

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

Student expectations are important because they influence decisions before purchase and help determine satisfaction after purchase, yet, key factors influencing student expectations of service quality have received little attention in marketing literature. This study explores the influential factors shaping student expectations of service quality in Technical and Vocational Education institutions and their impact on service delivery. Adopting a quantitative exploratory approach, the study employed questionnaires as the primary data collection tool. A non-probability sampling method was used to gather insights from 421 informed and exposed respondents. The empirical findings highlight that students in TVET institutions have heightened expectations in terms of the service quality they received. All Servqual dimensions tested, scored below the expected margins. In conclusion, urgent attention to service quality is imperative for TVET institutions, not only to retain academically sound students but also to secure funding essential for their growth and survival in a complex, congested academic space.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Service Quality, TVET, Customer Perception, and Expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as defined by UNESCO and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2002), holds a pivotal role in educational development. TVET integrates technology, practical skill acquisition, and general education, preparing individuals for diverse occupational roles across economic and social sectors. Such an approach not only equips learners for workforce integration but also fosters societal growth by empowering youth with essential skills (Dania, Baka, & Mohamed, 2014; Azeem & Oma, 2019). However, as the expectations of students, here treated as 'customers', have evolved, understanding these expectations has become vital for TVET institutions, particularly in developing regions like South Africa.

Customer expectations, a central theme in marketing literature, refer to pre-purchase beliefs about the quality and nature of goods or services. These beliefs shape decision-making, satisfaction, and loyalty, making them essential for service providers (Gerber & Bothma, 2008; Hoorens, 2012). This study applies these insights within the TVET context, aiming to assess how students' expectations influence service quality perception, which remains under-examined within higher education frameworks.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) concepts, as defined by UNESCO and ILO (2002), play a crucial role in the educational process. This approach emphasizes the study of technologies and related sciences, as well as the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, and knowledge associated with various occupations across economic and social sectors. This is complemented by a foundation in general education (Dania, Baka, and Mohamed, 2014). This definition of the TVET concept underscores its significance in preparing individuals for meaningful contributions to both the workforce and society. By focusing on a holistic approach that combines technical and practical skills with a broad educational foundation, TVET serves as a key driver of personal and societal development. Azeem and Oma (2019) have shed light on the diverse forms of learning available within the TVET framework, encompassing both formal and non-formal learning. This inclusive approach seeks to empower young individuals with the indispensable knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the dynamic landscape of the professional world. As TVET institutions are expected to provide indispensable knowledge and skills to young individuals, it is also important for them to have a better understanding of their customer expectations, which are students.

The significance of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) concept in preparing individuals for meaningful contributions to the workforce and society highlights the importance of understanding customer expectations within the framework. Before exploring customers' expectations, it's crucial to define the foundational terms of this concept: 'customer' and 'expectations.' A 'customer' refers to a person or business purchasing goods or services from a third party (Gerber and Bothma, 2008; Ramees and Safeena, 2016). Johnson (1999) appropriately characterizes customers as the lifeblood of businesses, underscoring their imperative role in survival. Shifting to the term 'expectations,' it can be understood as a preconceived belief about future occurrences (Hoorens, 2012).

Scholars such as Panitz, Endres, Buchholz, Khosrowtaj, Sperl, Mueller, Schubo, Schütz, Teige-Mocigemba, and Pinquart (2021) have broadly explored the probabilistic nature of beliefs about the future, showcasing their impact on perception, affect, cognition, and behavior across diverse contexts. This renders expectations of a highly relevant concept within both basic and marketing disciplines. Hoorens (2012) asserts that expectations may be rooted in personal experiences, information from others, cognitive construction, or heuristic thinking.

The characteristics of a given situation, its physical and social environment relative to an individual, can serve as the antecedents of conditional beliefs. These beliefs are utilized to predict situational outcomes as precisely as possible. Notably, expectations exhibit differences in specificity for different situations and outcomes. Generalized expectations, as abstractions of more specific expectations regarding groups of similar situations and expected outcomes (Banich, and Caccamise, 2010), play a crucial role. For instance, threat expectations generalize across situations evoked by an entire class of cues with similar attributes, not just those previously followed by an aversive event (Dunsmoor and Paz, 2015). As an illustration of generalization outcomes, individuals studying at training institutions may expect that the courses offered will enhance their employability. Generalized expectations are highly adaptive, providing parsimonious heuristics about what to expect, especially in situations that cannot be

exhaustively analyzed or contain unfamiliar elements (Binz and Endres, 2019). In this paper, the combined terms 'customer' and 'expectations' will be treated as a singular term. This approach aims to assess the expectations of customers, particularly those seeking education or engaging in studies at TVET institutions in developing countries, such as South Africa.

The concept of customer expectations, as elucidated by diverse authors, researchers, and scholars, presents mixed viewpoints. Olson and Dover (1979) characterize it as pretrial beliefs concerning a product, Zeithaml et al. (2009) emphasize perspectives on service superiority that customers use to evaluate service providers, Boshoff and du Plessis (2010) offer a distinctive definition centered on beliefs and ideologies about service delivery, Machado and Diggins (2012) define it as pre-existing beliefs serving as a benchmark for assessing actual service delivery, Kim and Mattila (2013) spotlight customer beliefs about service outcomes before an encounter, and Ratnawita et al. (2023) underscore customer desires or expectations in a shopping environment. Therefore, for this paper, the aforementioned definitions of customer expectations were adopted.

