

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE DELIVERY IN AN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken to determine the actual level of student satisfaction with service delivery levels in an academic department at a higher education institution in South Africa. A quantitative research approach was used employing survey research through a questionnaire. The target group consisted of 1 033 Public Administration students from which a sample of 194 students was randomly drawn. Data was subjected to descriptive statistics and all the constructs were tested for reliability and validity by conducting the Cronbach's alpha. To check for significant differences between the demographics of population and age, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. A major result revealed that the respondents had overall high expectations for service delivery. They also perceived the experiences of service delivery as overwhelmingly positive. It was found that empathy and accessibility do not make considerable contributions to students' experiences of quality services. These results support the principles of the SERVQUAL model, implying that the general experiences of the respondents can be classified as new knowledge in service delivery literature. The results may serve as guidelines to a follow-up study and may be extended to other academic modules in the same academic department. The results may also contribute to better comprehension of service delivery matters

INTRODUCTION

The private monitoring agency "Municipal IQ" counted 111 service delivery protests in 2010. Gauteng experienced the most protests (38%), followed by the Western Cape (16%) (Municipal IQ 2010: internet). These protests have a negative impact on the capacity of the state and ultimately on the economy of the country, reflecting a broader failure in the entire public service delivery system. Although the South African government's service delivery principles, mandated mainly in the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery of 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997(b): internet), comply with international standards, and are well established, research reveals that there is a gap between public policy formulation and implementation of government programmes in terms of service delivery (Open

Society Foundation for South Africa 2007: internet).

Information about poor service delivery in the education sector is widely available. For example, in a study conducted by Ghadamosi and De Jager (2009, 890) it was revealed that students' perceived experiences with services at two universities of technology were significantly lower than their expectations of services at their universities. Particular areas of concern were, among others, the following: problems with registration; poor support from administrative staff; use of temporary staff at peak registration periods and poor computer facilities.

A major internal quality management investigation (audit) was also conducted at the particular university (University 1) where this study has been done. The audit was done during 2008 under the auspices of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education. The HEQC has the statutory responsibility to conduct institutional audits as indicated in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997(a): internet) and the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008 (Republic of South Africa 2008: internet). Report number 24 of the HEQC identified service delivery as one of the main indicators of improvement in terms of quality management at University 1. Specifically, the report indicated that the university addresses student dissatisfaction with service delivery at the different stages of the student process and finds solutions for both bad service and system failure in such a manner that it realises the promises made in the institution's service charter'(Republic of South Africa 2011: internet).

Against the background of the HEQC audit, several other service delivery surveys were conducted at University 1 (at university and college levels) with the aim of gaining insight into students' experiences pertaining to the services provided. A 2009 research study commissioned by Employer 1 revealed that student satisfaction levels had declined from 2005 to 2009. Research variables showing the lowest satisfaction ratings among 2009 students include, among others, aspects such as registration, student support and the Student Representative Council (University 1 2009: internet). Given that service delivery is a high priority at Employer 1, College 1 has acknowledged annual surveys among students as one of the methods to measure student satisfaction levels. One of the most interesting findings of the 2007 research, for example, was that students were generally satisfied with the service delivery levels in College 1. An average satisfaction score (mean) of 5.33 was obtained for the constructs of the different business units on a 7-point Likert scale. Scores above 4 reflect that students are generally satisfied with the services. Although the satisfaction levels were relatively high, many satisfaction items were also scored low by the students who participated in the study. The lowest-scoring satisfaction items include, among others, the following: time between receiving study material and first assignment; communication support systems; availability of lecturers and tutors; individual attention and availability of discussion classes (University 1 2009: internet).

Thus, given the history of poor service delivery in the higher education sector, and the fact that no specific service delivery research has been done among third-year students in Academic Department 1 at University 1, it was considered advisable to verify the expectations and actual level of service delivery that the academic department provides to these students. The researcher is of the opinion that clear benefits may potentially ensue from understanding the actual service requirements of these students. Tracing the expectations and levels of service delivery offered to these students could enable Academic Department 1 to act upon areas requiring improvement. Against this background, the following pertinent research question was raised to simultaneously serve as the research problem: *What are the expectations and the perceived experiences with current service delivery levels) among a selected group of third-year students in Academic Department 1 at University 1?*

The rest of the article is structured as follows: A review of service delivery literature is presented. The research design is outlined and justified next, and is followed by the research findings (results) and discussions. The implications for further research are then presented and, finally, conclusions with research limitations and practical and theoretical implications are highlighted.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE DELIVERY

In this part of the article details are given of selected theoretical aspects of service delivery and the different options available for measuring service delivery in the higher education sector are analysed.

