

## Student Assessment of Service Quality in Sport in Tertiary Education: A Developing Country Perspective

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**Abstract:** University sport is affiliated to University Sports South Africa (USSA) which is recognised as the official national co-ordinating sports structure for the regulation and organisation of all university sports activities in South Africa. The university sports department houses a variety of sport and provides for all levels of competition. The university provides a range of pathways for people to fulfil their sporting potential, varying from lunchtime social recreation or right to international competition. Although, the university remains a strong competitor in major sport codes there is a general decline in student physical activity as evidenced by low participation rate by students in competitive sport the number of sport codes being reduced and low usage of facilities for recreational purposes. The aim of this study was to investigate students' expectations and perceptions of the sport offering at the university. A total of 400 students completed the survey using a questionnaire developed from the SERVQUAL instrument. All the service quality dimensions in the students' surveys of sport at the university contain negative mean gap scores. From these findings, specific gaps in the service quality dimensions can be identified and closed. Assurance and empathy were identified as good predictors of service quality.

**Key words:** Expectations, perceptions, service quality, assurance, empathy, sport offering, service quality dimensions, gaps

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### INTRODUCTION

Sport is a critical component in holistic student development. Through sport, the student is exposed to student life in a way that differs from the academic, cultural, religious and social experiences campus life can offer. Guttman (2000) maintains that sport has been a part of the higher education experience for students and staff for many years, providing recreational opportunities for many and competitive opportunities for elite performers. Community programmes are provided by higher education institutions to offer children, young people with disabilities, senior citizens and those recovering from illness opportunities to participate in sport. Widening access to higher education sport can be a powerful incentive to groups under represented in higher education.

Zeithaml *et al.* (2006) state that customer expectations are beliefs about service delivery that serve as standards or reference points against which performance is judged. The concept of expectations has been widely used in many studies about consumer behaviour. Customer expectations are critical to service marketers. Expectations will deeply influence customer behaviour. For instance, if a customer's last experience with a company was negative, he/she will again be dissatisfied.

According to Bebeko (2000), customer expectations are not stable. Since, customers' expectations are one kind of human perceptions based on verbal information, personal needs, experience and commercial information and customer service expectations are usually dynamic. Sometimes, it is easier to predict expectations with a more aggregate level of groups of consumers.

Customers have different types of expectations about service. In general, researchers focus on two types of customer expectations. According to the levels of the service expectations, the highest one is called desired service. Desired service reflects the hopes and wishes of some consumers. The other level of service expectations is defined as adequate service. Adequate service represents the minimum tolerable expectation which means the bottom level of performance that customers are willing to accept (Metters *et al.*, 2006). The ranges of the variations between the desired service level and the adequate service level can be the zone of tolerance. Based on the specific situation and various needs, the service performance of suppliers provided is very different from the same provider and even with the same service employee. Desired service is more stable than adequate service. Fluctuations in the zone of tolerance mostly focus on the adequate service level rather than the desired service (Gilbert and Wong, 2003).

The zone of tolerance not only concerns the perception of the service but also the perception of the service delivery process. An individual customer's zone of tolerance increases or decreases based on a number of factors including company-controlled factors. The more important the factor, the narrower the zone of tolerance is likely to be (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006).

Robledo (2001) identifies assurance as employees' knowledge and courtesy and the ability of the firm and its employees to inspire trust and confidence. This dimension consists of four original determinants: competence, courtesy, credibility and security.

Zeithaml *et al.* (2006) define assurance as employees' knowledge and courtesy and the ability of the organisation and its employees to inspire trust and confidence. According to Dhurup *et al.* (2006), assurance represents courtesy, credibility and competence on the part of the staff at sport organizations because sport in universities is critical as it plays an integral and important role in student life. Sport builds team spirit, camaraderie and plays a role in cementing relationships. It also encourages healthy competition, promotes discipline and fosters a gracious attitude to both winning and losing. Lessons learnt through participation in sport are valuable to all areas of life.

Access, communication and understanding/knowing the customer are merged into empathy. The basic target of the dimension is to afford more facilities for current or potential customers and enhance the services capacity through personalized or customized service. Curry and Sinclair (2002) describe empathy as the caring, individualized attention that the firm provides its customers.

Quality is the extent to which the service, the service process and the service organisation can satisfy the expectations of the user. All service organisations recognise the importance of service quality because it affects customer loyalty and satisfaction. Service quality also has been suggested as a means of developing a competitive advantage (Landrum *et al.*, 2007). Lovelock and Wright (2002) define quality as the degree to which a service satisfies customers by meeting their needs, wants and expectations. This definition means that if a firm does not improve quality service to its customers, it will be able to switch its customers to another supplier who can satisfy them and its competitors will take over the market.

