Managing expectations of international and kiwi students: 
A challenge for beyond 2003!

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Abstract: This study assesses students perceptions of services experienced at UNITEC, 
Auckland New Zealand. The questionnaire used in the survey at UNITEC was based on the 
SERVQUAL scale that contains 20 service attributes, grouped together into five dimensions, 
Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. The study found a significant 
difference between students expectations of what an “Excellent tertiary institution” should 
offer in the way of services and the students perceptions of the services being offered at 
UNITEC. A significant difference was also found between the perceptions of local students 
and international students in all five dimensions with the international students perceptions of 
services being lower than the local students.

Keywords: Needs, Expectations, International students

Introduction

In the last eight years, there has been a three-fold increase in the number of international 
students enrolled in public tertiary institutions in New Zealand. According to the latest 
statistics from the Ministry of Education, there were 26,871 international students enrolled in 
tertiary education as at 31 July 2002, an increase of 9,214 (around 50%) in international 
students since 31 July 2001. 86% of all foreign fee paying students (FFP) are from Asia 
(Ministry of Education). At UNITEC Institute of Technology in Auckland, more than 63% of 
the students enrolled in the Business Faculty are international students.

With this dramatic increase in our classrooms of the number of international students, who 
come from a different cultural background, the challenge for educational institutions and 
teachers is to be able to measure the legitimate needs and expectations of this group of 
students, then satisfy or even exceed them, while not losing sight of the needs and expectation 
of the local students.
Literature Review

In the last decade there has been a considerable increase in the number of foreign students studying at New Zealand tertiary institutions, and the trend is continuing (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). More than 80,000 foreign students studied in New Zealand last year, earning the country $1.7 billion and making education the fourth-largest export earner, sandwiched between meat and horticulture (Perrott, 2003). The Ministry of Education has identified many other potential benefits, including greater diversity of programmes; exposure to different cultures and perspectives; enhanced facilities and teaching; and a wider international network (McKinlay, 2002).

According to McKinlay, the important factors for international students choosing New Zealand as a studying destination are cost, New Zealand’s proximity to Asia and use of the English language. Therefore, learning English is one of the key objectives for international students. Beaver & Tuck (1999) found that Asian students, like the Pacific Islanders, rate the provision of additional assistance with the English language as “very important”. The overall meaning which some students vest in a higher degree is translated into providing better career opportunities in their home country (cf. Cannon, 2002). Hellsten (2002) believes another expectation of international students is of increased intercultural exchange for the benefit of improving professional and language skills, especially for those placed within the language industry. Therefore, it can be concluded that international students expect to complete their study within the expected timeframe, and to enhance their English language ability, to increase the chance of getting a ‘good’ job back home (Peterson et al, 1999).

International students appear to have more problems to deal with than their local peers. Research generally indicates that international students suffer more psychological and social distress than domestic students (Ward, 2001). A study of international students in Canada (Chataway and Berry, 1989) found that the foreign students had more psychological, social and health problems than the local students. Culture shock, social isolation, conditions in the home countries, cross-cultural relationships, financial difficulties, immigration laws and accompanying anxiety, employment for self and spouse, stress, and depression, are examples of problems international students have to deal with (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). Similar problems were also identified by Lin et al (1997) in New Zealand, that include language barriers, financial concerns, performance anxiety, depression, loneliness, homesickness, relationship problems, non-assertiveness, individualism and bicultural conflicts, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and paranoia.

In addition, to learn in a language other than their own poses immense barriers. In an Australian study of international students, Boonyanate (1996) found that every student indicated that their lack of ability to write essay and reports in English was one of their main problems. In the same research, students indicated that they had trouble understanding lecturers and students. Jones et al (1999) also reported that teaching staff identified poor English skills of international students as a reason to slow the delivery of lectures.

Pearson et al (1999) found that, as well as believing that a tertiary qualification would get them a “good” job, most university students expected to have access to learning support services and quality teaching. Other researchers (Billing, 1998; Ramsden, 1998) found that students valued those mechanisms that clarified the expectations of lecturers and tutors (e.g., clear course objectives, good staff – student communication); and preferred enthusiastic teachers who had good presentation skills, and provided detailed, regular prompt feedback.
(Mullins et al., 1995). East (2001) found similar expectations from international students - they wanted to be assured of the quality of the teaching, wanted the University to respond to their education needs, wanted to improve their English language skills and wanted to experience Australian culture and mix with local students. In addition, Hellsten (2002) found that the expectation of being ‘taken care of’ by the host community and institution was prevalent among the international students. Ward’s (2001) research suggested that international students expected and desired contact with their domestic peers, and positive social, psychological, and academic benefits arising from this contact, although the amount of interaction between international and domestic students was low.

