

# **Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions: A Case of South African Technical Vocation Education and Training Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

Female students comprise the majority of students worldwide, accounting for approximately 60% of the student population. Understanding their unique expectations and perceptions is crucial, especially given that they may hold distinct views when compared to their male counterparts. These differing expectations encompass various aspects of their educational experiences, such as teaching quality, support services, and t future career prospects. This accentuates the significance of Technical Vocation Education and Training (TVET) institutions, in both developed and developing countries, in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and perceptions of female students, as they constitute a substantial portion of the institution's customer base. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the expectations and perceptions of female students regarding service quality within selected TVET institutions. To achieve this aim, a survey was conducted using the service quality (SERVQUAL) model as the measurement instrument. The survey reached 240 females drawn from diverse campuses of the selected TVET institutions, ensuring representation across different groups through systematic and quota sampling techniques. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, and data analysis employed descriptive statistical

techniques. The findings of this study highlight the significant presence of female students in TVET institutions and their level of expectations and perception were revealed, as a result, five gaps were identified.

**Keywords:** Service Quality, female students' expectations and perceptions, Technical Vocational, Education and Training, TVET

## **Introduction**

In South Africa, there are 50 Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions that are administered in terms of the Continuing Education and Training Act, No 16 of 2006, as amended (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015). These institutions are mandated to provide technical and vocational education and training programmes to society who completed at least Grade 9 at the school level. However, there are also opportunities for society with a Grade 12 certificate. In general, there are three broad categories of qualification that are offered at TVET institutions, namely: the first broad category is known as the National Certificate (Vocational) which is offered at three levels, for example, levels 2, 3, and 4 of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The second broad category is known as the Report 191 National Technical Education programmes certificates that are offered at six sub-levels (N1 to N6) for Engineering Studies and three or four sub-levels (introductory, N4 to N6) for business and General Studies. This part-qualification culminates in a National Diploma on the condition that students meet the requirements for work experience. The third broad category is known as occupational qualifications and part-qualifications, including workplace-based learning. The aforementioned TVET programmes are offered to prepare society with relevant skills and knowledge for the labour market (Bünning 2006; White Paper for post-school Education and Training 2013; Shirley, Chijioke, and Chukwumaijem 2015); as well as to create new ideas that will improve the performance of the company and create new companies (Makinde & Bamiro 2022).

Goel (2010) argues a well-skilled and knowledgeable workforce is the engine of economic growth for any developed or developing country. Nevertheless, for these institutions to be able to equip society with responsive skills, they must hire qualified personnel (Zungu 2020). According to the

ETDPSETA report (2013/2014), qualified personnel especially lecturers, and instructors are regarded as qualified when they hold relevant academic diplomas/ qualifications. Females form part of society and need to be equipped with education and skills to participate in a modern economy (Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities RSA 2014-2019).

The history of gender access to education has favoured males more than females (Wilson 2007), with the literature also revealing that females were prevented from attaining their full potential because of the low priority placed on educating daughters (who marry and leave the family) and the lower status of female in general (Ashford 2012). One of the concerns raised by families in the past was the safety of females whilst away from home, however, governments and communities have begun to break down the barriers. However, there is irresistible evidence of the benefits of educating females. One of the benefits of female education captured in studies includes lower levels of harmful practices toward Females (Ashford 2012). Ashford adds that educated females were likely to take care of their health, desire fewer children, and educate themselves well.

Statistics show that females who registered with TVET institutions are in the majority, for instance, in the year 2015, females who registered in the South African TVET system were higher (69 688) and (37 984 completed) compared to their, male counterparts (37 502) and (18 893 completed) (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015). Nevertheless, a report released by the Department of Higher Education in March 2021 for the year 2019, shows the increasing number of both females (126 082) and men (81 652) who were registered. This report further reveals a total of 102 170 females and 60 006 men completed TVET qualifications, respectively (Department of Higher Education and Training 2019). Another study that was conducted by Ferm (2021) on Swedish vocational students' revealed that sample female had a relatively higher percentage in relation to students commonly enrolled in the industrial programme. These statistics have drawn a clear picture that female students are in majority in the TVET system. Therefore, their expectations and perceptions matter.