Lovelock and Wright (2002) define customer satisfaction as a sort of emotional reaction that arose from an actual experience. Metters *et al.* (2006) also indicate that satisfaction is the consumer's fulfilment response. Satisfaction is the customer's evaluation of a product or service in terms of whether that product or service has

met the customer's needs and expectations (Bruhn and Georgi, 2006). According to Truong and Foster (2006), customer satisfaction takes place in two situations. One is the result of a product or actual service meeting the customer's expectations. The other is the result that exceeds the expectations. Dissatisfaction will occur when the actual service is below the expected level. So, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are the outcome of a subjective evaluation process.

The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is still a mystery whether customer satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality or vice versa. Several researchers suggest that customer satisfaction leads to service quality (Lee *et al.*, 2000).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The sample comprised 400 students in terms of the predicted population of 21000 students studying at the DUT. Two types of non-probability sampling were used. Quota sampling was used to seek respondents in the same proportions. This method is regarded as the most useful form of non-random sampling and does offer a cost and time-effective solution for questionnaire-based research by the market research industry (Curwin and Slater, 2002). The breakdown of the quota was calculated using the mean proportion percentage across the five faculties of the DUT. Convenience sampling which is the cheapest and easiest way to conduct the sample was used to select respondents.

Data was collected by administering a questionnaire to students across six campuses of the DUT. The SERVQUAL instrument which is a pre-existing, validated instrument by virtue of its extensive use in a variety of service quality settings was used to measure students' expectations and perceptions of service quality of the DUT sport offering. The SERVQUAL Model consists of a standardised questionnaire which included two statements for each of the 13 items that represented the two dimensions described. An expectations' study containing 13 statements is used to ascertain the general expectations of customers concerning a service. A perceptions' section containing a matching set of 13 statements was used to measure customers' assessments of a specific firm within the service category. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 14.0 for Windows.

## **RESULTS**

About 49% of the respondents were in the 18-20 age group followed by 44.5% in the 21-23 age group and 6.5% of the respondents were 24 years and older. The age

profile indicates that the 18-20 age group was the dominant group. The percentage of male respondents was 43.3% while the percentage of female respondents was 56.7%. The 43.3% of the respondents were African followed by 30% Asian, 15% white and 11.8% coloured. The 40.8% of the respondents were in their 1st year of study followed by 36.3% in their 2nd year and 23% in the third year of study. First year students were the dominant group. The percentage of respondents residing in DUT residence was 17% while 83% were non-resident respondents as depicted in Table 1.

**Assurance:** As shown in Table 2, the expectations means reflected the highest score (3.69) for members feel safe in their dealings with the staff and closely followed by a mean score of (3.68) for behaviour of personnel instills confidence in members. The lowest mean score (3.59) is attributed to staff is consistently courteous with members.

The perceptions means statements indicated that three statements have similar means scores namely: members feel safe in their dealings with the staff (2.68), staff has the knowledge to answer members' questions (2.67) and behaviour of personnel instills confidence in members (2.66). The lowest mean score (2.57) is attributed to staff is consistently courteous with members.

A comparison of the mean expectation and perception indicated a large difference between the dimensions. The largest gaps ( $G = -1.02$ ) were found in

service quality statement behaviour of personnel instills confidence in members and staff is consistently courteous with members. The smallest gap ( $-0.95$ ) was for staff has the knowledge to answer members' questions.

**Empathy:** The attributes in Table 3 were to evaluate the empathy dimension of service quality of the sports department at DUT. Two statements in this dimension, namely: operating hours are convenient to all members and staff understands the specific needs of their members had similar expectation scores of 3.65 and 3.62, respectively. The expectation score for staff has the members' best interests at heart was at the lowest 3.48 for this dimension of service quality.

The highest perception score (2.78) is for the statement operating hours are convenient to all members while the lowest score (2.48) is for the statement staff gives members individual attention. When comparing the attributes gap scores, it is evident that the biggest gap score ( $G = -1.04$ ) is for staff understands the specific needs of their members and the lowest gap score of ( $G = -0.82$ ) is attributed to staff has the members' best interests at heart.

**Comparison of quality dimensions:** As evidenced in Table 4, both dimensions exhibited negative mean gap scores ranging from 0.75-1.38. The general mean gap figure for all the attributes is  $-0.99$ . Materials are visually appealing attribute has the smallest negative mean gap score of  $-0.75$  while staff provides their services at the time they promise to do so has the largest negative mean gap scores of  $-1.38$ .

