

Identifying the Most Prominent Gaps in Private Higher Education

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ABSTRACT Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa play a crucial role in the global service sector, making effective service methodologies essential in competitive markets. However, PHEIs face sustainability challenges due to increasing competitive pressures. Therefore, they should seek effective strategies to maintain their relevance within the market. The research objectives were to identify the most prominent SERVQUAL gaps in PHEIs. By identifying these SERVQUAL gaps, PHEIs can formulate strategies to mitigate competitive risks. Utilising the SERVQUAL model, the study creates a measurement matrix to pinpoint and prioritise service quality gaps. A quantitative research approach was followed employing a SERVQUAL questionnaire consisting of 22 items across five dimensions. These dimensions are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The findings reveal that responsiveness presents the largest gap, consistent with previous research outcomes. Understanding these gaps enables PHEIs to better position themselves to navigate the competitive landscape and improve overall service quality.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a foundational pillar of any society, and both public and private sectors invest substantial efforts in establishing leadership within this domain (Hoque et al. 2023). The 120 South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) operate in highly competitive environments, necessitating continuous efforts to add value and maintain relevance within the educational sector (van Wyk 2021). These PHEIs provide both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, striving to meet the evolving demands of students and the broader academic landscape. Given their significant role, it is crucial to make every effort to sustain PHEIs (Siyum 2024). The heightened competitive landscape within the academic sector compels higher education institutions to enhance their service quality to meet evolving market demands (Hoque et al. 2023). Therefore, attracting and retaining stu-

dents presents a significant challenge for private universities, particularly considering the notable rise in the number of universities and colleges globally (Stankovska et al. 2024).

Continuous evaluation of their relevance and the quality of their offerings is essential to ensure competitiveness and alignment with market demands (van Wyk 2021). Despite these efforts, Van Antwerpen and Dirkse van Schalkwyk (2023) highlight that persistent quality gaps continue to threaten the sustainability of PHEIs. Consequently, it is essential to evaluate the factors that contribute to student satisfaction and foster loyalty to the institution (Van Antwerpen and Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2023).

The study reported on in this paper utilised the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model, which is regarded as a valuable instrument for identifying service quality gaps, including within higher education institutions. The SERVQUAL model, initially developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), has undergone several refinements and modifications over time (Jusufovašić and Stević 2023). This service quality measurement model is versatile and can be applied across various service systems. However, it is primarily designed for existing users, such as students in

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this context, who possess prior knowledge and experience with the service provider, in this case, a PHEI (Jusufobašić and Stević 2023). According to the literature, organisations demonstrating high service quality levels are better positioned to meet customer needs while maintaining economic competitiveness within the market (Al Bassam and Al Shawi 2011; Putri 2024).

Objectives

This paper examines the discrepancies that currently exist within PHEIs regarding the implementation of the SERVQUAL model (Van Antwerpen and Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2023). The objectives of the research are as follows.

1. The primary aim of this study is to introduce a measurement matrix designed to identify the most significant comparative SERVQUAL gaps among the various campuses of PHEIs.
2. The secondary objective is to provide actionable recommendations to address these prominent gaps.

By identifying these elements, PHEIs will be better positioned to address the SERVQUAL gap effectively, thereby minimising non-competitive risks in the context of higher education.

Literature Review

Educational institutions are pivotal in driving national development by developing skilled human capital and fostering an intellectual society (Al Bassam and Al Shawi 2011; Putri 2024). Moreover, the quality of higher education is recognised as a critical priority, particularly in developing nations (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023; Al-Refaei et al. 2024). Hence, education is a critical institution, especially considering the global shift towards a knowledge-based economy (Adnan et al. 2024). In today's academic environment, students have a wide range of expectations, including flexibility in what they learn, how they learn, and the depth of learning, all tailored to their individual academic needs (Stankovska et al. 2024). Student satisfaction has emerged as a key concern for higher education institutions, closely linked to the perceived quality of services provided. As noted by Stankovska et al. (2024), service quality plays a pivotal role in shaping students' overall satisfaction within these institutions.

Therefore, the quality of services in higher education is crucial, as it directly impacts student satisfaction, which in turn influences student loyalty (Robiah et al. 2024). A positive perception of service quality is therefore essential to maintaining high levels of student satisfaction (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023). Despite these imperatives, Van Antwerpen and Dirkse van Schalkwyk (2023) contend that significant gaps persist in the service quality offered by higher education institutions, specifically within the South African context. Therefore, evaluating service quality has become an essential requirement in an increasingly globalised world, driven by the expansion of educational offerings (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023).

