A comparative study between staff and student perceptions on service quality

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Abstract

Each year within South Africa the university environment becomes increasingly more competitive, as every university in the country aggressively competes for the same pool of students. To succeed a South African university has to meet this challenge and become more customer orientated. Thus, service quality can be a determining factor when students choose a university.

It is important therefore that university management identify the service quality variables within a university and understand how it affects the students and staff within the university. In this paper the study undertaken aims to look at staff and student perceptions on service quality. In this study the researcher developed the questionnaire by adapting the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) to the quality dimensions peculiar to tertiary education environment.

The findings of the study recorded that staff and students were dissatisfied with the service offerings made to them at the university's five campuses. Further, the relevant quality gaps for tangibles, responsiveness, reliability empathy and assurance were identified for staff and students and reported on. Recommendations that could help close the quality gaps found between the staff and students have also been identified.

Key phrases
GAPS model; service quality; Servqual; staff perception; student perception

1.   INTRODUCTION

From a strategic perspective, universities all over the world are becoming more aware of service quality. One way to measure quality is to identify student perceptions as they constitute the universities major marketing segment. When planning curriculum, housing and teaching venues the needs of students must be taken into account.

Therefore, customer orientated definitions on service quality are important to draw from if an institution wants to implement service quality within tertiary institutions in South Africa. 'Meeting the needs of customers' who are the student population is the key element in defining quality of "service" within tertiary institutions. If taken a step further, service quality

can be used as a competitive advantage to attract students from within the country and abroad. If a university can offer quality education at affordable prices then it can use its excellence in service quality attributes to attract students.

This study was different in the sense that it did not only focus on student perceptions but staff perceptions on quality of university services were also investigated. The reason for taking a more holistic approach by incorporating the perceptions of staff is that the researcher viewed academic and support staff as primary deliverers of the different aspect of the tertiary education service provided to the students, and therefore deemed it necessary to examine their views on aspects of service quality. Secondly staff at the university were internal customers as well so the researcher saw relevance in ascertaining staff perceptions of university service offerings as well.

2.   PROBLEM INVESTIGATED

Measuring service quality within tertiary institutions is an indicator of whether students and staff are satisfied or dissatisfied with the services offered. Students and staff have their own perceptions and expectations on how they view service quality of the university's service offerings. If there is a service quality gap, this indicates that students and staff are dissatisfied with the level of the university's service offerings.

The problem investigated is that students and staff are dissatisfied with the university's service offerings. Management of the university need to investigate these service quality gaps and implement strategies to close these service quality gaps to improve student and staff satisfaction of the university's service offerings.

3.   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

For this study on staff and student perceptions on service quality at the University of KwaZulu-Natal the following research objectives were put forward:

- to conceptualize the theory on service quality;
- to identify a model of service quality that has been applied to tertiary institutions;
- to identify service quality gaps in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's service delivery;
- to ascertain how staff and student perceive their quality of service offerings made at the five campuses at the University of KwaZulu-Natal;
- to analyse the results of an empirical survey undertaken amongst staff and students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and to report thereon.

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4.   THEORETICAL LOOK AT SERVICE QUALITY

The debate on service quality presented below has gathered literature from various scholars. The section is divided into shareholders of service quality within tertiary institutions, the service quality debate and its impact on higher education institutions and lastly the SERVQUAL and GAPS model on which the study is based is discussed.

4.1   Stakeholders of service quality within tertiary institutions

Students and staff are major stakeholders in a university. Their perceptions on quality are very important to record as the differences or similarities they reveal can help the organization improve its service quality offerings. From a theoretical perspective service quality is a very complex issue. The researcher is also in agreement with Lovelock and Wirtz (2011:405) who go on to say that quality means different things to people according to the context. Within higher education stakeholders include students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors, and assessors (including professional bodies). Each stakeholder has a different perspective on quality.

For this study quality perceptions are looked at from the student and staff perspectives as they are both different stakeholders in the university.

4.2   Service quality debates and its impact on higher education institutions

The service quality debate within tertiary institutions is discussed below. Further customer evaluation of service quality is also put forward and discussed.

