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## Service Quality in International Conference Industry; A Case Study of WCES 2015

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### Abstract

This study is conducted to evaluate the service quality in the international conferences. A statistical analysis was provided based on data collected from 105 delegates from the actual industry. A structured self-administered questionnaire was developed by taking into consideration the original SERVQUAL instrument and conducted to the respondents in order to analyze their general expectations on conference services and the actual service performance they perceived with the conference. The study also assessed the impact of respondents past experiences on their expectations. The results show that there is a significant difference between the respondents' expectations and perceptions which lead to low satisfaction level in respondents depending upon the gap in the service quality of the conference. In addition, the analysis has addressed the relationship between the service quality and customer satisfaction in terms of future behaviors of the respondents and word-of-mouth recommendations. The main findings conclude that service quality is a dynamic process which needs every time improvement.

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### 1. Introduction

The conference industry is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing service industry, which forms a major part of the business events sector (Rogers, 2013). Hence, competition for the conference industry increases day to day as the demands of customers increase. Increased competition and more-demanding customers mean that careful consideration must be taken for the facilities and services provided during conferences (Hinkin & Tracey, 2003).

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Therefore, in terms of ensuring success in market place and competitive advantage, it is critically important to understand the role of ‘quality’ as an element in the effectiveness of service provision (Langer, 1997; Demir, and Demir, 2015).

Service is the only way to meet the expectations of the conference participants since it is a basic tool for the conference operation and negotiation (Lee and Park, 2002). In previous researches, many approaches have been developed to analyze the quality of services. According to Parasuraman et al., p. 42 (1985), service quality can be defined as “*perceptions result(ing) from a comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance*”. Based on this perspective, in 1985, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry have developed the current measurement of perceived service quality, SERVQUAL, to measure customers’ expectations and perceptions concerning a service encounter. This scale measures service quality by calculating the difference between expectations and perceptions. According to the scale developed by Parasuraman et al., (1985), if the levels of perceptions exceed expectations, it will be regarded as higher levels of quality. Conversely, if the expectations have not been met by the organization, the quality of service will be classed as bad or poor (Fick and Richie, 1991; Yurdakul, 2016).

In this article, the importance of service quality to the conference industry is presented as a measure of how well the service level delivered matches the participant’s expectations and the relationships between customer perception and satisfaction.

## 2. Literature Review

In this research, literature is based around service quality, conference services, attendees’ expectations and satisfaction, and service quality evaluation which will then be used for the primary research which is crucial to meet the objectives. Even though, most of the main resources used for this study is from the 80’s and 90’s, most of the most contemporary theories are based on the findings of Parasuraman and therefore, these theories, especially for the literature review still maintains high validity and authority over contemporary studies. Initially, the term service quality is explained in detail. Then, aspects of service quality that are associated with conferences are outlined. This leads into identifying service quality model, as well as the evaluation of service quality and the measurement techniques that are used to measure the expectations and perceptions of customers. The final area of literature review is on conference industry. Service Quality in International Conferences is examined and how service quality fixed with conferences is outlined.

### 2.1. Service Quality

In contemporary economy, service quality has received a considerable research attention in marketing literature (Teas, 1993). Substantial research has focused on the concepts of service quality associated with customer attitudes and satisfaction, and the measurement techniques of the service quality (Taylor and Cronin, 1992).

Many academic literatures and books address variety of definitions and concepts about service quality and hypothesize a comparison of consumer expectations with performance. Parasuraman, Valarie, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, p.42) defined service quality as “*perceptions resulting from a comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance*”. In addition, Severt et al. (2006) stated that service quality is a tool for how well the customer expectations are matched by the delivered service level and it is known that if the customer expectations are higher than the perceived performance, then it could affect the customer satisfaction negatively (cited by Parasuraman et al., 1985). In consonance with this, service quality can be seen as a bond that is created between the organization and its customers (Schneider & White, 2004). Even though there are many different definitions for what service quality is, the general consensus in the literature is that it is the discrepancy between the expectations and the perceptions of customers.