Even though institutions strive to meet student expectations, achieving student satisfaction in higher education remains a significant challenge (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023; Khondkar and Muzareba 2024). Assessing service quality poses difficulties for satisfaction models, primarily because, while multiple factors exist for measuring goods, establishing a standardised measure for services is considerably more complex (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023).

The SERVQUAL model is one of the most widely recognised tools for assessing service quality. However, other frameworks may also be suitable for evaluating service quality within higher education institutions, namely SERVPERF, HEDPERF and the 5Q's Model (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023).

The Service Performance (SERVPERF) model was introduced in 1992 in response to criticisms of the SERVQUAL scale, particularly regarding its limited validity across different industries and cultural contexts (Cronin and Taylor 1992; Kashif et al. 2016; Ardiansyah and Fakhlina 2024). SERVPERF is considered to have superior psychometric properties and is argued to provide more accurate predictions of individual responses to service quality. Unlike SERVQUAL, which is based on a confirmation/non-confirmation paradigm, SERVPERF conceptualises service quality in terms of performance attributes and attitudes.

Similarly, Higher Education Performance (HEDPERF) was developed to specifically evaluate service quality specifically within higher education. Despite its targeted focus, it has not gained significant popularity, largely due to its similarity to SERVPERF (Muhammad et al. 2020).

HEdPERF includes five dimensions of non-academic aspects, academic aspects, access, program issues, and reputation.

The 5Q's Model, proposed by Zineldin (2007), measures service quality in higher education through five dimensions of education/research, process implementation, infrastructure, communication, and atmosphere. This model incorporates factors both within and beyond the institution's direct control, offering a more comprehensive assessment compared to SERVQUAL.

However, the SERVQUAL model is widely acknowledged and utilised to evaluate service quality across various sectors, including higher education institutions (Wider et al. 2024). Also, SERVQUAL remains the most widely recognised and utilised instrument for assessing service quality, particularly in higher education institutions within developing countries (Valencia-Arias et al. 2023).

Originally proposed in the seminal work by Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988), the SERVQUAL model assesses service quality through five critical dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Wider et al. 2024). This tool systematically captures the gap between anticipated and actual service delivery, providing a comprehensive evaluation of service performance. The five dimensions are fundamental in providing services that align with student expectations. Tangibility refers to the physical attributes of the institution, such as facilities, equipment, and the overall learning environment. Reliability measures the institution's ability to consistently fulfil its commitments, including the accurate dissemination of information related to courses, timetables, and administrative processes. Responsiveness highlights the institution's capacity to offer prompt and effective support, addressing student queries promptly. Assurance examines the expertise, competence, and trustworthiness of staff, which fosters confidence among students. Lastly, empathy assesses the institution's attentiveness to the individual needs and concerns of students, ensuring a personalised and student-centred approach to service delivery.

The SERVQUAL model offers several advantages, valued by both academics and industry practitioners (Al Bassam and Al Shawi 2011). It enables organisations to regularly monitor cus-

tomers' perceptions of service quality, allowing for comparative performance analysis against competitors. The data gathered through SERVQUAL can be visually represented, making it easier to identify an organisation's strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the model supports both dimension-specific and overall assessments of service quality and facilitates customer segmentation based on their SERVQUAL scores. Further, the model's adaptability allows it to be applied across various service sectors and settings, making it relevant in different empirical, cultural, and national contexts. Its straightforward gap analysis methodology, paired with a customisable questionnaire, has been rigorously tested and refined, rendering it statistically valid and suitable for comparative benchmarking.

However, SERVQUAL has also faced criticism, with some scholars arguing that its results tend to be subjective (Jonkisz et al. 2021). Limitations include its inadequate fit in certain contexts, where it may not meet convergence criteria or effectively differentiate between variances. Furthermore, SERVQUAL is sometimes critiqued for offering a one-dimensional, rather than a comprehensive, multidimensional evaluation of service quality (Jonkisz et al. 2021). Despite these limitations, the SERVQUAL model continues to be widely recognised and utilised as an effective tool for measuring service quality.

