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Why select and remain in my University: Re-examining Higher Education in South Africa

Johan de Jager, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa
Gbolahan Gbadamosi, University of Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT
Tertiary institutions have a major role in providing relevant education that best meets the needs of the various constituencies served. To meet these needs an assessment of factors that influence their choices becomes imperative. As a result of the governments' policy to transform higher education in South Africa and the challenges brought about by globalisation and internationalisation, tertiary institutions are facing new challenges. Attracting quality students in a highly competitive education environment is crucial as the numbers of students' dropping out especially call attention to wastage in government funding. This paper examines some of the criteria used by South-African students, when choosing or evaluating a tertiary institution. The main findings include a significant positive link among trust in management, satisfaction with transport, perception of readiness for change and overall satisfaction with the university. These variables have indirect relationship with satisfaction with transport and living arrangement of students. Practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future studies were articulated.

INTRODUCTION
Prospective higher education students normally undertake extended decision making during their process of application for course study. The decision process with regard to a course or a specific institution can be very complex. In addition universities and other institutions of higher education are competing to recruit students. An increased understanding of the potential higher education student decision-making process would enable Higher Education (HE) institutions to market their courses in a more timely and effective way (Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge, 2001:197). Consequently institutions of higher education should be well aware of what aspects students value most in order to make a final decision with regard to a specific institution. Institutions of Higher Education are restricted by numbers of students and consequently it is obvious that they will compete for the best students who have a better chance to complete their studies in the shortest possible time frame.

Measuring service quality at higher education institutions worldwide is a common phenomenon (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; Athiyaman, 1997; Oldfield & Baron, 2000). The aim of this paper is to investigate the importance of key attributes when assessing tertiary institutions and making a choice. Tertiary education in South Africa has been subjected to some transformation during the last couple of years and South Africa also experiences a high level of unemployment like many developing countries. For this study, students were selected at two universities in South Africa in order to evaluate their initial expectations of the services provided by their selected institution of higher education. Challenges in the tertiary education sector and the marketing aspects thereof, with specific reference to the service quality associated with the service package provided to students, are reviewed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Global Challenges in the tertiary education sector in Africa
During the past decade and a half, the world has seen a slow, but constant transition from the ideological confines of the post World War II structures to a more interdependent global society and economy, yet divided into the developed and developing worlds. The fall of Apartheid in South Africa and the subsequent emergence of Sub-Saharan Africa from its colonial past and gradual transition to

democratic free market states have created a new dynamic where the competition for resources and strategic interests are fierce.

According to Michael (2004) the main challenge for developing countries lies in the mobilisation and equipping of their human resources with knowledge to exploit the advantages of globalisation. The information age has provided the developing world with a unique opportunity to play catch-up in a world where knowledge is the only endearing asset of any society. Adekanmbi (2004) is of the opinion that the terms globalisation and internationalisation of education are in fact one and the same as it would entail the freedom to apply information. It would seem that the developing world has arrived at a crossroad through globalisation. In the case of South Africa, Badat (2003) states that transition occurs in a context of globalisation and economic growth and is increasingly dependant on knowledge and information of its high priests, globalisation and integration into the global economy. The challenges faced by higher education in South Africa is compounded through the integration of equity goals of national policy as a means of redressing inequalities of the inherited educational system. Kargbo (2000) acknowledges that like in other developing countries, the African universities are a major element in development, at the apex of the educational system as a place for the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge and playing a pivotal role in the onward struggle for national development.

Over the past few years, higher education institutions in South Africa have experienced dramatic changes, in their structuring, funding and student numbers. The tertiary education sector faces many new challenges, including more recently various mergers and the transformation of *Technikons* into universities of technology. This transformation has not only brought about a change of status in these institutions, but also the mergers of intrinsically different institutions. The broadening of access to higher education in South Africa under the present government policy has also seen a growth in the number of applications to tertiary institutions (Bunting & Cloete, 2004). According to Cooper & Subotzky (2001), South Africa has experienced a "revolution" regarding the increase in proportion of black student enrolments in tertiary education where the majority have been black since the middle 1990s. This consequently calls for re-assessment of the needs of current students in higher education.

