

A Gap Analysis of the Quality of Student Support Services in an Open Distance Learning Institution

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an investigation of the quality of student support services. The latter are important aspects in the development of a whole-person experience in any educational system. In the open distance learning (ODL) mode of education, student support services are even more important as they are the anchors of student success. Based on this, the main purpose of this paper is to observe the possible gaps between students' expectations (the ideal standard) and their experiences (the perceptions formed) of student support services as provided by the University of South Africa (UNISA). The respondents of this paper were doctoral students of UNISA who live and work in Ethiopia. A multi-dimensional and "standardised" instrument was used as a tool to collect quantitative data. The theoretical framework adopted in analysing the results was the gaps model. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and dependent t-tests were the statistical tools employed. The findings show that there were gaps between the students' expectations and experiences along the four dimensions of the instrument, namely Supervision Support, Infrastructure, Administrative Support and Academic Facilitation. It was therefore recommended that UNISA should focus on improving the relevant services it gives to its international students.

Keywords: expectations and experiences; student support services; open distance learning; gap analysis; service quality; doctoral students



Introduction

Student support services are core elements in making the learning process efficient and effective. Such services assist students to become competent by decreasing attrition and also contribute to the success of distance education programmes (Southard and Mooney 2015, 56; Wheeler 2008 in Mwenje and Saruchera 2013, 132). Student support services also assist in boosting students' confidence and self-esteem and in enabling students to be self-directed and independent which, in turn, improve students' persistence and success in their studies. All these things can happen if the student support services are well planned and delivered (Dzakiria 2005, 106).

In an open distance learning (ODL) system, student support is more individualised as individual students are given special support that assists in curbing the impersonal (disengaged) part of this special mode of learning. Disengagement, isolation and a lack of face-to-face contact in ODL are caused by the geographical separation of students from lecturers and administrative staff. Making students the central point of student support services and considering their heterogeneity enable one to target their individualised needs and hence to improve their experiences (Carter 2007, 26; Dowling and Ryan 2007, 88). It is further maintained that student support services "are developed with the specific needs of learners in mind, and so are context-specific ... [L]earner support activities are aimed at meeting the unique needs of the individual (although this may occur in groups)" (Mhlanga 2010, 32). Conversely, a lack of or insufficient student support services results in high dropout rates, student anxiety and finally ineffectiveness of a learning programme. For this reason, institutions that offer education through the open distance mode must always consider the need for student support schemes that are designed along with the course offerings (Prinsloo 2010, 10).

In the field of gap analysis, service quality is a major and an elusive concept. It can be defined "as the customer's impression of the relative superiority/inferiority of a service provider and its services" (Bitner and Hubbert 1994 cited in Prakash and Mohanty 2012, 3). It is further noted that service quality is geared towards identifying customers' needs and meeting their requirements (Tan, Hamid, and Chew 2016, 102). When service providing firms work to ensure the satisfaction of their customers, and in the meantime to increase their competitiveness and gain more market share, it can then be said that service quality is guaranteed (Nyenya and Bukaliya 2015, 45).

In service quality literature—for example, the works of Lovelock and Gummesson (2004, 21) and Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988, 13)—some common characteristics of services differentiate them from goods. These are intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (IHIP). Intangibility refers to the nature of services as difficult to verify. Heterogeneity refers to services' inconsistency from one provider to another and from one customer to another. Inseparability is the interaction between customers and service givers whereas perishability refers to the simultaneous nature of service production and consumption. Education, in terms of

these four characteristics, qualifies as a service (Ong and Nankervis 2012, 279; Sultan and Wong 2010, 267).

Since this study aims to observe the possible gaps between doctoral students' expectations and experiences of student support services, the gaps model that was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) was found to be the best suited theoretical base. This model was further developed by the same authors in 1988 with the inclusion of a measuring instrument named SERVQUAL. After holding extensive interviews with executives and customers of four service-rendering firms, the authors formulated four company gaps and one customer gap (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 44–9), which are briefly described below.