### 2.2. Customer Satisfaction

It is a well-known fact that, the focus of the industry is always on the customers because the customers directly take part in the service process. Correspondingly, customer satisfaction has become a key strategic issue where the businesses attempt to maximise profits (Lotfi, Dehaghi, 2014). Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000) defines satisfaction as

a customer judgement of an experience either cognitive or emotional. In the view of Parasuraman et al. (1988) satisfaction is customer's pleasurable level of fulfilment. In addition, there is a general view that defines satisfaction as an evaluation of the customer's expectations compared to perceived service (Langer, 1997).

A major debate in the literature is whether satisfaction is a consequence of service quality. Both empirical and theoretical arguments have been put forward to demonstrate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Despite the contradictory evidences, literature supports the view that customer satisfaction is an outcome of service quality (Taylor & Baker, 1994). For instance, in the study of Parasuraman et al. (1985), it is proposed that customer satisfaction leads to an increase when the service quality perceived by the customer is high.

The main objective of a business is to satisfy its customers. The logic behind this objective is that, it will be more profitable to keep current customers than having new ones (Naik et al., 2010). As reported by (Rust & Oliver, 1994), satisfaction has direct influence on the customer's future intentions and behaviours towards the service (Taylor & Baker, 1994). It has been estimated that a satisfied customer is more eager to re-use and recommend the service to family and friends (Taylor & Baker, 1994). In addition, there is a direct relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Hallowell, 1996). Loyalty behaviours, including relationship continuance, increased scale or scope of relationship, and recommendation (word of mouth advertising) are merely the products of customers' beliefs which stem from perceived lack of advantages and service quality provided by other competitors (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Thus, it could be deduced that, service quality and customer satisfaction all create a chain reaction that results in a surge in profits. action has direct influence on the customer's future intentions and behaviours towards the service (Taylor & Baker, 1994). It has been estimated that a satisfied customer is more eager to re-use and recommend the service to family and friends (Taylor & Baker, 1994). In addition, there is a direct relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Hallowell, 1996). Loyalty behaviours, including relationship continuance, increased scale or scope of relationship, and recommendation (word of mouth advertising) are merely the products of customers' beliefs which stem from perceived lack of advantages and service quality provided by other competitors (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Thus, it could be deduced that, service quality and customer satisfaction all create a chain reaction that results in a surge in profits.

### *2.3. Customer Expectation*

Understanding the expectations or needs of customers assists organizations in how to best serve the customer and provide a basis on making improvements for their satisfaction (Hallowell, 1996). The term 'expectation' differs depending on the way it is used in the service quality or customer satisfaction literature (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the service quality literature, expectation means wants or desires of customers. In other words, people's feelings about what the service should be rather than it would. In contrast, in the satisfaction literature, it is used as customer's predictions about what is likely to happen during an exchange of service (Kunst & Lemmink, 1996).

When people attend to a particular event, they hope for positive outcomes and desire to be met their expectations completely (Oliver, 1980). Correspondingly, expectation level of customers about the service can vary according to these hopes and wishes. For instance; when people accept the service which is not performed in line with their expectations, it is known as adequate service and the service level that they hope to receive is known as desired service (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2009). In other words, customers assess the perceived service quality on the basis of their desires and the acceptability level. However, any failure to meet customers' expectations may cause dissatisfaction so it directly affects the future intentions and behaviors of customers.

In recent years, researchers have placed a greater emphasis on understanding the customers' expectations role. It is an undeniable fact that customers' expectation level of quality is on the rise. This proves the point that if expectation levels of customers are greater than the perceived performance, it causes customer dissatisfaction and contributes to modest discrepancies (Shanin & Samae, 2010).

### *2.4. Customer Perceptions*

Perceptions of customers' are always considered as their reality. In line with their perceptions of the service provided will be formed through their assessment of the quality whether they are satisfied with the service. As

perceptions may shift over time, companies need to assess their customers' perceptions continually in order to maintain their success in the market place (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990).

