

## **A SERVQUAL Gap Analysis Between Two Private Higher Education Institution Campuses in South Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) have expanded globally, embedding themselves in highly competitive markets. To navigate this environment, the enhancement of service quality, particularly through the SERVQUAL model, is crucial for gaining a competitive advantage. This paper addresses the gaps in the SERVQUAL application within PHEIs, focusing on their impact on service quality. The primary objective is to propose a measurement matrix to identify and analyse SERVQUAL gaps across PHEI campuses. The study compares two campuses, ABC and XYZ, and reveals significant discrepancies, particularly in the dimensions of reliability and responsiveness, where Campus ABC underperforms. These findings highlight the critical need for PHEIs to address service quality deficiencies in order to remain competitive and meet evolving student expectations. The research concludes that continuous improvement in service quality is essential for PHEIs to attract students and sustain their competitiveness in a globalised education market.

**Keywords:** Service Quality - Higher Education - PHEIs (Private Higher Education Institutions) - SERVQUAL Model - Student Satisfaction - Competitive Advantage

## **Introduction**

Educational institutions perform a critical part in nation building through the development of skilled human resources and an intellectual society (Alam et al., 2021). Hence, higher education, and the quality thereof, is viewed as one of the most important priorities especially in developing countries (Al-Refaei et al., 2024). It is, therefore, the responsibility of tertiary institutions to offer quality training, knowledge and skills transfers to society (Al-Refaei et al., 2024). However, Van Antwerpen and Van Schalkwyk (2023) state that gaps still exist within the service quality of higher education institutions in South Africa.

In delivering tertiary education and training, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) aims to cultivate the essential skills needed to enhance both the economic development and social advancement of the South African population (DHET, 2024). Despite skepticism towards Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), they play a critical role in addressing skill shortages within the workforce.

Within the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, PHEIs multiplied globally and are now engrained in a highly competitive environment (Iqbal et al., 2023). Within such a competitive environment, the authors are of the opinion that strategies should be employed to increase the SERVQUAL offerings by PHEIs to gain a competitive advantage. However, the measurement of service quality (SERVQUAL) in PHEIs is challenged by the complex intangible nature of service and the associated diverse quality expectations of stakeholders (Goran, 2016). Although universities strive towards meeting the necessary service needs and expectations, the satisfaction of students in higher education is proven as a difficult task (Khondkar & Muzareba, 2024). However, a comparative matrix of the offering is required in terms of service quality (Goran, 2016). This is critical as the expense associated with acquiring new customers is considerably higher than that of retaining existing ones. This principle is equally applicable to higher education institutions (HEIs), which must prioritise the retention of students to sustain enrolment in advanced academic programmes, including the second and third cycles of study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **SERVQUAL dimensions**

SERVQUAL is defined as a multidimensional research instrument specifically designed to measure the quality of service by measuring the expectations of a respondent through five dimensions namely: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. This model was originally designed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). SERVQUAL is an essential tool to measure the quality of service delivery and can provide guidance on how to improve service quality. Literature states that an organisation with high levels of service quality is capable of meeting customer needs whilst being economically competitive (Alam et al., 2021).

The SERVQUAL model offers several advantages that are highly valued by both academics and practitioners (Al Bassam & Al Shawi, 2010). It allows for regular tracking of customer perceptions of service quality, enabling firms to compare their performance with that of competitors. The data collected can be visually presented, making it easier to identify strengths and weaknesses relative to competition. Additionally, SERVQUAL provides firms with the

ability to assess their service quality performance both by individual dimensions and overall. It also facilitates the segmentation of customers based on their specific SERVQUAL scores.

The model's flexibility allows it to be adapted to various service settings and sectors, making it applicable across different empirical contexts, countries, and cultural backgrounds. The gap analysis approach of SERVQUAL is logical and straightforward, with a pre-designed questionnaire that can be customized as needed. Moreover, SERVQUAL is a well-established instrument, benefiting from extensive field testing and refinement, making it statistically valid and suitable for comparative benchmarking purposes.

However, it is worth noting that SERVQUAL has also received negative reviews that state that the tool tends to be subjective (Jonkisz et al., 2021). SERVQUAL may be characterised by limitations, such as a poor fit with certain contexts, where the results obtained do not meet stringent convergence criteria and may fail to discriminate specific variances effectively. Additionally, SERVQUAL is limited to providing a one-dimensional assessment of service quality, rather than a multi-dimensional evaluation (Jonkisz et al., 2021). However, notwithstanding the criticism, the tool is still widely acknowledged as a service quality tool.