Gap 1: The “customer expectation vs. management perception gap” refers to the gap that may exist between how executives of companies perceive the expectations of their customers and the actual expectations of customers who make use of those services. In the context of this paper, students are the major customers who receive student support services. This gap can be translated as a discrepancy between what the university management perceives students' expectations to be and what students actually expect from student support services.

Gap 2: The “management perception of service quality specification” gap refers to the difference between how executives of companies perceive customers' expectations and how adequately and appropriately these perceptions are translated into specifications of service quality the company aims to render to its customers. In the case of this paper, this is a gap between what university management perceives students' expectations to be and how these perceived expectations are incorporated into the student support guidelines and policies.

Gap 3: The “service quality specifications vs. service delivery gap” is the gap between how company executives determine the service will be provided and how service is delivered in practice by the front-line staff members of a company who have direct interaction with the customers. In the case of this paper, this is the gap between how university management conceptualises student support services and the actual services delivered to the students.

Gap 4: The “service delivery vs. external communications gap” concerns the existence or absence of external communication about services to customers. A company that advertises itself widely but does not deliver a good service faces a service quality gap between what is on offer and what customers perceive to have received in practice. This gap can be translated in the context of this paper as the difference between the student support services that are delivered to students and the promise of the university (through different media like the university's website and news concerning the university) to students about its service quality.

Gap 5: The “expected service vs. perceived service gap” is a gap that refers to the experience of customers (unlike the first 4 gaps, which show company gaps). This gap results from what customers expect to receive from a company and how they perceive the delivered service. In this context, a gap may exist between students’ expectations of the student support service quality and their actual experiences of the services since they joined the university. This gap is the point of departure of this paper.

The gaps model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988, 48–9), states that the assessment of service quality based on the fifth gap can be described as:

- Experience > Expectation → “Perceived quality is more than satisfactory”
- Experience = Expectation → “Perceived quality is satisfactory”
- Experience < Expectation → “Perceived quality is less than satisfactory”

The two major concepts here are what customers expect of certain services and their actual experiences in the service encounter. Expectations are what customers desire or want to get from the service encounter and “represent a form of ‘ideal’ standard” (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1993, 144). Customers’ expectations are influenced by three important factors, namely word-of-mouth communication (what customers hear about the service provider from other persons), personal needs of customers (what customers desire to get from the service provider) and customers’ experiences during previous encounters with the company (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 48; Rajasekhar, Muninarayanappa, and Reddy 2009, 219). Two other aspects, namely external communication and the price of the service, can also influence expectations (Hill 1995, 12–3). However, the study by Sultan and Wong (2013, 79–80) found that in the higher education context, information and past experiences are the most influential of these aspects in determining expectations.

For service providers, identifying customers’ needs must precede decisions on what to offer so that customers’ expectations are met and quality service provision is guaranteed (Barnes 2007, 314; Jain, Sinha, and De 2010, 144). Advertising their offerings by including ideas which suggest that they understand customers’ needs also influences the way customers perceive the services as the advertisements shape customers’ expectations (Joseph, Yakhou, and Stone 2005, 67–8). In the educational context (Jain, Sinha, and De 2010, 144), “students have become more discriminating in their selection and more demanding of the colleges and universities they choose. Therefore, it is important for universities to understand their [students’] expectations.” Measuring expectations is therefore important so that they are better understood and clearly guide the means of further improvement by the service providers (Sultan and Wong 2010, 262).

Another very important aspect of service quality is customers’ actual experience with (or perception of) the service encounter (Kuo, Wu, and Deng 2009, 888). From the very beginning of the service encounter, customers form perceptions of the services that they

experience. This leads to the formation of an overall impression of the quality of the services on offer (Ong and Nankervis 2012, 284). Customers' perceptions of services provided can also be regarded as their evaluation of the performance of service providing firms. Companies should therefore be measured to understand the quality of the service they provide (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1990, 35). The gaps model asserts that measuring both expectations and experiences provides a diagnostic power to identify problem areas in service delivery, which in turn gives tangible feedback to the company for further improvement (Tan, Hamid, and Chew 2016, 107).

