

# Exploring Student Satisfaction and Service Experience among Non-Traditional Students in a Private Higher Education Institute in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Student satisfaction is important in a higher education institution's strategy in a competitive private higher education sector. What drives student satisfaction and retention is service quality, which includes a combination of excellent learning and non-learning aspects. This paper is based on non-traditional students at a private Higher Education Institute (PHEI) in South Africa which offers undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning programmes to adult learners in full-time employment. The study aims to explore the postgraduate students' current satisfaction levels based on the service (quality) provided by the administrative staff, who are known as Programme Conveners (PCs). The research problem is that the current feedback survey conducted by the Institute does not provide sufficient information on the student satisfaction with the quality of service provided by the PCs.

A descriptive design and quantitative approach were adopted to conduct a survey among a convenience sample of masters and doctorate students, using the validated SERVQUAL instrument. It was determined that of most concern to the students from among the four SERVQUAL dimensions is Responsiveness and Reliability. Thus, the PHEI needs to identify, define and strengthen the elements of the aforementioned SERVQUAL instrument if it intends to improve student satisfaction.

**Keywords:** satisfaction, postgraduate students; service experience; responsiveness; service reliability

*Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020*

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## Introduction

"A great student experience is no longer a nice to have, but a must-have and the best way to generate a great student experience is to deliver high quality and personalised engagement" (Deal, 2017). The digital age has changed student's expectations of the education service delivered by higher education institutes and they expect quality service that is more flexible, continuously interactive and personalized (van den Berk, 2015). Rena, (2010) notes the importance of quality higher education at a national level, as well as in line with the internationally accepted standards, especially for developing countries. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has

brought about new developments and challenges in the educational industry. "Education moved from national to global education, from state-controlled to open market economy, from general education to an educational system-driven market and from on-time learning for a few to lifelong learning for all" (Rena, 2010).

This study is conducted among non-traditional students at a PHEI in South Africa. The Institute offers undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning programmes to employed adult learners and it is the only institute in South Africa that has adopted the "Mode 2" learning approach, which is the process of knowledge

production in the context of the application. This means that adult learners are able to apply theory to their current work environment as part of the learning process (EL Education Inc, 2015). The service product includes the delivery of personalised service, optional tutorial sessions in the form of workshops, learning materials and support delivered through an online learning platform.

Programme Conveners (PCs) are assigned to programmes and cohorts within programmes, comprising 200 students per PC. The PC is the main contact person for all student matters and this enables the personalisation of the customer service. Students have access to a survey platform to evaluate their learning experience, faculty, learning material per module, administration and service provided by the PCs. This survey is called the Module Evaluation: Student feedback and is based on the monthly delivery of modules and workshops.

The student feedback data shows a consistent average or mean score of 81.34% in 2016, 81.40% in 2017 and 81.36% in 2018, which reflects an average score of 80%, implying the overall service perception is very good. However, the students are also required to rate the levels of communication, interaction, and administration of the workshop by the PCs. In 2016 27% of the students rated the aforementioned service elements as being average and below average; in 2017, 24% rated service as being average and below, and in 2018, 24% of the respondents rated the service as being average and below. It is apparent that a fairly significant portion of the student population perceive that the service has not improved over the past three years, regardless of the number of changes and improvements that have been implemented by the Institute.

In light of the above, the aim of this study is to gain further insight into the student satisfaction levels when dealing with the administration staff members at the PHEI. The objectives are to adapt a service quality measurement instrument to gain insight into students' satisfaction levels and identify administration areas that require improvement

## Literature Review

Azam (2018) found that service quality is positively connected to students' satisfaction.

Kakakhel, Baloch and Ali (2018, quoted Saravanan, 2018) argued that in order to increase customer satisfaction levels, better service quality, quick service, knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful employees are required. Quality service is a combination of excellent learning and the non-learning process (Muhammad, et al., 2018).