Expectations theory

In the services context the central point of measuring service delivery is the disconfirmation of expectations theory. There has always been extensive deliberation about the best way to quantify education services. On the one hand, Cheng and Tam (1997, 23) point out that 'service delivery in higher education is a rather vague and controversial concept'. On the other hand, it is well acknowledged that 'universities are increasingly finding themselves in an environment that is conducive to understanding the role and importance of service delivery' (Shank, Walker and Hayes (1995, cited in Brochado 2009, 176). As a result of the difficulty in defining measurement methodologies, different approaches have emerged, leading to the inclusion or not of expectations as a determinant of the service. This difference in meaning has led to two different paradigms: the disconfirmation paradigm (expectations) and the perception paradigm (perceived experiences) (Ekinçi 2004, cited in Petruzzellis, D'Uggetto and Romanazzi 2006, 351]. Obviously, these two paradigms provide for both positive and negative disconfirmations. This relationship is supported by the literature, both theoretically and empirically (Angell, Heffernan and Megicks 2008, 238-239).

Although the disconfirmation of expectations theory provides a respectable

framework to compare expectations and experiences of services, it is deficient in the quantitative details that can be applied universally (Ling, Chai and Piew 2010, 3-4). Despite the shortcomings of the disconfirmation paradigm, the existing literature does support the relationship between these two paradigms. In this article, therefore, the disconfirmation of expectations theory is adopted as a platform to measure the PHRM students' expectations and perceived experiences of service delivery in Academic Department 1.

Service delivery

The literature on service delivery highlights the importance for the higher education sector to examine the services that are provided by their institutions in order to commit themselves to constant improvements in terms of service delivery. However, there is a widespread debate in the literature about the best way to define service delivery (Khoshafian 2007, 311-312). From their research Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, 42) conclude that 'service delivery, amongst others, includes a measure of how well the service level has been achieved, or matches customer expectations'. This definition is echoed by Zeithaml (1988, 3-5) who states that 'perceived service delivery reflects the opinion of the customer regarding the superiority ... of a product or service'. In his research on service delivery Pupo (2010, 75-76) highlights the customer factor by claiming that 'there is no better proxy for the long-term economic potential of a business ... than the strength of its customer-satisfaction ratings'. These three quotations clearly show that service delivery should be judged by the customers' assessments. In the higher education context, according to research by Tait and De Jager (2009, 1027), that obviously involves the education experiences of the students who are regarded as one of the primary customers. Generally, the experiences of students as customers take place internally (internal customers) and are based on the assessment of all the critical components of the education system, including inputs as well as outputs. Some authors are of the opinion that the traditional methods of assessing service delivery levels in higher education, namely measuring input levels such as expenditure per student and number of library volumes, are deficient.

Nowadays, service delivery is also being driven by outcomes assessment, which requires measuring the desired results of a particular instructional or education effort that is more strongly directed to the learning process. Other service delivery outcomes include the assessment of quality in teaching and learning and measuring the quality of the total student experience. According to a study by Abouchdid and Nasser (2002, 199) all these approaches are based on subjective student expectations and perceptions which are indispensable for service delivery and institutional promotion. Sometimes these student satisfaction assessments may be used as an instrument for closing the gap between the conventional views on how to advance higher education, and more market-oriented approaches. Market-related strategies are not inappropriate for current higher education institutions where there is a well known understanding of the teaching methods and processes

as a long-term investment in students' lives (Gallifa and Batallé 2010, 157). These perspectives call attention to a new way of understanding service delivery as an outcome. Thus, student expectations and perceptions are strategic variables to be studied in this context and are regarded as being important for the focus of this article. Research of this kind will not only widen the scope of service delivery at University 1, but it will also give a broader understanding of the main theme of the study.

Conceptual framework

Approaches to measuring service delivery have been based mainly on the disconfirmation of expectations theory. Despite the many proposed alternatives to this theory, the centre of contemporary academic debate on service delivery is, according to Gallifa and Batallé (2010, 157), on the merits of the SERVQUAL model, first proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 44). This model puts together both the dimensions of 'expectations' and 'perceptions' (experiences), reducing student prejudice caused by academic related events that might be manipulating their rating decisions in terms of service delivery. The advantage of dealing with the expectations and experiences of students simultaneously provides an opportunity for expressions based on needs, concerns and experiences as a collective whole.