The PHEI sector plays a vital role within the global service industry, including in South Africa. Effective service methodologies and strategies are essential for ensuring optimal functioning in competitive markets. However, a major challenge for PHEIs is increasing competitive pressure, which demands innovative strategies to maintain relevance. This results in PHEIs facing sustainability challenges due to increased competitive pressures. Hence, PHEIs should seek effective strategies to maintain their relevance within the market. Therefore, the research reported on in this paper aims to identify the most prominent SERVQUAL gaps in PHEIs. When these SERVQUAL gaps are identified, PHEIs can formulate strategies to mitigate their competitive risks. As the sector expands in South Africa, measuring service quality becomes crucial for securing a competitive edge. This paper highlights discrepancies in applying the

SERVQUAL model within PHEIs. Service quality is especially critical for PHEIs, given their competitive, marketing-driven, and highly regulated environment, where agility and responsiveness are key to meeting shifting expectations.

METHODOLOGY

The SERVQUAL instrument is divided into two main sections, that is, one measures general service quality expectations, and the other evaluates perceived service quality received from a specific organisation (Jones and Shandiz 2015). Each item addresses five key service dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, by capturing both expectations and perceptions (Gavahi et al. 2023; Hoque et al. 2023). This dual format allows for the identification of service quality gaps between anticipated and actual experiences.

The SERVQUAL model highlights five critical gaps that can hinder service delivery and affect customer perceptions. Gap 1 involves the difference between customer expectations and management's perception of those expectations, indicating potential misunderstandings. Gap 2 reflects the misalignment between management's understanding of customer expectations and service specifications, suggesting a failure to translate expectations into actionable standards. Gap 3 focuses on the inconsistency between service standards and actual delivery, often resulting from issues like poor training or resource allocation. Gap 4 concerns the discrepancy between actual service delivery and external communications, where overpromising can lead to dissatisfaction. Gap 5, the overall gap between perceived and expected service, is the most crucial, as it directly shapes customer satisfaction.

To address these gaps, organisations should enhance communication, refine systems, and develop skilled employees to consistently deliver high-quality service. Gap scores within each SERVQUAL dimension help organisations assess where service exceeds or falls short of expectations, track service trends, compare providers, and evaluate service dimensions by importance to different customer groups (Jones and Shandiz 2015).

The study adopted a quantitative research approach, utilising questionnaires as the primary data collection method. It was grounded in a

positivist philosophy, aligning with the perspective of natural science. This philosophical stance involves engaging with observable social realities to produce generalisable, law-like findings (Saunders et al. 2019). This study focused on one PHEI in South Africa comprising multiple campuses. Convenience sampling was employed to engage student participants (Saunders et al. 2019). Conducted at PHEI campuses across three provinces, the research aimed to identify service quality gaps. A pilot test of the SERVQUAL questionnaire confirmed its suitability for the student population, enhancing data reliability.

The target population comprised students enrolled at the selected PHEI. The objective of the study was to identify and compare potential gaps, if any, between the institution's five campuses. The questionnaires were administered electronically, enabling students to complete them through an online survey platform (Saunders et al. 2019). A total of 884 students (out of 1500) completed the survey, resulting in an impressive response rate of 65 percent (Pallant 2016). The high response rate can be attributed to support from senior management and encouragement from lecturers. During class sessions, lecturers actively motivated students to complete the online survey, which significantly boosted participation.

The measurement instrument employed in this study was derived from the original (seminal) SERVQUAL questionnaire, developed by Zeithaml et al. (1990). This tool, which originates from their seminal work, is widely recognised by organisations to assess service quality due to its adaptability and standardised framework. The SERVQUAL instrument consists of 22 items distributed across five dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. For this study, the authors adapted the original statements from Zeithaml et al. (1990), as outlined in Table 1.

Tangibles include personnel, equipment, and facilities, while reliability refers to consistent and accurate service performance. Responsiveness reflects the readiness to assist customers promptly, and assurance encompasses employee knowledge and courtesy, instilling trust. Empathy involves providing personalised attention.