Sharpe's customer expectations

Krishnamurthy and Kumar (2015) demonstrated that customers often form expectations about a product or service through various channels, including reading newspapers, and magazines, browsing websites, or engaging in conversations with other customers. In these instances, the formation of expectations is not driven by a predetermined goal; rather, it occurs serendipitously. Consequently, these expectations are likely to be weak and can be influenced or altered through persuasive marketing communication strategies (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000). This underscores the importance of TVET institutions employing effective marketing communication to engage with their target audience, particularly prospective students. Effective marketing communication is considered one of the factors that shape customer expectations. Another influencing factor is every piece of outbound communication from the service provider, which may have impacted prospective customer expectations. Previous customer experiences with the service provider are another significant factor shaping expectations. If existing customers are highly satisfied, this sets a high level of expectations that must be maintained (Customer Thermometer, 2024). Conversely, if previous experiences have been suboptimal, customers may lack confidence in the service provider, resulting in lower expectations (Customer Thermometer, 2024).

Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT)

Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) is a model that helps explain how people feel about their experiences as consumers, whether shopping, using a product, or utilizing a service (Buba et al., 2024). At its core, EDT is closely aligned with customer satisfaction, which is viewed as an emotional reaction to a product or service experience. This theory has become a widely used framework in understanding satisfaction, especially in public service contexts, as it links consumer expectations with their subsequent feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Zhang et al., 2021).

Core Principles of Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory

EDT revolves around three main interactions: expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation. Each plays a role in shaping customer satisfaction and is explained through a series of relationships (Gillison & Reynolds, 2018):

1. **Expectations and Perceived Performance:** The foundation of the EDT model is the relationship between expectations and the perceived performance of a product or service. Expectations are developed through past experiences or others' opinions (Gillison & Reynolds, 2018). According to Qazi et al. (2017), these expectations act as standards against which people gauge their experiences. When expectations are high, perceived performance needs to match or exceed them for a positive outcome.
2. **Disconfirmation and Satisfaction:** Satisfaction is derived from the comparison of performance to expectations. If a product or service meets or exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation occurs, leading to satisfaction. Conversely, if the performance falls short, negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1980; Spreng et al., 1996).
3. **Role of Psychological Insights:** EDT goes beyond measuring outcomes to explore the psychological impact on consumers. This model allows researchers to understand the factors influencing satisfaction from an internal perspective, providing insights into the mental processes that drive consumer behavior (Zhang et al., 2021).

Applications in Public Services

Although EDT originated in consumer behavior research, it has become increasingly relevant in public administration. The theory posits that a citizen's satisfaction with public services depends not only on the services' effectiveness but also on how well they align with expectations (Chen et al., 2022). This emphasis on expectation management suggests that successful public service delivery is more than meeting standards; it requires understanding and potentially shaping citizens' expectations to enhance satisfaction.

Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory remains one of the most promising models for analyzing customer satisfaction. By examining the alignment between expectations and perceived performance, EDT provides a nuanced view of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, making it invaluable in both consumer behavior and public administration research. As expectations continue to evolve, EDT offers a flexible framework to adapt and understand the shifting landscape of consumer expectations and satisfaction.

STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The idea of treating students as customers stems from marketing literature, particularly the influential work of Kotler and Levy (1969). Initially focused on commercial enterprises, this concept has broadened to encompass a range of service providers, including government bodies, colleges, and universities (Kotler, 2005). As a result, educational institutions are expected to regard students as customers, reinforcing the notion that education functions similarly to service delivery in the business world (Desai, Damewood, and Jones, 2001). Not

recognizing students as customers in universities and colleges may indicate a deficiency in customer orientation, which can lead to outcomes that deserve further investigation (Guilbault, 2016).

The author emphasizes the importance of viewing students not just as passive recipients of education but as active customers. This perspective is crucial, as how an institution defines its customers influences its approach to service delivery. Research by Koris and Nokelainen (2015) supports this notion, demonstrating that students expect to be treated as customers in several areas, including feedback mechanisms, classroom engagement, and communication practices. Additionally, in line with corporate models of customer satisfaction, many educational institutions may prioritize student satisfaction—viewed as fee-paying customers—over critical educational outcomes or workforce preparation (Calma and Dickson-Deane, 2020).

Sander et al. (2000) highlighted that student expectations provide valuable insights. Recognizing student expectations as important information allows TVET institutions to customize their programs, services, and resources to better align with student needs and preferences, ultimately enhancing the educational experience, increasing satisfaction, and improving outcomes. Moreover, addressing or exceeding student expectations can lead to higher retention rates. By understanding what students want, TVET institutions can develop strategies to meet those needs, which can significantly boost student success and completion rates. Furthermore, institutions that proactively seek and respond to student expectations can establish a positive reputation, fostering positive word-of-mouth, favorable reviews, and a robust alumni network—all contributing to long-term success. Effective communication with students also improves when their expectations are acknowledged. Conversely, neglecting to meet customer service expectations can result in losing both internal and external customers to competitors who fulfill those needs (Phiri and Mncwabe, 2013). When students feel valued and see their expectations addressed, it can lead to greater engagement, involvement, and a positive campus atmosphere.

For the purpose of this study, students will be regarded as customers of TVET institutions, as they are the primary consumers of the services these institutions provide. Additionally, this research aims to assess the factors that influence students' expectations concerning three service quality dimensions within TVET institutions. The following section will explore these dimensions of service quality in greater detail.

DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY

Extensive research conducted over the years has identified a range of variables that encompass the magnitudes used by customers to evaluate service quality. These magnitudes include access, credibility, competence, courtesy, reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, understanding of customers, and communication. While the original list was extensive, it has been refined over time to focus on five key magnitudes: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. In this paper, we will specifically discuss three fundamental dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness. These dimensions have been selected due to

their critical role in evaluating service quality and addressing any service-related shortcomings as suggested by Tait, Roberts, Strydom, & Machado (2020). The following subsection focuses on defining the three fundamental dimensions of service quality.

Tangibles dimensions of service quality

Brink and Berndt (2009), Bateson and Hoffman (2010), Wilson et al. (2013), Auka et al. (2013), Boshoff (2014), Jordaan & Samuels (2015), and Boshoff & Berndt (2018) have indicated that the tangible dimension of service quality encompasses the exterior of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials, all of which must positively reflect on the service provider (Brink & Berndt, 2009).