Looking at the quality of services from different dimensions helps in the process of measuring customers' expectations and experiences. This is because service features vary from one context to another; this in turn presupposes the dimensions of services vary from one kind of service to another (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1994, 114; Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, and Seebaluck 2016, 246) and also across cultures and economies (Malhotra et al. 2005, 260). Moreover, a dimensional approach provides a richer understanding of the different features of the services on offer (Sultan and Wong 2010, 262).

In measuring service quality, different authors use the SERVQUAL instrument or modifications of it. To mention a few, Wael (2015) used SERVQUAL to observe the expectation, experience and satisfaction levels of students regarding university services. Lampley (2001) used a modified version of SERVQUAL to explore gaps in service quality by comparing doctoral students' expectations and experiences. Sarrico, Ferreira and Silva (2013) used POLQUAL (modified SERVQUAL) to study customers' expectations and experiences of service quality in the traffic police force, whereas Kalotra and Sharma (2017) used SERVQUAL to assess service quality in the hospitality industry.

Problem Statement

The main purpose of this paper is to address the possible gap in service quality literature with particular reference to higher education institutions. It has become commonplace in the higher education system to regard students as customers. They are currently considered as customers because major services in the higher education sector are prepared for their benefit and they are also the ones who are primarily and directly affected if services suffer one way or another (Ong and Nankervis 2012, 279; Yeo and Li 2014, 97). The existing body of knowledge in this regard is scant and becomes scantier when the focus is on the open distance mode of education with particular emphasis on the quality of student support services, especially as provided to doctoral students (Barnes 2007, 317; Sultan and Wong 2010, 264). Hence, the problem addressed in this paper is the perceived gap between the expectations and experiences of doctoral students who are based in Ethiopia and the focus of the paper is on the quality of student support services that are provided by the University of South Africa (UNISA). The specific objectives of this paper are to:

- determine the expectations and actual experiences of doctoral students concerning student support services offered by UNISA;
- compare the abovementioned expectations and experiences of doctoral students in order to identify if there are gaps between their expectations and experiences with the student support services; and
- offer suggestions for improvement.

Methods

Context

UNISA is one of the most well-known providers of ODL in the world. It is one of the public universities in South Africa and offers its programmes solely via an open distance (especially electronic) mode of learning. Apart from its regional learning centres located in the different regions of South Africa, it has established a centre in Ethiopia that mainly offers master's and doctoral programmes. This is based on an agreement UNISA concluded with the government of Ethiopia in 2007. This paper focuses on identifying the expectations and experiences of doctoral students who live in Ethiopia and who are enrolled in different programmes of UNISA.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population of this study consisted of a total of 465 doctoral students of UNISA based in Ethiopia. From this population, 260 students comprised the sample. The socio-demographic characteristics of these respondents were as follows: four per cent of them were females and 96 per cent were males. With regard to age distribution, the majority of the respondents (85%) were in the age range of 31–50 years. Considering their marital status, 83 per cent of the respondents were married and 15 per cent were single. Approximately 35 per cent of the respondents were enrolled in the College of Education, 29 per cent in the College of Human Sciences, 14 per cent in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, 12 per cent in the College of Economic and Management Sciences, which also includes students in the School of Business Leadership, and eight per cent in the College of Science, Engineering and Technology. For the purposes of this paper, however, these socio-demographic characteristics were not used to analyse the data as the major objective of the paper was to observe the gaps between students' expectations and experiences of the quality of student support services.