Tertiary education has experienced a dramatic decline in government subsidies and an increase in student fees in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Palihawadana, 1999; Soutar & Turner, 2002) that have similar educational systems to South Africa. This is due to various changes in the respective environments. In South Africa the decline in funding from subsidies is also a direct consequence of the trend of falling pass rates (Naidoo, 2003). It appears as if tertiary institutions face increasing market and financial pressures in various countries. The result has been a more competitive educational environment. Mutula (2001) states that the decrease in subsidies affects the quality of teaching and research and has lead to overcrowding in many universities, deteriorating physical facilities and a lack of resources for text books, educational materials, laboratory consumables and maintenance. The perceived quality has also had an effect on the choice of institution by eligible candidates.

The role of marketing in the tertiary education sector
The increased level of competition in the education environment has led to institutions of higher education employing managerial techniques to improve the efficiency and quality of their provisions (Palihawadana, 1999) and switch from a passive to a more active market approach (Naudé & Ivy, 1999). If universities are to satisfy student's requirements they must be aware of their own offerings and how these are perceived in the market place. It is important for institutional policy makers to be aware of the influential factors and the associated impact on potential students (Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge, 2001:197).

Higher Education Institutions should understand their own offerings and how these are perceived in the market place, because it could have important marketing and management implications. Various factors influence the choice of potential scholars to study at a specific tertiary institution, including location (Ford, Joseph & Joseph, 1999; Roberts & Allen, 1997), reputation of academic quality

(Landrum, Turrisi & Harless, 1998; Ivy, 2001), course specifics (Ford, Joseph & Joseph, 1999) and career opportunities (Ford, Joseph & Joseph, 1999; Krone, Gilly, Zeithaml & Lamb, 1981). A recent study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa has found that the most important influence upon choice of institution is its reputation followed by the geographical location. One of the reasons why location is important for students in South-Africa is because more than a third of all learners do not have suitable quiet place in their homes to study (Cosser, 2002) and might use library facilities to study.

Objective of the Study
The primary objective of the study is to investigate the relationship among some service quality variables dealing with higher education service delivery in South Africa. It also examines some of the criteria used by South-African students, when choosing or evaluating a tertiary institution. In addition, the study examines if there are significant differences between the two universities sampled as well as whether gender differences exist in the variables explored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The sample framework
A random sample of 391 South-African students in the Faculty of Management of two universities was selected (Tshawane University of Technology – TUT and Cape Peninsula University of Technology – CPUT). Sample elements were selected from a list of all courses (including numbers of students per course). The sample comprises 41% males and 59% females. The attitudes of the student samples were tested regarding the importance of pre identified service quality variables related to academic and non academic issues when assessing a specific tertiary institution.

Measuring instrument and reliability
In developing the research instrument the inputs of several related studies were used. Demographic information was sought, various aspects related to the reasons why and how a specific university was chosen as well as the attitudes of the students sampled were tested regarding the perceived performance of the universities in pre-identified service quality issues when selecting a specific tertiary institution. The list of variables was based on an extensive literature research and the findings of focus groups consisting of students and lecturers. The questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected students in pre-determined classes. Structured questionnaires were used and included several variables related to service quality at a higher educational institution.

The following variables were measured with a single item fixed choice scale measure. They include academic performance, the main reason for study, living arrangement during school time, and satisfaction with transportation to the university.
Overall satisfaction with the university was also measured by a single item: What is your overall level of satisfaction with the university where you are currently enrolled? Response was anchored on a 5-point scale from "very satisfied" to "not satisfied at all".
Intention to leave: was measured on by four items on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Example item include: (1) I often think of quitting my present educational institution (reserved score) and (2) I plan to stay in my present educational institution to develop my skills and complete my education. We obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 for the sample.
Trust in Management and Support: was measured by five items on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". "Example item include: (1) I am convinced my educational institution treat me with respect (2) The management of my educational institution encourages ideas and suggestions about ways to make the institution better. We obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for the sample.
Perceptions of organizational readiness for change: was also measured by five items on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Example item include: (1) Management takes action quickly enough when new opportunities could help the institution (2) My educational institution adapts well to changes in funding levels. We obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 for the sample.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Our analysis of the respondent profile produced the following results. Respondents were 59% female, about 43% were in their first year, 25% were within the 18-19 years age bracket, 31% were between 20-21 years; while about 18% were over 22 years. TUT had about 59% students participating. On academic performance, we found nearly 40% indicated a B grade average (60-69%) and 37% a C grade (50-59%). Only 2% scored lower than E (lower than 40%) and 12 in the A category (70-100%). Majority of the respondents indicated that they got aware of the University through friends (40%), family member (34%), Media (20%), the institution itself (27%) and teachers (17%). The major reason for study was for better job opportunities (48%), personal development (32%) and higher income (15%). Results obtained on the living arrangement revealed that majority were still living with their parents (41%), University residence (25%), and rented flats (12%). It is also interesting to note that over 60% of respondents were satisfied with their university.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviation and t-Test of Study Variables (University)