4.2.1 Service quality within higher education

As service marketing has evolved over time, more research has been conducted on quality 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 the students and staff within the university environment. Sultan and Wong (2011:11) argue that service quality research in higher education sector is new, at least, compared to that of commercial sector. Shanker (2010:566) argues that an education service can be evaluated on the basis of its service content (curricula; course material; student workload; and constituent faculty) as well as the service delivery system.

Education consumers have a wide array of choices and may make selections based on their own evaluation through referrals; opinions sought from others; and the brand or corporate image of the educational institution. South African universities have become more market

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orientated and are tailoring their degrees and diplomas to suit the needs of students and the labour market. To meet students' needs, university management tries to provide modest, low cost accommodation close to the university. They also provide large, well equipped lecture venues; laboratories; entertainment; and sports facilities and endeavour to ensure a safe and welcoming learning environment.

Bruhn and Dominik (2006:446) posit that service quality reflects how the customer evaluates a service by comparing the service received according to the service's characteristics with their expectations regarding these characteristics. The specific service characteristics (e.g. friendliness, empathy, convenience) are grouped into so-called service quality dimensions in order to make them operational. There are various approaches to service quality dimensions. The most important one is based the SERVQUAL approach differentiating five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy)

An added complication is that goods quality and service quality is different. According to Lamb, Hair and McDaniel (2013:196-197) service quality is more difficult to evaluate than goods quality because of the four characteristics of services that being its' intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous and perishable nature.

4.2.2 Customer evaluation of service quality

Kurt and Boone (2012:356-357) argue that everyone has a story about bad and good service. As a consumer, your perception of the quality of service you have purchased usually is determined during the service encounter- the point at which the customer and service provider interact.

Service quality refers to the expected and perceived quality of the service offering. If a gap exists between the level of services customers expect and the level they think they received, it can be favourable or unfavourable. If the customers' expectations are exceeded then the gap is favourable. If the actual service does not add up to the customers' expectations of the service offerings and falls short, then the gap is unfavourable.

Brink and Berndt (2004:59) argues that 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 organizations because they want to quantify (measure) it. The reason for the focus on quality of service and customer satisfaction is the belief that organizations can differentiate themselves by means of providing better service quality and overall customer satisfaction.

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University management need to understand what students perceive as good service quality within the university.

Naidoo (2011b:4) illustrates that quality dimensions within a tertiary institution refers to quality in terms of well skilled academic staff; quality of program offering and its value and relevance to the labour market; quality in terms of good facilities, equipment, lecture and recreational venues; quality in terms of good administration staff who are efficient in administration and dealing with student affairs; quality in terms of safety of the students at campus; quality in terms of research output; quality in terms of scholarships and funding facilities available to students within the campus; ranking of the university within the country; global recognition of the university and the universities commitment to international student enrolments.

Yeo (2008:153) adds to the debate on the importance of understanding students perceptions on quality by adding that there are a number of ways in which tertiary institutions fall short of improving service standards. Simply by not knowing what customers expect impacts on the quality of the services offered. Universities are not prepared for the shifting needs of their customers (students) (Yeo 2008:153). Courses and programmes are not always relevant in terms of subject matter and teaching approaches. Learning processes can be compromised and academic rigor is questioned.

Another important debate put forward by theorists is the link between quality and customer satisfaction. According to Fisk, Gove and John (2004:153), quality creates a chain reaction with regard to loyalty and customer inclination to establish enduring relationships with service providers. It can be said that 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 its loyal customers (that being the students that stay on to complete their degrees at the university or who go on to do post-grad degrees) then the service delivery link between customer and service organization is established. If the staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal understands its 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 (Naidoo 2011b:5).

4.3   SERVQUAL and GAPS model

Since this study was solely based on the SERVQUAL and GAPS model since these had the best fit for the study, the researcher saw great relevance in mentioning the theories

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underpinning these models. For the study undertaken by the researcher the variables in the tertiary education sector were adopted to the SERVQUAL instrument. The discussion on the model below tests the quality variables namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles and empathy which are all applied to the study undertaken. The discussion on how the SERVQUAL model was developed and expanded upon by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1985:41-50) would commence below.

