PERCEIVED GAP OF ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES AT A TERTIARY INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract - The rendering of quality and efficient service in higher education has remained a topic issue extending over a decade yet current research still indicates the necessity to glean from previous experiences. HE institutions have to be concerned not only with what society values in terms of skills and abilities of their graduates, but also with how their students feel and perceive their education, and the quality of HE throughout educational curricula and administrative processes. Institutions must view students as their primary clients and seek to maximize their satisfaction based on educational services rendered. Using a quantitative approach this research evaluated administrative practices in three selected Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVET) in KwaZulu-Natal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) is being driven towards commercial competition imposed by economic forces, resulting from the development of global education markets and the reduction of governmental funds (Porral et al., 2013:603). Quality could be defined as transformation or value added (Porral, Mangin and Corti, 2013:603).The term quality in higher education refers to the policies, processes and actions through which quality is maintained and developed. Higher education administrators should focus on students' perceptions of educational quality. Service quality in higher education institutions is assessed through the students' perspective. Previous researchers have recognized the importance of the perceived quality from the students' viewpoint, in order to achieve quality enhancement (Porral, Mangin and Corti, 2013:603).

The South African education sector has been haunted by the spirit of change and transformation from the apartheid-influenced education system to one that will represent the demographic make-up of the country (Klerk and Dye, 2015:165). The higher education sector has had various policies promulgated, amended and re-amended in order to change the landscape. The policies regarding student satisfaction are important in higher education because of its role in competing for a high quality of students and in the retention of students. It is also important for the referral of prospective students and often receives prominence in strategic mission statements and objectives (Klerk and Dye, 2015:165).

AIM AND OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to evaluate administrative practices in three selected Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges (TVET) in KwaZulu-Natal. In order to achieve the aim, the following objective was addressed:

•To identify the perceived gap between current and best practices regarding administrative practices to both students and staff using strategies identified by SERVQUAL gaps;

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study conducted by Mukumbareza (2014:46) evaluates citizens' satisfaction with the quality of e-government information services provided by the Southern African Development Community. The study by Mukumbareza (2014:46) relates to the aim and objective of this study; determining students' expectations and perceptions of administrative practices.

Hence, this study seeks to evaluate the administrative practices in three selected TVET colleges in KZN. Students' confidence in their expectations with regard to a service should definitely have a desirable impact on satisfaction. Students' expectation proxies considered in this study are: Meeting personal needs – this measures the expectations of students of the college services to meet their administrative needs when doing a transaction; Reliability – this measures students' expectations of administrative practices services consistently producing, meeting and exceeding service specifications and also the availability of the services; andOverall quality – this determines the students' expectation of administrative practice services to meet the overall quality expected (Karthikeyan and Ramkumar, 2015:249).

Service quality plays a vital role in service delivery by improving the productivity, profitability and customer satisfaction of the organization, as a summary of cognitive and affective reaction to a service incident (Karthikeyan and Ramkumar, 2015:250). Customers always evaluate the services in total and see how well they meet expectations in any higher educational institution, not just by merely providing a service but by ensuring that it is moving towards developing and maintaining mutually long-

term relationships with students (Karthikeyan and Ramkumar, 2015:250).

Perceived service quality is the overall evaluation of service quality after students have 1used college administrative services (Mukumbareza, 2014:46). It measures perceived guidelines, the simplicity of using college services and timely response to students' requests during a service transaction. It evaluates customization and reliability of service. Perceived service quality has a positive effect on students' satisfaction. Perceived quality interaction proxies considered in this study are: Response timeliness – this is how fast a service request can be completed and is measured by the speed a task is completed, by response time and execution time; and Ease of use – the usability of the website during students' navigation which reduces customer frustration and results in students' satisfaction (Mukumbareza, 2014:46).

2.1 Students' Satisfaction

Students' satisfaction can be measured in terms of how many students are satisfied and how well their expectations are met, evaluating whether the college performance is meeting the ideal administrative practices, fulfilment of expectations and overall students' satisfaction. Students' trust measures the level of experience the students have in relation to the college administrative practices' transaction from the time of accessing it up to the last stage of service interaction. This also involvestrustworthiness of the college and implies that the students will not feel betrayed (Mukumbareza, 2014:47). Hence, the aim of this study was to investigate the system support given to administrative clerks in delivering quality administrative practices to students by the administrative manager, and to evaluate perceptions and expectations of students regarding the current administrative practices.