Montgomery and Barnes (1993) reveal customer expectations may differ regarding the product or service offered to them. This revelation is true, for example, female student expectations may differ from those of male students; highlighting the need for TVET institutions to know and understand both female and male students' expectations and perceptions as they form

part of the institution's customer base. This paper intends to evaluate female students' expectations and perceptions at selected TVET institutions, as limited studies have been conducted to address the issue of female student expectations and perceptions in terms of the four service quality dimensions.

## **Service Quality Concept**

Service quality, a concept extensively studied by researchers, academics, and authors, refers to the ability to meet customer expectations and deliver services at a level that aligns with those expectations. Various definitions have been proposed: Brink and Berndt (2009) emphasise the precise fulfillment of customer expectations, while Olaleke O<sup>2</sup> (2010) and Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2013) focus on capturing the customer's perception elements of service quality. Similarly, Machado and Diggins (2012) and Boshoff and du Plessis (2010) view service quality as a customer's evaluative judgment of the service provided. Wirtz, Chew and Lovelock (2013) define service quality as consistently surpassing customer expectations through exceptional performance. Saleem et al. (2017) assess service quality based on how well it meets customer expectations. In broader terms, service quality encompasses the alignment between customer perceptions and expectations (Mukumbareza 2014). Understanding service quality is particularly crucial in the context of TVET institutions. By adopting these diverse definitions, we acknowledge the common thread that all of them revolve around meeting customer expectations, specifically those of female students in this case. Recognising service quality as a strategic tool allows for the customization of service delivery and contributes to customer satisfaction within TVET institutions. Consequently, it becomes imperative to explore the significance of comprehending expectations and perceptions within this context.

## ***Female Student Expectations of Service Quality***

In the realm of TVET, a critical aspect is understanding the service quality expectations of female students. These expectations are influenced by their past experiences and individual learning, which shape their desired and reasonable service quality standards (Wijaya, Rai & Hariguna 2019). Notably, it's crucial to acknowledge the significant variability in customer expectations, with some individuals having narrow tolerance thresholds,

while others exhibit more flexibility in their criteria (Berndt & Boshoff 2018). Therefore, TVET institutions should gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the formation of these expectations, as this insight is fundamental for ensuring sustainable business growth (Filho & Anez 2021). Meeting and even surpassing these expectations can result in substantial benefits, such as increased sales, greater customer retention, and the cultivation of brand loyalty. Conversely, a failure to deliver quality service may prompt female students to explore alternative providers (Olaleke O<sup>2</sup> 2010). Thus, comprehending and catering to female students' expectations of service quality is a crucial aspect of success for TVET institutions.

Historical expectations have played a significant role in shaping perceptions of female performance and education. Eisenmann (2006) highlights the evolving expectations surrounding female education. Historically, limited opportunities fostered the belief that females were less inclined or capable of pursuing advanced education. However, recent statistics reveal a substantial increase in female enrollments within TVET institutions (Department of Higher Education and Training 2017). In this paper, we consider female students enrolled in TVET institutions as valuable customers.

Customers, including female students, exhibit diverse desires, needs, and tolerance levels for service quality (Zungu 2020). These expectations can be explicit, implicit, or exact. Consequently, it becomes the responsibility of TVET institution marketers to understand and address the expectations and needs of their customers (Hleza 2015; Ibrahim, Rahman & Yasin 2012). Neglecting this responsibility can lead to difficulties in attracting and retaining customers (Phiri & Mncwabe 2013). Female students, in particular, possess unique expectations shaped by factors such as lifestyle, status, and employment prospects (Pillay, Mbambo & Mason 2017). However, in this context, they recognize the pivotal role of TVET institutions in developing a skilled workforce (Shirley, Chijioke & Chukwumaijem 2015).