The study referenced in this paper reports on the five SERVQUAL dimensions – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy – from the seminal work of Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991).

### **Problem statement**

Along with globalisation and liberation, PHEIs face numerous service quality challenges in order to stay abreast with the competition (Chui & bin Ahmed, 2016). Hence, PHEIs have no choice but to improve the quality of their service to compete globally and attract students (Chui & bin Ahmed, 2016).

The problem addressed in this paper pertains to the fact that gaps exist within the PHEI relating to SERVQUAL model (Van Antwerpen & van Schalkwyk, 2023). The aim of this paper is to present a measurement matrix to identify comparative SERVQUAL gaps in PHEIs.

The higher education sector, particularly PHEI, holds a pivotal role within the global service industry, including in South Africa. Consequently, the implementation of appropriate service methodologies and strategies is essential to ensure the optimal functioning of PHEIs within dynamic and competitive markets. Agile and responsive solutions are imperative for PHEIs to effectively adapt to the continuously evolving demands of these environments. Consequently, the core challenge facing PHEIs stems from the intensifying competitive pressures that compels these institutions to adopt innovative strategies to sustain their relevance and viability within an increasingly dynamic context. As the private higher education sector continues to expand in South Africa, the measurement of service quality becomes crucial for securing a competitive advantage in this evolving landscape. Therefore, the primary objective of the research presented in this article is to identify the most significant gap among the service quality dimensions that influence student satisfaction at a selected PHEI.

### **Research design and methods**

The SERVQUAL research instrument is structured into two sections: one that captures consumers' general expectations of service quality, and another that assesses their perceptions of the actual service quality received from a specific organisation (Jones & Shandiz, 2015).

Each item within the five dimensions of service quality is presented in two forms: a measure of the expectations of the service dimension, and an evaluation of the perceptions of the organisation being assessed. This dual approach allows the instrument to capture both the anticipated and actual experiences of consumers.

The SERVQUAL measurement instrument identifies five critical gaps that may hinder effective service delivery, thereby influencing customers' evaluations of service quality. These gaps, as outlined by Foster and Gardner (2022), represent discrepancies between customer expectations and the actual service provided.

Gap 1 refers to the difference between customer expectations and management's perception of those expectations, revealing potential misunderstandings of customer needs. This gap underscores the importance of accurately gauging customer expectations to ensure service alignment.

Gap 2 pertains to the misalignment between management's perceptions of customer expectations and the actual service quality specifications. This gap indicates that even if management correctly understands customer expectations, there may be shortcomings in translating these into appropriate service standards.

Gap 3 highlights the inconsistency between service quality specifications and the actual service delivery, often resulting from deficiencies in employee training, resource allocation, or managerial oversight.

Gap 4 emerges from the discrepancy between actual service delivery and the external communications provided to customers. This misalignment can lead to customer dissatisfaction when the service they receive does not match the expectations set by promotional materials or other external communications. Lastly, Gap 5 captures the overall difference between customers' perceived service and their expectations, reflecting the cumulative effect of the previous four gaps. This gap directly influences customers' overall perceptions of service quality and their satisfaction with the service provider.

To effectively address these gaps, organisations must implement corrective actions such as improving communication channels, refining system design, and fostering a workforce equipped with the skills necessary to deliver high-quality service consistently. These strategies are essential for closing the gaps and ensuring that service delivery meets or exceeds customer expectations, thereby enhancing overall service quality (Foster & Gardner, 2022; Palmer, 2014).

Hence, the gap score for each item within each dimension is then calculated by comparing expectations with perceptions. These gap scores facilitate further analysis in several ways (Jones & Shandiz, 2015). Identifying dimensions where service quality either exceeds or falls short of expectations (Jones & Shandiz, 2015) includes

- Analysing service quality over time to assess the impact of specific quality initiatives;
- Comparing service quality across competing providers;
- Evaluating different service dimensions based on their importance to customers;
- Analysing service quality dimensions as perceived by different customer groups.

This comprehensive approach enables organisations to gain valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their service delivery, thereby informing strategies for improvement and competitive advantage.

The research reported on in this paper was specifically undertaken in South African PHEIs which might also be stated as a limitation. South African comprises nine provinces and a comparison was made between two campuses in two provinces, namely the Western Cape and Gauteng. The research utilised convenience sampling to approach the target population for participation in the survey. Convenience sampling was applied to obtain as many as possible participants (students).