Additionally, Mohd (2016) stated that physical facilities are essential in supporting effective teaching and learning. In the context of service quality, the tangible dimension plays a crucial role in shaping customer perceptions and expectations.

Customers often form judgments about the overall quality of a service based on the tangible cues they encounter. For example, the cleanliness and aesthetics of classrooms in public TVET institutions, the modernity of equipment in lecture rooms, or the appearance and professionalism of academic or administrative staff in an institution's restaurant. Furthermore, tangibles can provide tangible evidence of the service experience and contribute to students' trust and confidence in TVET institutions.

This clarification of the tangibles dimension of service quality comprises five key features of the physical environment that need to be considered by public TVET institutions.

The first feature is the exterior of equipment and fixtures used during teaching and learning, including projectors, laptops, desks, chairs, lecturer cabinet files, and lecture halls.

The second feature is the exterior of physical facilities, such as residence halls, toilets, libraries, study classrooms, and lecturer rooms. School facilities like classrooms and libraries directly impact students' performance, and the lack of such facilities can affect teachers' morale and effectiveness, as well as students' attitudes, self-esteem, sense of security, comfort, and social behavior. Public TVET institutions should learn from the outcomes of various studies that they need sufficient physical facilities to support effective teaching and learning, and these facilities should be well-maintained to improve lecturers' morale.

The third feature is the appearance of public TVET personnel, which should create a positive impression on the customers. Machado (2014) stated that personnel must look the part and their appearance should reinforce professionalism. This means that public TVET personnel should dress in a manner that aligns with the image of professionalism.

The fourth feature is the materials associated with the service, including textbooks and study guides. The availability of relevant study materials is crucial for effective teaching and learning, and public TVET institutions should provide students with the necessary study materials to support their modules or courses. Additionally, the availability of relevant study materials assists lecturers in delivering quality teaching and learning to their customers, who are the students.

The fifth feature is the communication materials, such as flyers, brochures, institution magazines, and institution newspapers. Public TVET institutions should consistently update their brochures and magazines with useful information. However, Machado and Diggines (2012) emphasized the importance of using these elements correctly to create the appropriate impression. Over-promising or miscommunicating the physical evidence can lead to incorrect expectations and risk customers expecting a different level of service quality.

Zeithaml et al. (2009) stated that the condition of the physical surroundings is tangible evidence of the care and attention to detail exhibited by the service provider, which applies to public TVET institutions as well. Furthermore, this dimension can be achieved by skillfully and professionally handling the complaints of all customers by public TVET institutions. The higher the customers appreciate the physical aspects, the higher the overall evaluation of public TVET service quality will be.

The physical service setting is a crucial tangible factor that influences the perception of service quality. For instance, Bitner (1992) focused on the elements under the control of businesses at the point of interaction between customers and the business, arguing that these controllable elements can affect perceptions of service quality and encourage repeat patronage. NOTE: Yasak and Alias, (2015) revealed that having good facilities, effective administration, and willing trainees by themselves cannot achieve a good VET program without skilled instructors to deliver the training.

Providing an adequate number of instructors who possess the appropriate occupational skills and professional knowledge for the specific area of skills training is not easy as most skilled professionals prefer to work in industries rather than in the education sector.

Reliability dimension of service quality

Kim and Kim (1995), Brink and Berndt (2009), Zeithaml et al. (2009), Dhurup et al. (2006), Boshoff and du Plessis (2010), and Machado (2014) have described the reliability dimension of service quality as the ability to consistently deliver the promised service reliably and accurately. This dimension refers to the public TVET institutions' competency in providing service quality consistently. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how well public TVET institutions deliver service to their customers (students).

This study aims to address this gap and provide information on the topic. Yeo (2008) stated that the discrepancy between promised and delivered service is often the result of misleading communication through advertisements and exhibitions.

Therefore, public TVET institutions should avoid over-promising to prevent customer dissatisfaction and potential loss of customers to private TVET institutions. Service providers who fulfill customer promises, deliver services as promised, exhibit consistent and dependable performance, perform the service correctly the first time, maintain accuracy in billing and record-keeping, ensure availability of merchandise, and conduct error-free sales transactions and records (Auka et al., 2013) significantly influence customer perceptions (Bloise and Tankersley, 2004).

Public TVET personnel should strive to provide the desired service level correctly the first time and within the designated time frame to uphold their promises. Proper delivery of services enhances customer perception of quality (Brink and Berndt, 2009). When public TVET institutions establish a strong brand, they gain a reputation for reliability within the TVET environment.

Responsiveness dimension of service quality

Brink and Berndt (2009), Auka et al. (2013), Kontic (2014), and Machado (2014) describe the responsiveness dimension of service quality as the willingness of service providers to continuously assist customers and provide prompt service. This dimension emphasizes the importance of public TVET institutions employing personnel who are willing to assist their customers (students) in obtaining in-service training and completing their courses.

The responsiveness dimension is characterized by the speed and effectiveness of the service provider's response to customers (Auka et al., 2013). Key indicators for public TVET institutions in this regard include the promptness of personnel in answering phone calls, responding to student queries, addressing student problems, and providing updates on service delivery timelines. In essence, public TVET personnel must exhibit a willingness and readiness to serve and assist their customers. Additionally, public TVET institutions' personnel must possess knowledge about the services they offer. However, Arpin (2007) also points out that the responsiveness dimension encompasses the concept of flexibility and the ability to customize the service, focusing on the process of service delivery from the customer's perspective rather than solely on their needs. Thus, service providers need to consider the customer's viewpoint and experience in the service delivery process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the purpose of this study, this research study followed a quantitative, exploratory survey design, using a purely quantitative questionnaire as a data collection instrument. The quantitative approach allowed for the evaluation and measurement of the quality of services provided by the TVET institutions by testing the levels of customers' perceptions against their expectations. A Likert scale offers options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" concerning the expectation statements provided which were related to three service quality dimensions (Dimensions included tangible aspects, reliability aspects, and responsiveness aspects). The participants' level of agreement, based on those expectations of service quality, was tested to determine critical dimensions contributing to customer services at the selected TVET institutions.