This SERVQUAL model was developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985:41-50) who supported Grönroos' (1984:36-44) findings. These findings were based on three underlying themes namely:

- Service quality is more difficult for the customer to evaluate than goods quality.
- Service quality perceptions result from a comparison of customer expectations with actual service performance.
- Quality expectations are based not solely on the outcome of the service; they also involve evaluations of the process of the service (Parasuraman et al. 1985:42).

To add to the debate Kasper, Van Helsdingen and De Vries (2006:190) argue that the full SERVQUAL model contains a large part of Disconfirmation model (Oliver 1977) the disconfirmation between expected service and perceived service derived perceived service quality. Parasuraman *et al.* (1985:41-45) reported on five dimensions of service quality namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy:

- **Tangibles:** including the physical components of the service;
- **Reliability:** dependability of service provider and accuracy of performance;
- **Responsiveness:** promptness and helpfulness;
- **Assurance:** knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence;
- **Empathy:** caring, individualised attention the firm gives its customers. For this study the perceptions of staff and students on the above five dimensions of quality was investigated.

Zeithmal, Berry and Parasuraman (1985:141-50) developed the GAPS model (1984-1986) that is used in conjunction with the SERVQUAL instrument. This model identified four potential gaps within a service industry. Metters, King-Metters, Pullman and Walton (2006:185), as well as Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), conducted studies in several industry sectors to develop and refine SERVQUAL. Their scale involved expectations-perceptions

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gaps scores along five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles.

Bruhn and George (2006:49) suggest that within the GAPS model, service quality is defined as the gap between customer perceptions and customer expectations. When customer perceptions of a service exceed their expectation, they will perceive a high service quality. However, when a customer perceives that a service fails to meet expectations', the customer perceives bad service quality. This difference, called GAP5, is determined by four other gaps, GAP1 to GAP4. According to Kasper *et al.* (2006:192) GAP1 to GAP4 are as follows:

- GAP1: consumer expectation-management perception gap;
- GAP2: management perceptions-service quality specifications gap;
- GAP3: service quality specification-service delivery gap;
- GAP4: service delivery-external communications gap.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology section in the paper will highlight the survey conducted in this study, the questionnaire development, the sampling method used, ethical clearance, the populations, samples sizes, validity and reliability of data collected, the statistical method and presentation of results and the limitations of the study.

5.1 Data collection

The survey was conducted on staff and students at the five campuses of University of KwaZulu-Natal using a self-administered questionnaire. The survey was designed to collect information from staff and students on their perceptions on service quality within the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The researcher and her fieldworkers delivered the questionnaires to the respondents personally or administered it at central locations or via e-mail and internal campus mail. The researcher personally administered the questionnaire at the five campuses of UKZN namely; Edgewood campus, Howard campus, PMB campus, Medical school campus and Westville campus.

The staff respondents were handled in two ways. Firstly the researcher and the fieldworkers did drop-offs of the questionnaires at staff offices at the five campuses at UKZN. Secondly, the researcher acquired the telephone directory and telephoned staff asking them to participate in the survey. When they agreed to participate in the survey, they were either posted or e-mailed the questionnaire as they requested.

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5.2   Response rate

A total of 290 (82%) questionnaires were collected. 31 questionnaires from staff (9%) were spoilt and could not be included in the survey. The remaining 257 (73%) of staff's completed questionnaires were included in the survey. The researcher concurred that the response rate for the staff survey was good, it being 73%.

To increase response rates from staff, the researcher included a self-addressed envelope to the staff respondents so that they could complete the questionnaire and post back thereafter. With respect to the student respondents, the researcher visited some lecture halls after gaining the permission from the respective lecturer's and conducted the survey. To reach more students the researcher did drop-off surveys. Here the questionnaires were left with students who frequented the library, computer LANs, cafeteria and student residences at the five campuses of UKZN and were picked up at a later date after they were completed.