Considering the many expectations that International students have and problems they face adjusting to a new country and learning environment, it is important for educational institutions to be aware of students needs and expectations, and take steps to identify, measure, meet and exceed those expectations which are under their control. East (2001), in a study of international students’ expectations at La Trobe University, concluded that, “there is, therefore, a need to analyse international students’ perspectives in the light of customer expectations of quality service.” She noted that there is, however, ongoing debate on labelling students as customers (Szorenyi-Reischl, 1998, Coady and Miller, 1993; Crittenden, 1997). Her assessment used group discussion, the SERVQUAL questionnaire designed for use in service industries (Parauraman, 1988), and interviews. There is a need to build on this by assessing the expectations of both foreign and local students as customers, and through this improving the institution’s service.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this two-phase, sequential mixed methods study was to firstly explore student views of their experiences of the services provided at UNITEC in a focus group setting. Then, based on these views, the second phase was to adapt East’s (2002) version of the SERVQUAL questionnaire to reflect some of the service concerns raised by the focus group students. A group of 300 students were then surveyed to ascertain their perceptions of what makes an excellent educational tertiary institute and their evaluation of the quality of service at UNITEC. The rationale for using both qualitative and quantitative data was that a useful survey of student experience could best be developed only after a preliminary exploration of student concerns.

**Research Questions**

Are there gaps between students’ expectations of the type of service that an excellent tertiary institution would provide and what they perceive to be the quality of educational services that they actually receive at UNITEC?

Do the above perceptions differ between domestic and international students?

**Research Methodology**

A positivist paradigm has been used in this research. Positivism is an organised method for combining deductive logic, “where the researcher moves from the general principles of a theory to particular observations” (Davidson & Toloch, 1999, p18) with precise empirical observations of behaviour in order to discover and confirm a set of problematic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity. A quantitative methodology
has been chosen for this study as deductive research builds on the notion of formal testing of existing theories. This study is building on the existing research by East (2002) to test if her findings hold true for the students at UNITEC.

The questionnaire used in the survey at UNITEC was based on the SERVQUAL scale that contains 20 service attributes, grouped together into five dimensions. These dimensions relate to:

**Tangibles**: Physical facilities and equipment.

**Reliability**: Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

**Responsiveness**: Willingness to help customers (students) and provide prompt service

**Assurance**: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.

**Empathy**: Caring individualised attention the institution provides its customers

and were designed to measure service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). This type of survey based on SERVQUAL requires respondents to score on a Likert scale, two different scores on all of the attributes relating to each dimension. The two different scores relate firstly to what the respondent would expect from an excellent service provider (Tertiary institute in this survey) and secondly scoring on their perception of the service delivery from the specific firm or institution (UNITEC in this survey). The difference between the expectation and perception scores, constitute a quantified measure of service quality.

For the purpose of our survey, the five dimension attributes were adapted to reflect the tertiary sector. Parasuraman et al (1988, pp28) comment that, ‘...items under each of the dimensions can be suitably reworded and augmented to make them more germane to the context in which the instrument is to be used.”

An anonymous questionnaire was issued in class to New Zealand Diploma in Business (NZDipBus) level 4 and 5 students. A written questionnaire was considered an appropriate data collection instrument because it permitted a large number of people to be surveyed in a brief period of time. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections. Using a seven point Likert type scale with designations of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, the SERVQUAL questionnaire paired 20 expectations of excellent tertiary service in the first section, with 20 perceptions of service experienced at UNITEC in the second section. The third section gathered general demographic information about each student, this included gender, course of study, length of study, ethnicity, and age. The sample in this research represented a mix of both domestic and international students of both genders. It also represents a spread of students across all three levels of the Bachelor of Business Degree.

During week 6 of the semester 300 questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate students in the Business Faculty at UNITEC. Of these 189 were returned completed.

**Results**

**Reliability and Validity**

The procedures involved in developing SERVQUAL ensured that the scale when trialled was reliable and consistent, and that the factors it claimed would be measured were in fact
measured (Parasuraman et al 1988, p28, cited East, 2001:59). In adapting East’s survey to be appropriate for both local and international students at UNITEC, it was deemed necessary to retest the survey for reliability. The items in each dimension were analysed for co-efficiency using Alpha Correlation in the SPSS program. The resulting scores of reliability indicate a reasonable conformity of items to each dimension.

Table 1 Alpha Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>No of Items</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>No of Items</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.6545</td>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.6725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.6081</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.7711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.6973</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.7078</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.7998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.7775</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.8174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expectation Gap

The expectation gap was calculated by contrasting the student mean expectation score of Excellence at a tertiary institution with the mean perception score of what happens at UNITEC. It can be seen from Table 2, in the Overall results, that the Responsiveness and Empathy dimension have the biggest gap of 1.3. Comparison of responses of International and local students on these two dimensions, reveal that the expectation gap is larger for the international cohort than the local students Responsiveness (1.6) and Empathy (.85).

Table 2: Comparison of Overall score with International & Local Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Paired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>E-P</td>
<td>Expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A paired t test was used to determine if there was any significant difference between expectations and perceptions. On all five dimensions at the 95% (0.05) confidence level there was a significant difference between what students expect from an excellent tertiary institution and their perceptions of the services offered at UNITEC.

Chart 1 Comparison of Overall score with International and Local Students
An Independent Sample t-test was carried out to see if there was any difference in the way local students and international students responded to the five dimensions in both the Expectations and Perceptions surveys.