TVET institutions must acknowledge the varying expectations and tolerance levels for service quality among female students, influenced by word-of-mouth, communication, experience, and fees (Zungu 2020). Meeting and satisfying these expectations are essential for retaining female customers. The following subsection will delve into the perceptions of female students regarding service quality at TVET institutions. In

conclusion, understanding and addressing the expectations and perceptions of female students within the context of TVET institutions is not only a matter of service quality but also a crucial factor for educational institutions in attracting and retaining a diverse and dynamic student body

### ***Female Student Perceptions of Service Quality***

Various scholars, academics, and researchers have presented a range of definitions regarding the concept of customer perception of service quality, each illuminating different facets of the notion. For example, Theron, Bothma, and Du Toit (2004) underscore that customer perception is rooted in their expectations and knowledge, while Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009) argue that it is shaped by customers' evaluations of the provided service quality. Additionally, Zimmerman and Blythe (2014) characterize customer perception of service quality as the process of transforming sensory input into an understanding of the world's functioning. Collectively, these definitions emphasize the significance of comparing customer expectations with actual service performance, particularly considering the intangibility of services (Berndt & Boshoff 2018).

Understanding the perceptions of females in South African society concerning TVET institutions holds particular importance, given their prevailing perception as a last resort for pursuing training (Pillay *et al.*, Mbambo & Mason 2017). Factors such as service encounters, evidence of service, image, and price influence the perceptions of female students (Machado 2014), while the institution's reputation, comprehension of its offerings, and effective marketing contribute to shaping their perceptions (Tlapana & Myeki 2020). Managing these factors remains critical as any shortcomings in service delivery can result in dissatisfaction.

Recognizing that perceptions are subjective and can differ among individuals, it's crucial to acknowledge that female students' perceptions may diverge from those of their male counterparts. As TVET institutions also target female significantly, gathering feedback from female students becomes imperative. Understanding customer perceptions aids institutions in gaining insights into how customers view their products and services (Durmaz & Diyarbakirlioglu 2011). By aligning with customer perceptions and expectations, institutions can effectively influence their perception and adapt their offerings accordingly (Schiffman, Kanuk & Wisenblit 2010).

## **Measuring Female Student Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality**

To assess service quality from the perspective of female students, various instruments, commonly referred to as service quality dimensions, are employed. These dimensions, including tangibles, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy (Berndt & Boshoff 2018), capture distinct aspects of service quality. In this study conducted at selected TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal, four service quality dimensions were specifically selected to evaluate the expectations and perceptions of female students regarding the quality of services provided. Assurance encompasses factors like trust, competence, and credibility of staff members and the institution as a whole. Reliability relates to the consistency and dependability of service delivery over time. Responsiveness measures the willingness and promptness of the institution to meet customer needs and handle inquiries or complaints. Finally, empathy reflects the institution's understanding and care for the unique needs and concerns of female students. To measure these dimensions and assess female students' expectations and perceptions, a comprehensive tool was developed. The tool operationalised each dimension through specific indicators and criteria. For example, indicators for tangibles may include the condition of facilities, availability of resources, and the physical environment of the institution. Indicators for assurance may include the competence and professionalism of staff members and their ability to instill confidence in female students. Table 1 describes four dimensions of service quality used as a measuring tool of female students' expectations and perception of TVET service quality.

**Table 1: Four aspects of service quality dimension**

<b>service quality dimension</b>	<b>Areas covered by service quality dimension</b>
Assurance	(1) Conduct of personnel instilling confidence in customers; (2) Customers' sense of safety in transactions; (3) Consistently courteousness of TVET personnel; and (4) Willingness of TVET personnel to assist customers.

Reliability	(1) Adherence to promises within specified timeframes; (2) Genuine effort to resolve customer problems; (3) Consistent error-free service performance; and (4) Emphasis on maintaining error-free records.
Responsiveness	(1) Clear communication regarding service timelines; (2) Prompt service delivery; The workforce gives customers prompt service; (3) Willingness of the workforce to assist customers; and (4) The workforce is never too busy for customer requests.
Empathy	(1) Individual attention from the institution's workforce; (2) Convenient operating hours for the Institution; (3) Personal attention to each customer; (4) Focus on the best interest of the customer, and (5) Understanding of specific customer needs.