Generally, the findings implied that comparatively speaking, students experienced less discrepancy between their expectations and perceptions towards materials are visually appealing than towards staff provides their services at the time they promise to do so provided by the sports department at the DUT.

These results as presented in Table 4 reflected that the scores for expectation were significantly higher than those for perception at the 95% level of significance for each of dimension. In the mean gap scores analysis of service expectations and perceptions, it can be observed that the assurance dimension is lowest ( $G = -0.76$ ) between the expectation and perception of service quality.

Table 1: Biographical data of respondents

Total number of students (400)	Percentage
<b>Age</b>	
18-20	49.0
21-23	44.5
24 and older	6.5
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	43.0
Female	57.0
<b>Race</b>	
Black	43.0
White	30.0
Asian	15.0
Coloured	12.0
<b>Year of study</b>	
First	41.0
Second	36.0
Third	23.0
<b>Location</b>	
Residence	17.0
Non-residence	83.0

Table 2: Assurance

Statements	Expectations means (SD)	Perceptions means (SD)	Gap (PM-EM)
Behaviour of personnel instills confidence in members	3.68 (1.021)	2.66 (0.983)	-1.02
Members feel safe in their dealings with the staff	3.69 (0.997)	2.68 (1.061)	-1.01
Staff is consistently courteous with members	3.59 (0.940)	2.57 (0.955)	-1.02
Staff has the knowledge to answer members' questions	3.62 (0.979)	2.67 (0.919)	-0.95

Table 3: Empathy dimension of service quality of the sports department

Statements	Expectations means (SD)	Perceptions means (SD)	Gap (PM-EM)
Staff gives members individual attention	3.47 (0.983)	2.48 (0.991)	-0.99
Operating hours are convenient to all members	3.62 (1.060)	2.78 (1.191)	-0.84
Staff gives members personal attention	3.57 (1.004)	2.60 (1.041)	-0.97
Staff have the members' best interests at heart	3.48 (1.071)	2.66 (1.092)	-0.82
Staff understands the specific needs of their members	3.65 (0.983)	2.61 (0.996)	-1.04

Table 4: Comparison of quality dimensions

Dimension	Expectation mean (SD)	Perception mean (SD)	Gap PM-EM
Assurance	3.64 (0.81)	2.88 (0.66)	-0.76
Empathy	3.56 (0.80)	2.63 (0.80)	-0.94

However, this finding does not mean that assurance is not important. This finding simply means that the assurance is relatively less important in comparison with the other factors as respondents reflected in the survey. In terms of expectations for the sport offering at the DUT, empathy rates the lowest (3.56) while assurance (3.64) is relative high for expectation and it is the highest for perception (2.88).

## DISCUSSION

The assurance dimension is a combination of the competence, courtesy, security and access dimensions of the SERVQUAL Model. The theoretical study indicated that employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence are vital. Trust and confidence can also be instilled into students when the facilities are conveniently located. Confident managers are those who are knowledgeable and courteous and able to inspire students' trust and confidence. The results showed that the largest gap in this dimension was related to the unwillingness of staff to assist students to locate facilities. This implies that managers lacked confidence and as a result failed to build an approachability and ease of contact. This could be attributed to ignoring the care and needs of students who are not familiar with the surroundings.

The empathy dimension is a combination of the original communication and understanding dimensions of the SERVQUAL Model. The theoretical study showed that communication refers to caring, individualised attention provided to customers. The essence of communication is that customers feel special and unique through personalised or customised service as well as trained employees building positive communication relationships with them. To apply this factor, staff should make every effort to understand students' needs and employees should use simple language when communicating with them. The results revealed that the largest gap was associated with failure to understand the specific needs of students. This implies that managers failed to communicate with students about what they

expected to know about their sports offerings. This is due to a lack in communicating with students and poor understanding of their needs.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined students' expectations and perceptions of service quality. The results indicate that there were gaps in terms of the two dimensions of service quality, namely assurance and empathy. To close all the assurance gaps, the following recommendations are made:

- Staff should invite suggestions through a suggestion box. This in essence may help them to identify critical areas of students' concerns
- Managers should also consider and lend support to staff concerns due to their contact with students every day
- Managers should audit employees' courtesy and attitude

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To close all the empathy gaps, the following recommendations are made:

- Managers should have a communication plan which outlines communication policies, identifies the communication objectives and media and then evaluates the overall quality of the communication system by comparing communication objectives to actual performance
- Managers should conduct research to understand the students' needs. This research should be repeated annually to ensure a track is kept of students' changing needs.
- Staff interaction with students must be encouraged

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