The study included, but was not limited to, the following criteria for the inclusion of PHEIs:

- PHEIs with a national footprint.
- PHEIs with more than 1 000 students.
- PHEIs with a student profile aligned with other PHE institutions DHE.
- PHEIs where senior management agreed to participate in the survey.

The target population was students studying at a selected PHEI. The aim was to compare the gaps (if any) between the two campuses of the specific PHEI – one situated in Cape Town, Western Cape (named ABC) and the other in Gauteng (named XYZ).

Before the survey commenced, the SERVQUAL questionnaire was tested to ensure that it was a good fit for inclusion regarding the population under investigation. This ensured that the instrument was understandable which would, in turn, increase the reliability of the data collected. The questionnaires were distributed electronically to the students to complete via an online survey system (Saunders et al., 2016). Students from all faculties were invited to participate in the survey. Before the survey, an agreement was sought with senior management from each of the campuses to ensure that students would be permitted to complete the questionnaire during a class session. Hence, students were encouraged by the lecturers to complete the survey during class sessions. The completed surveys were stored on the servers of the PHEIs and returned to the researchers via an automated process. This was followed by data cleaning, interpretation and analysis (Saunders et al., 2019).

A total of 120 students out of 300 completed questionnaires were submitted by the respondents. The response rate was 40% which was deemed satisfactory (Pallant, 2016). The good response rate can be attributed to the user-friendly nature of the online survey system and the generally favourable perception of survey requests issued by the PHEI's senior management. This positive sentiment, coupled with the ease of using the online system for data collection, contributed to achieving an acceptable return rate.

### **Measuring Instrument**

The measurement instrument utilised in this study originated from the SERVQUAL questionnaire by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry in 1991. This tool originates from the seminal work of Zeithaml et al. (1991) and is widely utilised by organisations to measure service quality due to its adaptability and standardisation of the framework. The SERVQUAL measuring instrument comprises 22 items divided over the five dimensions. The instrument measures five dimensions namely: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The tangibles refer to personnel, equipment, physical facilities and communication materials and reliability relates to the consistent and accurate performance of service. Responsiveness encapsulates the readiness to respond and assist within a certain timeframe while assurance signifies courtesy, knowledge, and the ability of employees to instil confidence and trust. Lastly, empathy refers to the provision of individualised attention and care of customers (Zeithaml et al., 1991; Foster & Gardner, 2022). The authors adapted the statements

from Zeithaml et al., (1991) from the statements in column 1 (Table 1) to column 2 (Table 1) in order to be aligned towards PHEIs.

**Table 1: Items for SERVQUAL Dimensions and Gaps**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Column 1 The original refined SERVQUAL statements</b>	<b>Column 2 The PHE adapted SERVQUAL statements</b>	<b>Gaps for ABC</b>	<b>Gaps for XYZ</b>
<b>Tangibles</b>	1.	The College has modern-looking equipment.	The Campus has up-to-date equipment.	-0.05	0.02
	2.	The College's physical facilities are visually appealing.	The Campus' physical facilities (e.g. buildings and furniture) are attractive, visually appealing and stylish.	-0.09	0.10
	3.	The College employees are neatly appearing.	Personnel at the Campus are well-dressed and neat at all times.	-0.30	-0.39
	4.	Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) are visually appealing at the College.	The materials of the Campus (e.g. pamphlets and study material) suit the image of the College.	-0.42	-0.33
<b>Reliability</b>	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.	-0.04	0.43
	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.	-0.55	-0.16
	7.	The College performs the service right the first time.	The Campus is always dependable and renders the service right the first time.	-0.11	0.01
	8.	XYZ College provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	The Campus provides services at the time it promises to do so.	-0.31	0.07
	9.	The College insists on error-free records.	The Campus keeps accurate records (e.g. accounts, academic reports, etc.)	-0.17	-0.25
<b>Responsiveness</b>	10.	Employees of the College tell you exactly when services will be performed.	The Campus tells students when services will be rendered.	-0.6	-0.26
	11.	Employees of the College give you prompt service.	Students receive fast (prompt) service delivery from the Campus personnel.	-0.32	0.21