A convenience sampling technique “in which respondents [were] chosen based on their convenience and availability” (Babbie 1990 in Creswell 2009, 148) was utilised. The researcher tried to contact all the students that constituted the population telephonically and the ones who answered their phones were asked for their consent to complete the instrument. If they declared themselves willing to do so, the instrument was sent to them via their private e-mail addresses. The convenience sampling technique is often criticised for a perceived lack of generalisability to a larger population (Babbie 2013,

128; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2012, 141). However, in this paper, the advice of McMillan (2012, 104) was followed “not to dismiss the findings but to limit them to the type of subjects in the sample.” After a data cleaning procedure, a total of 227 (49%) students’ responses were utilised for analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

This study employed the survey method and gathered responses from a sample of available respondents through a 28-item, four-dimensional instrument. The initially developed instrument consisted of 40 items. To ensure its validity, the draft instrument passed through rigorous content validity and factor analysis procedures, after which the items were reduced to 28. After data collection, the reliability coefficient was calculated to be 0.86. The 28 items were categorised in four dimensions, namely Supervision Support, Infrastructure, Administrative Support and Academic Facilitation. Table 1 below presents the contextual meanings of each dimension.

Table 1: Contextual meanings of dimensions

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Meaning as Used in this Study</i>
Supervision Support	Issues that are directly linked to the academic activities of the students like the instructions/ guidance rendered by supervisors.
Infrastructure	Services related to both the physical and non-physical (soft format) set-up that the university provides.
Administrative Support	The provision of valuable information to students, and services that are related to application and registration processes.
Academic Facilitation	Activities that the university provides to ease and assist in the academic journey of doctoral students so as to increase throughput.

Data Analysis Methods

In this study, means and standard deviations were used with the purpose of showing the level (extent) of students’ expectations and experiences of the student support service quality, and the deviation of each dimension from its grand mean (Murphy and Davidshofer 2005, 82). In addition, dependent t-tests were employed to observe if the mean differences between expectations and experiences were statistically significant. The dependent t-test was chosen because the two variables under consideration (expectations and experiences) came from the same sample of doctoral students of UNISA who are based in Ethiopia. To observe if the statistically significant t-test results

also had practical significance, effect size was calculated for each dimension by means of Pearson's r (Field 2009, 333).

Findings

Students' Expectations and Experiences of Service Quality

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were employed to describe the extent of the students' expectations regarding the four dimensions of student support services, namely Supervision Support, Infrastructure, Administrative Support and Academic Facilitation, the meanings of which are discussed in Table 1 above.

Table 2 below presents the level of the students' expectations and experiences of service quality by considering each of the four dimensions separately. The grand mean value for the dimension of Supervision Support was 3.45 on a scale of 4.0. The scale is 4.0 because the expected range of each of the items was to fall in the scale of zero (none), one (little), two (some), three (much) and four (very much). The minimum and maximum values of each of the 10 items in the dimension also ranged from 3.12 to 3.58. The standard deviation of the grand mean, on the other hand, was 0.53, which implies that the variation between the students' responses was very low (the students' responses were largely similar). The findings show that the students had higher expectations (than their experiences) of the supervision support services as provided by UNISA.

The second dimension that was taken into consideration was Infrastructure. This dimension had a grand mean value of 3.47 with the eight individual items falling in the range of 3.29 to 3.58. The items' means had a dispersion of 0.62 from the grand mean, showing a small variation in the students' responses. Similar to Supervision Support, the students' expectations of the physical and the soft format infrastructure provided by UNISA was higher than their experiences of the same.

The six items under the dimension of Administrative Support had a minimum mean value of 3.45 and a maximum mean value of 3.61. The grand mean was 3.56 with a standard deviation of 0.53. The fourth dimension, Academic Facilitation, had four items, a minimum mean value of 3.48, and a maximum mean value of 3.64 with a grand mean of 3.57. Similar to the other dimensions mentioned above, the dispersion of the mean values from the grand mean was 0.54. As with the first two dimensions referred to above, there was minimal dispersion among the means of the items under the dimensions of Administrative Support and Academic Facilitation, suggesting that the students' responses were very similar. All these facts imply that, overall, the students' expectations of the student support service quality were high.