The research instrument employed a seven-point Likert scale to measure respondents' lev-

Table 1: Measurement instrument

Dimension	Item	Column 1	Column 2
		<i>The original refined SERVQUAL statements</i>	<i>The PHE (Private Higher Education) adapted SERVQUAL statements</i>
<i>Tangibles</i>	1. The College has modern-looking equipment.		The Campus has up-to-date equipment.
	2. The College's physical facilities are visually appealing.		The Campus' physical facilities (for example, buildings and furniture) are attractive, visually appealing and stylish.
<i>Reliability</i>	3. The College employees are neatly appearing.		Personnel at the Campus are well-dressed and neat at all times.
	4. Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) are visually appealing at the College.		The materials of the Campus (for example, pamphlets and study material) suit the image of the College.
	5. When the College promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.		When the Campus promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.
	6. When you have a problem, the College shows a sincere interest in solving it.		When students have problems, the personnel of the Campus are sympathetic and reassuring.
	7. The College performs the service right the first time.		The Campus is always dependable and renders the service right the first time.
	8. The College provides its services at the time it promises to do so.		The Campus provides services at the time it promises to do so.
	9. The College insists on error-free records.		The Campus keeps accurate records (for example, accounts, academic reports, etc.).
	10. Employees of the College tell you exactly when services will be performed.		The Campus tells students when services will be rendered.
<i>Responsiveness</i>	11. Employees of the College give you prompt service.		Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from the Campus personnel.
	12. Employees of the College are always willing to help you.		Lecturers at the Campus are willing to assist students.
<i>Assurance</i>	13. Employees of the College are never too busy to respond to your requests.		Personnel of the Campus are not too busy to respond promptly to students' requests.
	14. The behaviour of employees of the College instil confidence in customers.		Students can trust the personnel of the Campus.
	15. You feel safe in your transactions with the College.		Personnel at the Campus inspire confidence.
	16. Employees of the College are constantly courteous to you.		Personnel at the Campus are polite.
<i>Empathy</i>	17. Employees of the College know how to answer your questions.		Personnel receive adequate support from the Campus management to improve their service provision.
	18. The College gives you individual attention.		Students receive individualised attention from administrative personnel (for example, doing something extra for students.)
	19. The College has operating hours convenient to all its customers.		Lecturers provide individual attention to students.
	20. The College has employees who give you personal attention.		Personnel of the Campus do know what the needs of the students are (for example, recognising students as customers).
	21. The College has your best interest at heart.		The Campus personnel have the students' best interests at heart.
	22. Employees of the College understand your specific needs.		The Campus personnel are easily accessible to students (for example, easily available to see or to contact by phone, email, etc.).

els of agreement with each statement. The semantic differential scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), allowing respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements presented.

For each of the 22 statements, the expectation of the service quality was measured and then tested against the perception of service quality using the seven-point Likert scale.

Data was then cleaned, analysed, and interpreted to derive the final results (Saunders et al. 2019), providing valuable insights for service improvement within PHEIs (shown in Table 1).

RESULTS

The following section examines the service quality levels by conducting a gap analysis across the five dimensions of service quality for each campus (Table 2).

Gap Analysis

The comparison of SERVQUAL scores across five campuses reveals insights into the perceived service quality at each institution, highlighting areas where service gaps are most pronounced. For each of the 22 statements, the expected level of service quality was measured and then compared to the perceived level of service quality. The evaluation covers five key dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Each campus exhibits distinct patterns in its service quality performance, as detailed below.

Tangibles

In the dimension of tangibles, which assesses the physical attributes of the institution, including equipment, facilities, and personnel appearance, the scores are generally negative across all campuses, indicating dissatisfaction. Notably, Campus B recorded the worst score for personnel appearance (-0.32), while Campus D slightly outperformed others with a score of 0.02 in terms of up-to-date equipment. The overall tangibles score across campuses is consistently negative, with Campuses A and C (-0.19 and -0.21, respectively) reflecting larger gaps compared to other campuses.

Reliability

The reliability dimension, which gauges the dependability of service delivery, varies significantly across campuses. Campus D performed the best in this area, with positive scores in keeping records accurately (0.07) and adhering to promises (0.43). In contrast, Campus C recorded a notable gap in personnel responsiveness to student problems (-0.55). Campus A showed a slight overall positive score of 0.05 in reliability, while Campuses B and C performed poorly with scores of -0.18 and -0.23, respectively.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness, which measures how promptly and effectively the institution responds to student needs, was the dimension with the largest gaps across all campuses. Campus C exhibited the most significant overall gap (-0.38), driven by a particularly poor score in lecturer willingness to assist students (-0.95). Campus D performed relatively better, especially in personnel responsiveness to student requests (0.47). Campuses A and C recorded similar levels of responsiveness (-0.22 and -0.27, respectively), with the largest deficits in informing students when services will be performed. Overall, this dimension exhibited the largest gap among all the SERVQUAL dimensions.

