

## The Link Between Student Satisfaction and Service Quality: A Case of a Rural Based Public University

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**KEYWORDS** Student Satisfaction. Service Quality. Rural. South Africa. University

**ABSTRACT** Globalization and the advent of the information age are recent evolutions that have catalyzed increased competition amongst non-traditional competitors. Institutions of higher education now strive to attract the best and most talented students, thus increasing the bargaining power of students as key stakeholders for universities. As such the satisfaction of students with the quality of the services rendered by universities is now paramount in the attraction and retention of students, respectively. This qualitative paper found that the interviewed students at the rural-based institution of higher learning were fairly satisfied with the academic, social and financial factors of the institution. These findings are significant in that they indicated a potential barrier to the competitiveness of the institution in relation to other public universities.

### INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, competition within non-traditional industries has increased significantly. One such industry is higher education. In the contemporary global market, students have gained significant bargaining power, leaving higher education institutions to compete for the best students. Liebenberg and Barnes (2004) for instance, determine that if public higher education institutions are unable to render the required service that 'the customer' (learner) seeks, more learners may choose to study at private institutions, and that there is a concentrated focus on branding and marketing of universities. The most important factors influencing the choice of higher education institutions are the reputation of the institution, as well as, other factors such as fees, sport facilities and accommodation (Cosser et al. 2004).

The challenge for most institutions of higher learning in South Africa then is to associate with student satisfaction and service quality. Tomsich (2011) observes that a significant proportion of university administrators and instructors pay little or no attention to the needs of students and meeting their expectations. Research has shown that student dissatisfaction

may have a negative causal effect on the performance of students, which impacts the quality of student output (Sulkowski 2011; Tomsich 2011). With this in mind, this paper seeks to establish the link between student satisfaction and service quality at a South African rural-based public institution of higher learning. In order to establish this relationship, the study objectives were to:

- To assess if students are satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning at the university.
- To examine if students are satisfied with auxiliary university services such as the library and accommodation services and facilities, respectively.
- To find out if students are satisfied with the bursaries and loans facilitated by the university.

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

- Are students satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning at the university?
- Are students satisfied with auxiliary university services such as the library and accommodation services and facilities respectively?
- Are students satisfied with the bursaries and loans facilitated by the university?

### Literature Review

The study is grounded in the theory of customer satisfaction. Service provision is probably one of the most explored phenomena in marketing literature. Understanding customer satisfaction makes it possible for service providers to identify the main factors influencing customer relationships longevity. Cronin et al. (2000) in a study on satisfaction examined customer behavioral relations in six different industries (universities, sports, entertainment, healthcare, fast food) and found that satisfaction had a direct influence on behavioral intentions in all industries.

Important elements in student satisfaction are likely to concern the role of the instructor and of the students, as these elements may be central to student learning (Winberg and Hedman 2008). Kotler and Keller (2006) elaborated that for the effectiveness of the system, satisfaction is necessary. Students' satisfaction is highly imperative because if they are fully satisfied with the facilities provided by the universities, their positive response will incline more students to join it. Hermans et al. (2003) elaborate that communication between teacher and student is an important factor enhancing a student's satisfaction at the universities.

According to Strauss and Volkwein (2004), multiple student level variables influence student satisfaction and institutional commitment. The most important influences were located in academic factors, social integration and growth, followed by financial aid and academic satisfaction. Thomas and Galambos (2004) state that now when the students are being considered as the consumers of higher education institutions, their satisfaction is becoming more important to these institutions, especially the institutions, which need new admissions. The satisfaction of the students as well as learning of these students should be the important outcome of the institutions (Applenton-Knapp and Krentler 2006).

### METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the researcher followed the qualitative research approach because the type of information is descriptive and non-numerical. Qualitative research is concerned with qualitative phenomenon involving quality. Some of the characteristics of a qualitative re-

search method are, it is non-numerical, descriptive, applies reasoning and uses words (Hoepfl 2007; Patton 2011).

The study population comprised final year Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com.) students studying marketing. The study was comprised of a sample of 23 students. The non-probability sampling was deemed appropriate for this study, particularly purposive sampling. Participants were purposively selected based on the following characteristics, that is, they needed to be a registered student at the university, be a third-year (final year), and a B.Com. marketing degree student.