According to Grigoroudis and Siskos (2010), "Customer satisfaction is considered today as a baseline standard of performance and a possible standard of excellence for any business." Customer satisfaction which is the key factor for business and development in the market, is the ability for the business to provide valuable and unique products that will satisfy the customer needs. This includes the feelings associated with the atmosphere and the purchasing process before and after (Biesok & Wyrod-Wrobel, 2011). According to Biesok and Wyrod-Wrobel (2011), the core factors that contribute to customer satisfaction are product value and quality, rational decision-making process and positive emotions. The less important factors are the purchasing process and the marketing elements that exceed customer expectations (Grigoroudis & Siskos, 2010). Thus, measuring customer satisfaction is important to understand customers, since this enables the business to address the customer expectations, understand the perception of the product or service and improve customer satisfaction (Grigoroudis & Siskos, 2010).

Raisman, (2016), found that 24% of students leave a university due to being treated poorly or receiving poor service, 20%, left because they felt the university did not care about them, 19% felt that it was not worth the time or money, and 13% to 8% had personal problems, financial constraints and poor grades. Boice-Pardee, Richardson and Soisson (2018) propose 'tips' that institutes can use to provide service quality when interacting with students and applicable to any other customer expectations. These include: treating students with dignity and respect, providing students with clear directions to solve problems and issues, being responsive, and providing timely answers to questions and regular progress feedback (Boice-Pardee, et al., 2018).

While these are specific to individual service interaction, it is best for the institute's

administrative staff and other departments to identify and learn more about their own student's service expectations (Boice-Pardee, et al., 2018).

Several research studies have been conducted on service quality by adapting the SERVQUAL model to fit various environments (Chui, Ahmad, Bassim & Zaimi, 2015; Azam (2019; Daniel, Liben & Adugna, 2017). The SERVQUAL model developed by Zeithaml, Parauraman and Berry in 1985, was developed as a marketing tool, to capture and measure the expected service quality and service experienced of customers (Mulder, 2018). The main focus is on customer needs and the gap between their expectations and the actual service provided (Mulder, 2018). This model enables organisations to make decisions on the expectancy pattern, before making changes to improve internal systems (Mulder, 2018).

The original SERVQUAL model had ten dimensions, namely, Reliability, Responsiveness, Competence, Access, Courtesy, Communication, Credibility, Security, Knowing the customer, and Tangibles. Subsequent research resulted in refinement of the model to five dimensions and was referred to as the RATER model comprising Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy (Mulder, 2018). The final SERVQUAL instrument comprises 22 items which measure service quality from a perceptions and expectations perspective. This instrument was used in the present study by adapting the items to the higher education environment.

## Research Methodology

### Research Context

This study was conducted at a PHEI in South Africa, offering distance learning programmes to non - traditional students, since the increase of non-traditional students or adult learners has made higher education are more complex (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2016). Non-traditional students are mature students from the age of 25 years and older, part-time studies or distance learning, working full time and have children (Macdonald, 2018). Non-traditional students' needs are different from

those of traditional students, since these students have children and are in fulltime employment. They have to manage their family, work responsibilities and are required to perform well with their studies (Macdonald, 2018). These students look for educational institutes that have flexible programmes, schedules and timely service from facilitators and administration staff (Macdonald, 2018).

A study conducted by Barnes and Noble College (Nd) on non-traditional students at a mode 1 institute reports that the student's integration into the institute's community and culture as one of the major contributing factors (Barnes & Noble College, n.d.). Little evidence is shown that the administrative functions have a big effect on at-risk non-traditional students. The study however, recommends that institutes invest more time and resources for non-traditional student's success (Barnes & Noble College, nd).

Carin Stoltz-Urban (2017), investigated factors contributing to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students and the following emerged: student integration, academic supervisor support, and administration management and service. This researcher recommends that the educational institutes should offer and maintain effective and efficient service for non-traditional students. This includes open communication, accessible information and a monitoring system during the research phase, which will enable the institute to meet the needs of its clients and improve completion rate (Stoltz-Urban, 2017).