In practice, the SERVQUAL model makes use of selected dimensions of the disconfirmation of expectations theory, suggesting that the difference (gap) between 'expected' and 'perceived' (experiences) service delivery levels by and large uncovers the students' service assessment. From a structural point of view, 22 items were initially included in the model overseeing ten service delivery factors. However, wide-ranging statistical analysis exposed noteworthy correlations between many of the variables. This justified the case for reducing the ten variables to the current five, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Brochado 2009, 176; Pupo 2010, 72).

Although the SERVQUAL model has been used extensively in the past, it has been subjected to criticism as well. Basically, the criticisms boil down to dimensional issues. On the dimensional criticisms, there is still much disagreement on the framework and the quantity of the dimensions (Hoffman and Bateson 2006, cited in Ling et al. 2010, 5). Owing to the perceived shortcomings in the SERVQUAL model, the researcher conducted a comprehensive study of various other service models and official service delivery documents at University 1 to ensure that this study is industry-related. A background study was done of University 1's 2015 Strategic Plan, University 1's Service Charter, College 1's Service Charter, School 1's Service Charter and Academic Department 1's Teaching and Learning Code (Khoshafian 2007, 72-75; University 1 2011(a): internet; University 1 2011(b): internet; University 1 2011(c): internet; University 1 2011(d): internet; University 1 2011(e): internet). The different variables were slightly refined so that the items were mainly similar to the dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. This was done to

ensure that validity checks would not create unexpected results due to the problems of construct validity. The researcher identified the following five dimensions of the service delivery concept:

- **Accessibility.** Access to services and approachability: access to departmental website, access to university's website, academic staff in person, phone, e-mail and fax.
- **Tangibles.** Appearance of facilities, staff and study material: general helpfulness of staff, handling of enquiries, convenience of operating hours, user-friendliness of tutorial letters and study guides and visual appearance of the departmental website.
- **Reliability.** Capacity to carry out the promised service in accurate ways: academic competence of lecturing staff, politeness of administrative staff, delivery of study material to empower students, availability of staff during operating hours, and handling of enquiries in a satisfactory way.
- **Responsiveness.** Prompt attention and speedy response: general experience with efficiency, rapid response in dealing with enquiries, turnaround time with the marking of assignments, information in study material and departmental website.
- **Empathy.** Compassion and individual attention to student needs: staff members' care for students, experience with individual attention, patience levels of staff, willingness to assist and follow-up actions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The sections below provide an overview of the research design and methodology.

Design

This study is an exploratory research project, because globally and locally there are limited studies that investigate service delivery matters in academic departments. An exploratory research project is often undertaken to fill the void in the literature in areas of inquiry that are new or under-studied, and existing areas where the research problems have been insufficiently answered. There was no study found locally that investigated service delivery in Academic Department 1. More particularly, a one-group post test-only design was chosen, because the focus was on a single group of third year students that was studied only once (De Vos 2001, 125-126). Basically, it involves the measuring of expectations and experiences of one group of respondents (unit of analysis - PHRM students) that were subjected to different forms of service delivery during a particular academic year.

Methodology

According to the literature, most of the studies on service delivery are both quantitative and qualitative in nature frequently using, for example, questionnaires, case study experiences, literature studies and interviews (Angell, Heffernan and Megicks 2008, 242). This study was exploratory (the first of its kind in Academic

Department 1) in nature using a quantitative research approach to understand what students consider to be good quality of tuition and related services. Within the quantitative paradigm, the empirical method of investigation (survey) was used, which means the researcher used a questionnaire to assemble the data. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions. In order to inform the literature review and support the structured questionnaire, the evidence sources used were academic textbooks, Internet sources, government legislation and official university documents. In addition, journal articles were consulted, which was believed to be the most appropriate form of investigation to convey service delivery documentation.

Population, sampling and sampling method

Based on the arguments of Gallifa and Batallé (2010, 161) it can be accepted that students' acquaintance levels with a higher education institution will extend over time. In fact, these authors are of the opinion that 'in their final year, students have an accurate perception of the institution and of its elements which can be understood as perceptions of service delivery. Usually at this time students also have some critical viewpoints.' The group of respondents was selected using simple probability sampling in which each element (student) in the population had a known (and not-zero probability) chance of being included in the sample. For this reason, a finite population group consisting of 1 033 third-year students (which means all the elements were counted) was chosen, because perceptions are usually more critical at this level of study. Data was collected using the 'personal contact' approach during group discussions for those students registered during a particular semester of an academic year at the Limpopo Hub, the Gauteng Hub, the Western Cape Hub and the KwaZulu-Natal Regional Office. The questionnaire (with a covering letter) was also distributed electronically and by mail to those students who were not able to attend the group discussions. These students were registered at the Eastern Cape Hub, the Mpumalanga Sub-region Hub and the Midlands Regional Office. The sample (194) was well balanced with regard to student origin (28% from Limpopo; 25% from Gauteng; 17% from KwaZulu-Natal; 13% from the Western Cape; 8% from the Eastern Cape; 6% from other provinces; 3% from Mpumalanga), gender (62% female and 38% male), population group (70% Africans, 13% coloureds, 9% whites and 8% Asians) and age group (34% in the age group 30-39 years; 30% in the age group 20-29 years; 25% in the age group 40-49 years; 11% in the age group above 50 years). Responses were obtained from 53 students, which imply that the response rate represented 27.3% of the sample.

