staff and students expectations on an item.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to test the reliability of the findings. This is a measure of internal consistency of a measurement or test (Welman Kruger & Mitcell 2005: 147). A Cronbach's alpha above 0.7 is deemed acceptable (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black 1998: 88). The results of the test were 0.916 for student expectations and 0.885 for staff. The results of the Cronbach's alpha tests are above 0.7 which indicates that the measurement process is reliable.

Validity testing for the SERVQUAL instrument has been carried out as stated in Parasuraman *et al.* (1985: 114) Therefore no validity testing was carried out for this study.

Results

Student Expectations

The top 5 expectation scores of the students were:

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1. Statement 8: *Employees of an excellent University will always be willing to help customers* (from the Responsiveness dimension) scoring 6.30

2. Statement 22: *An excellent University will have operating hours convenient to all their customers* (Tangibles) scoring 6.30

3. Statement 6: *Employees of an excellent University will tell customers exactly when services will be performed* (Responsiveness) scoring 6.29

4. Statement 13: *Employees of an excellent University will have the knowledge to answer customer questions* (Assurance) scoring 6.27; and

5. Statement 18: *An excellent University will have modern-looking equipment* (Tangibles) which scored 6.13.

Graph 1: Student and Staff Expectations of Service Quality
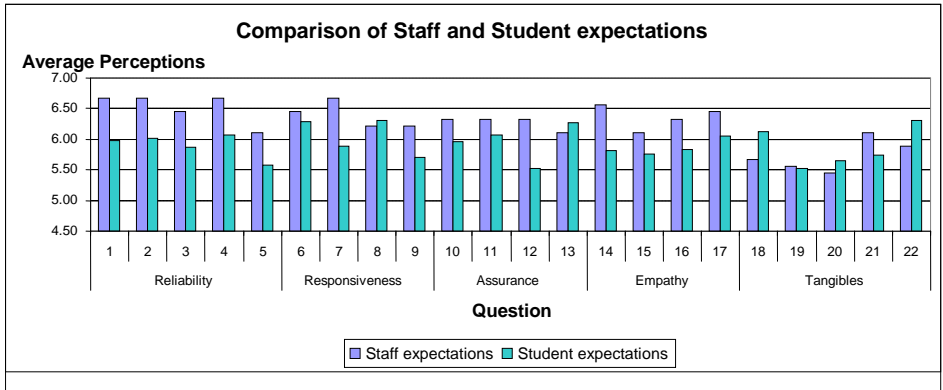
Staff Expectations
The highest expectation scores for the staff all scoring 6.67 were:

1. Statements 1: *When an excellent University promises to do something by a certain time, they will also do so* (Reliability);

2. Statement 2: *When customers have a problem, an excellent University will show sincere interest in solving it* (Reliability);

3. Statement 4: *An excellent University will provide their service at the time they promise to do so* (Responsiveness); and

4. Statement 7: *Employees of an excellent University will give prompt service to customers* (Responsiveness).

Comparison of Staff versus Students' Expectations
When comparing the expectations of staff with those of students, several levels of analysis could be conducted.

1. A comparison of the most important dimension as determined by dimension averages reveals that the most important dimension to students is Responsiveness (average 6.04) whereas Reliability is seen to be most important by staff (6.51). The highest expectations for the students included the Responsiveness (statements 6 & 8), followed by Assurance (statement 13) and Tangibles (statement 18 & 22) dimensions. In contrast, the highest expectations for the staff included the Reliability (statements 1, 2, 3 & 4), Responsiveness (statements 6 & 7) and Empathy (statement 17) dimensions.

2. Still comparing dimension averages, it was only in the Tangible dimension where the average score of the student expectations exceeded that of the staff. Thus in all dimensions other than Tangibles, staff perceived the dimensions to be more important to students than the students themselves did.

3. The comparison of the staff expectations with the students' expectations of service quality in Graph 2, showed that staff expectations of an excellent university were generally higher than those of students (in 17 of the 22 items). In other words, staff had higher expectations of what was required for excellent service quality than students did.

Graph 2: Gaps between Staff and Student Expectations of Service Quality
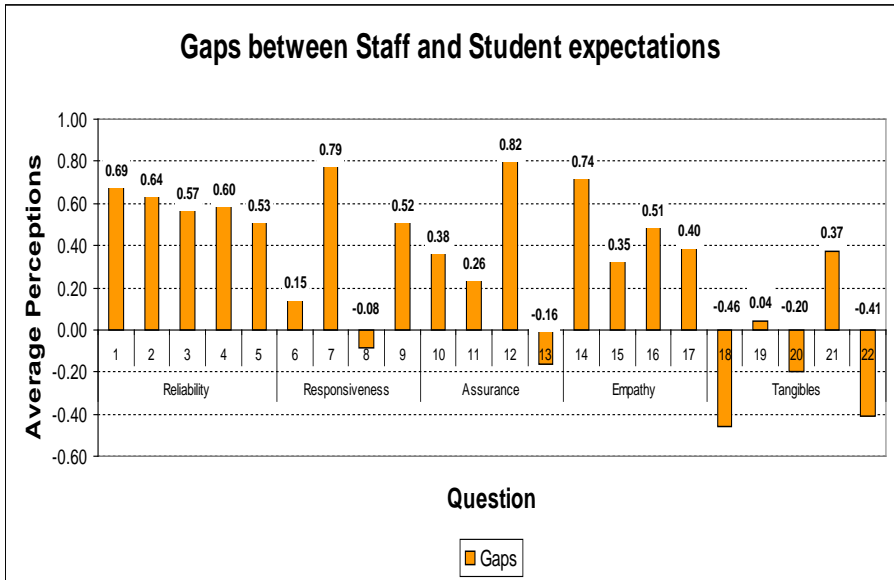
Staff Expectations Higher than Student Expectations