### 2.5. *Service Quality Model*

The 'Gap Model', which is one of the most heuristic contributions to the service management literature (Lewis and Booms, 1983), is developed by American researchers Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988 (Langer, 1997). As part of the exploratory research, the researchers conducted a series of comprehensive face-to-face interviews in order to understand the insights of executives on what constitutes the quality of service (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990).

Five key insights identified about the service quality concept referring to interaction between the customer and organization (Teas, 1993). However, only Gap 5 is investigated for this research which is overall quality determined by subtracting expectations from perceptions. The Gap 5 emphasizes the expected service-perceived service gap: due to factors influence customers and the shortfalls on the service provider side. The importance of closing the gap between customer expectations and perceptions by first understanding what they expect. Consequently, this will lead the organization to close this gap in order to provide high quality service which will satisfy the customers.

## 3. SERVQUAL

The measurement of service quality has an increasingly important role for an organization in the delivery of higher level of service. However, due to the unique characteristics of service quality such as inseparability, intangibility, heterogeneity and perishability, it is difficult to measure the service quality. Additionally, customer perceptions and expectations are playing a central role in the evaluation of service quality (Naik et al., 2010). Based on this perspective, in 1988, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry have developed a specific measurement instrument known as SERVQUAL (Langer, 1997).

SERVQUAL is based on the gap theory explained in the previous sections of the literature review. The instrument is a multiple-item scale devised to measure expected and perceived service quality which is determined as the fifth gap in the Service Quality Model. In the subsequent work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's, ten quality dimensions were proposed for the evaluation of service quality (including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication and understanding the customers) (Oliver, 1980). Further research led to the simplification and the collapse of the original ten dimensions into five with providing a basis for a 22-item instrument (SERVQUAL) which measures both expectation and perception (Oliver, 1980).

SERVQUAL is a standardized questionnaire with 22 pairs of questions that represent the five dimensions which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The first 22 statements is designed to arrest the customer expectations on service attributes whilst the corresponding statement refers to reflect the customers' perceptions regarding the experienced service quality of a particular organisation (Fick and Ritchie, 1991). In this manner, customers could be able to describe how a service should be performed in general and how it actually operated by a particular organisation to them during the service delivery (Langer, 1997).

The SERVQUAL has been used by many organisations in order to deliver high service quality, with of course alterations to suit the research context.

### 3.1. *Service Quality in Conference Industry*

The conference industry is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing service industry depending on the people's increasing demand in exchange for ideas and information through communication and learning (Shone, 2014). Increased competition and more-demanding customers mean that careful consideration must be given to the facilities and services provided during conferences (Hinkin & Tracey, 2003). The attendees are a valuable component of the conferences. When the delegates who attend to the conferences from all over the world return to their homes, they bear in mind the experiences they had related to the services overall. Therefore, in terms of

ensuring success in market place and competitive advantage, it is critically important to understand the role of 'quality' as an element in the effectiveness of service provision (Langer, 1997).

In line with the established points of view in the existing literature, the conference industry develops and becomes a large-scale modern service industry. Consequently, conferences have a number of characteristics such as service and venue requirements since they are based on a place where conferences take place and involve a range of services leading to the delegate's experiences (Shone, 2014). Crouch and Weber (2002) emphasize that the provided service and facilities are also essential for the success of a destination specifically in the international conferences in terms of conference tourism (Mair, 2014). On the other hand, a rise in the public education has raised the expectations of participants and such expectations are exponentially increasing in the levels of technical requirements and interaction amongst the delegates through social media. Although a small-scale meeting may require only main equipment, a larger conference requires a very high logistical support in terms of specialist activities such as venue and ancillary services like staff, catering, environment and ambiance (Shone, 2014). Moreover, in order to create a successful conference and perform an excellent service, it is necessary to understand the service needs of participants from their arrival to the departure.

Service quality within conference industry is crucial for satisfying attendees and creating loyalty along with customers (Naik et al., 2010). In other words, a conference manager needs to be able to meet the expectations of the conference attendees and delegates in order to gain a competitive advantage against competitors (Rust & Oliver, 1994).