Research instrument

The research instrument used for the study was a questionnaire which was a slight variation of the SERVQUAL model of Parasuraman et al. (1985) referred to above. Compilation of the questionnaire involved the following stages:

- Analysis of the literature obtaining service delivery concepts, related procedures and dimensions and items to be included in the questionnaire.
- Analysis of service delivery questionnaires already used in other institutions, such as the South African Public Service Commission.
- Selection of experts in service delivery of the Bureau for Market Research and the Quality Assurance Promotion Unit at University 1 to explore factors that would be relevant from the students' viewpoints for evaluating the quality of services.
- Compilation of the structured questionnaire.
- Completion of a pilot study involving five randomly chosen staff members in Academic Department 1.

Data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire encompassing four sections. Section A was confined to four questions where students were required to respond on their biographical characteristics such as population and age (independent variables). Section B and C required students to evaluate the expectations and the perceived experiences with current service delivery levels of Academic Department 1 respectively (dependent variables). More particularly, Section B consisted of expectation dimensions and Section C of perceived experienced dimensions obtained from the original SERVQUAL model and adapted to University's 1 context. A five-point Likert-scale, where the options were anchored from 'very high' on the one hand to 'very low' on the other, was used. The draft questionnaire was initially subjected to pilot testing with a total of five staff members chosen at random from Academic Department 1. These staff members were requested to remark on any perceived vagueness, lapses or errors pertaining to the draft questionnaire, mainly in order to determine whether the wording of the questions was appropriate. For example, one question was slightly rephrased to ensure simplicity. The improved questionnaire was then provided to five randomly chosen experts (established researchers and quality assurance representatives) in Academic Department 1 for their opinions before being administered for the full-scale survey. These experts observed, for example, that words such as 'learners' should be replaced by 'students' and they also suggested that all the Public Administration students should be included in the study, which in fact did not correspond with the preliminary feedback. Some of the points raised by the experts were relatively insignificant. However, it was decided to add minor changes in the final version of the questionnaire for the sake of clarity. The pilot study was done to enhance the reliability and validity of the questionnaire for this particular study. Further, reliability and validity were ensured through purposive selection of the sample, selection of information according to a comprehensive literature review and data reduction after verification with the target group.

Data analysis

The 53 completed questionnaires were coded and captured by means of the statistical software programme SAS-JMP version 8.01 for Windows. Summary

tables and charts (bar and pie) were compiled in order to demonstrate the main expectations and experiences of students regarding the services received from Academic Department 1. The actual level of student satisfaction with current service delivery levels were measured using descriptive statistics (frequency and mean percentage differences). Descriptive statistics were performed in order to portray the main characteristics of the sample. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure reliability of the constructs in the questionnaire. In practice, this means that the same set of items would elicit the same responses if the same questions were recast and re-administered to the same respondents for the construct. The nearer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0 the better the internal consistency of the items in the scale (Horton and Kleinman 2011, 156). In general, the reliability and validity analyses of the dimensions (constructs) recorded relatively high Cronbach's alpha values. All the subscales showed a high alpha, which is an indication that the dimensions are reliable. Mean scores were calculated for each of the dimensions; thereafter an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for significant differences between population and age.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct this study and obtain data was granted by the Chair of Academic Department 1. Ethics clearance was sought from College 1 at University 1. The Ethics Committee could not grant clearance because application was done after the research had already commenced. However, the researcher has applied for ethical compliance in terms of the University's Ethics Policy. Hence, an ethical compliance certificate has been issued by the Ethics Committee of College 1 to do this research.

Storing and destroying of data

All data and information will be stored in a high security safe in the Principal Researcher's office. The office is only accessible to the researcher. Data stored on the researcher's computer is password protected. Data and information will be destroyed when it is no longer of functional value. This is projected to be five (5) years from the date of publication of this study. A record, stating what records were destroyed, when and how the researcher did so, will also be kept.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The respondents' expectations and experiences regarding service delivery at Academic Department 1 and problems of service delivery are presented below.