5.3   Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed using a five point LIKERT scale. Closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. Naidoo (2013) in her study developed the questionnaire by adapting it to the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985).

According to Naidoo and Mutinta (2014:225) the five quality dimensions adapted to the study are:

- **Tangibles:** that included the physical components of the service. for example the seating, lighting of 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 staff gives its students.

The SERVPERF was a model that emanated from SERVQUAL, designed for tertiary education services. However, using SERVQUAL & GAPS is superior over SERVPERF. Arguments put forward by Tan & Kek (2004:23) favour the use of the SERVQUAL model in higher education. SERVQUAL adds value to obtaining gap scores as opposed to obtaining only performance scores as SERVPERF does.

This is due to SERVPERF neglecting to include expectations' of customers when measuring service quality within the higher education service industry.

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SERVQUAL is a very useable model that in this study was adapted to the tertiary education industry and came up with results that concurred with other studies in other countries as cited in this paper. The SERVPERF that emanated from SERVQUAL, and that is recommended for the tertiary education industry to measure quality, is lacking as this model does not take into account expectations of students/staff. When calculating service gaps it is Perception (P) - Expectations (E). Formula for calculating quality gap is: GAP= P - E.

5.4   Sampling method

A combination of non-probability and convenience sampling was used in the research.

Non-probability sampling procedures were used by the researcher as they met the sampling objectives satisfactorily. Additional reasons for choosing non-probability over probability sampling are the cost and time issues. With non-probability sampling the questionnaires were given to any willing staff or student to complete. Welman, Kruger and Michel (2009:68) reiterates the advantages of non-probability samples is that they are less complicated and more economical in terms of time and financial expenses than probability samples.

According to Sekaren and Bougie (2010:276) convenience sampling refers to the collection of information from members of a population who are conveniently available to provide it. The researcher had the freedom to choose whoever they could find, hence the term "convenience sampling".

5.5   Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the specific ethical guidelines by Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2001:165) that the information provided by the respondents be treated as strictly confidential. A primary ethical responsibility of the researcher was guarding the privacy of the staff and student respondents.

5.6   Sample and population size

This study was unique in that it was based on staff and students at UKZN. The researcher chose two samples from UKZN, namely staff and students respectively.

The researcher identified **Population 1,** as being around 40,000 students (UKZN 2007b:4) there were just under 40,000 students registered at the five campuses of UKZN.

For **Population 2** the researcher identified total staff, both academic and non-academic, permanent and contract, as 4,170. (UKZN 2007a:25).

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Sample 1 included 380 students from UKZN's five campuses namely; Westville, Howard, Edgewood, Nelson Mandela Medical School and Pietermaritzburg. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010:296), Krejcie and Morgan's tables (1970) indicate that for a population of 40,000 the sample size would be 380. All 380 (100%) questionnaires were returned completed. This was an excellent sample response rate.

Sample 2 included 354 academic and non-academic staff from Westville, Howard, Edgewood, the Medical School and Pietermaritzburg campuses. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010:295), Krejcie and Morgan's tables (1970) indicate that for a population of 4,170, the sample size would be 354.

5.7   Validity and reliability

To test validity the questionnaire was reviewed by peers from the University of KwaZulu-Natal who were experts in research methodology, senior academics, and a professional statistician. Based on their feedback, a few questions were re-phased. In this respect, the design of the questionnaire enjoyed high content validity, and a pilot study was conducted to ensure that the instrument measured what it intended to measure.

To test reliability of data collected in the study, the Cronbach Alpha test was used. The Cronbach's Alpha for overall staff perceptions was 0.981 and for overall student perceptions it was 0.974, representing a good significant level of internal reliability of the measuring instrument.

5.9   Limitations of the study

Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. To ascertain whether the parametric or non-parametric tests should be used in the study, a Normality test was first conducted by researcher. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data did not follow a normal distribution. Therefore non-parametric statistics namely the Mann Whitney U test was employed in the study.