#### **4. Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to define the service quality of an international conference as a measure of how well the service level delivered matches the participant's expectations.

#### **5. Methods**

This research was carried out using a quantitative approach to acknowledge the research statement. The discussion revealed a distinction between qualitative and quantitative approach regarding the choice of research methods (Clark et al, 1998).

##### *5.1. Research Instrument Design*

A self-administered questionnaire was selected to obtain a numeric description of research conducted. The logical reason behind using the questionnaire method was that this method would enable the measurement of the gap between expectation and perception by providing a coherent analysis of the change in the expectations and perceptions of the attendees before and after the conference.

While constructing the questionnaire, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's original SERVQUAL scale and its five dimensions which are Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy, was used as a guideline. Therefore, some extra questions were included in the actual questionnaire answered by the participants which was not present in the actual SERVQUAL scale. Generally, short questions with simple language were included as much as possible to make the questionnaire less confusing and ambiguous (Horn, 2012).

A structured questionnaire, which anticipates the potential answers and categorizes the responses accordingly, consists of 10 closed and 1 open-ended question. The benefits of mainly using close-ended questions in terms of the completion, which provides a quick and easy way for respondents, and analysis and comparability of data (Baker and Foy, 2008).

5-point Likert scale and multiple choices were the mainly used question types in the questionnaire to obtain the data in numeric form which basically makes the analysis easier. The Likert scale is measuring the agreement and disagreement rates of respondents (Brotherton, 2008) by using 10 statements, instead of 22 statements as found in the original SERVQUAL. These statements can be composed in positive or negative forms (Brotherton, 2008) by selecting a position between 'Strongly Agree' and 'Strongly Disagree' on a 5-point scale (Fisher, 2010). As it is

important to maintain an ideal length of a questionnaire (Horn, 2012), 5-point Likert scale was used to save space in the questions 4 and 5.

### 5.2. *Piloting the Research Instrument*

Once the draft questionnaire is completed, the way to identify any potential inadequacy or error in the accuracy or relevance of the questions, is piloting or pre-implementation, so, the problems could be eliminated before using the questionnaire to collect actual data (Brotherton, 2008). The pilot study was carried out by using a small sample those who were similar to actual respondents. Along with having a small sample, it was necessary for the pilot sample to give results close to reality as much as possible. Therefore, five selected academicians who had attended to such conferences or those who were potential participants were given the questionnaires to comment and respond on the questions.

### 5.3. *Sample Design*

Due to the high attendance rates of the conference, a sampling method was used to gather the data. The sampling frame of this study was the conference participants regardless of nationality. A convenience sampling strategy was used which is the way of selecting a sample that is available at the time and place of researcher's choice (Brotherton, 2008). In this case, respondents, who were selected for inclusion in the sample, were asked if they are available and would fill out the questionnaire (Collis and Hussey, 2009). The reason of choosing this non-probability-based sampling technique was because it is easy to access (Baker and Foy, 2008) to the delegates in a particular conference compared to probability sampling technique where the samples are selected randomly (Brotherton, 2008).

This study focused on the service quality in conference industry. For this reason, 'Academic World Education & Research Centre' which is a non-profit organization was selected for investigation. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 130 participants during the conference dates (5-8 February 2015 in Athens) in order to achieve enough response rates for the analysis. A total of 110 questionnaires were answered which produced an overall return rate of 84, 6 %. Since a total of 5 questionnaires were not completely filled out. Thus, the total number of usable questionnaires for the aim of this research was 105.

The reliability obtained on the 105 questionnaires using Cronbach's Alpha is 0.85.

### 5.4. *Data Analysis*

The IBM SPSS was used to achieve descriptive statistics in order to summarize the data in the form of tables, charts and a range of graphical forms. Frequency distributions and Paired-Sample T-test were the main techniques used to demonstrate the responses for this research.

## 6. Results

### *Gender & Age of Respondents*

A total of 105 questionnaires were collected from the academicians while the conference was taking place. Amongst 105 respondents 67.6 % were female and 32.4 % were male respondents. This indicates that female respondents have a higher proportion compared to men.