Expectations of service delivery

The expectations of service delivery were measured by five items (accessibility, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and empathy) on a five-point Likert scale. More particularly, it was based on the following variations: 1=very high; 2=high; 3=average; 4=low and 5=very low. Overall, the scale performed well in terms of reliability and validity; the sample obtained a Cronbach's alpha (internal

consistency) of 0.97 for the dimension expectations. Next, the five service items were subjected to frequency analysis and the percentages are reported below.

In general, the percentages clearly show that the respondents' expectations (perceptions) of service delivery of Academic Department 1 mainly varied from 'high' to 'very high.' The percentage scores in the above two categories varied from 32% (lowest level in the 'high' category) to 49% (highest level in the 'very high' category). The highest percentage of respondents' evaluations of expectations of service delivery were from responsiveness ('very high' = 49%), accessibility ('very high' = 43%) and reliability ('very high' = 42%). The lowest percentage of respondents' evaluations of service expectations were from empathy ('very high' = 34%) and tangibles ('very high' = 26%).

In order to explore whether the population group and age group categories were related to respondents' service expectations, the one-way ANOVA was performed. From this, the means were also calculated across these two biographical subgroups. The overall mean of the four population groups was 1.99 out of 5 and for the four age groups it was 1.32 out of 5. Although there were no statistically significant differences in this sample between the four population groups (Africans, coloureds, Asians and whites), there was a slight deviation between the mean scores of Africans (1.78; standard deviation=0.58) and coloureds (1.77; standard deviation=0.65) on the one hand, and Asians (2.30; standard deviation=1.04) and whites (2.12; standard deviation=1.40), on the other hand. These mean scores demonstrate that the Africans and coloureds had slightly higher service expectations of Academic Department 1 than the Asians and whites. Overall, there were also no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of three of the four age groups: 20-29 years (1.53; standard deviation=0.36); 30-39 years (1.89; standard deviation=0.74) and 40-49 years (1.88; standard deviation=0.69). However, minor differences were found in the 50+ years category (2.5; standard deviation=1.08). This implies that older respondents had slightly lower service expectations of Academic Department 1 than those in the other age groups.

The above results are consistent with earlier research that analysed the perceived service expectations of students in the scope of service activities in the academic environment. In fact, the education literature appears to offer considerable support for the interaction between the five variables listed above and the positive effect it has on respondents' perceived service expectations (Abdullah 2006, 41; Brochado 2009:184-185; Gallifa and Batallé 2010:165-166; Ling, Chai and Piew 2010:12-14). Thus, these results support the existing literature. In addition, the results provide some important insights into the service delivery expectations of respondents at Academic Department 1 and three general conclusions can be drawn from this. The first of these conclusions deals with the differences in service expectations between the various five dimensions. Although not significant, it seems that the respondents regarded responsiveness, accessibility and reliability as the most important determinants of service delivery expectations. Academic Department 1

should, therefore, focus their service delivery attempts on the other two dimensions, namely tangibles and empathy. Failure to prioritise service delivery efforts may have a negative effect, resulting in inefficient allocation of resources. The second of these conclusions deals with the differences in service expectations between the population groups and age groups. The results indicated that Asians, whites and older students have slightly lower service expectations than the other groups. Even though these results are not significant, this study offers empirical evidence that Academic Department 1 should preferably extend their service delivery efforts even further, giving attention to these particular groups.

Experiences of service delivery

Once the frequency distribution of the service expectations had been performed the analysis moved onto measuring the respondents' experiences of service delivery at Academic Department 1. This procedure used the same five items (accessibility, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and empathy) on a five-point Likert scale including the following variations: 1=poor; 2=below average; 3= average; 4=good and 5=excellent. In addition, the items were expanded to dimensions which included five items each. For example, in the accessibility dimension, items such as 'access to departmental website' and 'access to the university's website' were included, implying that each dimension was structured in such a way that it was treated as a separate construct for analysis purposes. Descriptive and comparative statistics were used to analyse the data of these five constructs. This means that percentage scores were obtained for each of the items under the different dimensions. Analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was used to measure any statistically significant differences for the mean scores of the constructs between the population and age groups. The internal consistency of the five constructs was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each scale. In general, all the constructs (five dimensions) achieved high scores ranging from 0.70 to 0.91. This implies that the reliability and validity were at an acceptable level for experiences of service delivery. The parts below indicate the distribution of all the responses.