The population in this study is the actively enrolled students at the private higher institution, which numbered 2459. However, the researcher only focused on the postgraduate population of 87 active Master students and 100 Doctoral students. A probability sample of 15 masters and 15 doctorate students were surveyed by selecting every 5<sup>th</sup> registered student on the database.

A survey was conducted using SERVQUAL instrument via Google forms whereby emails were sent to the selected sample by providing a link to the survey. The 5-point Likert scale instrument aimed to determine the respondents "strength of feeling" towards the service quality of the private higher education institute (MacDonald & Headlam, 2008).

### Research Findings

Although 30 postgraduate students were targeted, Only 22 completed the survey. Table 1

represents the response with respect to Responsiveness, which in the SERVQUAL model is defined as the “willingness to help and provide service” (Wong, et al., 2012).

**Table 1: Responsiveness**

Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
<b>My Programme Convener is never too busy to respond to my requests</b>	0%	5%	9%	27%	59%
<b>My Programme Convener shows a sincere interest in solving my queries.</b>	0%	5%	9%	14%	73%
<b>My Programme Convener provides me with prompt service and timeous feedback.</b>	0%	5%	14%	18%	64%

From the findings in Table 1, it would seem that the vast majority of students agreed that the PCs were highly responsive.

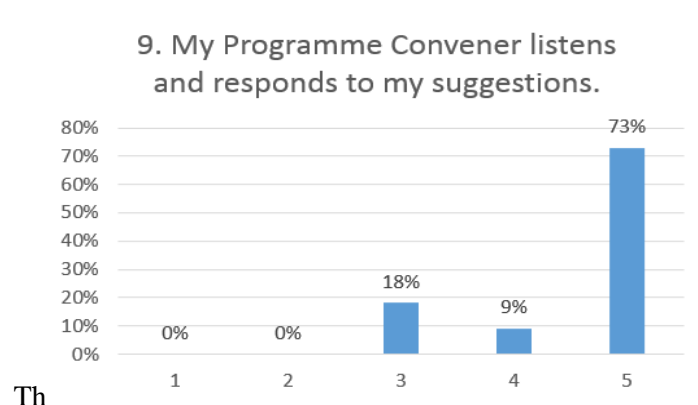
Table 2 reports the respondents’ perception of the Reliability dimension of the SERVQUAL model. Reliability defined as the “ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately” (Wong, et al., 2012).

**Table 2: Reliability**

Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
<b>My Programme Convener has the ability to handle queries effectively</b>	0%	0%	18%	18%	64%
<b>My Programme Convener delivers service right the first time.</b>	0%	5%	14%	32%	50%
<b>When my Programme Convener promises to do something by a certain time they deliver as promised.</b>	0%	5%	18%	27%	50%

Table 2 reflects that the majority of students ‘strongly’ agree that the PCs deliver reliable service.

Empathy is defined as “caring, individualised attention provided to customers” (Wong, et al., 2012). Figures 1-3 and Table 3 reflect response to aspects of the Empathy dimension of SERVQUAL.