	12.	Employees of the College are always willing to help you.	Lecturers at the Campus are willing to assist students.	-0.09	-0.60
	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.	-0.09	0.47
<b>Assurance</b>	14.	The behaviour of employees of the College instils confidence in customers.	Students can trust the personnel of the Campus.	-0.17	-0.11
	15.	You feel safe in your transactions with the College.	Personnel at the Campus inspire confidence.	-0.28	0.07
	16.	Employees of the College is constantly courteous to you.	Personnel at the Campus are polite.	-0.37	0.00
	17.	Employees of the College know how to answer your questions.	Personnel receive adequate support from the Campus management to improve their service provision.	-0.16	0.04
<b>Empathy</b>	18.	The College gives you individual attention.	Students receive individualised attention from administrative personnel (e.g. doing something extra for students.)	-0.09	-0.09
	19.	The College has operating hours convenient to all its customers.	Lecturers provide individual attention to students.	-0.02	-0.07
	20.	The College has employees who give you personal attention.	Personnel of the Campus do know what the needs of the students are (e.g. recognising students as customers).	-0.23	0.13
	21.	The College has your best interest at heart.	The Campus personnel have the student's best interests at heart.	-0.05	0.15
	22.	Employees of the College understand your specific needs.	The Campus personnel are easily accessible to students (e.g. easily available to see or to contact by phone, email, etc.).	-0.16	-0.03

Adapted from: Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1991)

The research instrument utilised a measurement scale using a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) where the respondents indicated their level of agreement with the statement.

## Results and discussion

The problem addressed in this paper pertains to the fact that gaps exist within PHEIs relating to the SERVQUAL model. The aim of this paper was to present a measurement matrix to identify comparative SERVQUAL gaps in PHEIs. The next section analyses the level of service quality (gap analysis) for each of the five dimensions of service quality for the campus.

### Gap Analysis

The following will provide feedback on the SERVQUAL gap analysis for the five dimensions of service quality. The summary of the gap analysis data is presented in Table 2. In the context of the SERVQUAL model, positive scores signify that customers' perceptions of the service surpass their expectations, indicating a high level of service quality provided by the service provider. Conversely, negative scores reveal a discrepancy where customers' expectations exceed their perceptions of the actual service received, highlighting areas of deficiency in service quality.

A comparative analysis was conducted between ABC and XYZ to identify disparities between the two campuses. The five dimensions are incorporated in the gap analysis (Table 2).

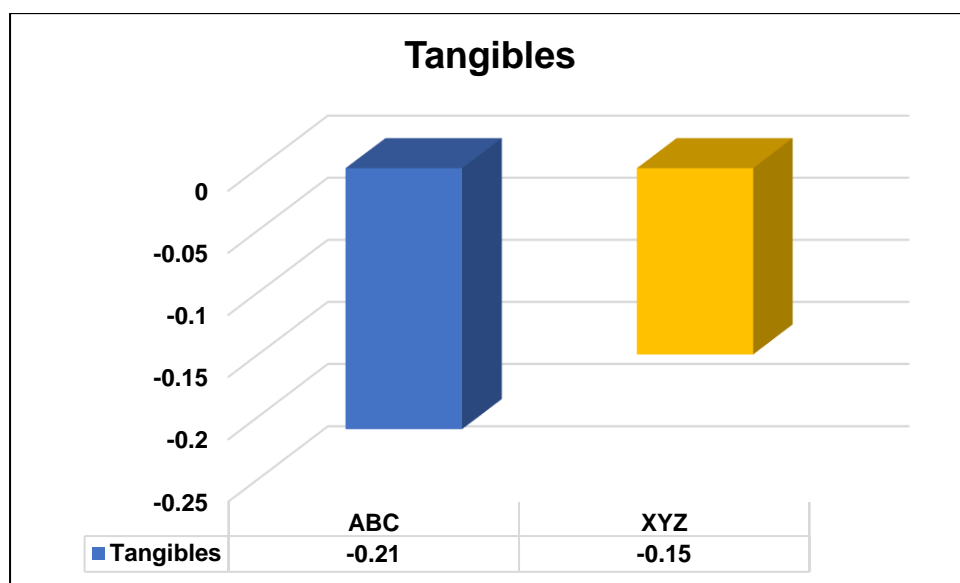
**Table 2: Dimensions for ABC and XYZ**

DIMENSIONS	CAMPUS	
	ABC	XYZ
Tangibles	-0.21	-0.15
Reliability	-0.23	0.02
Responsiveness	-0.27	-0.03
Assurance	-0.24	0
Empathy	-0.11	0.02

The gap analysis for each of the five dimensions is examined in the subsequent section.