A non-probability convenient sampling technique was used to identify and select the customers that would provide the necessary information that was needed to support the intentions of this research study. Using the sampling frame, the sample size for this study was 420. Furthermore, the questionnaire used to collect quantitative data covered all the questions that required data for this research topic. Therefore, TVET stakeholders (which include students) were interviewed to obtain data with regards to the variables that follow table:

Dimension	Statements
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When a TVET institution promises to do something by a certain time, it does so. - When you have a problem, an excellent TVET institution shows a genuine curiosity in resolving it. - An excellent TVET institution performs the service right the first time. - An excellent TVET institution performs the service right the first time. - An excellent TVET institution insists on error-free records.
Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personnel of the TVET institution tell you exactly when the service will be performed. - Personnel of an excellent TVET institution give their customer prompt service. - Personnel of an excellent TVET institution are always willing to help their customers. - Personnel of an excellent TVET institution has never been too busy with your request
Tangibles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TVET institution has modern-looking equipment - TVET institution facilities are visually appealing. - Materials associated with the service are visually appealing at an excellent TVET institution. - TVET institution personnel are neat in appearance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed significant findings within each service quality dimension:

1. **Tangibles:** High expectations were evident regarding the appearance and modernity of facilities and personnel professionalism. Students associated well-maintained physical spaces and updated equipment with better service quality.
2. **Reliability:** Student responses indicated a strong desire for timely and accurate service fulfillment, with lower satisfaction tied to unmet service promises. Consistency in service delivery emerged as a critical factor influencing trust and satisfaction.
3. **Responsiveness:** Responsiveness metrics showed a high student preference for prompt and flexible service. Personnel availability and proactive problem resolution were underscored as essential to positive student experiences.

Overall, these findings underline the importance of meeting or exceeding students' expectations to foster loyalty and improve institutional reputation.

The results presented below encompass the scoring patterns of respondents in each service quality dimension. These service quality dimensions were identified and selected based on the identified gaps between the measure of participants' expectations and their perception of being detrimental to services provided by TVET institutions. The utilisation of the Chi-square test to extract the level of significance of the relationship between the perceived and expected service was also conducted.

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a well-constructed research instrument was utilised to collect the relevant data. The questionnaire used for this study was developed to measure the level of service quality expected by TVET customers which are students. To gather

confidence in the instrument, a reliability test was conducted to measure the inter-item consistency, and the degree of positive correlation between items in a set (Islam, et al. 2011).

As claimed by Larsson et al. (2015), a reliability coefficient value is considered acceptable, when it is 0.70 or higher. The Cronbach’s Alpha analysis scores for the tested dimensions reflected that Reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$, N of items =5), while responsiveness (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.79$, N of Items = 4) and Tangibles (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$, N of Items = 4). Drawing from this, all service quality dimensions tested achieved and exceeded the recommended value of Cronbach’s Alpha, signaling that the instrument was consistently reliable.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s Test were conducted to assess the sampling adequacy and determine the appropriateness of employing factor analysis on the dataset. Bartlett’s test of sphericity aimed to test the null hypothesis of uncorrelated variables within the population correlation matrix. A significance level below 0.05 in Bartlett’s test would indicate a substantial correlation present in the data. The results of the KMO and Bartlett’s test are provided below for reference.

Table 3: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s Test

Service Quality Dimensions	Expectations			
	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
		Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Reliability	0,845	709,126	10	0,000
Responsiveness	0,782	477,254	6	0,000
Tangibles	0,705	195,789	6	0,000

The analysis of service quality dimensions yields highly promising findings. The Reliability dimension, assessed by a strong KMO score of 0.845 as presented in Table 3, demonstrates substantial sampling adequacy concerning customer expectations. This is further emphasised by the associated Chi-Square value ($\chi^2= 709,126$), indicating a notably positive impact on shaping customer expectations. Similarly, the Responsiveness dimension of service quality shows a strong KMO measure of 0.782 for expectations, with an approximate Chi-Square value for expectations were $\chi^2= 477,254$ as shown in Table 3.

These results underscore a clear and positive correlation between Responsiveness and customer expectations, highlighting the dimension’s constructive influence. While the Tangibles dimension KMO measure is slightly lower 0.705, it still describes satisfactory sampling adequacy for expectations. The associated Chi-Square value ($\chi^2= 195,789$) as shown in Table 3 strengthens the positive impact of Tangibles on shaping customer expectations.

Importantly, all statements within the reliability dimension of service quality are effectively loaded onto a single component for expectations, indicating an accurate measurement of the intended factors. Therefore, this study provides a convincing indication of the positive influence of each service quality dimension on customer expectations, offering valuable insights for enhancing overall service delivery.