Students' satisfaction proxies can be classified as follows: Overall satisfaction – this measures students' overall satisfaction with administrative practices in these colleges; Meeting ideal administrative practices – this measures whether administration services provided are meeting the ideal administrative practices expected by students; and Fulfilling expectations – this measures whether the college is fulfilling the expectations of the students (Mukumbareza, 2014:47).

2.2 Defining Service Quality

It may seem that the SERVQUAL model of evaluating service quality is not a perfect solution and the criticisms related to the theory are based on the Gap model. The methodology related to applying the SERVQUAL instrument of research and the model‘s dimensionality and validity have been noted. It still remains one of the most influential research instruments in researching service quality. Despite its numerous critics, the SERVQUAL instrument still continues to appeal to both academics and practitioners, irrespective of legitimate concerns about the validity of the scale (Yusuf et al., 2012:40).

A study conducted by Manuel (2008:51) concludes that customer satisfaction is the key ingredient in the success of any business. This is the most important factor that creates loyal customers. Presently, organisations are attempting to obtain increased customer satisfaction by focusing on the quality of their products and the service provided. Students were identified as customers of higher education institutions. Customer service can be described as the totality of what the organisation does to add value to its products and services in the eyes of the customer. Quality is described as the measurement of how well the product or service of the organisation conforms to the customers' wants and expectations. Another way to look at thisissue is to say that quality is the ability of the organisation to meet or exceed customer expectations (Manuel, 2008:53).

Anil and Icli (2014:31) conclude that quality is increasingly important for the higher education sector to better understand customer expectations and, therefore, to determine service quality. In higher education, the definition of a customer is quite different from the manufacturing or general services since groups such as students, employers, academic staff, the government and families are all customers of the same education system with a diversity of requirements (Anil and Icli, 2014:32). Customers can influence the quality of service received by others – either by enhancing or detracting from other customers' experiences. The final measure of quality customer service is simply how the customer perceives it. Perceptions are considered relative to expectations. Customers perceive service in terms of the quality of the service they receive and whether or not they are satisfied with their experiences (Anil and Icli, 2014:32).

The perceptions that customers form are vital to a service organisation, as the services they offer are intangible and sales rely heavily on a positive perception. Perception becomes an influential factor when comparing customers' satisfaction with the service that is provided to them. In the context of this study, a possible example could be students at a university developing a negative perception of service quality when services rendered by the institution fall below their expectations, thereby creating dissatisfaction (Manuel, 2008:32).

Customer satisfaction is influenced by specific product or service features and perceptions of quality. Satisfaction is also influenced by customers' emotional responses, their attributions, and their perceptions of equity (Manuel, 2008:2). Education services are often intangible and difficult to measure, since the outcome is reflected in the transformation of individuals in their knowledge, their characteristics, and their behaviour (Collier and Benestock, 2009:3).

The SERVQUAL model measures service quality on the five dimensions of tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions are well suited to measuring service quality in offline services. In order to meetstudents' needs and to get their share from the highly competitive market, universities and colleges need to increase the quality of the service they offer and measure satisfaction, which is a result of quality. Therefore, it is important to clearly define the dimensions of service quality leading to satisfaction in accordance with the field qualifications (Anil et al., 2014:31). In this way, TVET colleges will be able to increase administrative practices quality and, thus, students' satisfaction while eliminating dissatisfaction (Anil et al., 2014:31).

III. FINDINGS ON THE PERCEIVED GAP BETWEEN CURRENT AND BEST ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES TO BOTH STUDENTS AND STAFF

The objectives of this study was to investigate the perceived gap between current and best practices regarding administrative practices to students, using strategies identified by SERVQUAL gaps, in three selected TVET colleges. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrates the overall scoring dimension with five SERVQUAL determinants for this study.