### Tangibles

Figure 1 presents the gap analysis for the tangibles dimension. ABC obtained -0.21 and XYZ obtained -0.15.



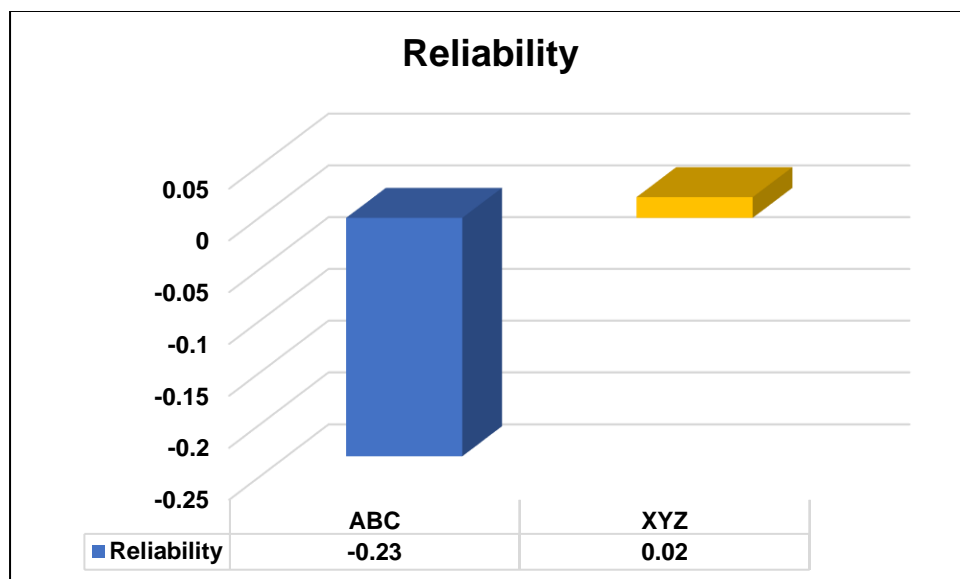
**Figure 1: Tangibles**



Figure 1 indicates that Campus ABC was perceived to perform the worst in terms of the quality of its materials, followed by the lack of a professional dress code for on-campus personnel. Furthermore, Campus XYZ was positively perceived in terms of its attractiveness and the visual appeal of the physical facilities as well as its up-to-date equipment (for which the perception exceeds the expectation). However, this is not supported in the manner the personnel dress (they are expected to dress professionally, but the perception was that they do not) and the quality of their materials (expected to suit the image of the campus, whereas the perception was that the quality did not suit its image).

### Reliability

Figure 2 presents the gap analysis for the reliability dimension. Campus ABC obtained -0.23 and Campus XYZ obtained 0.02. This is a substantial difference.



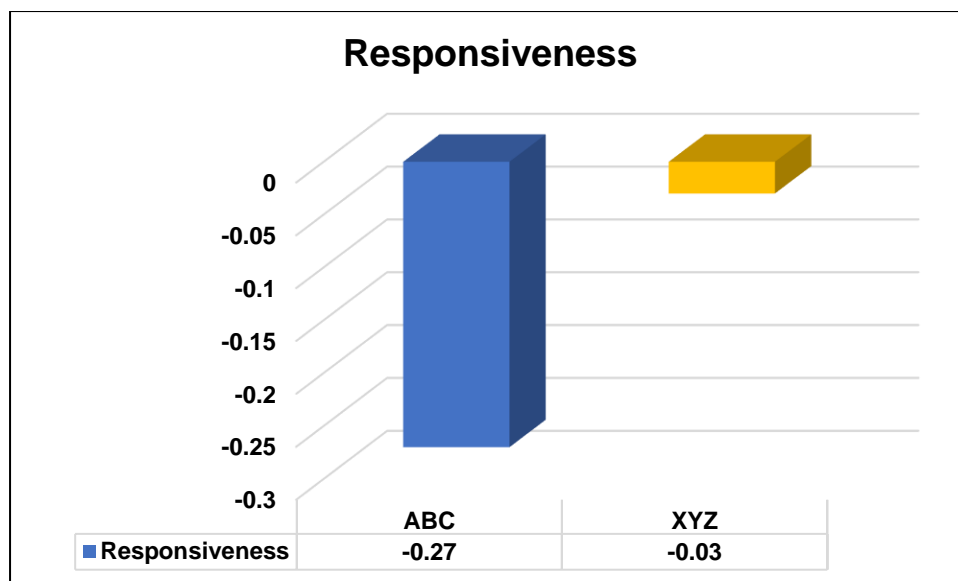
**Figure 2: Reliability**

According to the data in Figure 2, the respondents' expectations of Campus ABC appear to exceed their perceptions in all aspects of reliability. The campus was perceived to perform the worst regarding the extent to which the personnel acted sympathetically and reassuringly towards students when they presented problems, followed by rendering the promised services timeously.