Considering the extent of the students' actual experiences of the student support service quality they had received from UNISA, Table 2 indicates that the grand mean values for each of the dimensions were below 3.0 on a scale of 4.0. They were 2.54 for the dimension of Supervision Support, 2.45 for the dimension of Infrastructure, 2.85 for the

dimension of Administrative Support and 2.74 for the dimension of Academic Facilitation. These results suggest that the students' actual experiences of the support services at UNISA were notably lower than their expectations. The dispersion of the means of the items from the grand mean, the grand standard deviation for all four dimensions, is below 1.0 (namely 0.83 for Supervision Support, 0.73 for Infrastructure, 0.69 for Administrative Support and 0.75 for Academic Facilitation), which indicates that the students' responses regarding their actual experiences of the student support service quality were by and large similar.

The difference of the means between the students' overall expectations (all 4 dimensions together) and their overall experiences was also observed. The mean value of expectation was 3.55 whereas the mean value of experience was 2.62, also suggesting that the students' experiences did not match their expectations. The section below contains a discussion on whether these mean differences were statistically significant.

Table 2: Students' expectations and experiences of service quality

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Results of Expectation</i>			<i>Results of Experience</i>		
		N	Mean	Std. Dev*	N	Mean	Std. Dev
Supervision Support	Clear comments from supervisors	223	3.54	.61	221	2.82	1.01
	Supervisors acknowledge receipt of students' submissions	225	3.48	.74	224	2.84	1.02
	Information on ethical clearance procedures	220	3.43	.78	216	2.44	1.14
	Alerting students to useful resources	225	3.43	.76	222	2.35	1.19
	Using different technological media for communication	227	3.41	.73	226	2.51	1.06
	Guidance on governing rules and policies	227	3.48	.71	224	2.65	1.05
	Supervisors' timely responses to students' submissions	226	3.58	.72	226	2.68	1.07
	Supervisors periodically encouraging their students	226	3.46	.72	224	2.56	1.12
	Comments of supervisors being fairly consistent over time	220	3.50	.67	220	2.71	1.00
	Supervisors giving	225	3.12	1.01	226	1.67	1.3

Dimensions	Items	Results of Expectation			Results of Experience		
		N	Mean	Std. Dev*	N	Mean	Std. Dev
	information on research fund possibilities						8
Grand Means and Standard Deviations on Supervision Support			3.45	0.53		2.54	.83
Infra-structure	Online materials collection in the library	227	3.58	.72	227	2.98	.96
	Accessibility of online library throughout the year	221	3.49	.79	220	2.86	.96
	Up-to-date ICT resources	225	3.53	.69	224	2.67	.94
	Assistance for ICT-related challenges	224	3.40	.78	225	2.63	1.09
	Centre library stocking subject-related materials	225	3.56	.70	225	2.44	1.02
	Centre library stocking recent research books	224	3.53	.73	225	2.40	.98
	Accessibility of computer labs	222	3.29	.944	219	2.12	1.19
	Accessibility of Ethiopia Centre	223	3.32	.95	223	1.68	1.08
Grand Means and Standard Deviations on Infrastructure			3.47	0.62		2.45	.73
Administra-tive Support	User-friendliness of the myLife e-mail	224	3.61	.63	226	3.06	.91
	Provision of information on doctoral application	227	3.59	.63	227	3.12	.87
	Responses on admission decisions	227	3.55	.69	227	2.88	1.00
	User-friendliness of registration and re-registration	226	3.55	.68	227	2.94	.97
	Time span in communicating HDC decisions on proposal	224	3.51	.73	222	2.46	1.11
	Provision of information on administrative procedures	226	3.45	.74	225	2.66	.97
Grand Means and Standard Deviations on Administrative Support			3.56	0.53		2.85	.69
	Doctoral proposal	226	3.64	.62	226	3.25	.82

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Results of Expectation</i>			<i>Results of Experience</i>		
		N	Mean	Std. Dev*	N	Mean	Std. Dev
Academic Facilitation	development training						
	Relevance of training to students' research	226	3.62	.62	225	2.84	.96
	Provision of programmes for post-proposal students	223	3.48	.70	218	2.39	1.07
	Training on data analysis software	220	3.53	.68	219	2.46	1.02
Grand Means and Standard Deviations on Academic Facilitation			3.57	0.54		2.74	.75

*Note: Std. Dev is Standard Deviation

Comparison between Student Expectations and Experiences of Service Quality

In this section, attention is paid to the question of whether there were gaps between the students' expectations and experiences of the delivery of student support services. This is based on the gaps model, which assesses quality by observing the differences between the clients' expectations and actual experiences. Each of the four dimensions (Supervision Support, Infrastructure, Administrative Support, and Academic Facilitation) was subjected to t-test analysis. Thereafter a comparison of means between the cumulative results of expectations and the cumulative results of experiences was done. Table 3 depicts the mean differences.