Due to time and budgetary constraints, a major limitation of the study was that it was only conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's five campuses and not all universities in South Africa. Another limitation, was that the researcher used convenience sampling, which meant that the results of the survey could not be generalised and were only applicable to UKZN. These constraints however, did not in any way deter the researcher from ensuring that data collected was accurate and reliable.

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6. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

This section will discuss the descriptive statistics for staff and students. Thereafter, the inferential statistics, testing hypothesis 1 where the Mann-Whitney test on Gap scores for students and staff will be presented and discussed in detail.

6.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the student and staff respondents. A discussion on the mean and standard deviation for student and staff respondents will be provided on expectations and perceptions relating to tangible, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance quality variables.

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics for the dimensions by student and staff

	Student			Staff		
	N	Mean	Std. dev.	N	Mean	Std. dev.
Tangibles expectation	380	4.3881	.54348	257	4.3582	.54135
Reliability expectation	380	4.2637	.77128	257	4.4000	.59948
Responsiveness expectation	380	4.3783	.71901	257	4.4066	.60559
Empathy expectation	380	4.2821	.73466	257	4.2498	.59635
Assurance expectation	380	4.6300	.58950	257	4.5764	.57537
Tangibles perception	380	3.6000	.74739	257	3.5274	.79209
Reliability perception	380	3.1268	.98153	257	3.3751	1.03411
Responsiveness perception	380	3.1289	1.05590	257	3.4689	.90706
Empathy perception	380	3.2479	.96368	257	3.6047	.82404
Assurance perception	380	3.7802	.73658	257	3.8283	.75747

Source: Naidoo 2013:139-140

For students respondents in terms of perceptions of the service quality dimensions, the mean scores were ranked from highest to lowest and reveal the following: assurance (m=3.7802) indicating that students perceived the university as offering assurance; followed by tangibles (m=3.6000) whereby students perceived the university as having a pleasant learning environment and excellent facilities; empathy (m=3.2479) indicating that students perceived the university as showing empathy; students perceived the university as being slightly responsive (m=3.1289); and lastly students perceived the university as having a low level of reliability (m=3.1268).

The ranking of the variations in responses from the highest to the lowest showed the following for perceptions: responsiveness (SD=1.05590); reliability (SD=0.98153); empathy (SD=0.96368); tangibles (SD=0.74739); and assurance (SD=.73658).

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Regarding expectation, the mean scores ranked from highest to lowest indicated the following: students expected the university to offer more assurance (m=4.6300); they expected the university to offer a more attractive learning environment and better campus facilities (m=4.3881); they expected the university to be more responsive (m=4.3783); they expected the university to be more empathetic (m=4.2821); and lastly they expected the university to be more reliable (m=4.2637).

The ranking of the variations in responses from the highest to the lowest showed the following for expectations: reliability (SD=0.77128); empathy (SD=0.73466); responsiveness (SD=0.71901); assurance (SD=0.58950); and tangibles (SD=.54348).

For staff respondents in terms of perceptions of the service quality dimensions, the mean scores were ranked from highest to lowest and reveal the following: assurance (m=3.8283) indicating that staff perceive the university as offering assurance; followed by empathy (m=3.6047) indicating that staff perceive the university as showing empathy; tangibles (m=3.5274) indicating staff perceive the university as having a pleasant work environment and facilities; being slightly responsive (m=3.4689); and having a low level of reliability (m=3.3751).

The ranking of the variations in responses from the highest to the lowest showed the following for perceptions: 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; others strongly agreed (Max=5.00) for all quality dimension variables.

6.2   Inferential statistics

Regarding expectations, the mean scores were ranged from the highest to the lowest and revealed the following: staff expected the university to offer more assurance (m=4.5764); they expected the university to be more responsive (m=4.4066); they expected the university to be more reliable (m=4.4000); they also expected the university to offer more attractive environment and better campus facilities (m=4.3582); and lastly they expected the university to be more empathetic (m=4.2498).