The data shows that the highest percentage scores for experiences of service delivery in all five dimensions at Academic Department 1 were located between 'average', 'good' and 'excellent'. In fact, the percentage scores in these three categories fluctuated from 11% (lowest level in the 'average' category) to 50% (in the 'excellent' category). However, most of the highest ratings were clustered around 'good' and 'excellent'. Based on the percentage scores of these two categories, the responsiveness dimension received a fairly high positive rating from the respondents (overall the most important = 69.2%). All the variables that were measured gave rise to the superiority of this dimension. With regard to responsiveness, the variables which gave rise to a positive rating were: information in study material is on track with current events (81%), updating of the departmental website (77%), turnaround time on assignments (68%), general experience with

efficiency (65%) and rapid responses in dealing with enquiries (55%). Based on these percentage scores, respondents gave the highest priority to the variable study material, which implies that it contributes significantly towards service delivery in Academic Department 1 from a responsive perspective. Further, as can be seen from the data, the lowest rating (55%) was scored for responses in dealing with enquiries. In addition, an examination of the one-way ANOVA statistics indicates that statistically minor differences were reported between the two biographical groups. The overall mean of the experiences of the four population groups for responsiveness was 3.49 out of 5 and for the four age groups it was 3.79 out of 5. Based on the mean analysis, three of the four groups (Africans = 4.02 [standard deviation=0.66]; coloureds = 3.40 [standard deviation=0.71]; Asians = 3.50 [standard deviation=0.70]) gave relatively high importance to responsiveness. Further examination showed that the mean score of whites (3.04 [standard deviation=0.46]) was reasonably lower. Although white students are by far the minority, it can, thus, be interpreted that Academic Department 1 is not going in the direction of responsiveness as far as white students are concerned. In this sample, there were basically no statistically differences between the mean scores of the four age groups (20-29 years = 3.75 [standard deviation=0.87]; 30-39 years = 3.78 [standard deviation=0.64]; 40-49 years = 3.98 [standard deviation=0.59]; 50+ years = 3.67 [standard deviation=0.94]) with regard to their experiences of responsiveness.

Tangibles were rated overall as the second most important dimension (68%) in terms of service delivery in the 'good' and 'excellent' categories. In this regard, a significant number of responses (84%) showed that the respondents appreciated the appearance of study material and were of the opinion that it is user-friendly. The other four variables, namely general helpfulness of academic staff (66%), attractiveness of departmental website (65%), politeness of administrative staff (64%) and convenience of operating hours (61%), were also rated fairly highly in terms of service delivery. It is interesting to note, that as in the case of responsiveness, respondents gave a noticeably high rating for study material under the tangibles dimension as well. This is clear confirmation that the services of Academic Department 1, in terms of the provision of quality study material, were experienced as being overwhelmingly positive by the vast majority of the respondents in the sample. As far as practical value is concerned, it is worth noting that all the variables in the tangible dimension are perfectly positioned in terms of service delivery. This does not, however, mean that Academic Department 1 should conduct no more service delivery improvement efforts in future to advance in this area; rather it should maintain and improve upon the firm foundation that has already been established. Based on the one-way ANOVA statistics, minor differences were found between the mean scores of the two biographical groups. Taken as a whole, the mean scores of the four population groups and the four age groups were 3.48 and 3.78 out of 5 respectively. More particularly, the mean

scores were as follows: Africans (3.99 [standard deviation=0.70]), coloureds (3.40 [standard deviation=0.64]), Asians (3.15 [standard deviation=0.60]) and whites (3.40 [standard deviation=0.58]); 20-29 years (3.71 [standard deviation=0.76]), 30-39 years (3.78 [standard deviation=0.80]), 40-49 years (4.00 [standard deviation=0.63]) and 50+ years (3.63 [standard deviation=0.70]). From these scores it is apparent that in this sample there were no statistically significant differences between the population groups and the age groups regarding their experiences of service delivery for the tangibles dimension.