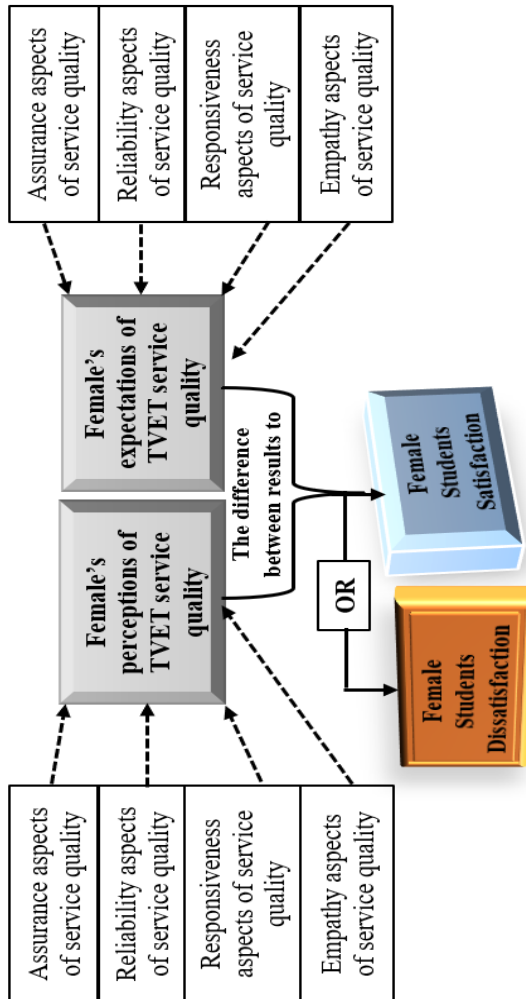
## **Customer Satisfaction**

One of the main objectives of various service providers (including TVET institutions) is to increase profit and minimise cost. This can be done by delivering and satisfying the customers' needs. Customer satisfaction can be viewed as an outcome of customer experience, and it represents a process (what was received and what was expected) experienced by customers (Berndt & Boshoff 2018). Satisfied customers are a good asset for any service provider and customer satisfaction is the only justification for a service provider's existence. The difference between customer expectations and perceptions can be either customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. If what customers perceive is greater than what they actually receive, this means that the customers are satisfied. However, if what they perceive is less than what they receive, this means that customers are dissatisfied (Zungu & Lekhanya 2018). One of the disadvantages of customers includes negative word-of-mouth, and dissatisfied customers will not remain faithful to the service



provider. However, if customers' expectation is met or exceeded then positive marketing will be spread through word-of-mouth to their families and friends (Hudson & Hudson 2012). The below figure clearly indicates the proposed conceptual framework for this study.

**Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework for this study**



## **Research Methodology**

In the realm of academic research, two prominent methodologies are widely recognized: qualitative and quantitative research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). Qualitative research, as described by Aspers and Corte (2019), involves interpreting and examining phenomena in their natural contexts, centering on the subjective understanding derived from people's interpretations. In contrast, quantitative research, as defined by Slevitch (2011), entails the systematic investigation of phenomena through numerical data collection and statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. For this study, a quantitative approach grounded in positivism was chosen. This decision was based on its capacity to establish clear links between research variables and apply rigorous statistical methods for data analysis. Positivism, emphasizing objectivity, measurement, and the generalizability of findings, aligns with this study's goal of gathering numerical data from a representative sample and employing robust statistical techniques.

A research design provides a framework for a research project (Wiid & Diggines 2021), offering structure and guidance. Wiid and Diggines (2021) outline three primary research designs: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. In this study, an explanatory research design was employed to gain comprehensive insights into the research problem.

The study's target population comprised female students aged 16 and above, enrolled in specific TVET institutions situated in urban areas, reflecting the typical age range of students within this educational context. Data collection involved a cross-sectional survey of 240 female students from various TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. To ensure a representative sample, a combination of quota and logical sampling methods was utilized, facilitating an equitable distribution of participants across the selected TVET institutions. This approach allowed for a comprehensive representation of female students across different age groups, including teenage youth (16 to 19 years), early adults (20 to 30 years), and middle-aged adults (31 years and above).

The data collection process incorporated a well-structured questionnaire designed to capture relevant insights into the participants' perceptions and expectations regarding the service quality dimensions. Furthermore, the study rigorously assessed the reliability of the 18 questionnaire items using Cronbach's Alpha, a widely recognized measure of inter-item consistency. This approach ensures the internal consistency and overall reliability of the

questionnaire. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher, as recommended by Larsson *et al.* (2015), was established as the benchmark for determining the acceptability of the items.