Conversely, Campus XYZ was trusted to deliver on its promises with precision and timeously. However, it appeared to have problems with recordkeeping, and personnel that were unsympathetic and not as reassuring as they were expected to be.

### Responsiveness

Figure 3 presents the gap analysis for the responsiveness dimension. ABC obtained -0.27 while XYZ scored -0.03.

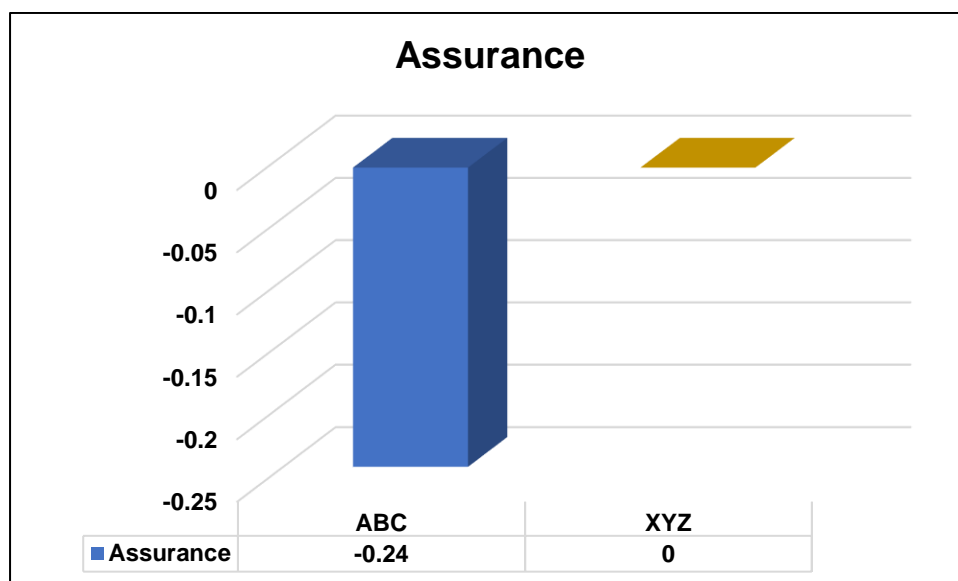


**Figure 3: Responsiveness**

Figure 3 indicates that Campus ABC was perceived to perform the worst in informing students when services will be rendered, followed by the promptness with which services were provided. Moreover, the lecturers at Campus XYZ were perceived as unwilling to assist students as expected and students were also uninformed of when services would be rendered. Regarding the promptness of service delivery and responses to student requests by the college’s personnel, the perception was higher than the expectation.

**Assurance**

Figure 4 presents the gap analysis for the assurance dimension. ABC obtained -0,24 and XYZ scored 0.