Reliability was rated overall as the third most important dimension (64%) in the 'good' and 'excellent' categories concerning the delivering of services at Academic Department 1. Results obtained on the reliability variables revealed that a large number of the respondents (83%) were of the opinion that study material was of a high quality and that it empowered them as students, while a slightly lower level of consensus (61%) was measured amongst respondents pertaining to their service experiences in the handling of their academic enquiries. Further, the frequency scores disclosed that respondents rated academic competence of lecturing staff (56%) and availability of staff during official hours (56%) in the same position. The significant positive link with study material in the responsiveness, tangibles and reliability dimensions is an important signal of the interwoven nature of this variable. These results are of great interest in understanding the main trends in service experiences at Academic Department 1. It can be deduced that Academic Department 1 is showing improvement in delivering quality study material to its students. Although the ratings for academic competence and availability of staff are somewhat lower than the other variables in this dimension, it can be assumed that these variables are also strong indicators of how reliable staff in Academic Department 1 is with regard to the service experiences of the students. The one-way ANOVA statistics show that the inclusive mean scores of the experiences of the two biographical groups (population and age) were 3.58 and 3.83 out of 5 respectively. Closer analysis of the mean scores exposed the following: Africans = 4.02 (standard deviation=0.63); coloureds = 3.79 (standard deviation=0.60); Asians = 3.13 (standard deviation=0.43); whites = 3.40 (standard deviation=0.22); 20-29 years = 3.91 (standard deviation=0.60), 30-39 years = 3.86 (standard deviation=0.70), 40-49 years = 3.90 (standard deviation=0.62) and 50+ years = 3.67 (standard deviation=0.74). These scores show that there were statistically insignificant differences between the two biographical groups for reliability.

The fourth most important dimension (58%), rated by the respondents in the 'good' and 'excellent' categories, was empathy. On the first two variables, a fairly high percentage (68%) of the respondents indicated that staff members were always willing to assist, while a slightly lower percentage of respondents (63%) were of the view that staff members showed patience in the delivery of services. Results obtained on the other three variables of empathy revealed that 58% were of the view that staff members cared about students, 55% felt that individual attention

was given to them and 46% were of the opinion that staff members engaged in follow-up actions after contact was made. Closer inspection of the abovementioned results shows that Academic Department 1 is underachieving in follow-up actions and this should be a major cause for concern. The overall mean scores of the one-way ANOVA statistics, with regard to the experiences of the two biographical groups, revealed the following results: population groups obtained 3.33 and age groups obtained 3.63 out of 5 respectively. More particularly, the mean scores disclosed that there were no significant differences between the Africans = 3.81 (standard deviation=0.85); coloureds = 3.57 (standard deviation=0.55) and Asians = 3.06 (standard deviation=1.53). However, the whites = 2.90 (standard deviation=0.80) revealed a fairly lower score. The scores for the age groups were as follows: 20-29 years = 3.73 (standard deviation=0.92), 30-39 years = 3.43 (standard deviation=1.01), 40-49 years = 3.85 (standard deviation=0.73) and 50+ years = 3.54 (standard deviation=0.98). It is evident from these scores that there were statistically no significant differences between the two biographical groups for empathy.

Accessibility was rated as the fifth most important dimension (52%) in the 'good' and 'excellent' categories. To a certain extent, this result is understandable as University 1 is a distance-based education institution and students do not have regular contact with the lecturing staff, which may have a detrimental effect on the service experiences of students. However, the mere fact that the respondents regarded accessibility as the least important dimension points towards gaps in this area for which immediate solutions need to be found. Although the overall score for accessibility is noticeably lower than the scores of the other four dimensions, the results indicate that access to the university (73%) and the departmental websites (71%) have significant positive correlations with the overall service experiences of respondents. Despite the positive responses to two of the variables in the accessibility dimension, the quantitative results also revealed negative responses in the other four variables. Particular areas of concern for the respondents are in access to academic staff by e-mail (50%), by phone (43%), in person (40%) and by fax (37%).

Results of the one-way ANOVA analysis showed basically the same overall mean scores for the two biographical groups, namely 3.22 for the population groups and 3.48 for the age groups (out of 5) respectively. The mean scores for the population groups ranged from 3.60 (standard deviation=0.81) for Africans; 3.17 (standard deviation = 0.70) for coloureds; 3.13 (standard deviation = 0.69) for Asians; and 3 (standard de = 0.62) for whites. With regard to age groups, the one-way ANOVA analysis yielded the following mean scores: 20-29 years = 3.18 (standard deviation=0.72), 30-39 years = 3.52 (standard deviation=0.75), 40-49 years = 3.63 (standard deviation=0.96) and 50+ years = 3.61 (standard deviation=0.61). The abovementioned results show that there were statistically no significant differences between the two biographical groups with regard to accessibility.

In summary: the results of this sample revealed that responsiveness, tangibles and reliability are the most positive influencing dimensions in the respondents' evaluation of their experiences of service delivery. On the contrary, empathy and accessibility are not ideally placed and do not make substantial contributions to the students' experiences of service delivery. These results support the research of Brochado (2009:183) which found that all three these dimensions (not in a particular order) are important indicators of service delivery. The same study provided proof that the empathy and accessibility dimensions did not make considerable positive inputs to service delivery.