Then, the respondents were asked to state their age by ticking one of the most appropriate five age groups provided, 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55 and Over 56. The results of frequency test provided, the majority of respondents were aged between 26 and 35 years old which is nearly covering a third of the results with 32.4%. 29.5% of respondents are aged between 36 to 45 years old, whereas 26.7% aged between 46 and 55 years old. The results support a representation of optimal age group for the conference is between 26 to 55 years old those academicians who desire new socialization and networking opportunities that contribute to the exchange of ideas and the updating in their fields (Shone, 2014). This results also shows that 6.7% of respondents are aged between 18 to 25 years old which indicates those people who may thinking of a career in academia and want to get information

for the future. Ultimately, 4.8% of respondents are aged 56 or older who may have more experience in conferences compared to younger participants.

#### ***Attending Rates to International Conferences***

Figure 1 presents the frequencies of attending to international conferences in a year by respondents. It indicates a significant number of respondents were attended to the conferences from 1 to 3 times (41.9%). In addition, the Figure 1 illustrates 31.4% of respondents have had experiences in conferences 7 times or more and 20.0% were from 4 times to 6 in a year. When looking at the results it could be seen that there are only few respondents who have not attended to a conference before (6.7%). According to these results, a considerable number of respondents were able to compare the perceived performance against their wants along with considering the past experiences they had with similar conference services.

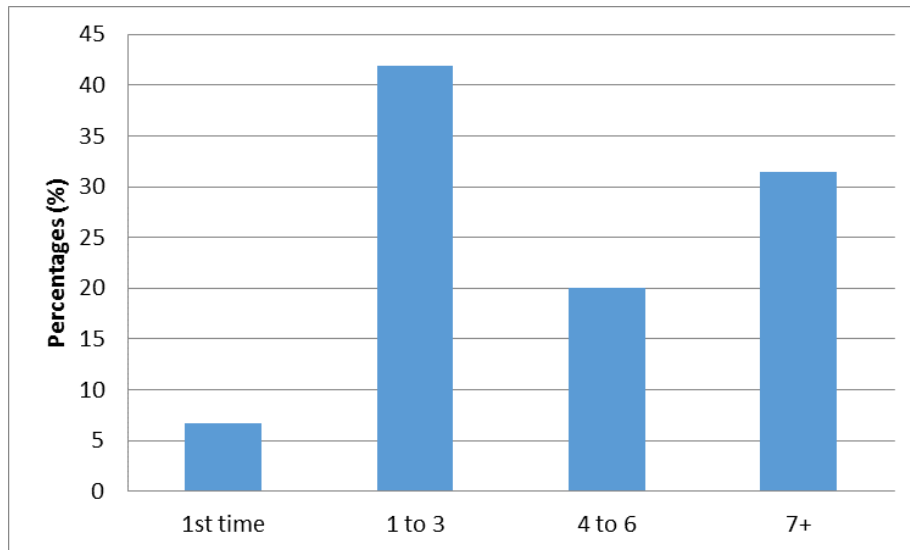


Figure 1 Frequency of attending to international conferences

#### ***The methods used by organization to reach to respondents***

Respondents have had five options to choose in order to state the way of getting information about the conference. According to the responses obtained from respondents, 57.1% of respondents, which represents more than half, received an e-mail that includes information about the conference. This implies that the organization successfully identified its target audience and managed to attain people easily by achieving their aims. Word-of-mouth has the second highest percentage with 14.3% while the attended before and AWER-Centre website options have the same rate, 11.4% and also 5.7% of respondent searched for this conference in Google. According to these results, word-of-mouth seems as another main information source for the future participants (Taghizadeh et al, 2013). It could be deduced that positive post-conference impressions on attendees can lead to positive word-of-mouth and high reputation as reported by (Rittichainuwat et al, 2001).