## **Results**

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the findings and their interpretations, facilitating a detailed discussion. A total of 240 quantitative questionnaires were administered in person at the selected TVET institutions, with a remarkable 100 percent response rate observed as noted by Donk, Verbeek, Verhagen, Groenewoud, Hosman, and Bartels (2016). The collected data underwent analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0.1 This analysis included examining reliability statistics and assessing the dimensions of service quality, with a specific focus on comparing the expectations and perceptions of female students. To effectively meet the research objectives, the study evaluated four dimensions of service quality based on the expectations and perceptions of female students.

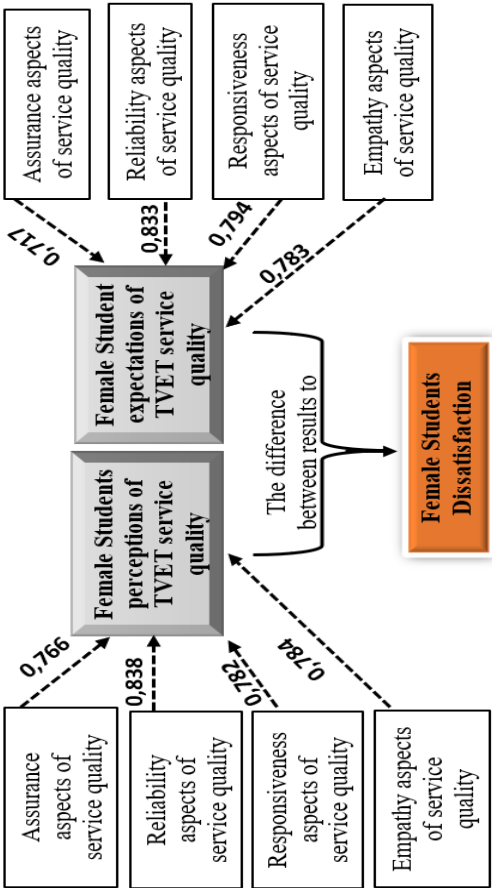
### ***Reliability Statistics***

The reliability scores for the four dimensions of service quality expectations - Assurance, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Empathy - demonstrate strong internal consistency, with values of 0.717, 0.833, 0.794, and 0.783, respectively. These scores surpass the recommended threshold for Cronbach's alpha, affirming the robust internal reliability of the measurement. This high level of internal consistency underscores the credibility of the data, indicating that the questionnaire items effectively capture the nuanced expectations of female students within the realm of service quality provision. Consequently, these findings not only validate the study's framework but also contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping students' perceptions and expectations.

Similarly, the dimensions of service quality perception - Assurance, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Empathy - exhibit reliability scores of 0.766, 0.838, 0.782, and 0.784, respectively, all surpassing the 0.70 reliability threshold for exploratory research. These results were also highlighted in Figure 2, reinforcing the notion that the questionnaire items

demonstrate strong internal consistency and effectively capture the nuanced perceptions of the respondents. This insight emphasizes the significance of addressing these dimensions to cultivate an environment that aligns with the evolving expectations and perceptions of the students, thereby enhancing the overall quality of educational services. Moreover, the overall reliability scores for both service quality expectations (0.782) and perception dimensions (0.793) exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 for Cronbach’s Alpha, as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Overall findings of this study



These results underscore the robustness of the study's methodology and its capability to effectively measure the diverse dimensions under scrutiny. Notably, the reliability scores surpassing 0.80 further fortify the study's credibility, signifying a remarkably strong internal consistency that enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

### **Analysis of Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality Dimensions: A Comparison of Results**

This section presents the comprehensive findings of the study, focusing on the expectations and perceptions of female students regarding service quality aspects at the selected TVET institutions.

#### ***Assurance Aspects of Service Quality: Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions***

Assurance aspects of service quality are essential for building customer confidence in TVET institutions. This study specifically evaluates four key aspects:

- (1) Personnel conduct in building customer confidence;
- (2) Customer perception of transactional safety;
- (3) Consistent courteous behavior of TVET personnel; and
- (4) Willingness of TVET staff to assist customers.