Table 3: Mean differences between expectations and experiences

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Mean Experience</i>	<i>Mean Expectation</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>
Supervision Support	2.54	3.45	-0.91
Infrastructure	2.45	3.47	-1.02
Administrative Support	2.85	3.56	-0.71
Academic Facilitation	2.74	3.57	-0.83
Overall/Total	2.62	3.55	-0.93

To observe if the negative means are statistically significant, a dependent t-test was conducted, as shown in Table 4 below. In all cases, the result proved to be statistically significant.

Table 4: Gaps between students' expectations and experiences

Dimension	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Mean Expectation– Mean Experience Supervision Support	.901	.913	.066	.770	1.032	13.569	188	.000
Mean Expectation– Mean Experience Infrastructure	1.013	.850	.060	.894	1.132	16.825	198	.000
Mean Expectation– Mean Experience Administrativ e Support	.698	.746	.051	.597	.798	13.705	214	.000
Mean Expectation– Mean Experience Academic Facilitation	.832	.834	.058	.718	.946	14.376	207	.000

The dimension of Supervision Support was checked to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the students' expectations and experiences of the support that they received from their supervisors. The t-test results show that, on average, students' actual experiences of supervision support were statistically significantly less (Mean = 2.54, SE = 0.061) than their expectations (Mean = 3.45, SE = 0.038) ($t_{(188)} = 13.57, p < 0.001$). This result shows a statistically significant difference at p value of 0.001, which means that the students' expectation of the Supervision Support was higher than their actual experiences. The effect size was observed by using Pearson's correlation and was found to be $r = 0.50$. The result shows that there is a

statistically and practically significant gap between the students' expectations and experiences of service delivery in regard to Supervision Support.

According to Table 4, the t-test result for the Infrastructure dimension indicates that, on average, students' actual experiences of the infrastructure support provided by UNISA were statistically significantly lower (Mean = 2.45, SE = 0.052) than their expectations (Mean = 3.47, SE = 0.044) ($t_{(198)} = 16.83, p < 0.001, r = 0.59$). This statistically significant result implies that there is a gap between the students' expectations and actual experiences of service delivery with regard to the infrastructure that UNISA provides; the gap shows a negative direction as expectations exceed experiences.

The dimension of Administrative Support was observed to check if there was a gap between students' expectations and experiences. The result shows that, on average, students' actual experiences of Administrative Support were statistically significantly lower (Mean = 2.85, SE = 0.047) than their expectations (Mean = 3.56, SE = 0.036) ($t_{(214)} = 13.71, p < 0.001, r = 0.50$). The result of this dimension also showed that the difference of the means was high. Similar to the observations regarding the preceding two dimensions, the students' expectations exceeded their experiences with regard to the dimension of Administrative Support.

The fourth dimension of student support service delivery offered by UNISA was Academic Facilitation. The result of the t-test as shown in Table 4 above reveals that, on average, students' actual experiences of the activities under this dimension were statistically significantly lower (Mean = 2.74, SE = 0.052) than their expectations (Mean = 3.57, SE = 0.037) ($t_{(207)} = 14.38, p < 0.001, r = 0.50$). This result shows that there are statistically significant gaps between students' expectations and experiences; their experiences are lower than their expectations.

In general, it was observed there was a statistically and practically significant difference between the students' expectations and their actual experiences as observed in the cases of the four expectation-experience dimensions. All the results point to expectations exceeding experiences.