### ***The respondent's attendance frequency rates***

As depicted in Table 1, a total 45.7% of all respondents indicated that they had been in more than four AWER-Centre conferences in the past and 35.2 % of them had attended at least one conference before. These results provide a clear indication to the perceptions of respondents about their past experiences with this conference organization. Overall, this indicates that satisfied customers are more likely to re-attend to the conferences (Severt et al, 2006). Taylor and Baker (1994) support this by stating that satisfaction has direct influence on customer's future intentions and loyalty. Furthermore, satisfied participants are more likely to make recommendations to others (Taghizadeh et al, 2013) and therefore they engage in word-of-mouth positively to the conference (Severt et al, 2006). A significant proportion of respondents (19%) stated that it was their first conference.

Table 1: How many times have the respondents attended to this organization's conferences before

	Frequency (No.)	Percentage (%)
<b>This is my first conference</b>	20	19.0
<b>1 to 3</b>	37	35.2
<b>4 to 6</b>	20	19.0
<b>7 +</b>	28	26.7
<b>Total</b>	105	100.0

### ***The Impact of Past Experiences in the Expectation Level***

As aforementioned in the literature by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990), past experiences could be a factor that influences the people's expectation levels. Therefore, it could be deduced that the more frequent people participate to the conferences, the more likely they are to evaluate specifically this conference based on their experiences only (Lee & Park, 2002). Evaluation of participants' past experiences are likely to provide a basis for the expectations that the respondents feel the conference services should be regarding the future performance (Getz, O'neill & Carlsen, 2001).

The mean score of the data obtained from the respondents to measure the expectation levels which is related to the objective 'to identify the relationship between the service quality expected by participants and international conference'. According to the data analyzed, the mean score of the expectations is certainly high, 52.69. Consistent with this high score, it is evident that respondents were satisfied from their past experiences and so, they re-attended to this conference with higher expectations than the previous one. This would support the theory of individuals' expectations could be influenced towards the past experiences associated with similar conference services stated by (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990). Consequently, respondents with more conference experience appear to have high expectation levels as their confidence in AWER-Centre conference's increases.

### ***Expectation and Perception Analysis***

The questionnaire was composed by taking into account the original SERVQUAL scale to ascertain respondents' expectations and perceptions of the service quality provided in the conference. Thus, respondents were asked to rate their agreements to the 10 statements provided with the questionnaire. As shown in Table 2, the average mean score obtained from the respondents' ratings which indicate their expectations for the conference services in general are 52.69 whilst the average score for the conference services they perceived are 20.18. As can be seen from the results, the mean score of the expectations is significantly higher than the mean scores of the perceptions. This illustrates that expectation levels of respondents were beyond the perceptions of the conference performance which could be linked to past experiences of the respondents. This differences between the scores confirm that there is a gap in the service quality of this conference which supports the hypothesis about the service gaps argued by Parasuraman et al.



(1985) makes the point of conference manager must be aware of the delegates' expectations and preferences in order to provide consistent and high service quality. In next section, this gap is analyzed in more detail and the gap score between expectation and perception for each statement is calculated.

Table 2 the mean score of respondents' expectations and perceptions

	Mean Rank	No.
Expectations	52.69	105
Perceptions	20.18	105

### Gap Analysis

In order to obtain the desired information for to be met the aims and objectives of this study it is essential to understand the quality of services the delegates expected from the conference organization. The point is that to compare the differences between the level of delegates' expectations and the level of perceived service quality among the conference.

Wilcoxon test was performed to find out whether there was a significant difference between respondents' expectations and perceptions in terms of quality of the services provided by the conference. The mean scores of the evaluation are reported in Table 2 as 52.69 for the expectations of respondents and 20.18 for the perceived performance of the conference. In order to measure the service quality discrepancies, SERVQUAL approach was used to calculate the differences between expectation and perception scores by subtracting the respondents' perceptions from their expectations (Shanin & Samae, 2010).

$$\text{Perception} - \text{Expectation} = \text{Quality}$$

Table 3 further analyses the gaps between the 'Expectations' and 'Perceptions' of 10 service quality attributes in case of Academic World Education and Research Centre delegates. The findings indicate a considerable support for the hypothesis that service quality is a comparison of people's expectations with the performance of services they perceived (Zeithaml et al, 1990). As depicted in the Table 3 there is a significant difference between the overall expectations and the conference's performance in each of statement separately and totally which is 32.51. This difference indicates that service quality is less than satisfactory and so decrease in delegates' satisfaction level occurs.