Table 1: The Overall Scoring by Dimension with Five SERVQUAL Determinants for the study

Statements	eThekwini			Elangeni			Coastal			Overall		
	E	P	Gap	E	P	Gap	E	P	Gap	E	P	Gap
Tangibles	4.8	2.9	-1.9	4.6	2.6	-2.0	4.6	2.5	-2.0	4.6	2.7	-2.0
Reliability	4.7	2.5	-2.2	4.5	2.3	-2.3	4.6	2.3	-2.2	4.6	2.3	-2.2
Responsiveness	4.7	2.6	-2.1	4.5	2.3	-2.2	4.6	2.4	-2.2	4.6	2.4	-2.2
Assurance	4.7	2.6	-2.2	4.6	2.5	-2.1	4.6	2.5	-2.1	4.6	2.5	-2.1
Empathy	4.7	2.5	-2.2	4.6	2.4	-2.2	4.6	2.4	-2.3	4.6	2.4	-2.2

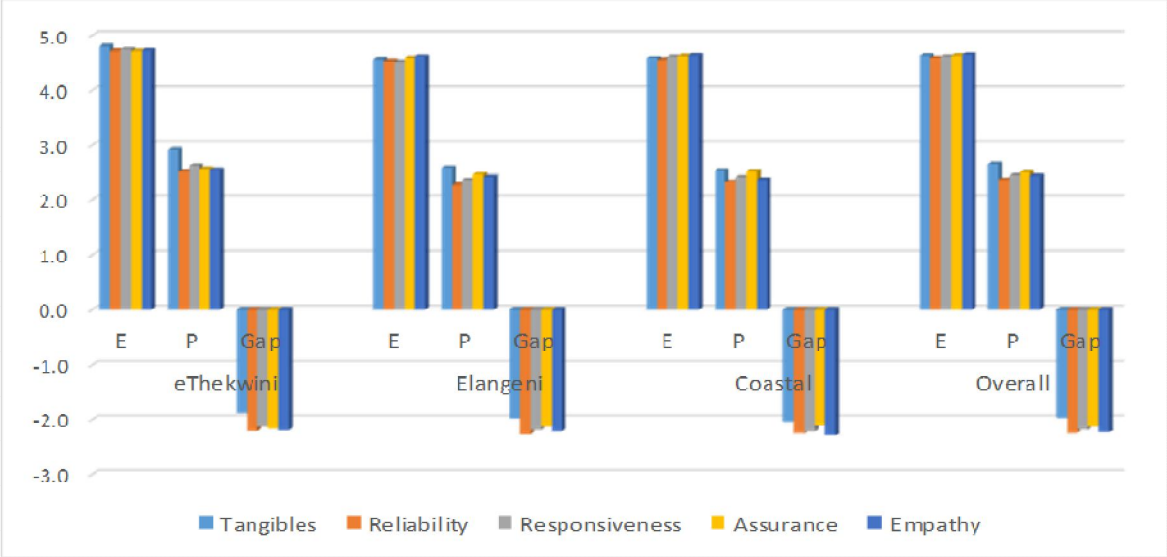


Figure 1: Graph Depicting Results of all Five SERVQUAL Determinants for the Study

As indicated in Figure 1, expectations were higher than perceptions, resulting in low quality in all five SERVQUAL dimensions. In terms of service quality, the physical and academic services relate to the appearance of the physical facilities as well as the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately (Parasuramanet al., 1985). Students form their own perceptions of the experienced service and it is important for higher education institutions to know exactly what these perceptions are, as this might lead to an increase of potential students in the future. Every individual student has specific expectations about a service; however, these are formed before the actual service takes place. Therefore, the perceptions they form after the actual service delivery are very important (Hefer and Cant, 2014:10).

IV. DISCUSSION ON THE EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS REGARDING ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES

The findings of the study agree with previous studies that adopted a SERVQUAL framework as it also

focuses on trying to understand customers' expectations adequately. These factors describe administrative clerks' ability to influence the students as a way to deliver good administrative practices at TVET colleges. This involves fulfilling promises, willingness in sharing knowledge and competency of service administrative clerks in answering specific students' queries and requests, providing and creating a warm atmosphere while dealing with (students), making students feel comfortable while receiving services, portraying a good image of the TVET colleges and delivering prompt service (Abdullah et al., 2013:16).