Assurance

Assurance, reflecting the confidence students have in the institution's personnel, also revealed areas for improvement. Campus D demonstrated the strongest performance in this dimension, with personnel inspiring confidence (0.07) and polite behaviour (0.00). However, Campus A exhibited consistent deficits across most items, resulting in an overall score of -0.14. Campus C's gaps were more pronounced, particularly in the dimension of personnel politeness and receiving adequate support from management, leading to an overall score of -0.24.

Empathy

Empathy, which assesses the personalised attention given to students, showed mixed re-

Table 2: Items for SERVQUAL dimensions and gaps

Dimensions	Statement	Gap score	Campus A	Campus B	Campus C	Campus D	Campus E
<i>Tangibles</i>	The college has up-to-date equipment. The physical facilities (for example, buildings and furniture) at the college are attractive, visually appealing and stylish. Personnel at the college are well dressed and neat at all times. The materials of the college (pamphlets and study material) suit the image of the college.	-0.10 0.03 -0.35 -0.26	-0.14 0.03 -0.41 -0.23	-0.17 -0.16 -0.32 0.02	-0.05 -0.09 -0.30 -0.42	0.02 0.10 -0.39 -0.33	-0.11 0.14 -0.30 -0.32
<i>Reliability</i>	Total When the college promises to do something by a certain time, they do so. When students have problems, the personnel of the college are sympathetic and reassuring. The college is always dependable and performs the service right the first time. The college provides services at the time they promise to do so. The college keeps their records accurately (for example, accounts, academic reports, etc.)	-0.17 0.19 -0.10 0.01 0.03 -0.24	-0.19 0.19 0.02 0.05 0.18 -0.19	-0.15 0.04 -0.22 -0.15 -0.15 -0.44	-0.21 -0.04 -0.55 -0.11 -0.31 -0.17	-0.15 0.43 -0.16 0.01 0.07 -0.25	-0.15 0.27 0.06 0.09 0.08 -0.25
<i>Responsiveness</i>	Total The college tells students when services will be performed. Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from the college's personnel. Lecturers at the college are willing to assist students. Personnel of the college are not too busy to respond to students' requests promptly.	-0.02 -0.53 -0.04 -0.58 -0.02	0.05 -0.50 0.01 -0.60 -0.07	-0.18 -0.59 -0.06 -0.95 -0.11	-0.23 -0.60 -0.32 -0.09 -0.09	0.02 -0.26 0.21 -0.60 0.47	0.05 -0.60 -0.03 -0.63 -0.05
<i>Assurance</i>	Total Students can trust the personnel of the college. Personnel at the college inspire confidence. Personnel at the college are polite. Personnel get adequate support from the college management to improve the performance of their services.	-0.24 -0.22 -0.12 -0.18 -0.12	-0.22 -0.22 -0.02 -0.23 -0.08	-0.38 -0.23 -0.19 -0.07 -0.29	-0.27 -0.17 -0.28 -0.37 -0.16	-0.03 -0.11 0.07 0.00 0.04	-0.25 -0.30 -0.19 -0.14 -0.14
<i>Empathy</i>	Total Students receive individualised attention from administrative personnel (for example, doing something extra for students). Lecturers provide individual attention to students. Personnel of the college do know what the needs of the students are (for example, recognising students as customers). The college personnel have the students' best interests at heart. The college personnel are easily accessible for students (for example, easily available to see or to contact by phone, e-mail etc.).	-0.16 -0.09 -0.15 0.04 0.02 -0.22	-0.14 -0.08 -0.13 0.05 0.00 -0.23	-0.19 -0.21 -0.34 0.19 0.02 -0.59	-0.24 -0.09 -0.02 -0.23 -0.05 -0.16	0.00 -0.09 -0.07 0.13 0.15 -0.03	-0.19 -0.05 -0.18 0.09 0.04 -0.09
	Total SQI	-0.07 -0.13	-0.08 -0.11	-0.19 -0.22	-0.11 -0.21	0.02 -0.03	-0.04 -0.12

Source: Authors' own compilation (2025)

sults. Campus D had the best performance, recording a positive overall score (0.02) and high ratings for recognising student needs (0.13) and having students' best interests at heart (0.15). However, Campus B displayed significant gaps, particularly in personnel accessibility (-0.59), resulting in an overall score of -0.19. Campuses A and C performed similarly, with total scores of -0.08 and -0.11, respectively.