S/N	Study Variables	CPUT		TUT		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance				Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	t	df	
1	Age	3.41	1.04	3.33	1.08	.84	.359	.654	388	.514
2	Gender	1.69	.50	1.54	.50	12.36	**.000**	3.047	341	**.002**
3	Current study year	3.03	1.00	2.73	1.11	10.63	**.001**	2.800	363	**.005**
4	Academic Performance	2.25	.77	2.64	.93	9.57	**.002**	-4.510	372	**.000**
5	Main reason for study	2.53	1.08	2.58	1.16	2.69	.101	-.465	378	.642
6	Usual living arrangement	3.13	1.72	3.72	1.92	8.28	**.004**	-3.142	364	**.002**
7	Satisfaction with transport	3.45	1.50	3.34	1.49	.25	.614	.710	328	.478
8	Intention to leave	13.16	2.47	13.15	2.82	4.91	**.027**	.054	368	.957
9	Trust in Management & Support	14.46	4.30	13.80	4.73	2.02	.156	1.383	383	.167
10	Perceptions of readiness for change	11.11	3.42	11.28	3.74	1.81	.179	-.458	386	.648
11	Overall satisfaction with the university	2.37	.87	2.44	.77	.75	.386	-.829	386	.407

N = 391, CPUT = 160, TUT = 231

As the table shows, Levene's test for equality of variance shows significant variance between the two universities with respect to gender (p < .000), current year of study (p < .001), academic performance (p < .002), usual leaving arrangement (p < .004) and intention to leave the university (.027). However, the independent t-test revealed all these variables but intention to leave the university as significantly different. We also used Chi-square crosstab tables to find significance for each variable pair. There are significantly more males at TUT than Cape Town (Chi square P < 0.009). Higher academic performance was reported at CPUT. Significantly more students at CPUT live with their parents than at TUT. With intention to leave, the independent t-test and our Chi-square were both not significant between the Universities.

Levene's test for equality of variance shows significant variance in gender differences with respect to age p < .000, current year of study p < .033 and the University p < .000. However, the independent t-test confirmed these differences for the three variables. The females are generally older than the males. The significant inverse relationship found between age and gender (r = -0.107, p < 0.05) also confirms this. The female students are spread throughout the years of study while a higher number of the males seem to be in the first year? We also found a direct significant correlation between gender and current year of study (r = 0.451, p < 0.001). Also, there are significantly more females than males at TUT than CPUT.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviation and t-Test of Study Variables (Gender)

S/N	Study Variables	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		F	Sig.			
1	Age	20.51	**.000**	2.371	292	**.018**
2	Current study year	4.59	**.033**	-2.737	309	**.007**
3	Academic Performance	.12	.733	1.702	380	.090
4	Main reason for study	3.73	.054	.962	377	.337
5	Usual living arrangement	.89	.344	.742	386	.459
6	Satisfaction with transport	.33	.564	-.002	327	.999
7	Intention to leave	.07	.795	.425	387	.671
8	Trust in Management & Support	.96	.327	-1.096	382	.274
9	Perceptions of readiness for change	.20	.652	.663	385	.508
10	Overall satisfaction with the university	.16	.692	1.077	385	.282
11	University (CPUT or TUT)	28.87	**.000**	2.872	351	**.004**

N = 391, Male = 158, Female = 232 (Missing = 1)

Intercorrelation coefficients were conducted among all the study variables. We found a direct relationship between age and current year of study (r = 0.451, p < 0.01) and between age and living arrangement (r = 0.132, p < 0.05). Current year of study is significantly but inversely correlated with the academic performance (r = -0.105, p < 0.05). This implies that as the student advances in their year of study the academic performance declines. Our Chi square crosstab analysis confirms this (F = 74.92, df. = 5, p < 0.000). Current year of study is directly and significantly correlated with trust in management (r = 0.176, p < 0.01) and perception of readiness for organisational change (r = 0.106, p < 0.05). Both of these variables increases as the student stay longer in the university. It is logical that people tend to become more loyal and trusting as they stay longer with a service.