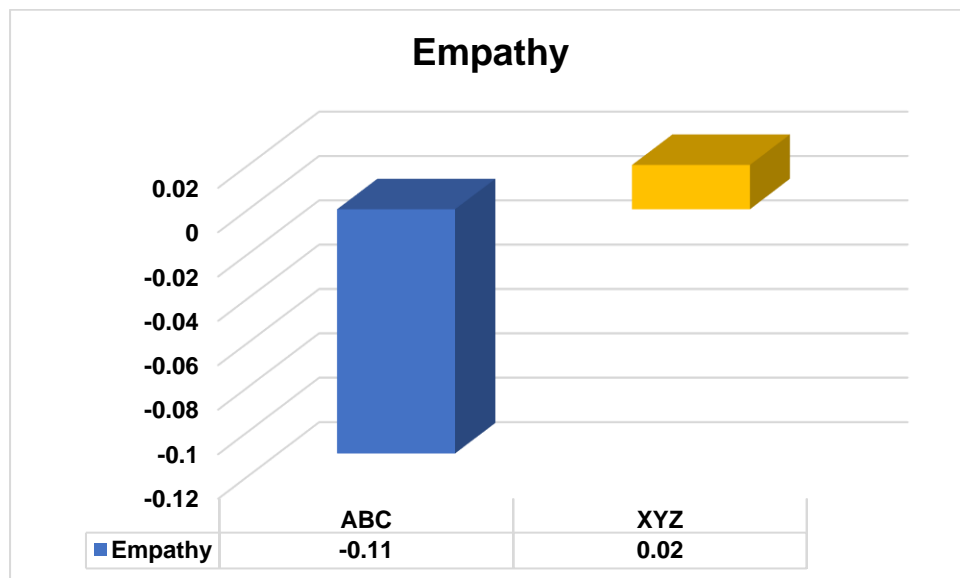
**Figure 4: Assurance**

Based on Figure 4, it appears that Campus ABC does not perform well on all aspects of assurance, with the perceived politeness of personnel being the worst. Figure 4 indicates that

the expectation of politeness at Campus XYZ was on par with the students' perceptions. Personnel at Campus XYZ appeared to inspire confidence in their students. Furthermore, they were well-supported by management to enable them to improve their performance and the quality of their service delivery. However, the personnel at Campus XYZ were perceived to be untrustworthy.

### Empathy

Figure 5 presents the gap analysis for the empathy dimension. ABC obtained -0.11 and XYZ obtained 0.02.

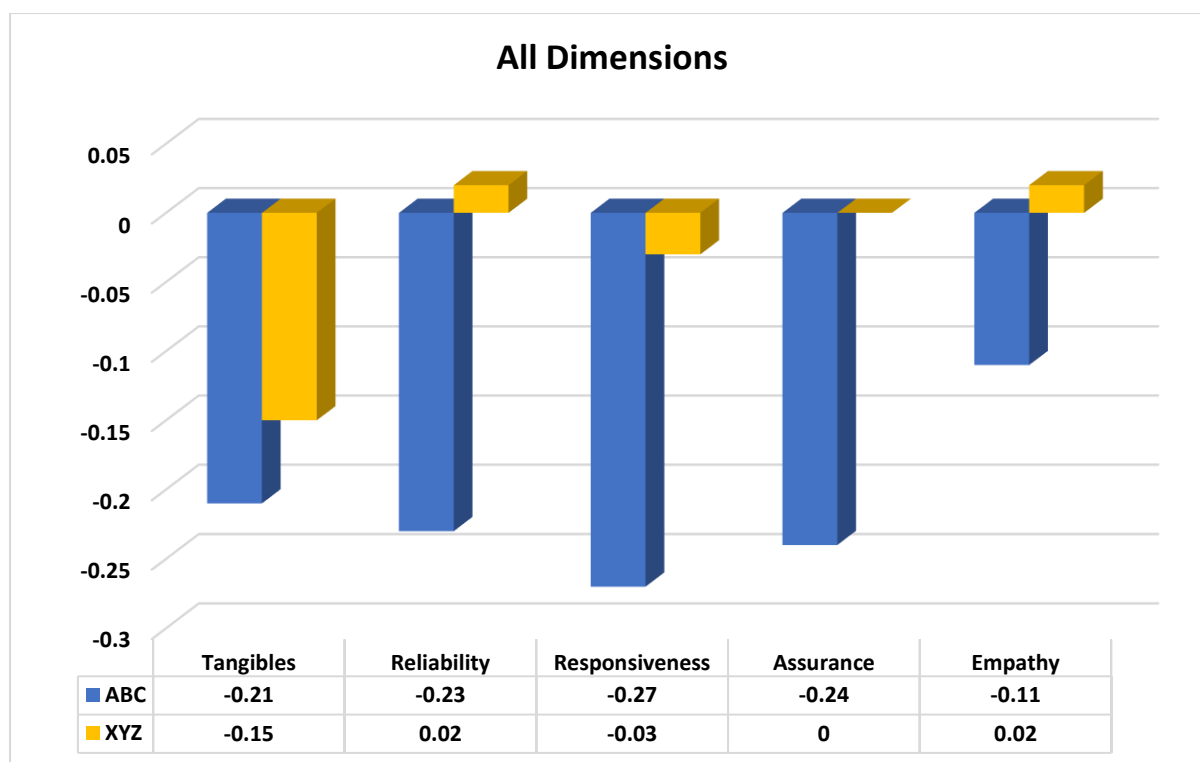


**Figure 5: Empathy**

According to the data in figure 5, Campus ABC was perceived as performing the worst in recognition of students' needs, followed by the perceived inaccessibility of personnel to students. The data also suggests that even though Campus XYZ was perceived to recognise the needs of students and have their best interests at heart, their personnel did not project this goodwill by performing below the expected level of service to students owing to their perceived unwillingness to show empathy with individual student needs, lack of individual attention to students and their perceived inaccessibility.