**Figure 1: Elements of Empathy**

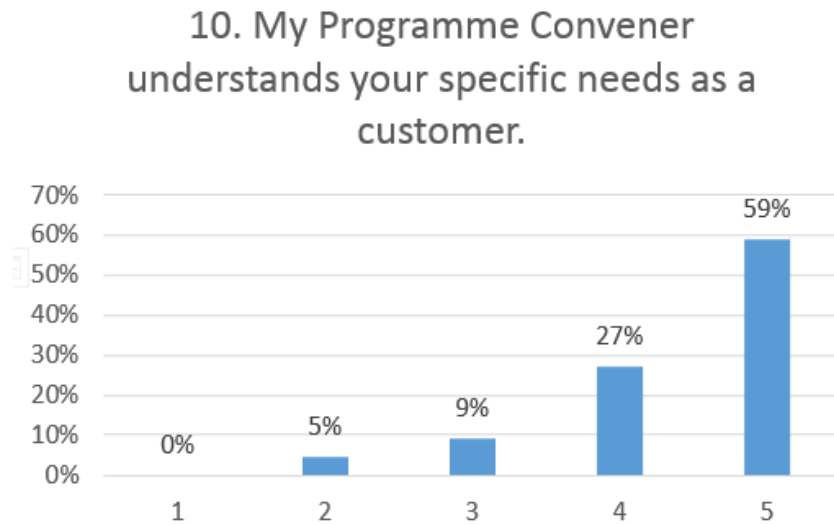
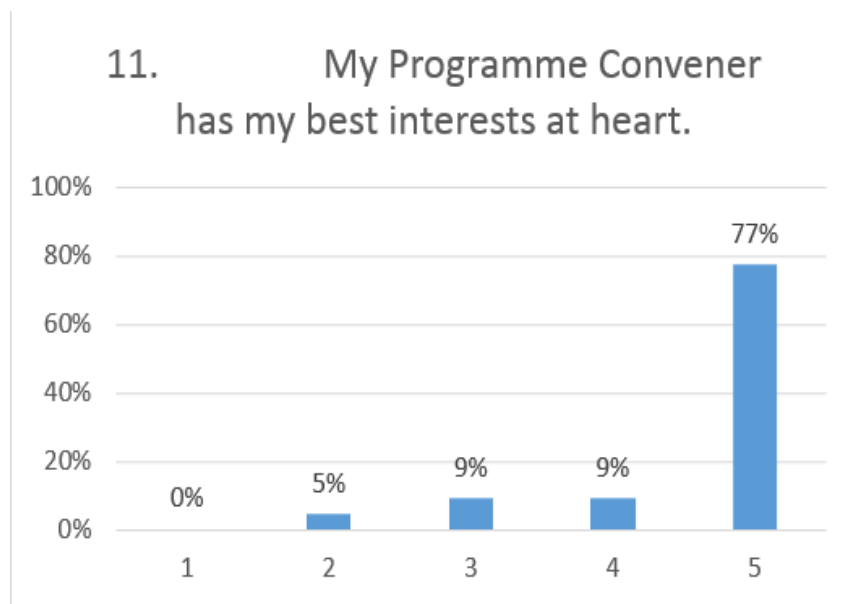
**Figure 2: Elements of Empathy****Figure 3: Elements of Empathy**

Table 3 reflects a summary response to elements of Empathy as an important service quality determinant.

**Table 3: Summary Response to Empathy**

Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
My Programme Convener listens and responds to my suggestions.	0%	0%	18%	9%	73%
My Programme Convener understands your specific needs as a customer.	0%	5%	9%	27%	59%

<b>My Programme Convener has my best interests at heart</b>	0%	5%	9%	9%	77%
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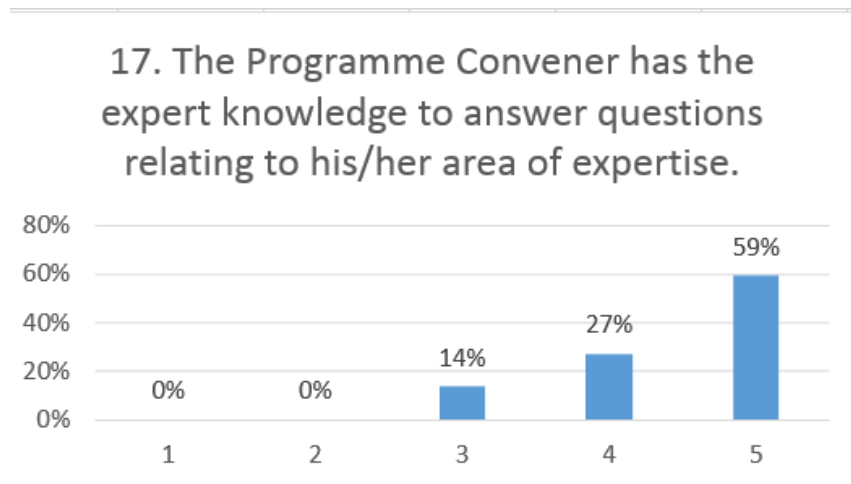
With respect to Assurance which is defined as “Knowledge of the programme Convener and their ability to inspire confidence in the service quality” (Wong, et al., 2012), Table 4 reflects that the participants were also positive about this dimension of service offered by the PCs.