Overall SERVQUAL Index (SQI)

The overall SERVQUAL Index (SQI), which represents the aggregate service quality score, revealed the greatest service quality gaps at Campus C (-0.21) and Campus B (-0.22). Conversely, Campus D (-0.03) and Campus E (-0.12) exhibited the least service quality deficits. Campus A recorded a moderate SQI of -0.11. These scores suggest that while some campuses have addressed certain service quality dimensions, significant gaps remain, particularly in responsiveness and personnel engagement across all campuses.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the research was to identify the most significant comparative SERVQUAL gaps among the various PHEI campuses. The increasingly competitive higher education landscape requires institutions, particularly PHEIs, to enhance service quality to meet evolving student expectations (Siyum 2024). As universities expand globally, attracting and retaining students has become more challenging (Hoque et al. 2023; Van Antwerpen and Dirkse van Schalkwyk 2023). This paper examines the sustainability challenges confronting Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) amid intensifying competitive pressures. Despite substantial investments in service enhancements, persistent quality gaps continue to undermine institutional sustainability.

The study found that responsiveness represents the most significant gap in the SERVQUAL assessment of South African PHEIs. Rani (2024) defines responsiveness as the intent to meet customer demands as promptly as possible. It encompasses both a willingness to assist customers and a genuine interest in their opinions.

This finding is significant, as it corresponds with previous research by Zeshan (2010), Khodayari and Khodayari (2011), Roy et al. (2023) and Stankovska et al. (2024), all of whom identified responsiveness as the largest gap of the SERVQUAL dimensions in PHEIs. Further this finding directly aligns with the study conducted by Stankovska et al. (2024), which reported that the most significant service quality gap in tertiary institutions in Bulgaria pertained to the responsiveness dimension. This parallel suggests that responsiveness remains a persistent and systemic challenge in higher education contexts across different countries, reinforcing the urgency for targeted interventions in this area. In order to rectify this, Victor (2024) states that responsiveness involves promptly assisting clients; timely responses to queries or complaints significantly impact how clients judge service success and overall satisfaction. The study by Rani (2024), conducted in Bangladesh—a developing country with contextual similarities to South Africa—reinforces the significance of responsiveness as a critical component of service quality in emerging economies. Hence all systems should be aligned to improve prompt responsiveness.

To enhance responsiveness, institutions should implement clear protocols that boost staff engagement and prioritise student needs. Organising customer service workshops will equip staff with the essential skills needed to effectively address student concerns. Additionally, establishing response monitoring systems will allow institutions to track and evaluate their responsiveness, ensuring that student feedback is systematically addressed. By focusing on these strategies, PHEIs can better meet their students' needs and improve overall service quality. Addressing responsiveness not only enhances student satisfaction but also strengthens the institutions' competitive position in the higher education landscape. Furthermore, the study's findings underscore the necessity for a robust framework to tackle service quality discrepancies, ensuring that PHEIs remain responsive to student needs and competitive in a dynamic educational environment.

Hence, the establishment of clear protocols that enhance staff engagement and prioritise student needs is essential for improving respon-

siveness. In line with this, Khan (2024) asserts that the implementation of clear protocols for staff in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the SERVQUAL framework. It is recommended that strategic sessions be conducted to develop effective approaches for enhancing responsiveness to students. This recommendation is supported by Taroum and Masaud (2024), who assert that strategic planning is not merely a procedural formality but a critical mechanism for improving service quality in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Additionally, service workshops focusing on student needs should be implemented to improve overall service quality. In line with this recommendation, Van Antwerpen and Van Schalkwyk (2024) advocate for the implementation of SERVQUAL workshops in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) to enhance responsiveness. Ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement are essential and strongly recommended.

The paper offers a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Firstly, it measures the SERVQUAL gaps within a South African PHEI. The study reported on in this paper revealed that responsiveness exhibits the largest gap in the SERVQUAL assessment of South African PHEIs. This finding directly responds to findings from Zeshan (2010), Khodayari and Khodayari (2011), Roy et al. (2023), and Stankovska et al. (2024).

Secondly, the paper provides a valuable managerial contribution by offering practical recommendations for South African PHEIs to reduce the identified SERVQUAL gaps. Implementing these recommendations can enhance service quality by addressing key areas of improvement, thereby fostering greater student satisfaction. Ultimately, reducing these gaps will contribute to the long-term sustainability of PHEIs in the competitive academic landscape, ensuring they remain relevant and competitive in delivering high-quality educational experiences.