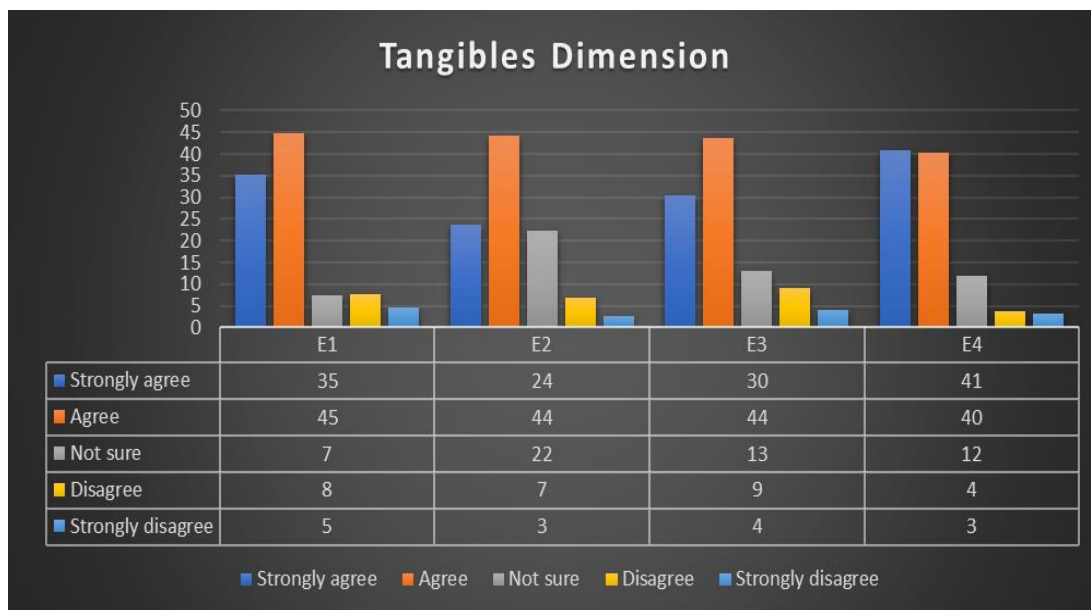


Figure 1: Tangibles

The results presented herein are centered on student expectations concerning the Tangibles dimension of service quality. These expectations are depicted in Figure 1, which comprises four statements: The TVET institution has modern-looking equipment (coded as E1); the facilities of the TVET institution are visually appealing (coded as E2); materials associated with the service are visually appealing at an excellent public TVET institution (coded as E3); and the personnel of the TVET institution is neat in appearance (coded as E4).

Statements 1 to 3 (coded E1 to E3) were analyzed to gauge students' expectations regarding service quality, as illustrated in Figure 1. For Statement E1, 80% of respondents agreed (35% strongly agreed and 45% agreed), while 13% disagreed (8% strongly disagreed and 5% disagreed), and 7% were unsure. This indicates a strong appreciation among students for the neat appearance of the institution's personnel.

Statement E2, which addresses the visual appeal of the institution's facilities, garnered 68% agreement (24% strongly agreed and 44% agreed). In contrast, 10% disagreed (7% strongly disagreed and 3% disagreed), and 22% were unsure. This suggests that although most students have high expectations for the visual appeal of the facilities, there is a significant portion who are either uncertain or dissatisfied with this aspect.

Feedback on Statement E3, "Materials associated with the service are visually appealing at an excellent public TVET institution" (coded as E3), reveals that 74% of respondents agree (30% strongly agree and 44% agree). In contrast, 13% disagreed (9% strongly disagreed and 4% disagreed), and 13% were unsure. This suggests that while a majority of students appreciate the visual appeal of service materials, there is a notable proportion who are either dissatisfied or uncertain. These findings highlight the importance of maintaining high visual standards for materials to meet student expectations.

The statement “The personnel of the TVET institution are neat in appearance” (coded as E4 in Figure 1) received significant positive feedback, with 81% of respondents agreeing (41% strongly agree and 40% agree). In contrast, 7% disagreed (4% strongly disagreed and 3% disagreed), while 12% were unsure. This indicates that students highly value the neat appearance of institution personnel as a key aspect of service quality. TVET institutions can use this feedback to enhance their service quality by ensuring that personnel consistently maintain a professional appearance, thus better meeting student expectations. The next section focuses more on respondents' feedback regarding the reliability dimension of service quality in terms of students' expectations.

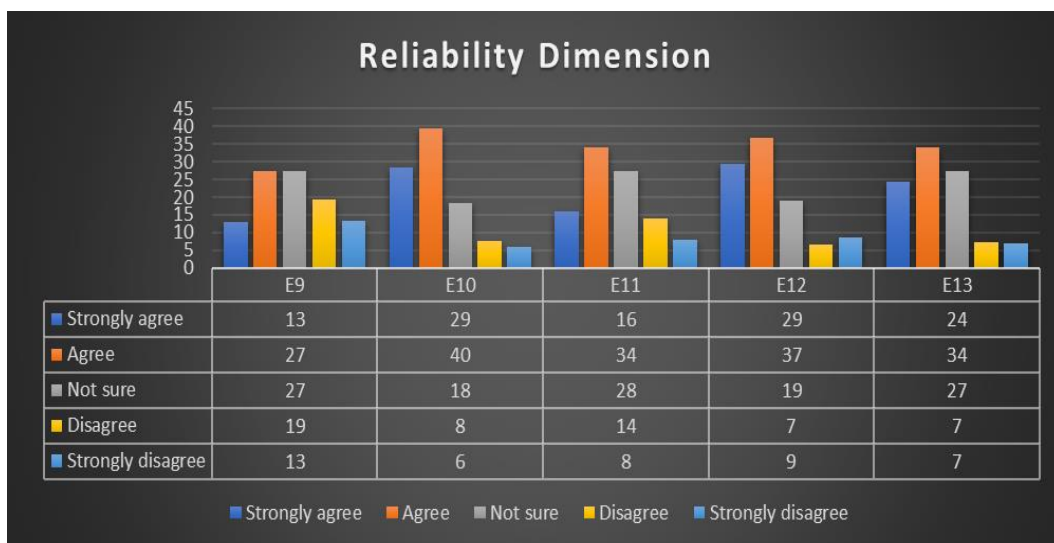


Figure 2: Reliability

Figure 2 presents students' expectations regarding service quality at the selected TVET institution. These findings, coded as E9 to E13, provide valuable insights into student perceptions. For instance, Statement 1 (coded as E9) pertains to the prompt: "When a TVET institution promises to do something by a certain time, it does so." A combined 40% of respondents agree with this statement (13% strongly agree and 27% agree), indicating an expectation for timely fulfillment of promises, though there is room for improvement. Conversely, 32% of respondents disagree (13% disagree and 19% strongly disagree), and 27% are unsure. Understanding and addressing these expectations is crucial for TVET institutions to effectively meet stakeholders' needs. By consistently delivering on promises within specified timeframes, institutions can enhance trust, credibility, and satisfaction, thereby fostering positive relationships and outcomes for all parties involved.