Based on the expectations and perceptions of female students, the study reveals an average mean score of 3.84 and 3.31 for the assurance aspects of service quality, indicating a significant gap of -0.53. This implies that the perceived service quality fell below the expected standard, emphasizing the urgent need for a robust service delivery recovery strategy to bridge this gap effectively. In addition, the conducted Chi-square test further supports the significance of these findings. The results indicated that female expectations and perceptions yielded  $\chi^2=198.996$ ,  $df=18$ ,  $p=0.000$ , and  $\chi^2=146.137$ ,  $df=19$ ,  $p=0.000$ , respectively. The very low p-value ( $p=0.000$ ) demonstrates a strong level of significance, suggesting a notable relationship between the

assurance aspects of service quality and the expectations and perceptions of female students. This underscores the non-random nature of the identified discrepancies, highlighting the need for immediate attention from the TVET institutions to improve their services and effectively meet the expectations of their female students.

### ***Reliability Aspects of Service Quality: Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions***

Reliability aspects of service quality were assessed to evaluate the expectations and perceptions of female students at the selected TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. These aspects encompassed factors such as the institution's ability to fulfill promises within specified timeframes, its commitment to resolving customer issues, its accuracy in service delivery, and its emphasis on maintaining error-free records. The findings of this study indicate that the average mean score for reliability aspects of service quality, concerning female student expectations and perceptions, was 3.58 and 3.13, respectively, resulting in a reliability service quality gap of -0.45. This suggests that, according to the female students, the services provided by the TVET institutions do not meet their expectations across all reliability aspects of service quality. It is crucial for TVET institutions to develop strategies to enhance their service delivery for their female customers. Furthermore, a chi-square test was conducted to analyse the reliability aspects of service quality in terms of female student's expectations and perceptions. The results indicated a chi-square value of 134.539 (with 22 degrees of freedom) and 114.290 (with 24 degrees of freedom), both associated with a p-value of 0.000. The very small p-value suggests a highly significant relationship between the reliability aspects of service quality and the expectations and perceptions of female students, highlighting the need for the TVET institutions to take action to improve service delivery for their female students.

### ***Responsiveness Aspects of Service Quality: Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions***

Four aspects of responsiveness were evaluated to assess the perceptions of service quality among female students at the selected TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. These aspects included the workforce's ability to (1)

communicate service timing accurately, (2) provide prompt service, (3) always be willing to assist customers, and (4) never be too busy to attend to customer requests. The study findings revealed that the average mean scores for the responsiveness aspects of service quality, concerning female student's expectations and perceptions, were 3.74 and 3.25, respectively, resulting in a gap score of -0.49. This indicates that the expectations of female students enrolled in TVET institutions exceeded what was delivered, and the institutions faced challenges in meeting these expectations. Additionally, the Chi-square test was performed on the responsiveness aspects of service quality in terms of female students' expectations and perceptions. The results indicated a Chi-square value of 206.386 (with 19 degrees of freedom) and 109.963 (with 18 degrees of freedom), both associated with a p-value of 0.000. The very small p-value underscores a highly significant relationship between the responsiveness aspects of service quality and the expectations and perceptions of female students, emphasising the need for the institutions to address the identified challenges in meeting the expectations of their female students.

### ***Empathy Aspects of Service Quality: Female Students' Expectations and Perceptions***

Empathy aspects of service quality were evaluated in relation to the expectations and perceptions of female students. This dimension reflects the level of care and individualized attention that customers anticipate from TVET personnel. The study's examination of three statements on empathy aspects aimed to assess female students' perceptions of service quality at TVET institutions. Four key empathy aspects were considered, including the attentiveness of the institution's workforce to each customer individually, the convenience of operating hours, the personalized attention provided to each customer, and the genuine concern and comprehensive understanding of specific customer needs by the workforce. The findings indicated that the average mean scores for empathy aspects of service quality, concerning female student's expectations and perceptions, were 3.58 and 3.16, respectively, resulting in a gap score of -0.42. This empathy service quality gap highlights the disparity between the service provided by TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal and the expectations of their customers. To bridge this gap and meet customer expectations, these institutions need to