The study demonstrates that overall service quality within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) has not yet attained the desired benchmark, despite numerous improvement efforts and institutional initiatives. This finding is consistent with the work of Victor (2024) in Tanzania and Rani (2024) in Bangladesh, who also

reported significant service delivery gaps, particularly in the dimension of responsiveness, within developing country contexts. Accordingly, all SERVQUAL-related strategies within PHEIs should be purposefully aligned towards addressing and rectifying shortcomings in responsiveness.

Skýpalová et al. (2024) assert that the diversity of student populations and the complexity of contextual factors within and across countries preclude the applicability of a one-size-fits-all approach. As such, the responsiveness dimension of service quality must be tailored to accommodate varying scenarios and specific institutional contexts, thereby ensuring more effective and contextually relevant service delivery.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study confirms that responsiveness remains the most pressing service quality challenge within South African Private Higher Education Institutions. This dimension, linked to the willingness and ability to promptly assist students, emerged as the largest SERVQUAL gap. The persistence of this shortfall signals systemic inefficiencies and highlights the need for targeted institutional reforms. To address this, institutions must implement structured protocols that actively prioritise student needs and enhance staff responsiveness. Furthermore, regular service training and continuous performance monitoring are essential to embed a culture of accountability and improvement. Tailoring these efforts to accommodate diverse student populations and contextual realities will further strengthen service delivery. By narrowing this gap, institutions not only improve student satisfaction but also reinforce their relevance and sustainability in a competitive educational landscape. The study thus offers both theoretical insights and managerial guidance to support long-term service quality enhancements in the PHEI sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The secondary objective of this study is to provide actionable recommendations to address these prominent gaps. To enhance service quality in higher education, several recommendations

are proposed based on the comparison of SERVQUAL scores for PHEIs in South Africa, including the following.

Focus on Tangibles

All campuses report dissatisfaction with physical aspects, including facilities and personnel appearance. Regular assessments and investments in modernising infrastructure and improving staff professionalism are essential.

Enhance Reliability

Significant gaps in reliability, especially in fulfilling promises and maintaining accurate records, necessitate standardised processes. Training programs should focus on improving service delivery and building trust through reliable record-keeping and problem resolution.

Improve Responsiveness

This area shows the largest service gaps, particularly in lecturer responsiveness to students. To enhance responsiveness, institutions should implement clear protocols that boost staff engagement and prioritise student needs. Hosting customer service workshops will equip staff with the essential skills to effectively address student concerns. Additionally, establishing response monitoring systems will enable institutions to track and evaluate their responsiveness, ensuring that student feedback is systematically addressed. By focusing on these strategies, PHEIs can better meet their students' needs and improve overall service quality. Addressing responsiveness not only enhances student satisfaction but also strengthens the institutions' competitiveness in the higher education landscape. Furthermore, the study's findings underscore the necessity of a robust framework to address service quality discrepancies, ensuring that PHEIs remain responsive to student needs and competitive in a dynamic educational environment.

Strengthen Assurance

Assurance, which reflects student confidence in staff professionalism, requires improvement. Soft-skills training and better management

support are needed to build trust and increase staff competence and politeness.

Increase Empathy

Personalised attention to students is inconsistent, with gaps in staff accessibility and attentiveness. Institutions should foster a more student-centred approach, offering mentorship programs and making personnel more accessible to address individual needs.

Campus-specific Interventions

Tailored approaches are necessary, especially for campuses with the largest service gaps, such as Campuses C and B. Best practices from higher-performing campuses, such as Campus D, should be analysed and adapted.

Track Service Quality

Continuous monitoring through SERVQUAL assessments will provide ongoing insights into service improvements, helping institutions maintain high service quality and meet student expectations.

By addressing these areas, institutions can improve service delivery and student satisfaction across all campuses.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the research reported on in this paper contributes to understanding service quality gaps within PHEIs, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study focused exclusively on SERVQUAL gaps, which may not reflect broader challenges at other PHEI campuses in South Africa or internationally. Secondly, it was limited to one private PHEI with five campuses, limiting its applicability to non-private institutions. Lastly, the geographical scope was confined to South Africa, limiting the generalisability of the results. Future research should replicate the study across a wider range of PHEIs, both domestically and internationally, to enhance insights into service quality dynamics in diverse educational contexts.

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