Statement 2: “When you have a problem, an excellent TVET institution shows a genuine curiosity in resolving it,” coded as E10 in Figure 2, reflects respondents' expectations. The data reveals that 69% of respondents either strongly agree (29%) or agree (40%) with this statement. In contrast, 14% either disagree (8%) or strongly disagree (6%), while 18% are unsure. These results indicate a high level of agreement among students that an excellent TVET institution

should show genuine curiosity in addressing problems. Furthermore, they highlight the importance students place on institutions being responsive and proactive in problem-solving. To align more closely with student expectations and enhance performance in this dimension, institutions should focus on addressing these concerns effectively.

In Statement 3, we evaluate the exceptional performance of a TVET institution, identified as 'E11' in Figure 2. This label underscores the institution's high capability, particularly in service delivery. The phrase "performs the service right the first time" emphasizes its consistent ability to provide accurate services on the first attempt, without the need for corrections. The study reveals that 50% of respondents (16% strongly agree and 34% agree) support this statement, reflecting a high level of satisfaction with the institution's performance. In contrast, 22% of respondents disagree (14% strongly disagree and 8% disagree), and 28% are unsure. These results suggest that TVET institutions should focus on addressing the concerns of the 22% who disagree and the 28% who are unsure. By doing so, they could improve overall satisfaction and work towards converting these respondents into loyal customers.

In Statement 4, labeled 'E12' in Figure 2, we evaluate the characteristic of an excellent TVET institution as its ability to deliver services promptly as promised. The data indicates that 63% of students either strongly agree (29%) or agree (34%) with this statement, demonstrating a high level of satisfaction with the institution's timeliness. In comparison, Statement 5, coded as 'E13' in Figure 2, emphasizes the importance of maintaining error-free record-keeping. Here, 58% of students agreeing with the statement (24% strongly agree and 34% agree), which is slightly lower than the agreement level for Statement 4. This suggests that while the institution is generally perceived as committed to accurate record-keeping, there is a perceived need for improvement in this area. The next section focuses more on respondents' feedback regarding the responsiveness dimension of service quality in terms of students' expectations.

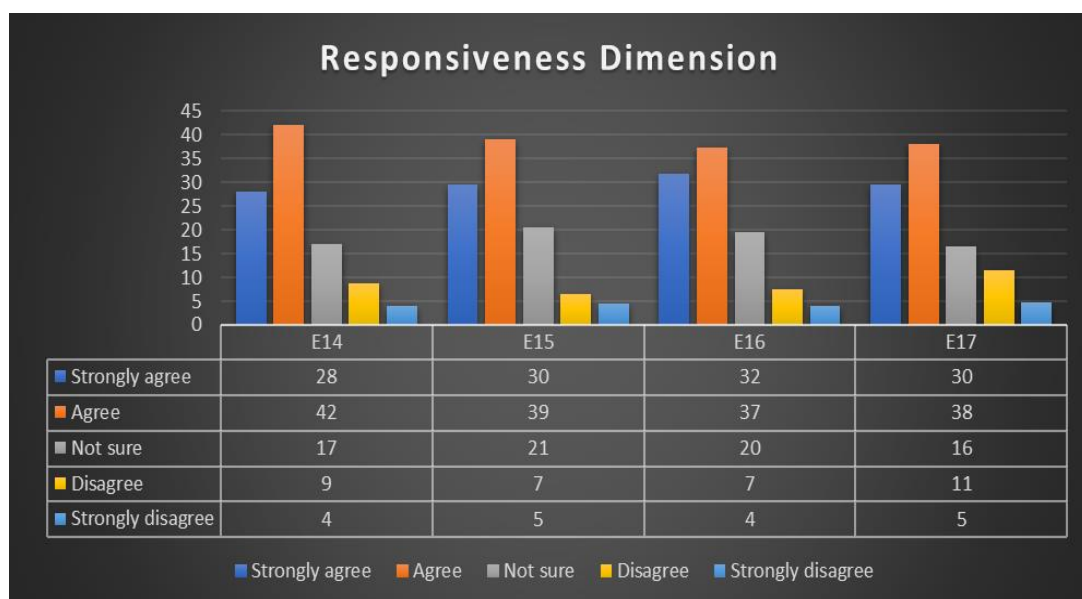


Figure 3: Responsiveness

Figure 3 presents respondent feedback regarding the responsiveness dimension of service quality, focusing on student expectations at the selected TVET institutions. This dimension is assessed through four statements:

1. Personnel of the TVET institution inform you precisely when the service will be performed (coded as E14 in Figure 2).
2. Personnel of an excellent TVET institution provide prompt service to their customers (coded as E15 in Figure 2).
3. Personnel of an excellent TVET institution are always willing to assist their customers (coded as E16 in Figure 2).
4. Personnel of an excellent TVET institution are never too busy to address your requests (coded as E17 in Figure 2).

These statements offer insights into how students perceive responsiveness in service quality at the institutions under study.

In Statement 1, coded as E14 in Figure 3, 70% of students agreed with the precision with which TVET institution personnel inform them about service timing. Specifically, 28% strongly agree, and 42% agree with the statement. Despite this high level of agreement, 13% of respondents either strongly disagree (9%) or disagree (4%), and 17% are unsure. This indicates that while students generally find the information about service timing reasonably precise, there is still some room for improvement. The current score suggests that the institution's communication could be enhanced to reach a higher level of satisfaction and agreement among students.

The overall level of agreement with Statement 2, "Personnel of an excellent TVET institution provide prompt service to their customers" (E15 in Figure 2), was 69%, with 30% strongly agreeing and 39% agreeing. In contrast, 12% of respondents disagreed (7% strongly disagreed and 5% disagreed), while 21% were unsure. These results indicate that most students are generally satisfied with the promptness of service provided by TVET personnel, though a notable portion remains uncertain or dissatisfied.