The dimensions where the expectations of the staff exceeded those of the students in all the statements were the Reliability and Empathy dimensions. This may indicate that staff are placing more emphasis on these areas than is necessary to meet student expectations. As can be seen in Graph 2, statements 7 (Responsiveness), 12 (Assurance) and 14 (Empathy) had the biggest gaps between the student and staff expectations:

1. Statement 7: Employees of an excellent University will give prompt service to customers;

2. Statement 12: Employees of an excellent University will be consistently courteous to customers; and

3. Statement 14: An excellent University will give customers individual attention

Staff focus on delivering high levels of service related to these activities will require considerable time, perhaps taking time away from activities considered more important to the students ie where negative gaps exist.

Student Expectations Exceed Staff Expectations

Staff expectations were lower than the students in three dimensions: Responsiveness (statement 8), Assurance (statement 13) and Tangibles (statements 18, 20 & 22).

1. Statement 8: *Employees of an excellent University will always be willing to help customers*.

2. Statement 13: *Employees of an excellent University will have the knowledge to answer customer questions.*

3. Statement 18: *An excellent University will have modern-looking equipment*;

4. Statement 20: *Employees of an excellent University will be neat in appearance*.

5. Statement 22: *An excellent University will have operating hours convenient to all their customers*.

Discussion and Recommendations to SFP Management

The aim of this study was to compare the expectations of staff and SFP students of the service quality at the point of entry to the university. Service personnel 'involved in the process of service delivery can be crucial in defining that service and customer's perceptions of it' (Palmer 2005: 48). Thus the staff expectations of what is required for excellent service quality

are critical to assess as these will affect their behaviour in the service encounter.

From the results, overall staff expectations exceeded those of the students and this indicates that overall, their performance in service delivery should match or exceed that required by SFP students. This is commendable and SFP management should acknowledge this and provide positive reinforcement to staff. Meeting and exceeding customer expectations is a goal of many organisations but it is important to ensure that minimum requirements are met across all dimensions first rather than expectations being exceeded for some dimensions and not met for others. Thus, in terms of having limited resources, as most university programmes do, it is necessary to prioritise resources, i.e. time and money, especially in areas that are important to customers. The results showed that the expectations of the staff far exceeded those of the students in statements 7, 12 and 14.Activities assessed in statements 7 (providing prompt service) and 14 (giving student individual attention) in particular, draw on the resource of time of the staff member and money because it impacts the number of employees required to be able to provide this level of service. These resources could be used better towards statements 8, 13 and 22 which were the negative gaps, i.e. where staff expectations were lower than those of the students. One could then expect that service delivery in these areas might not meet student expectations. The dimensions needing attention would thus be as follows.

Responsiveness

The Responsiveness dimension had the highest average score for the students which indicates that the students see this a very important aspect of the service quality. Statement 8 (Employee willingness to help*) in particular,* had a negative gap score.

This is an important area of customer service as it reflects the care and importance of the customer to staff and the institution as a whole. Concerns about the level of caring may be exacerbated by the student's added anxiety about this new environment. For example, it has been found that these students come from fragmented families and societies and they struggle with family support, both personal and financial (SFP 1998: 6). This lack of support structure and increased anxiety about how they will

live, pay for tuition, food etc. may increase their expectations of staff in the university system to be able to alleviate these fears. Thus their expectations are high in terms of staff willingness to help them. This needs to be communicated to staff so that they can empathise with the students and show a genuine willingness to help them.

For this statement staff expectation scores were only marginally less (0.08) and thus staff appear to be almost in line with student expectations i.e. they appear to recognise this expectation of these students. This gap would however, need to be monitored to ensure that it does not widen.