**Table 4: Elements of Assurance**

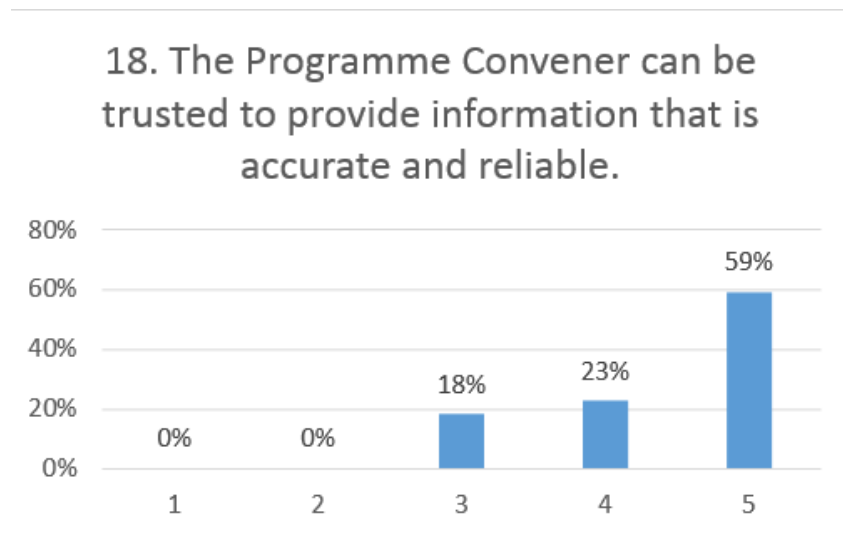
Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
<b>My Programme Convener is consistently courteous with me.</b>	0%	5%	9%	9%	77%
<b>My Programme Convener has a professional approach</b>	0%	5%	9%	9%	77%
<b>My Programme Convener instils confidence in me.</b>	0%	9%	5%	27%	59%

### Knowledge

This question was asked to find out what the student's perception is with regards to the roles and responsibilities of a Programme convener.



**Figure 4: Knowledge of Programme Convener**



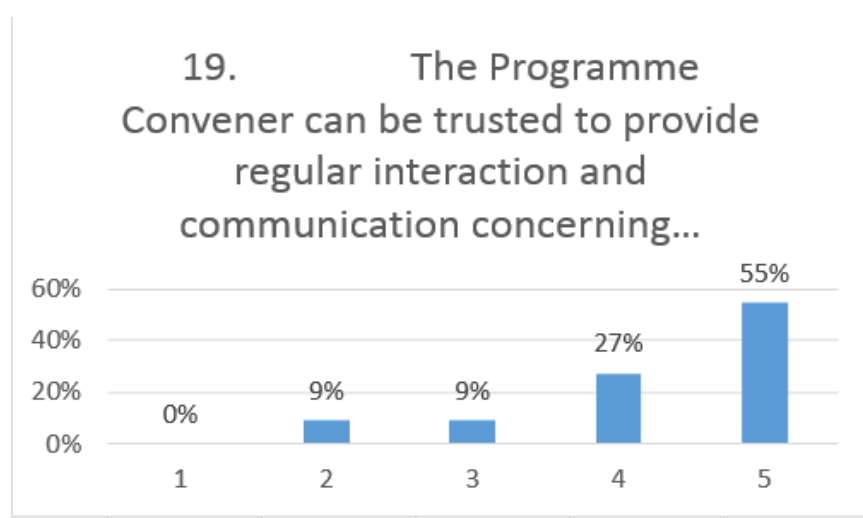
**Figure 5: Accurate and Reliable Information**

**Table 5: Knowledge**

Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
The Programme Convener has the expert knowledge to answer questions relating to his/her area of expertise.	0%	5%	14%	27%	59%
The Programme Convener can be trusted to provide information that is accurate and reliable.	0%	0%	18%	23%	59%

### Communication

This question was asked with regards to the communication service delivery, which is a fundamental part of the service provided by the programme convener.