Statement 3, "Personnel of an excellent TVET institution are always willing to assist their customers" (coded as E16), received a 69% agreement rate from surveyed students, with 32% strongly agreeing and 37% agreeing. Conversely, 11% disagreed (7% strongly disagreed and 4% disagreed), and 20% were unsure. These results highlight that students generally have positive expectations of the institution's personnel regarding their willingness to assist. This positive feedback reflects the institution's effective commitment to providing quality service and consistent support to its students.

Feedback on Statement 4, "Personnel of an excellent TVET institution are never too busy to address your requests" (coded as E17), shows that 68% of respondents agree, with 30% strongly agreeing and 38% agreeing. Conversely, 16% disagreed (11% strongly disagreed and 5% disagreed), while 16% were unsure. This indicates that most students believe the personnel are generally available to address their requests. However, the relatively lower agreement

suggests that there might be concerns about occasional unavailability or busyness, pointing to an area where improvements could enhance overall responsiveness.

As indicated above, the respondents' expectations were somewhat validated based on their expectations, perceived experiences, and the level of promptness demonstrated by the TVET institution in providing personalized services when requested. The next section focuses more on respondents' feedback regarding Tangibles' dimension of service quality in terms of students' expectations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the need for TVET institutions to prioritize service quality in order to align with student expectations. By enhancing tangibility, reliability, and responsiveness, TVET institutions can address gaps in service provision that directly affect student satisfaction and retention. Investing in infrastructure, staff training, and responsive customer service practices can positively impact institutional success. Future studies may benefit from examining additional service quality dimensions, such as empathy and assurance, to provide a more comprehensive view of student expectations.

The study set out to meet two objectives, which will be discussed below:

To identify students' expectations in terms of service quality toward the selected TVET institutions by looking at three service quality dimensions which are tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness. As presented in Figures 1 to 3, students' expectations mean score is aimed to explore service quality within TVET institutions by addressing key issues. Specifically, it focused on assessing student expectations. The empirical findings identified three critical dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility, that significantly influence service quality within these institutions. These dimensions are pivotal in shaping the overall service experience for students.

Reflect on the tangibility of the service quality dimension at the TVET institution

In the context of service quality, the tangible dimension plays a crucial role in shaping student perceptions and expectations. Students often form judgments about the overall quality of a service based on the tangible cues they encounter.

Furthermore, tangibles can create tangible evidence of the service experience and contribute to students' trust and confidence in these TVET institutions. They serve as tangible representations of the service's quality and can influence customer satisfaction and loyalty. When students perceive high-quality tangible, they tend to associate it with a higher level of service quality. Therefore, TVET institutions need to pay attention to the tangibles dimension and ensure that the physical elements align with the service promises. This involves maintaining clean and well-maintained facilities, providing modern and functional equipment, and professionally presenting employees, by investing in tangible aspects, TVET institutions can enhance the perceived quality of their services, create a positive impression, and differentiate themselves from competitors. However, it's important to note that the tangible

dimension is just one aspect of service quality and should be considered in conjunction with other dimensions of service quality such as reliability, and responsiveness. In this section, these two-service quality dimensions will be discussed.

These results pose a serious problem for the existence of selected public TVET institutions, given that the higher education sector is tough and competitive when it comes to retaining and attracting academically gifted students and high-quality staff. The main argument on the reliability dimension is that the selected public TVET institutions seemed way off the radar when it came to delivering reliable services that are accurate and inspire customer confidence. Such services tend to turn customers off as they don't get their money's worth. With such a level of achievement, status, development, sustainability, recognition, and reputation will be damaged and the TVET institutions will find it extremely difficult to exist. This is because customers are always looking for services that will meet their needs and when they are not met, they quickly look for alternative institutions that will meet their needs and desires.

Exploring Reliability in Service Quality: A Reflective Analysis of TVET Institution Practices

The concept of reliability in service quality relates to the consistent and dependable delivery of services. Our study evaluated student expectations of service quality at selected TVET institutions by analyzing four key statements. One statement focused on whether TVET institutions fulfill promises made within specified timeframes. The findings showed the majority of respondents agreed with all reliability statements, such as indicating students' expectations for timely promise fulfillment. This highlights the importance of TVET institutions honoring their commitments to foster customer loyalty (Newman, 2016). Failure to meet promises, especially to students, can lead to disillusionment and disengagement. Dissatisfaction with failed promises may prompt students to express their discontent through various behaviors (Odoom et al., 2020). Implicit in this trust is the institution's ability to fulfill its commitments and roles as promised (Otoo et al., 2023). To maintain promise consistency, institutions must ensure that promises align with their capabilities and have clear due dates (Newman, 2016). Additionally, it's crucial to recognize that student expectations are heavily influenced by promises made by TVET institutions. Therefore, students anticipate specific outcomes based on these promises, shaped by factors such as marketing messages, brand reputation, and word of mouth. In essence, as per the EDT, students evaluate the services offered by the institutions in relation to their expectations. This makes it extremely crucial for TVET institutions to offer services that matches the expectations of students or risk losing their students to more well organised institutions who centre their attention on customer expectations.

Statement 2: When you have a problem, “an excellent TVET institution shows a genuine curiosity in resolving it”. The results of this study revealed that the student expectation mean score for statement 2 is 3.77. These results suggest that students generally expect that an excellent TVET institution would exhibit genuine curiosity in addressing their problem.

It is about the ability of a service provider such as TVET institutions to perform the promised service accurately and consistently, meeting or exceeding customer expectations every time. Reliability is crucial because students rely on the service provider such as TVET institutions to deliver the service as expected, without any failure or disruptions. In the context of reliability, students expect the service to be delivered on time, as promised, and without errors, or defects. They want to feel confident that the service provider will consistently meet their needs and provide a reliable experience. This includes factors such as promptness, consistency, and accuracy in delivering the service. In summary, the reliability dimension of service quality emphasizes the consistency and dependability of services, meeting or exceeding customer expectations in terms of timeliness, accuracy, and consistency.