Assurance

Statement 13 (employee knowledge to answer questions): It appears as though staff do not perceive the level of importance students attach to this dimension because they do not perceive the student expectations to be as high as they are. The importance of knowledgeable staff to these students may stem again from their backgrounds in that the university environment is very different to their school environment and thus questions they have may be far more varied than those of advantaged students entering the university system. For example, these students often come from extremely poor areas and experience high levels of anxiety about finance (SFP 1998:7). Callender (2003) states that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have parents who attended university (cited in Cooke *et al.* 2004: 409) and thus cannot get answers to basic questions from their parents. Grayson (1996: 993) also states that the gap between high school and university is wider for students coming out of black schools and therefore they may have many more questions than other students. Their questions may also relate to basic survival in a new environment and may thus be deemed more important to these students. Thus staff ability to answer questions may have a greater than usual impact of student perceptions of Assurance and Assurance, as a service quality dimension, may be perceived as being more important to these students than staff realise.

Employees need to be empowered to provide this service to their students. They must be made aware of the information needs of SFP students and be provided with the answers to their questions. Having staff who have the knowledge to answer the typical questions asked by SFP students

without having to refer them to a host of other people will reduce the anxiety levels of these students, make their transition into the university smoother and ultimately improve their perceptions of the service quality offered. Thus a system is needed to monitor whether staff feel that they are able to perform their duties and provide a platform to make their training needs known so that knowledge levels can be improved.

Tangibles

Because of the nature of services, the tangibles associated with the service in terms of the equipment, staff and operating hours become important in evaluating the level of quality they are receiving. The tangibles dimension was the only dimension where the average dimension score for students exceeded that of staff. In other words, this is the only dimension as a whole where student expectations were higher than staff. However it should also be noted that the Tangible dimension average was also the lowest overall. This means that Tangibles are the least important in terms of overall service quality. Nevertheless, three statements in this dimension showed negative gap scores where students had higher expectations than staff. Thus if SFP management wish to increase overall service quality, they should look at these aspects of service quality. The statements were 18 (*modern-looking equipment),* 20 (*neat employee appearance*) and 22 (*convenient operating hours)*.

The lower expectations of staff in statement 18 (equipment) could mean that they are more aware of the budget limitations that universities might be experiencing. They may also feel that the equipment merely provides support to their roles in terms of service delivery and thus are less important in terms of ultimate service delivery. Students on the other hand, may have the expectation that universities should have modern equipment. This may stem from the fact that their school environment was likely to lack such facilities as indicated by Grayson (1996: 993) and as they perceive the university to be part of an 'advantaged society' they expect to see up-to-date equipment. While staff does not impact this element of service, the university could consider emphasising in communication with these students, the state-of-the-art equipment the university does has. It could also ensure that teaching facilities are up-to-date and that staff use the various modern teaching tools available to them.

In terms of the gap in expectations for statement 20 (employee appearance) staff may be used to the more casual attire which is common in the corporate environment of a university. Universities have traditionally paid less attention to dress code conformity than even the school system. Staff may also be focusing more on what they do in terms of student administration, counselling etc. than their appearance. Students on the other hand, may be familiar with people of authority such as their school administrators dressing well and therefore have this expectation of staff at the university. SFP management may want to encouraged staff to dress neatly and make them aware of the impressions their appearances make on the customers. It is acknowledged that this recommendation may be difficult to implement in the university setting.

The lower expectation of staff in statement 22 (convenient operating hours) could be because many of the staff involved with the SFP students are also involved with other students in the university and thus are unable to adapt their service times / accessibility to the needs of SFP students specifically. The university systems (e.g. opening / working hours) are generally fairly controlled by university policies and rules. However, this was one of the two highest scoring expectations of students, and thus represents an element of service quality that they feel strongly about. If programme management wish to address service quality, then this gap will need to be dealt this. SFP management and staff could look at their operating hours in relation to the students' timetables. It might be necessary to have some restructuring of timetables to accommodate the needs of students.

Conclusion

In addressing the call from Government to address the injustices of the apartheid past through the implementation of access programmes and ensuring customer satisfaction in the service quality offered to access students, it is necessary for managers to be aware of the expectations of staff involved in the service delivery. This study found that overall, the staff had higher expectations than students did and thus the staff appear to understand the needs and expectations of their students. There were however, some negative gaps i.e. where staff expectations were lower than those of students. These may be of concern to SFP management as these lower expectations

indicate that the staff do not place the same level of importance on these factors and are thus not likely to meet student expectations in these service areas. Lower expectations were found in three of the SERVQUAL dimensions, i.e. responsiveness, assurance and tangibles. Recommendations were made to SFP management to align the staff and student expectations on these service elements. Such alignment should ultimately improve the service quality delivered by staff, and perceived by SFP students.

This study was limited to students and staff in a particular year and thus to determine whether such deficiencies are long term problems, it is also recommended that the study be repeated. A further limitation is that the study focused only on the point of entry into the university and thus did not address service quality expectations of teaching staff, for example. Again, to get a fuller picture of the extent of service quality and the alignment of staff and student expectations, this study should be extended to other stages in the service encounter. Despite these limitations however, the transition from school to university is particularly stressful for SFP students due to their disadvantaged backgrounds and thus improving the service quality at the first point in the transition will go a long way to improving the chances of successful integration of these students into the university environment.

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