Table 3 Respondents' Expectations and Perceptions of Conference Services

Variables	Expectations Mean	Perceptions Mean	Gap Score	Sd.	P.
1. Equipment is modern.	4.1714	3.4000	0.7714	1.02335 0.86157	0.000
2. Staff is well dressed and appears neat.	4.6286	3.5238	1.1048	0.81166 1.16928	0.000
3. Services provided on the organization promise to do so.	4.6762	2.5810	2.0952	0.75314 1.29185	0.000

4. Exact and precise service delivery is provided by the organisation.	4.4095	3.2000	1.2095	0.78072 1.05064	0.000
5. Staff shows a sincere interest in solving problems	4.6571	3.9143	0.7428	0.83007 0.65213	0.000
6. Staff gives prompt response to the requests.	4.6286	3.8952	0.7334	0.83502 0.63434	0.000
7. Staff has advanced information about services.	4.6476	3.8381	0.8095	0.79640 0.72223	0.000
8. The behaviour of staff inspires the confidence.	4.6381	3.8952	0.7429	0.77365 0.70607	0.000
9. Staff is polite.	4.6952	3.9619	0.7333	0.72223 0.64932	0.000
10. Staff gives the individual attention.	4.2762	3.7019	0.5743	0.96571 0.84623	0.000
<b>TOTAL</b>	52.69	20.18	<b>32.51</b>		

As seen in the Table 3, when analyzing the differences between respondents' expectations and perceptions various conclusions can be drawn. On closer examination of gap scores, it is clear that a meaningful discrepancy were realized in relation to a number of service related statements. First, 'Services provided on the organization promises to do so' has the highest gap score with 2.0952 because of the low perceived performance by the respondents. The second highest gap score is 1.2095 which is stating the 'Exact and precise service delivery is provided by the organization.' Particularly, respondents seem to be displeased about the service delivery process which means service quality is low. This could imply that conference managers had made inadequate plan about the service delivery.

The service related gap scores are followed by staff services. It could be seen a quite significant gap in the staff related statements, particularly with the appearance (1.1048) and the knowledge of the staff about the services (0.8095). (Fogli, 2006) states that staff is another most important component of conference service procedures. Participants are especially in communication with staff in any service delivery process (Mair & Thompson, 2008). Thus, the organization needs to pay more attention to its staff through a presentable appearance and might be trained the staff about the services.

In addition, the results show that respondents had high expectations in politeness of the staff (4.6952) and the promise timing in the services which is 4.68. These results indicate that the respondents might have positive past experiences in these fields so they expect more in terms of the relationship with staff and timing of the services provided. Although the respondents' highest expectations in staff politeness, the lowest gap score indicates that they are more likely to satisfy with the performance of staff. However, it is not same in the timing of the services provided.

It can be inferred that by concentrating on both respondents' expectations and perceptions, conference managers able to understand their target audience's wants and desires (Bowen & Chen, 2001) and the gaps in the service quality (Langer, 1997). From the above results and discussions, it could be confirmed that Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's theory about service quality perception and comparison is valid and fits a real life example which is the questionnaire conducted for this research (1985).

### ***Overall Satisfaction of Respondents***

The respondents' satisfaction level with the price they paid to the conference is at a high level with almost 43.8% 'Good', 7.6% 'Very Good' and 11.4% 'Excellent'. When the results are investigated in detail, it can be seen that the respondents are more satisfied with the price they paid. This is thanks to the price policy of the conference. It illustrates that the price is economic for the respondents and they are slightly satisfied with the services they perceived compared to the price they paid.