Reflect on the responsiveness of the service quality dimension at the TVET institution

The notion of responsiveness within the realm of service quality pertains to the readiness and willingness of a service provider to swiftly address the needs, requests, and inquiries of customers. It further signifies the organization's capacity to offer timely assistance, support, and solutions to customer-related issues or concerns. In the framework of service quality, responsiveness emphasizes the promptness of the service provider's actions and their capability to efficiently meet customer demands. This encompasses the speed and eagerness to assist, respond to inquiries, and resolve any challenges that may arise during the service interaction. A service provider exhibiting high levels of responsiveness is attentive to customer needs, actively engages with their concerns, and takes immediate action to deliver suitable solutions. They aim to reduce waiting times, furnish accurate and useful information, and adopt a proactive stance in fulfilling customer expectations. By providing responsive service, service providers can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and foster trust and loyalty. Customers appreciate prompt and efficient service, and when their needs are addressed swiftly, they are more inclined to view the service provider as dependable and trustworthy. In summary, the responsiveness aspect of service quality underscores the significance of timely and effective customer service, wherein the service provider shows a sincere commitment to addressing customer needs and resolving issues without delay. Consequently, this research study concludes that the selected public TVET institutions are significantly deficient in delivering services in a timely manner as required by their clientele, and they have not succeeded in maintaining individual responsiveness to inquiries and assistance. Additionally, the tools and devices typically employed to manage customer services have become outdated. Therefore, if the performance falls short, negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction which affects the core principles of EDT. The inability to offer the expected services affects the relationship that exists between expectations and perceived performance. This research expresses significant concern regarding an institution functioning within a highly dynamic and competitive higher education landscape. In its pursuit to attract and broaden its client base, one would expect that the institution would prioritize the needs of its clients. However, this expectation seems to be overlooked, as evidenced by the unfavorable service quality gap scores identified in the empirical analysis. Consequently, it can be concluded that unless the identified public TVET institutions take immediate action to rectify these negative service perceptions, they will face challenges in both retaining and attracting academically capable students. Furthermore, they

may encounter difficulties in securing funding from stakeholders, which could adversely affect their growth and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the assessment of different service quality dimensions. Among these dimensions, the competence and appearance of staff are vital indicators that customers consider when evaluating the services provided by a service provider, including public TVET institutions. To enhance service quality, it is highly recommended that public TVET institutions prioritize staff capacity building through comprehensive training workshops. This will not only improve employee competency but also enhance their productivity and engagement in their work. Well-trained and motivated employees contribute to a higher level of service reliability, resulting in improved accuracy and efficiency. Moreover, providing employees with the necessary information and skills enables them to address customer issues and inquiries with ease, further enhancing the institution's reliability and effectiveness. Regular evaluation of staff appearance and behavior is also crucial to inspire customer confidence. Maintaining a professional attitude and demeanor is greatly valued by clients, who seek to associate with reputable and professional institutions. By implementing these recommendations, public TVET institutions can significantly improve their service quality and meet customer expectations.

To enhance the services provided by public TVET institutions, it is essential to establish strong networks with other institutions and universities. By strategically learning from their counterparts, public TVET institutions can gain valuable insights into effective service delivery methods. Given the financial strength of technical and traditional universities in South Africa compared to public TVET institutions, it becomes crucial to innovate and integrate services to meet customer needs. Utilizing technology as a response mechanism can significantly improve customer satisfaction. For instance, implementing a user-friendly self-service website accessible from anywhere can streamline query resolution and enhance the institution's efficiency. It is also important for public TVET institutions to prioritize customer needs, continually evaluate industry changes, and embrace emerging service trends to remain relevant and competitive.

The image and reputation of an organization are crucial for its enduring viability. Public (TVET) institutions must urgently address the condition of their facilities and the resources at their disposal. Consequently, this research advocates for significant investments in state-of-the-art equipment, including modern computers, printers, telecommunication devices, and management software. Such resources will bolster and refine the institution's customer service management capabilities. Moreover, in the pursuit of attracting new clientele, institutions should enhance the aesthetic appeal and maintenance of their buildings. Well-kept and visually attractive facilities foster a favorable impression and instill trust among stakeholders. By prioritizing infrastructure enhancements, public TVET institutions can fortify their overall image and reputation, thereby ensuring a positive perception among students, staff, and the broader community. The effective administration of public TVET institutions necessitates the

formulation of a comprehensive strategic plan. This plan should address critical elements such as the organization of resources to assist employees in fulfilling their responsibilities and the promotion of a culture of innovation and leadership that nurtures positive attitudes among staff members. Establishing a robust performance monitoring and control system aligned with the newly defined public TVET standards is vital for improving staff commitment, performance, efficiency, and overall service quality. Additionally, it is imperative for public TVET providers to actively involve and seek consensus from all pertinent stakeholders, as their support and participation are essential for the successful implementation and attainment of the established goals and objectives.

Additionally, progressive organizations are increasingly adopting integrated models to effectively manage and enhance customer experiences. This principle is equally applicable to TVET institutions, where the EDT can play a pivotal role in assessing customer experiences post-interaction. Such assessments enable these institutions to formulate strategies aimed at improving overall performance. This is particularly important, as exceeding customer expectations can result in positive disconfirmation, fostering satisfaction, while failing to meet those expectations can lead to negative disconfirmation and subsequent dissatisfaction (Oliver 1980; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996). Neglecting to monitor and evaluate customer expectations can have severe repercussions for the institution's growth and sustainability. Given the dynamic and competitive nature of the academic environment in which TVET institutions operate, it is essential for them to enhance their service levels, particularly in terms of reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility, to align with customer expectations.

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