This section substantiates the findings of the t-test analyses that were done on overall items that measured students' expectations, on the one hand, and their experiences, on the other. Table 5 below shows that, on average, students' actual experiences of the quality of the student support services were statistically significantly lower (Mean = 2.62, SE = 0.048) than their expectations (Mean = 3.53, SE = 0.034) ($t_{(151)} = 16.41, p < 0.001, r = 0.64$).

Table 5: Gaps between the overall expectations and experiences

	Paired Differences						t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Mean Expectation –Mean Experience Total	.911	.685	.056	.801	1.021	16.405	151	.000	

This result indicates that there was a gap between the students' expectations and their experiences of the student support service quality. The effect size, $r = 0.64$, was also very high—testifying to the practical significance of the statistically significant result of the differences between the two means.

Discussion

The authors of the gaps model emphasise the importance of understanding expectations, because expectations provide a meaningful context for measuring service quality. Expectations are generally considered to be an indication of the ideal services in the eyes of customers (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1990, 34). Expectations are customers' wants or desires in their encounter with particular forms of services. For this reason, measuring expectations has the potential to reveal points that need to be improved in the process of service provision (Sultan and Wong 2010, 262). On the other hand, customers' experiences of services constitute their perceptions about the services at hand. Experiences refer to the overall impressions customers develop in the process of being served and hence they should be well understood through certain means of measurement. Some authors even contend that measuring experiences only is enough to understand service quality (Ong and Nankervis 2012, 284), though measuring both expectations and experiences provides a diagnostic power to identify problems.

Data were gathered through administering an instrument that was regarded as valid and reliable. Using grand means and standard deviations, it was found that, generally, the range of the students' expectations was closer to the possible maximum point of 4.0 (means ranging from 3.45 to 3.57). These results also had small variations in the students' responses (standard deviations ranging from 0.53 to 0.62).

On the other hand, in terms of the actual experiences of the doctoral students regarding student support services offered by UNISA, the findings of this study show that the means for each of the four dimensions were below 3.0 (on a 4-point scale). Similar to the findings on expectations above, the standard deviations of the students' experiences showed that the variation in the students' responses was very similar. The values of the standard deviations ranged from 0.69 to 0.83. From this data, it can be concluded that students' expectations are higher than their experiences.

The findings of this paper show that there are statistically significant gaps (at $p < 0.001$) between the students' expectations and experiences in all four dimensions (Supervision Support, Infrastructure, Administrative Support and Academic Facilitation). Moreover, the statistically significant difference of the gap between the overall expectations and overall experiences has an effect size of $r = 0.64$, suggesting that the student support service quality gap was both statistically significant and practically high. According to the gaps model, the students' assessment of service quality falls in the category of Experience < Expectation → "Perceived quality is less than satisfactory." These findings match the results of the studies conducted by Lampley (2001, 11), Kalotra and Sharma (2017, 65) and Sarrico, Ferreira, and Silva (2013, 286).

Recommendations

Satisfied students contribute to "selling" their university to other persons, which in turn boosts the university's image. This particularly applies to institutions that offer ODL (especially on a cross-border basis). Such institutions should consider their students' needs by paying attention to the context of the education-receivers so as to bring about satisfaction in their students. Hence, UNISA should strengthen the student support schemes it provides to the doctoral students that are based in Ethiopia. Apart from assigning a supervisor to each student, UNISA should establish a mechanism to check if supervisors give timely and constructive feedback on students' submissions, and if they work on inspiring, motivating and following up on their students' academic progress.

Other points UNISA should consider in overcoming the gap in the students' expectations and experiences could be to improve the physical library collection in the Ethiopia Centre's library and improving the user-friendliness of the myLife e-mail account. Similarly, the university should consider the timeliness of responses given on admission decisions, and avoid delayed responses on ethical clearance applications. With regard to the academic support UNISA gives to students in Ethiopia, it is useful if the relevance of the generic topics is checked for the different fields of study the students are enrolled in. These recommendations can help UNISA improve its student support services not only to students based in Ethiopia but also for all the master's and doctoral students enrolled in the university.

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