On the other hand, responses about the satisfaction is not as positive as the responses about the price on its own. According to the results, 50.5% of the respondents qualified their satisfaction with experience as fair which means neither good nor bad whereas 26.7% consider the experience as good. As aforementioned in the previous sections, these results can be linked to the past experiences of respondents. In the view of Schneider & White, (2004), the current satisfaction of the individuals can be influenced by their past satisfaction that relies on the past experiences. This confirms the theory that past experiences has a significant influence on individuals' satisfaction depending upon their expectations (Zeithaml, Parasuraman Berry, 1990).

Ultimately, respondents were asked their overall satisfaction about the organization. The results represent that 8.6% of respondents qualified the organization as poor and 44.8% as fair. The results reveal that the organization was in very poor quality. Thus, the organization needs to improve itself and the service quality to close the gap occurred.

In addition, many other critical elements that would influence satisfaction include, the return rate of the participants for the next year's conference, their recommendation to other potential attendees which are all concerned with behavioral intentions (Rittichainuwat et al, 2001).

### ***Word-of-Mouth and Loyalty***

A first glance at the frequency analysis of findings regarding the samples' willingness to recommend this conference to a friend did not provide any surprising results. According to the results, majority of respondents were more likely to recommend this conference which means a greater favorable word-of-mouth for the organization. Taghizadeh et al, (2013) states that word-of-mouth is important especially for the experience based service because in this kind of services, individuals' choices heavily rely on to the suggestions and advices from those who have previously attended. Consequently, 8% of respondents definitely will recommend this conference to a friend whereas, 43% probably will. However, the majority of respondents might or might not recommend (40%).

Furthermore, customer satisfaction is one of the fundamental elements in the success of a conference (Mair & Thompson, 2008) in terms of determining conference loyalty and behavioral intentions considering the next year's attendance (Rogers, 2013). Subsequently, the benefits of returning attendees include increase in revenue and brings competitive advantage to the organization (Shone, 2014). Thus, a deep investigation was carried out to the sample to understand their behavioral intentions about the conference.

The percentages of respondents' future intentions was exhibited by analyzing the collected data. This measure represents 69% of respondents are likely while 16% are very likely to attend the conference again. This features a considerable high proportion. Hallowell (1996) makes the point of when the services provided is satisfied the customer, the tendency to be loyal is usually high and this is based on the positive reinforcement.

## **7. Conclusion**

From the findings obtained by both primary and secondary data, this research can conclude that effectively executed quality research is key in order to understand participants' perceptions of conference quality and success. This research has also identified that the service quality is linked to the individuals' expectations and perceptions, which results from a comparison of their past experiences or word-of-mouth recommendations and the actual service they experienced within the conference (Naik et al, 2010). Based on this perspective, the American researchers Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) developed a service quality model which is one of the heuristic contributions to the service management literature (Fick & Ritchie, 1991). With this model, they illustrated the gaps through the service quality concept (Getz, O'Neill & Carlsen, 2001) which in addition to the model they developed SERVQUAL instrument to measure these gaps and evaluate the service quality (Shanin & Samae, 2010). Therefore,

primary research was necessary to investigate the delegates' expectations and perceptions in order to understand the effects of service quality in the conference industry in terms of customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

## 8. Recommendations & Suggestions

From the findings of secondary and primary research it could be deduced that service quality is an important issue in terms of competitive advantage. Therefore, some recommendations could be provided for both conference industry and AWER-Centre. It can be recommended that the conference industry needs to pay more attention to the wants and desires of people which is a principal feature of a successful conference in order to have a competitive advantage against the competitors.

Due to the continuous changes in the technology and services, it could be suggested to repeat this study with using the original 22-item instrument, SERVQUAL, to evaluate the changes in the improvement of services over time according to the expectations and perceptions of people.

In addition, this research was conducted in an international conference of AWER-Centre, therefore may not be generalized to other conferences. Thus, more conferences need to be investigated to expand and extent the service quality thorough conference industry. It can be also suggested that other related factors of service quality such as marketing and HR could be included in the future researches.

Furthermore, this research could be extended by researching the conferences took place in hotels and conference centers. How the service quality differs according to the venue could be compared and contrasted to extend the research.

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