Tangibles

The results indicate that students' overall average Likert score was 4.6. This score specified that students' expectations were very high regarding Tangibles when it comes to administrative practices. The Likert score for perception was 2.7, which was very low regarding the tangibles dimension of service quality, as identified by the SERVQUAL average Gap score of -2.0. The results indicated that the statements that constituted this dimension perfectly measured what they set out to measure.

As far as tangible and intangible services are concerned, service quality is important because it affects students' decisions as well as the institution's performance itself since the level of satisfaction with the service quality within sectors undermines the demonstration of their education context (Pohyae, Romle, Saleh, and Saleh, 2016:491). Hence, the statements for tangibles indicated low service quality in administrative practices at TVET colleges.

Reliability

The result indicated that most students' overall average Likert score is 2.2. This score implies that students expect administrative clerks to keep promises, to show a sincere interest in solving queries, to perform the service correctly the first time, and provide the service at the promised time. Most students' perceptions were very low in all four reliability statements of administrative practice. These results indicated low quality. The findings concur with Yusuf (2013:39), who stated that a discrepancy between the service promise and service delivery is often mainly due to inaccurate communication gained from advertisements and exhibitions. Many organisations tend to oversell their services, resulting in over-extended promises, and should believe that delivering a service and meeting commitments timeously, in keeping with the promised service timelines in a professional manner, will influence a customer's perception in a significant way.

Responsiveness

The results indicated that most students' overall Likert score of 4.6 in all four Responsiveness statements indicated that students' expectations are very high regarding responsiveness of administrative clerks. A Likert score of 2.4 shows that students' perceptions were very low regarding the responsiveness of administrative clerks and identified a gap that exists -2.2, which indicated low quality.

The findings of the study are in line with the study conducted by Anil et al., (2014:34) that there has to be a willingness to assist customers and to provide prompt service on a continuous basis. Sometimes, this service may take place out of normal operating hours. This dimension focuses on attentiveness and willingness in dealing with customer requests, queries and prompt complaint resolution. Responsiveness and good quality information services are about helping users define and satisfy their information needs, building their confidence in using information retrieval systems and making the whole activity of administrative practices a pleasurable experience. Hence administrative clerks are the centre of information, their willingness to assist is very vital and providing prompt service on a continuous basis.

Assurance

The results show that most students' overall average Likert score was 4.6, which indicated that students' expectations were very high regarding assurance of administrative practices by administrative clerks as opposed to a low perception score of 2.5. The average SERVQUAL gap within this dimension was -2.1 in all three colleges. In a higher education institution, the key individuals that link the customer to the company would be the academic and frontline staff. The institution must provide the assurance that employees have the ability to convey trust and confidence. To this end, an institution with a strong brand can communicate trust and confidence. The assessment of service quality depends, to a large extent, on how customers perceive the actual performance based on their expectation (Yavuz, 2016:98; Sultan et al., 2013:80).

Empathy

The results show that the overall average expectation score was 4.6 indicating that expectations were very high regarding empathy when it comes to administrative practices. The findings agree with previous studies by Pohyaeet al., (2016:497) who found that student perceptions of service quality in higher education are not directly involved with the content as higher educational institutions need to have and deliver course units, but they are involved with strategies to influence and retain their students, in which case they need to display empathy.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to determine the expectations and perceptions of students regarding administrative practices; and to investigate the

perceived gap between current and best practices regarding administrative practices to both students and staff using strategies identified by SERVQUAL gaps. The perceived quality is defined as one's opinion about the excellence of a product or service. The results of the relevant research questions were presented with conclusions based on the findings. The results demonstrated that, in each of the five SERVQUAL dimensions, there was a negative quality administrative practice gap. Negative administrative practice quality service gaps indicate that responsibilities have not been sufficiently fulfilled to meet students' expectations. The results of this study will provide great insight for management of the TVET colleges in addressing service quality of administrative practices.

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