The ranking of the variations in responses from the highest to the lowest showed the following for expectations: responsiveness (SD=.60559); reliability (SD=.59948); empathy (SD.59635); assurance (SD.57537); and tangibles (SD=.54135).

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Whilst the highest variation was recorded for the responsiveness quality dimension, the minimum and maximum scores indicate that for all the dimensions some subjects strongly disagreed that these service quality dimensions were present; others strongly agreed (Max=5.00) that all quality dimensions are present.

The inferential statistics will now be discussed. Hypothesis 1 relates to Table 2 and reflects the quality gap scores for students and staff at UKZN. The Mann-Whitney test was chosen to test the differences in means of the two populations (student & staff). Statistical significance was considered achieved with *p* value being less than 0.05. Table 2 is an illustration of the Mann-Whitney gap scores for students and staff.

Hypothesis 1: There is a statistically significant difference in the service quality gap scores for students and staff.

Table 2 indicates firstly that the gap scores for the staff and student respondents were all negative. This indicates that staff and student expectations far exceeded their perceptions. The negative gap scores are an indication that staff and students at UKZN are very dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by the university.

TABLE 2: Mann-Whitney test- gap scores for students and staff

	Mann-Whitney U	Z	P
Tangibles GAP score (P-E)	48110.5	-0.316	0.752
Reliability GAP score (P-E)	45053.5	-1.661	0.097
Responsiveness GAP score (P-E)	41181.0	-3.367	0.001*
Empathy GAP score (P-E)	38540.5	-4.526	0.000*
Assurance GAP score (P-E)	44783.5	-1.776	0.076
Overall GAP score (P-E)	42738.0	-2.674	0.008*

Source: Naidoo 2013:163

The findings concur with the argument put forward by Tan and Kek (2004:17), indicated that SERVQUAL measures the difference between what is expected from a service encounter and the perception of the actual service encounter (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988:214-218).

Service quality (Q) = Perception (P) – Expectation (E).

A negative number would indicate that expectations were not met (customers were dissatisfied). A zero would indicate that consumer expectations were met (customers were satisfied). A positive number would indicate that consumer expectations were exceeded (customers were highly satisfied).

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The overall findings of this study indicate that there were statistically significant differences in the responsiveness and empathy gap scores between staff and students ($p < 0.05$). The hypothesis is accepted. The results revealed that students have greater expectations of the University being more responsive and empathetic than staff.

To understand why the University is performing poorly in this area, one needs to first identify what the responsiveness variable entails. The results of this study concur with Lamb *et al.* (2013:197) who posits that responsiveness is the ability to provide prompt services. Pertaining to the results of the study, a large Gap score for responsiveness could be due to students feeling that they had to wait for long periods for services. It seems that students concerns, questions, requirements, complaints and problems have not been attended to on time. They have to wait a long time and this causes great dissatisfaction with the service encounter.

The high empathy Gap score for students was possibly due to students feeling that the university did not care about them or share their concerns. Students expected the university to understand their needs and make services accessible. The findings concur with the literature, as Brink and Berndt (2004:136) argue, that it is crucial for an organization to understand the values and expectations of each stakeholder group in order to determine their willingness either to help or hinder the organization in striving towards its vision.

Positive matching of the needs and objectives of the stakeholders and the organization is therefore required for a lasting relationship. The value provided to a customer is not created by the organization alone but requires a contribution from other stakeholders as well. A study conducted among student and faculty staff by Faganel (2010:215) revealed that there was a different understanding of quality amongst students and staff. This also concurs with the findings of this study.

The results of this study did not concur with Zafiropoulos and Vrana (2008:42) as their study amongst staff and students at a Greek university indicated the opposite of what occurred at UKZN. This illustrated that while staff had higher expectations, they perceived current educational services to be of a higher level. Students had lower expectations and they perceived current educational services to be of a lower level.

These findings could be attributed to several causes. They may reflect the experience that the staff had gained through education, training and studying in other institutions, or through employment experience. This experience could enable staff to value both their current situation as well as their current job, placing the home institution lower than the ideal but still

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high enough. In this study the opposite was true; the students had higher expectations than staff.