Qualitative data analysis is typically dependent on interpretation. With this in mind, the researcher used interviews to collect data from the participants concerning their experience with the services offered by the university during their years of study. A structured interview method was used to collect data and the responses of the participants were recorded. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the study show that a significant majority of the respondents were highly unsatisfied with the quality of teaching and learning, with the remainder expressing being moderately satisfied and only a small minority of the students intimating that they were highly satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning. Some observations include:

*"...The university does not provide us with learning material such as textbooks and study guides, which makes it difficult for us disadvantaged students to pass because we cannot afford such material." (Participant 1)*

*"There are projectors in almost every class but still those projectors are not utilized, we are still forced to learn using the chalk and board method, which strains us students because at times we are unable to see the handwriting of the lecture and therefore we become very slow when taking notes given the little time we have to attend each class." (Participant 18)*

*"I am satisfied with the technology at the university because there is a system called blackboard, this systems helps us get class notes, semester marks, test marks, course outlines and other important notices about the course." (Participant 10)*

*“There are not enough learning facilities at the university. At times there are clashes about venues and we are forced to dismiss classes, for this reason we attend tutorials late at 5.30pm, which is not safe for students who stay off-campus. There have been many cases of assault on off-campus students because they leave campus late as they attend tutorials till late.” (Participant 8)*

*“In my marketing class I am forced to arrive early to class because if not I will have to sit on the stairs as there are not enough seats to accommodate all students, sitting on the stairs for a whole double period makes it difficult for any student to pay attention or to write notes.” (Participant 3)*

*“...The university does not have skilled lecturers, the lecturers are incompetent. They are at times unable to clarify questions that students pose to them and at times these lecturers do not come to classes and therefore we are forced to attend classes on weekends so that we can cover all the chapters required for exams.” (Participant 12)*

*“...The university lacks skilled staff and this results in hiring graduates that do not possess any experience to lecture us. These unskilled lectures cause confusion among students because they also seem oblivious about what they are saying.” (Participant 7)*

*“I am satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning at the university because during my years in the university I have acquired enough knowledge to help me further my career goals. Our lecturers go an extra mile in insuring that we completely understand the course.” (Participant 6)*

The findings from the study shows that most of the respondents were highly unsatisfied with the library services, while a minority of the students were highly satisfied with the library services. Significant observations are included below.

*“I am not satisfied with the service. Some of the staff members are very rude and are not helpful when I need assistance at the library.” (Participant 10)*

*“...There is a shortage of relevant textbooks at the university. At times when I need a specific book for my assignment, I am unable to get it because it is unavailable.” (Participant 4)*

*“I am unsatisfied with the operating hours of the library because it closes at 10pm, which*

*is a hindrance for some of us who want to study. The library should be open 24 hours for students to study and utilize the library books as well as get information.” (Participant 6)*

*“...The library is not big enough to accommodate all the students. It is very difficult for a student to find a seat at the library, and at times I am forced to study in a class where there is uncontrollable noise.” (Participant 23)*

*“I am satisfied with the way rules are obeyed at the library. I am able to study in peace without any distractions, with the help of the security guards, silence is maintained at all times.” (Participant 15)*

The findings from the study shows that the majority of the respondents were highly unsatisfied with the funding at the university, with a significant minority of the students being satisfied with the funding opportunities available at the institution. Key observations are included below.

*“The service that I receive with regards to financial aid is always poor. First of all the staff is always rude and is never keen to help students. They come to work late and they take long lunch breaks.” (Participant 3)*

*“The queues are always long at financial aid. I spend hours, if not the whole day waiting to get assisted by the staff.” (Participant 4)*

*“The system that they use as financial aid is poor, it often goes offline and we wait there for hours waiting, the university should have on-line systems were students register for finance.” (Participant 7)*

*“Nsfas has helped me stay in school and has paid for all my fees since my first year and it still continues to change my life and gives other students an opportunity to reach their goals.” (Participant 11)*

The findings from the study show that the majority of the respondents were highly unsatisfied with the quality of accommodation facilities. Key observations are included below.