We also found academic performance is significantly and directly correlated with overall satisfaction with the university (r = 0.108, p < 0.05). The higher the academic performance reported the higher the reported overall satisfaction of the students. Living arrangement, we found to be inversely but significantly correlated with satisfaction with transport (r = -0.213, p < 0.01), but directly and significantly correlated with perception of readiness for change (r = 0.111, p < 0.05) and overall satisfaction with the university (r = 0.195, p < 0.01). Students who live farther from the University tended to be more concerned with a convenient transport arrangement. It is equally interesting that the more acceptable the living arrangement is for the student the more positive they generally feel about the university.

Satisfaction with transport is directly and significantly correlated with trust in management (r = 0.202, p < 0.01) and perception of readiness to change (r = 0.125, p < 0.05). The significant positive link among trust in management, satisfaction with transport, perception of readiness for change and overall satisfaction with the university is also an important signal of the interwoven nature of the study variables. Again, satisfaction with transportation is a strong indicator of how positively the university administration is perceived by the students.

Perhaps another interesting finding is that intention to leave the university is inversely but significantly correlated with trust in management (r = -0.151, p < 0.01), perception of readiness for change (r = -0.252, p < 0.01) and overall satisfaction with the university (r = -0.282, p < 0.01). It is clear that students will generally want to stay in a University where they are generally happy and satisfied, believes that management of the University will continue to work in their interest hence trust management and that the University is ready and perhaps willing to change for the better overall interest of its stakeholders.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Universities are educating those who will create and shape the future world as well as informing today's world. This makes the role of education crucial in today's rapidly evolving environment. Within this role, universities are responsible to many, including the students who are educated in this environment (Freeman & Thomas, 2005).

Overall, our findings identify some of the variables that contribute to high service quality in higher education. We found a strong link among trust in management, perception of readiness for change and overall satisfaction with the university. We also found that these variables have indirect relationship with satisfaction with transport and living arrangement of students. This highlights an important consideration that accommodation and convenient logistic in terms of movement to and from the university remains a major determinant of students' satisfaction. The result again indicated that the longer the students stay in the University the more tolerant they perhaps turn out to be hence becoming less critical and more trusting of management as they also grow to appreciate the enormity of some of the problems being tackled by the authorities. Another finding that calls for attention is intention to leave which is lower with increasing trust in management, perception of readiness for change and overall satisfaction with the university.

One of the questions we may ask therefore is how ready the HE sector in South Africa is for the required changes and if indeed the management of HE can drive the change? The same question is however apt elsewhere because we expect HE to be changing according to their environment which is dynamic and always changing. Universities and funding sources must be able to meet and collaborate on the issues that are most relevant to the world as it operates (Freeman & Thomas, 2005).

There are a number of practical implications from the foregoing findings and discussion. Education has long been recognised as the means to achieve change, create new ideas, and initiate the new practices that move a country towards increasing prosperity (Wheatley, 2001). Given our finding there is need for management of HE in South Africa to flag variables like satisfaction with transportation and living arrangement for closer attention as these variables were linked with those that could ensure that Universities make a difference in their performance – trust in management, perception of readiness for change and overall satisfaction with the university. We also endorse the view of Freeman & Thomas (2005) who argued that there must be a new definition of concept of consumerism within education that endorses the rights of students to receive quality education that will adequately prepare them for the workplace. In addition, we believe there is need to monitor and enforce management commitment in HE to these rights

The findings of this study open a number of prospects for further research. By investigating the variables identified in this study further, it may be possible to explain a number of gaps in the management of service quality and students' satisfaction in HE sector in South Africa. Follow-up interviews and focus groups discussion with carefully selected students and student groups may generate a wide range of rich additional information to what is obtainable with survey instruments with its several attendant limitations.

Finally, education has always been evaluated in terms of its practical value and in many parts of the world University education is highly revered and treasured because it has always been and may for a long time be available to very few people. The main purpose of this paper is to explore a few new service quality related variables in HE in South Africa. Our findings, albeit exploratory opens up a number of interrelated questions about the prospects of improving students satisfaction as well as opportunity for further research to advance our knowledge in this important area of higher education.

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