The results obtained in this study also allow for the identification of the relative influence of different variables for each service delivery dimension. When all five service dimensions are analysed, strategic data is reflected. The current findings suggest that study material has been identified as the most important service delivery indicator for respondents. Likewise, experiences with the university and departmental websites have also been determined as important service delivery variables. The research also exposed respondents' dissatisfaction with certain service delivery variables. The main variables which gave rise to a negative judgement (50% and below is regarded as a negative response) are the following: access to academic staff by e-mail (50%), follow-up actions after contact has been made regarding studies (46%); access to academic staff by phone (43%), access to academic staff in person (40%); access to academic staff by fax. As can be seen from these results sufficient ratings are scored in the positive for the different variables, while a few (four out of 25) variables scored negative ratings. The results revealed that access to or contact with staff, and empathy or care, are the most influencing negative dimensions and variables of service delivery. These results support the research by Angell, Heffernan and Megicks (2008, 246) which suggested that contact staff and their actions are important pointers of service delivery. Academic Department 1 should, therefore, prioritise the access and empathy dimensions (contact) as these make a substantial negative contribution to the experiences of students in terms of good service delivery. It should also be noted that the white respondents regarded responsiveness and empathy as being less important and thus Academic Department 1 needs to involve strategies to remove service delivery shortfalls for this particular population group in these areas.

CONCLUSION

There is agreement in the field that service delivery has currently become a strategic issue in the South African higher education sector. Nowadays, higher education institutions are being called to account for the services they provide. The mechanisms for achieving high service delivery levels are clearly provided for in policy documents such as the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008. One theoretical framework that provides a respectable foundation, and is frequently used in higher education for

measuring service delivery levels, is the disconfirmation of expectations theory. In terms of measurement methodologies, a review of the literature revealed that there are numerous service delivery evaluation models based on the disconfirmation of expectations theory. However, the most widely used model seems to be the SERVQUAL model, first proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). This model was adapted slightly to make certain it fits University 1's education environment. The different variables were also refined so that the items were mainly similar to the dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. This was done to ensure that validity checks would not create unexpected results due to the problems of construct validity. Within the abovementioned context, the research reported in this article was aimed at determining the actual level of service delivery among a sample of third-year Public Human Resource Management students in Academic Department 1 at University 1.

The research results have brought to the fore some implications for the various stakeholders. These implications can be divided into the following two categories: theoretical and managerial. It was shown in the study that the formation of determinants based on both the expectations and the experiences of respondents could be used concurrently to evaluate the overall perceived service delivery levels. Therefore, this article endorses the principles of the SERVQUAL model. This means that the overall positive and negative (although not overwhelming) experiences of the respondents can be classified as new knowledge in service delivery literature, enabling other researchers to establish the applicability of the identified service delivery levels from this particular research milieu.

In terms of management, the research results provide some practical implications for Academic Department 1 at University 1 in outlining strategies on how to address the gaps in current service delivery levels. First, given the results, there is a need to label those variables in the tangibles and empathy dimensions more closely, since they were valued as the least important in terms of service expectations. Although in the minority, there is a need to manage and monitor the service expectations of Asians, whites and older respondents more closely, because they were lower than the other groups. Second, the results of this study suggest that the empathy and accessibility dimensions are the least important service delivery indicators (experience). More particularly, respondents experienced the following variables as being less important than the others: access to academic staff by e-mail, follow-up actions after contact has been made regarding studies, access to academic staff by phone, access to academic staff in person and access to academic staff by fax. An important implication for Academic 1 is that they should prioritise the access and empathy dimensions (contact) as these make a substantial negative contribution to the experiences of students in terms of good service delivery. It should also be noted that the white respondents regarded responsiveness and empathy as being less important and thus Academic 1 needs to involve management strategies to remove service delivery shortfalls for this particular population group in these

areas.

As this study was directed at 194 third-year students (sample), but only 53 students responded, a possible first limitation may have been presented had other modules been included. Consequently, limited data is available and it may not be adequate to generalise on conclusions of this nature. Furthermore, it is accepted that questionnaires and individual discussions may have exposed personal attitudes rather than deeper realities that existed during the service delivery process at University 1. Lastly, the restriction of the boundary to only one module at undergraduate level as a target group implies that the findings of this study cannot be generalised across all other modules and qualifications at University 1. The main conclusion of this study is that the results provide conclusive evidence that the expectations and experiences levels were helpful in determining whether Academic 1 at University 1 delivers quality services to its students. However, the limitations show that future research is needed and that it should cover a larger variety of third-year modules to see if a consistent selection of expectations and experiences becomes evident.

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