7.   CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH

The following recommendations for student and staff are put forward as valuable research contributions that can be used by UKZN management to close the quality gaps found in the study (Naidoo 2013:12-40).

7.1   Recommendations for students

To close each quality gap the researcher has made specific recommendations for each quality variable which will be discussed in detail below.

7.1.1 Tangible gap

To close the tangible gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- UKZN should improve the layout and physical facilities within its five campuses.
- More technologically advanced equipment should be installed for students in the laboratories and computer centres.
- The libraries at the five campuses of UKZN should have better facilities, layout and better computers provided. More updated books and other literacy materials should also be in place.
- The furniture in venues should be cleaned and refurbished where possible or replaced to improve the appearance of venues.
- The lecture venues should be clean and well lit and air-conditioned. Generators should also be provided at lecture venues that prevent lectures from being cancelled during power outages.
- The university adverts, posters, brochures and websites should be more upbeat, colourful and trendy so that they catch the attention of the diverse student population.
- The university's five campuses should have proper facilities in place to cater to the needs of the disabled student population.
- There should be recreational and social spaces created for students at the various campuses.
- Contact personnel must at all times be neat, clean and presentable to the students.
- Adequate parking should be provided for students at the five campuses.

7.1.2 Reliability gap

To close the reliability gap the following recommendations are proposed:

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- The university management should develop systems and procedures that standardise service production to ensure that the core service namely teaching be delivered as reliably and consistently as possible.

- Before university management commit to any marketing communication made to students they should ensure that the promises made in these marketing communication brochures are realistic and achievable.

- The university management must understand students changing and varying needs and wants through having up to date market research being conducted on its students on a regular annual or semi-annual basis.

- There must always be well managed customer expectations of the reliability aspect of the service encounters and offerings made to students.

7.1.3 Responsiveness gap

To close the responsiveness gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Management at UKZN should implement standard procedures to maximise responsiveness to service situations that may occur reasonably regularly.

- Management must insist that staff be well trained, so that they can respond efficiently when necessary.

- Management at UKZN should develop proper procedure manuals and policy documents to help staff respond to student questions, complaints and requests.

- Contact staff at UKZN's various faculties must at all times ensure that students do not have to wait too long for assistance or to receive the service.

- Where possible UKZN management should individualise or customise a service offering made to the student. This decision should be filtered down to the various levels of management and staff.

- Management at the university must have knowledge of how the service processes at the campuses are viewed by the students.

7.1.4 Assurance gap

To close the assurance gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- UKZN management should create trust and confidence in the service encounter through the knowledge, skills and expertise of its' contact personnel.

- Creating continuity of service staff is important as it enhances student assurance levels.

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- Management at UKZN's five campuses should create an organization-wide image that reflects the core values of the university- that being its commitment to quality teaching; research and community engagement.

- Management at UKZN should build a strong corporate brand image that reflects the high quality of its' service offering and the universities commitment to research, teaching and learning.

- Management at UKZN can also use cues such as employee dress, appearance of the interior and exterior of the campuses, employees' positive attitudes, visible qualifications and credentials of its staff, and pleasant campus surroundings to reassure the students and their respective parents accordingly.

- During strikes and other violent disruptions at any of the UKZN campuses, management at all times need to ensure the safety of its students.

- While students are at the five campuses of UKZN, university management should have proper security in place to ensure that they are safe and their vehicles are safe as well.

7.1.3 Empathy gap

To close the empathy gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Contact staff of UKZN should make students feel important by responding to their needs and understanding their concerns.

- Contact staff at the university should be properly trained and skilled to be more empathetic towards the needs of students, especially those who coming from disadvantaged backgrounds like rural students who have very little exposure to city life. Contact staff should also be more helpful and empathetic to the disabled students who have special needs.

- Within certain departments or faculties service offerings should be tailored to individual student as much as possible.

- Both academic and support staff should make students feel important by developing long-term relationships with them.

- Both academic and support staff at UKZN should be trained to know students by name where possible and by their related service needs.