There were a number of questions that international students rated more important on the Expectation scale with three of the questions being concerned with Empathy. International students thought it more important than local students to have staff who understood the difficulties facing international students (11), understood the needs of both international and local students (15) and give useful advice when new students arrive (19).

Table 3 Significant differences in Local vs. International students (Expectations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>t-test (2-tailed) 95% (.05) level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. At an excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institute, the lecturers assess your work accurately. <em>(Reliability)</em></td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. At an excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institute, it is easy to find staff who help students with their language and study skills. <em>(Responsiveness)</em></td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institutes have brochures, handouts and web pages that are visually appealing and easy to understand. <em>(Tangibles)</em></td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The teaching staff at an excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institute understand the difficulties facing international students. <em>(Empathy)</em></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. At an excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institute the staff understand the needs of both international &amp; domestic students. <em>(Empathy)</em></td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Excellent New Zealand Tertiary Institutes give useful advice when new students arrive. <em>(Empathy)</em></td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also a significant difference between local and international students' perceptions of the service provided by UNITEC in two dimensions. The international student’s expectations were that an excellent tertiary institution would be empathetic towards their students. The perceptions of the international students on the empathy score were significantly different (lower) than local students. Although there was no significant difference between international students and local students in the expectations of assurance, results found a significant difference between local and international student’s perceptions of the assurance service dimension offered at UNITEC. With again the international students service perceptions being lower.

Table 4 Significant differences in Local vs International students (Perceptions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>t-test (2-tailed) 95% (.05) level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. At Unitec you are confident that the money you spend on this education is worth it. <em>(Assurance)</em></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. At Unitec you are taught the skills you need to get good results both academically and for future employment <em>(Assurance)</em></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. The Lecturers at Unitec have extensive knowledge in their field of learning. (*Assurance*)

16. Unitec offers students a range of support services (*Assurance*)

10. At Unitec the staff understand the needs of both international and domestic students (*Empathy*)

13. Unitec does have a good communication and signage system so that students know where and how to get help (*Empathy*)

19. The teaching staff at Unitec respond to student needs. (*Empathy*)

14. Unitec has modern equipment and computer labs for students to use (*Tangibles*)

17. At Unitec you know what to do in each subject to get a good mark. (*Reliability*)

20. At Unitec the lecturers assess your work accurately. (*Reliability*)

International students also reported lower scores than the local students in the Reliability dimension for questions 17 and 20.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the majority of students perceived the services offered at UNITEC in a positive light on all service dimensions. 63.2% of students scored between 5 and 7 on the Likert scale on the Empathy dimension, slightly more on the Responsiveness dimension (64%), 68.3% on the Reliability dimension, 74.2% on the Assurance dimension and 74.4% on the Tangibles dimension.

**Figure 1 Percentage of scoring bands on the 7 point Likert scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Score 1-3</th>
<th>Score 4</th>
<th>Score 5-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy (E)</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy (P)</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness (E)</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>90.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness (P)</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability (E)</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability (P)</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance (E)</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance (P)</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles (E)</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles (P)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

As can be seen from the results there is a significant difference between students’ expectations of the service that an excellent tertiary institute should provide and the perception of services being provided at UNITEC. The service dimensions that students see the biggest gap are Empathy (1.3) and Responsiveness (1.3) although the mean difference scores for the overall cohort reveal very little differences in the mean expectation gap between all the dimensions with Tangibles having the smallest gap (1.11) followed by Reliability (1.26) and Assurance (1.27). However, when the International students’ responses were separated from the local students’ scores it can be seen that the expectation gap was larger for the International students on a number of dimensions.
The results of this study would appear to support findings in the literature that international students have certain expectations of services they think a tertiary institute should fulfil, such as learning support services, quality teaching, good staff-student communications and prompt feedback from tutors (Pearson, 1999, Billing, 1998, Ramsden, 1998, East 2001, Ward 2001), as the international students in this research had higher expectations in the Responsiveness and Empathy dimensions of the SERVQUAL questionnaire which measure these expectations.

At UNITEC however the international students indicated that their perceptions in these important areas do not meet their expectations. This has important implications for UNITEC especially if the institution wants to attract and retain its International students.

Although there is a significant gap in students’ expectations and perceptions, in a more positive light, an analysis of the frequency of responses showed that the majority of students agreed that UNITEC was providing above average services to their students. This study has shown that there is room for improvement in the services offered to UNITEC students, especially the international students, but it must also be taken into account that the international student numbers have followed the statistics discussed in the introduction and doubled in the last eighteen months at UNITEC. This has placed a lot of pressure on the institution as a whole and staff in particular and it will take some time to streamline services to cope with the influx of international students.

The authors recommend that UNITEC keep track of how students perceive the services offered at UNITEC on an ongoing basis, both local as well as international students. There has been a lot of research concentrated on the needs of international students; we must ensure that our local students are taken into consideration as well.

This research is the first draft of a work in progress, it is part of a larger study, which will not only measure the students’ expectation gaps in the degree program but also repeat the same measures with the diploma students where far more support is offered to the international students. The expectations of the diploma and degree students will be compared to see if the needs of the diploma students are being served any better than the degree students.
References


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