**Figure 6: Trustworthiness of Programme Convener**



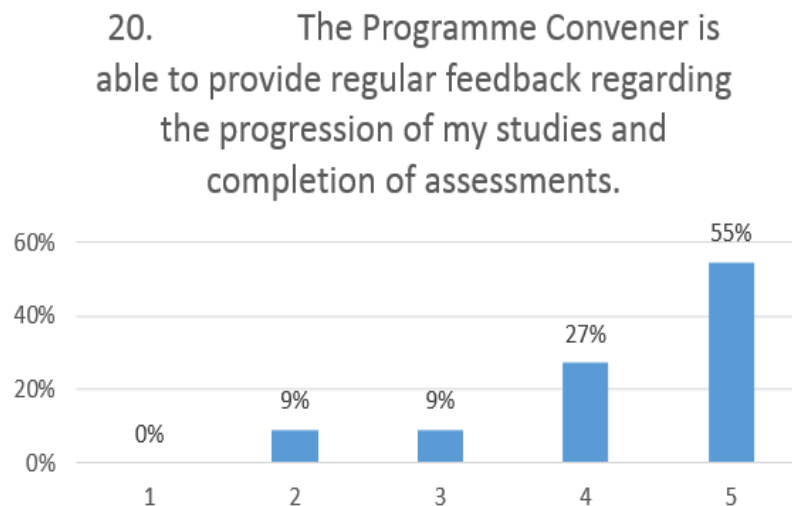


Figure 7: Feedback Provided by Programme Conevener

Table 6: Summary Response to Communication

Question	Rating (1) Strongly disagree	Rating (2)	Rating (3)	Rating (4)	Rating (5) Strongly agree
The Programme Convener can be trusted to provide regular interaction and communication concerning the workshop	0%	9%	9%	27%	55%
The Programme Convener is able to provide regular feedback regarding the progression of my studies and completion of assessments.	0%	9%	9%	27%	55%

### Importance Ratings

The rating of importance with regards to the four SERVQUAL dimensions.