devise a comprehensive service delivery recovery strategy focused on enhancing empathy. A Chi-square test was performed, returning  $\chi^2=153.058$  with 23 degrees of freedom and  $p=0.000$  for expectations, and  $\chi^2=114.705$  with 24 degrees of freedom and  $p=0.000$  for perceptions. These results strongly suggest a significant relationship between the empathy aspects of service quality and the expectations and perceptions of female students. The very small p-values indicate that the observed differences are highly significant, emphasizing the critical need for addressing the identified empathy service quality gap to better meet the expectations of female students at the selected TVET institutions.

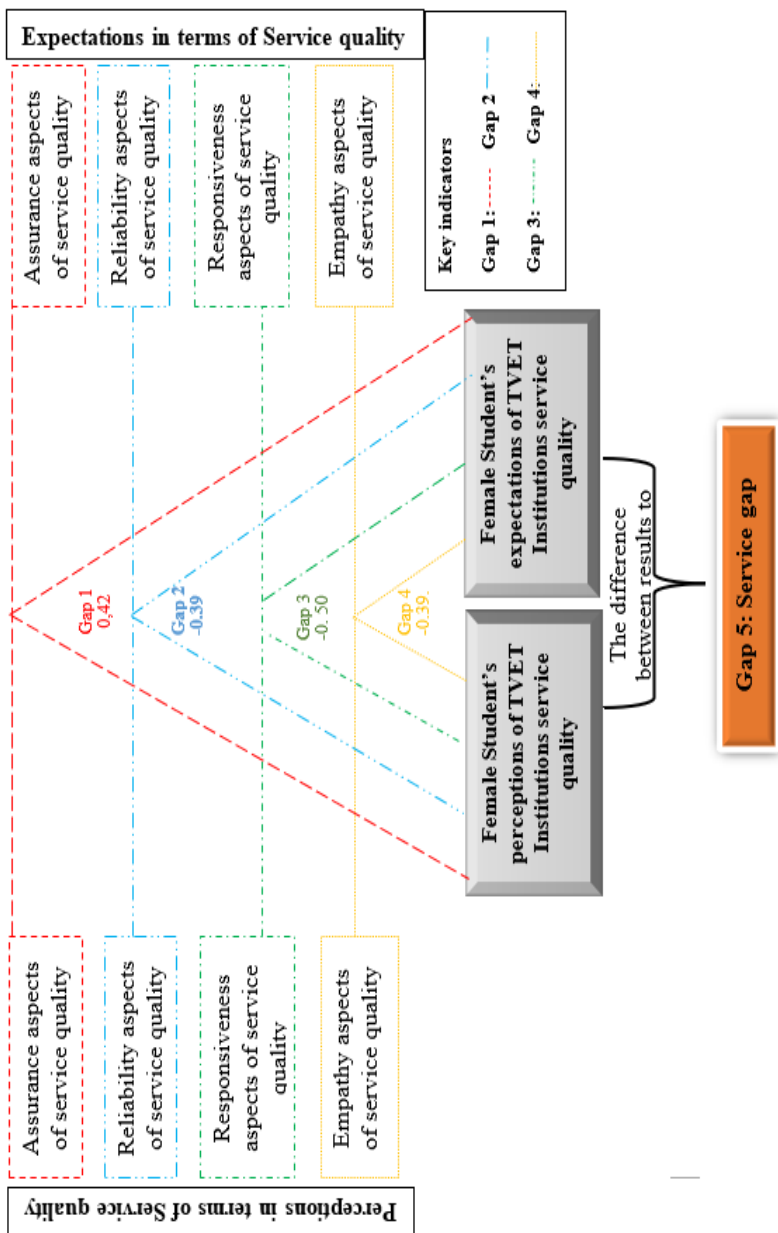
## **Discussion**

The objective of this research was to evaluate the expectations and perceptions of females regarding service quality in selected TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings indicate a notable disparity between the expectations of female students and the actual service quality dimensions offered by the institutions. These results are consistent with prior studies that emphasize the significance of understanding customer expectations in enhancing service quality (Gorgodze, Macharashvili & Kamladze 2019). Additionally, this study echoes the importance of aligning institutional offerings with student expectations to ensure student satisfaction and retention, ultimately contributing to the establishment's overall brand image and reputation (Zungu 2020).