7.2   Recommendations for staff

The recommendations for staff are put forward for the quality variables as follows:

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7.2.1 Tangibles gap

To close the tangibles gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Staff at Edgewood, Howard, Pietermaritzburg, Nelson Mandela Medical school and Westville campuses should be provided with a pleasant working environment.
- Staff should have the best technologically advanced equipment at hand to help them do that jobs more efficiently. An example would be staff having updated and modern computers, data projectors, scanners, photocopiers and printers at the office.
- UKZN academic staff should have modern teaching aids that can help them provide better lectures. An e.g. could be lab-tops to present high quality power-point presentations and microphones for teaching at large lecture halls.
- Both academic and support staff at UKZN should have nicely furnished and comfortable tea-rooms where they can take their lunch and tea breaks.
- Both academic and support staff members offices should be nicely painted, furnished and well lit and ventilated.
- Proper facilities should be in place for staff at UKZN who is disabled.
- More parking facilities should be provided for staff at all five of UKZN campuses.

7.2.2 Reliability gap

To close the reliability gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- The university management must understand staff needs by running annual staff surveys.
- There must always be well managed staff expectations of the reliability aspect of the service encounters and offerings made to them.
- Promises made to staff must be honoured by the different levels of university management.

7.2.3 Responsiveness gap

To close the responsiveness gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Management at UKZN should implement standard procedures to maximise responsiveness to service situations that may occur reasonably regularly for staff.
- The line managers in the various faculties and schools within the five campuses of UKZN must insist that academic support staff are well trained to help provide the necessary support to their respective academic staff.

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- UKZN management should develop procedure manuals to help staff respond to staff questions, complaints and requests.
- Staff must not be kept waiting for too long, they should receive prompt services within the universities various structures.
- Management at UKZN must have knowledge of how the service processes and outcomes are viewed by staff at all levels within the university.

7.2.4 Assurance gap

To close the assurance gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Staff at UKZN requires skilled and knowledgeable personnel to handle their requests, queries, problems or disputes that they have with the university.
- At UKZN creating continuity of service staff is important.
- UKZN management should create an organization-wide image that reflects the core values of the university- that being its commitment to quality teaching; research and community engagement.
- Management at UKZN should build a strong corporate brand image that reflects the high quality of the university's service offering and its' commitment to research, teaching and learning.
- While staff are at the university, management should ensure their safety.
- Proper security should be provided to ensure the safety of staff vehicles while they are at the university.

7.2.5 Empathy gap

To close the empathy gap the following recommendations are proposed:

- Management at UKZN should make staff feel important by responding to their needs and understanding their concerns.
- Management and staff of the university when relating to other staff should be trained to be more empathetic towards the needs of these colleagues.
- Management at the five campuses of UKZN should focus on making staff feel important by developing long-term relationships with them.
- Management should be empathetic to academic staff studying towards their Masters and PhD and lower their lecturer loads and administrative duties where possible.
- Management at UKZN should be more supportive and empathetic towards staff that have young children by providing more day care facilities at its' five campuses.

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8.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

A crucial strategic issue that affects service quality is competitive advantage. In view of the current financial crisis that has gripped the global economy, acquiring income from foreign sources is being slowly depleted worldwide.

The South African government has recognised that a way to acquire income from foreign sources is by attracting foreign students to study at our universities in South Africa. To do this, South African universities have to have a competitive edge. "Service quality" can be this competitive edge that attracts students to South African programmes at our various universities. Since students from Europe, Asia, America and Africa have a wide range of universities to choose from in South Africa, UKZN has to enhance and maintain a high level of service quality that can attract and retain international students to a wide range of program offerings (Naidoo 2011a:526-527).

Based on the results of the empirical study, the staff and students at the UKZN were dissatisfied with the service quality made within the service offerings.   By having surveys of this nature conducted at the university, management can have valuable information on staff and student perceptions at its disposal. This information can be used when drawing up service delivery strategies to improve the quality of tertiary education services to both staff and students within the tertiary institution.

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