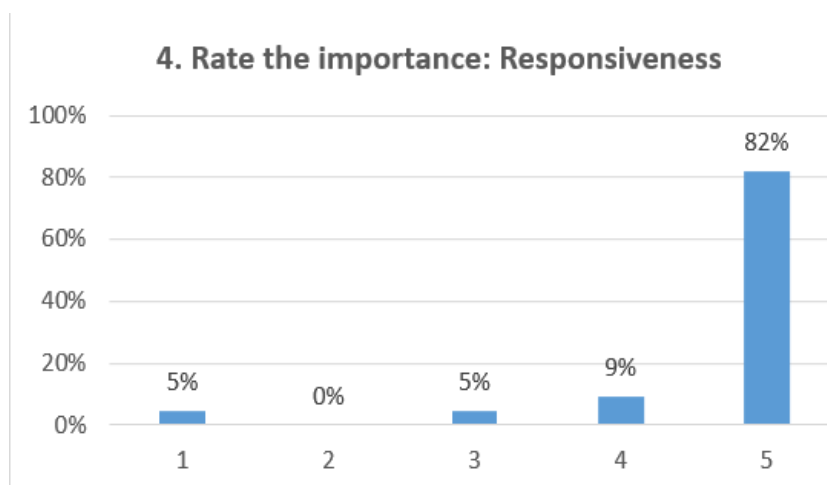


Figure 8: Responsiveness



### 8. Rate the importance:Reliability

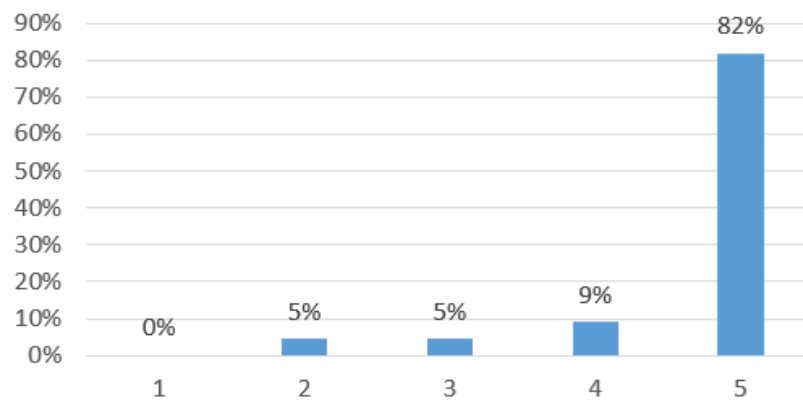


Figure 9: Reliability

### 12. Rate the importance:Empathy

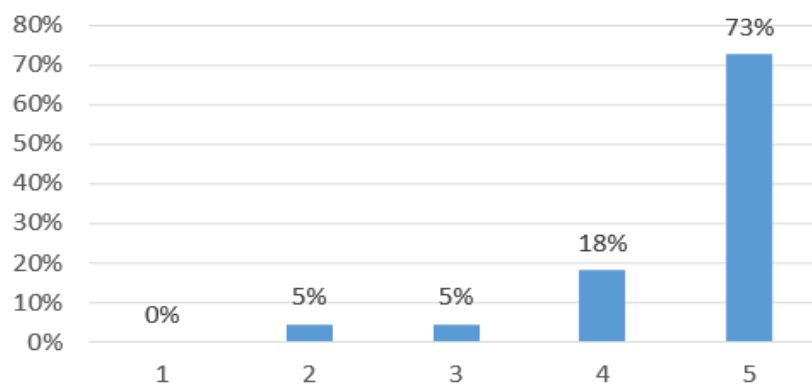


Figure 10: Empathy

### 16. Rate the importance: Assurance

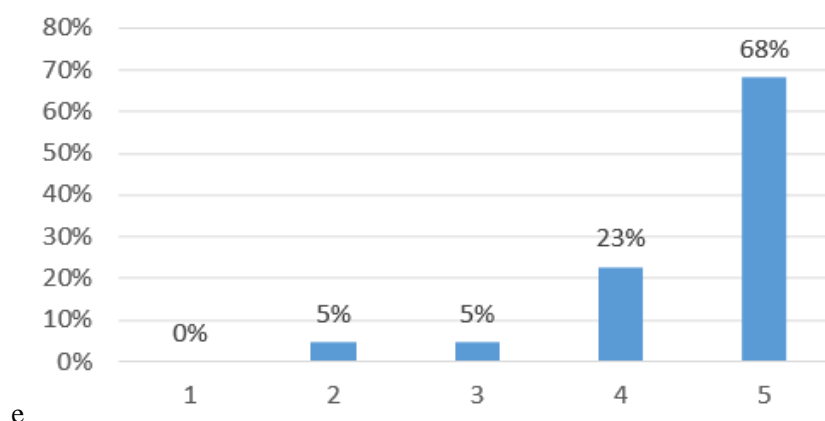
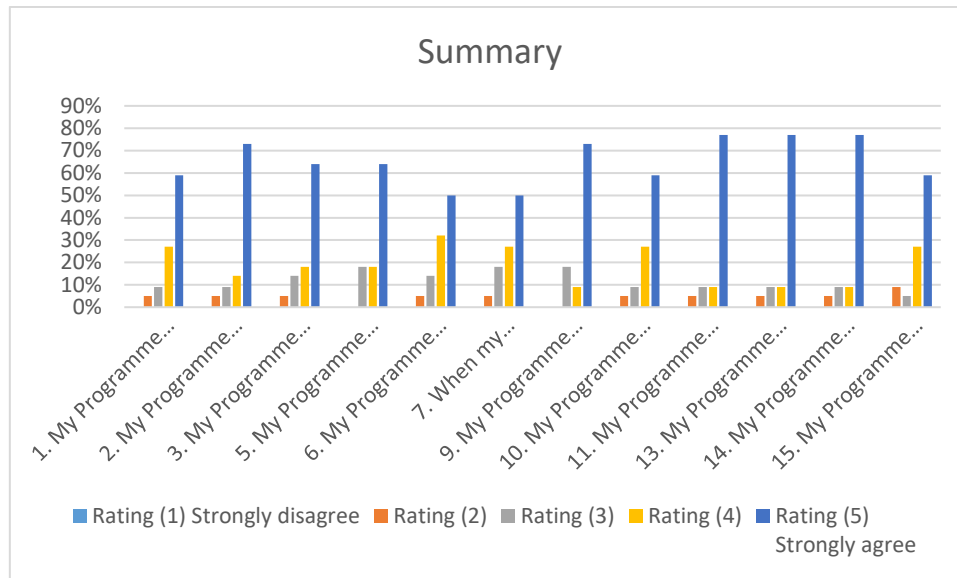