The identified gap between female student expectations and the current service quality dimensions highlights a critical area for improvement within TVET institutions. The discrepancy suggests a need for administrators and marketing teams to re-evaluate existing strategies and develop targeted interventions that address the specific expectations of female students. Moreover, considering the multi-dimensional nature of service quality, focusing on improving aspects such as assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy can significantly impact overall student satisfaction (Berndt & Boshoff 2018). Moreover, is necessary to address and unpack the following six gaps.

The following Figure 3 shows where the five TVET service quality gaps have emerged.





***Assurance Service Quality Gap 1:*** Service quality assurance involves maintaining a courteous and welcoming atmosphere, facilitating easy access to information, and ensuring a competent and approachable management team. This includes not only addressing customer inquiries promptly but also providing consistent and personalized attention. In the study, the mean scores for female students' expectations and perceptions of assurance service quality were 3.91 and 3.44, respectively, resulting in a gap score of -0.43. To narrow this gap, it is crucial for TVET institutions to focus on strategic recruitment, ensuring employees are appropriately positioned, enhancing the service delivery process, and implementing effective customer management strategies.

***Reliability Service Quality Gap 2:*** This gap signifies the disparity between customer expectations and the institutions' perceived reliability of service quality. It often arises due to unfulfilled promises made to customers, possibly resulting from misleading communication in advertisements and promotional events. The reliability service quality gap score was -0.39. To address this issue, TVET institutions should prioritize realistic commitments to customers and strive to consistently deliver promised services.

***Responsiveness Service Quality Gap 3:*** This gap denotes the difference between customer expectations and institutional perceptions, specifically regarding the responsiveness of service quality. The gap score for responsiveness service quality was -0.50. It underscores the importance of understanding the service delivery process from the customer's perspective. TVET institutions must communicate service timelines clearly and ensure their staff is responsive and efficient in catering to student needs.

***Empathy Service Quality Gap 4:*** This gap refers to the difference between customer expectations and the selected TVET institutions' perceptions of customers based on the empathy service quality dimension. In this case, the empathy service quality gap score was -0.39. The degree to which customers feel empathy will cause the customer to either accept or reject the service encounter. The higher the level of empathy, the higher the overall evaluation of TVET institution service quality is. Therefore, these institutions need to try their level best to understand their customer's problems and strive to execute activities in the customer's best interest. The literature revealed the

aspects critical in empathy include staff knowledge to respond to customer requests or needs (Brink & Berndt 2009).

**Service Gap 5:** This gap illustrates the challenge faced by TVET institution marketers in predicting and meeting customer expectations. Gap 5 signifies the discrepancy between the overall customer expectations and the perceived service quality offered by TVET institutions, with a Gap 5 score of -0.50. Meeting or exceeding customer expectations is critical for ensuring customer satisfaction. The study's findings highlight the dissatisfaction among female students enrolled in these institutions. These results not only provide valuable insights for future research but also underscore the need for institutions to understand and address the high expectations of female students across all four service quality dimensions (assurance, reliability, responsibility, and empathy).

## **Limitations**

This study focused specifically on selected TVET institutions in KwaZulu-Natal, with 240 female students participating in the questionnaire. However, due to the limited scope, caution should be exercised when applying the findings beyond the sampled institutions, as the diverse landscape of TVET institutions in South Africa was not fully represented. The inferences drawn in this study can be classified into two categories: theoretical implications and practical applications. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, future research endeavours should aim to expand the study's geographic coverage to include multiple provinces and a diverse representation of both public and private TVET institutions.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that TVET institutions should develop strategies to satisfy the needs of enrolled female students. It is also these institutions that improve their understanding of female students' needs, as the statistics clearly show many female students registered with these institutions. Failure to satisfy customer needs is likely to have serious implications (Berndt & Boshoff 2018). The implications of not delivering quality service to customers could result in an increase in costs, due to

customer complaints, service liability, and the redoing of defective work. Conversely, quality service will be to the advantage of the TVET institutions.

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