### All dimensions

Figure 6 presents the gap analysis of all dimensions across the campuses. In general, XYZ scored substantially higher on all dimensions.



**Figure 6: All Dimensions**

A comparative analysis of the SERVQUAL gaps between Campus ABC and Campus XYZ reveals notable differences across the five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions are crucial in evaluating service quality as they provide insights into the perceptions and expectations of service delivery within the two campuses.

In the tangibles dimension, which pertains to the physical aspects of service delivery such as facilities and equipment, Campus ABC recorded a gap of -0.21 implying that customer expectations exceeded their perceptions of the actual service provided. In contrast, Campus XYZ exhibited a smaller gap of -0.15 suggesting a marginally better alignment between expectations and perceptions in this area.

The reliability dimension, which measures the ability to perform promised services dependably and accurately, showed a gap of -0.23 for Campus ABC which purports a significant discrepancy between expected and perceived service quality. However, Campus XYZ displayed a slight positive gap of 0.02 indicating that customer perceptions slightly exceeded their expectations which demonstrates a higher level of service reliability.

For responsiveness which assesses the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service, Campus ABC again showed a notable gap of -0.27, reflecting a shortfall in meeting customer expectations. On the other hand, Campus XYZ recorded a much smaller gap of -0.03, signifying better responsiveness in service delivery.

In the assurance dimension, which reflects the knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to inspire trust, Campus ABC reported a gap of -0.24, while Campus XYZ showed no gap (0), indicating that customer perceptions met expectations in this area.

Lastly, in the empathy dimension which gauges the individualised attention provided to customers, Campus ABC had a gap of -0.11 whereas Campus XYZ recorded a slight positive gap of 0.02, suggesting a higher degree of customer satisfaction in this dimension.

This comparative analysis highlights areas where Campus ABC lags behind Campus XYZ in meeting service expectations, particularly in terms of reliability and responsiveness.

### **Conclusion**

The research presented in this paper aimed to address the service quality gaps within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) by employing the SERVQUAL model. A measurement matrix was developed to compare these gaps across campuses and identify areas for improvement. In the context of globalisation and increased competition, PHEIs face mounting challenges in delivering high-quality services that align with the expectations of students and stakeholders. As noted by Chui and bin Ahmed (2016), service quality improvements are essential for PHEIs to remain competitive and continue attracting students in an increasingly globalised educational market.

This study's findings reveal significant gaps between two campuses, particularly in the dimensions of reliability and responsiveness, where Campus ABC notably lags behind Campus XYZ. These discrepancies highlight the need for targeted improvements in service delivery to better meet student expectations and enhance overall satisfaction. The dimensions of reliability, which focus on consistent and dependable service delivery and responsiveness, which emphasises prompt and helpful assistance, are particularly critical for PHEIs seeking to differentiate themselves from competitors.

In conclusion, the competitive pressures facing PHEIs necessitate continuous evaluation and enhancement of service quality to remain viable and attract a diverse student body. The SERVQUAL model offers a valuable framework for identifying and addressing these service gaps, enabling institutions to implement corrective actions in areas where they fall short. Ultimately, improving service quality is not only a strategic imperative but also a fundamental requirement for PHEIs to maintain their competitive advantage and meet the evolving demands of students in a globalised education market.

### **Limitations and future research**

The research presented offers a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge by advancing our understanding of service quality gaps within the context of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the study. First, the research focused solely on evaluating the SERVQUAL gap between two specific PHEI campuses, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. The gaps identified in this study are context-specific and may not necessarily reflect the service quality dimensions or challenges present at other PHEI campuses, either within South Africa or internationally.

Moreover, the study's geographic limitation to South Africa further constrains the broader applicability of the results. While the insights gained are valuable within the South African context, they may not fully capture the service quality dynamics of PHEIs operating in different cultural, economic or regulatory environments. Therefore, to enhance the generalisability and robustness of the findings, future research could replicate this study across a more diverse range of PHEI campuses within and beyond South Africa. Such comparative studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of SERVQUAL gaps in various educational contexts, thereby enriching the global discourse on service quality in higher education.

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