Figure 11: Assurance

## Key Findings

The key finding is the low rating of the Responsiveness and Reliability dimensions of SERVQUAL as depicted in Figure 12.



**Figure 12: Summary of Survey Results**

In addition, there is an indication for further investigation with regards to the knowledge and communication area. Based on the presented data there is a gap between the student's expectations and experience. Further investigation is needed to identify if this is:

- the promotional gap, “the inability of the business to fulfil expectations created in the mind of the student through marketing communications”;
- understanding gap, “the gap occurred due to the translation of customer expectations into appropriate operating procedures and systems with the business”;
- procedural gap, “the gap occurred due to the inaccurate understanding of customer needs and priorities by the managers”;
- behavioural gap, “the difference between customer expectations and organisation performance, with a focus on how procedures adequately cover service delivery requirements; and/or
- perception gap, “the difference between customer performance perceptions and reality (Grigoroudis & Siskos, 2010).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the key findings in chapter four, the areas of concern noted by the postgraduate respondents, are Responsiveness: “Students should have easy access to the lecturers and administrative staff”. The “attentiveness to help students and provide prompt service” (Chui, et al., 2015). And Reliability: Consistency of processes and policy in the delivery of service”. “Effective workshop planning and management. This includes trustworthiness, keeping promises, handling complaints and solving problems” (Chui, et al., 2015).

It is recommended that the management of people is an immediate action that can be put in place by management. The researcher recommends the update of the current student survey to include additional questions that ask the student to rate the responsiveness and reliability of the service provided by the administrative staff. This will provide further insight into the service quality provided by the Programme Conveners. Additional benefits will mean that the management is able to identify internal improvement areas where personal require additional processes training

and or mentoring. As a result, this will improve the service quality provided by the programme conveners. This action can be done with immediate effect and management can start having more in-depth service delivery and development conversations with the programme convener. The realised benefits over time are a more focused team of programme conveners that are able to provide the service promised and supported by the management team through the Key Performance indicators.

Employee engagement impacts the level of service quality and customer experience (Guilfoile, 2017). According to Sandeen (2017) when dealing with non-traditional students it is absolutely important to have a dedicated and focused team. The team should have a good understanding of non-traditional students, approachable and can direct these students to the right resources quickly (Sandeen, 2017).

### Recommendations for Further Research

The researcher would like to take this study further by using the SERVQUAL model and develop a hypothesis based on the findings in this research paper. This will mean further insight, understanding and a larger sample group of which to obtain a more reliable data. In the ever-changing environment, there is always room for development and innovation to improve the current service quality and ensure that the institute retains and increase the student numbers.

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