*“There are not enough facilities at the university to accommodate all students.” (Participant 6)*

*“The university uses students’ academic marks to determine who will get accommodated at the university, which is a disadvantage to those that did not perform well.” (Participant 8)*

*“Students who fail do not get accommodated at the university.” (Participant 2)*

*“Students who do not get accommodated at the university are forced to stay off-campus, which has proven to be unsafe as a lot of students have been assaulted.” (Participant 19)*

*“The accommodation facilities are not clean, the workers are not doing a good job mainly because they are not supervised. They clean whenever they feel like it, at our res the cleaner only sweeps and mops once a week.” (Participant 7)*

*“The toilets are in a very bad state. At times I avoid using the toilets even when am pressed because they are never clean. Last year I had to consult at the doctors because I had contracted an infection from using the university toilets.” (Participant 8)*

*“We don’t have hot water at the reses, if you want to shower you should wake at 6am in the morning or else you have to bath in your room, which is unacceptable because we pay for hot water.” (Participant 5)*

*“When our furniture is broken it takes time for the maintenance workers to come and fix them, I spend my first semester without a chair in my room simply because they could not find one for me.” (Participant 12)*

*“The beds that we sleep on at the res are worn out and old at times it feels like am sleeping on the floor. They are not comfortable at all.” (Participant 8)*

*“It is very safe to stay at on-campus accommodation because we have security working 24 hours to protect us.” (Participant 13)*

*“The security at the accommodation facilities does a very good job and they always come check if a student reports a situation to them.” (Participant 1)*

*“The residences are safe even if you walk around in the middle of the night.” (Participant 2)*

*“I feel safe as a woman at the residential facilities because in all my years at the university there has been security at the entrance and any males have to sign in before they can be allowed in the girls residential.” (Participant 17)*

The following section discusses the findings of this study.

The findings of the study suggest that there is a fairly high level of dissatisfaction amongst the interviewed students at the institution in question. The literature reviewed suggests that there are a myriad of factors that influence the

satisfaction of students with their institution of higher learning, including academic, financial and social factors (Strauss and Volkwein 2004). As it emerged as a result of this study, the majority of students were dissatisfied with important factors such as teaching and learning (academic factors), student funding (financial factors) and auxiliary services such as student accommodation and facilities as well as, library services (social factors).

This should be an issue of major concern for authorities at the surveyed institution, considering that the literature consulted suggests that students are increasingly gaining bargaining power as consumers of higher education services provided by universities. In essence, new student attraction becomes increasingly tied to the ability of the institution to meet and satisfy the needs of its key stakeholder—the student (Thomas and Galambos 2004; Appleton-Knapp and Krentler 2006).

## CONCLUSION

The paper sought to establish the link between student satisfaction and service quality at a South African rural-based public university. Some of the most important factors influencing the choice of a university are the reputation of the institution and other factors such as fees, sport facilities and accommodation. From the qualitative findings of this study it is evident that the students surveyed at the institution were unsatisfied with some of the services that they are receiving from the university. Students are not completely satisfied with the academic, financial and social factors that influence their levels of satisfaction.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve service quality and student satisfaction, the study recommends that:

- The institution provides adequate learning materials for those students who cannot afford to purchase textbooks.
- Academic and administrative staff must be more ‘consumer-centric’ and provide better teaching and auxiliary services.
- The university must improve learning facilities to be able to accommodate the large number of students.

- University library staff should strive to have the relevant textbooks that students need for academic purposes.
- University management must seriously consider extending library hours, where the library should be open for extended hours for students who prefer to study at night.
- The service received at the financial aid should be improved the staff should recognize the importance of students, and therefore assist students to the best of their abilities.
- The university should consider investing in more residential facilities on-campus to be able to accommodate the large number of students to also avoid the high rate of crime experienced by the students who stay off-campus.
- The accommodation facilities should be kept clean at all times and there should be strict supervision emphasized on the cleaners so they perform their work to standards.

For additional research, a wider quantitative survey, conducted amongst a wider population of students in many universities is recommended.

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**Paper received for publication on October 2015**  
**Paper accepted for publication on June 2016**