SUPPORT STAFF EXPERIENCE IN THE EFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING OF UNIVERSITIES: A CO-CREATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

African Tertiary institutions (universities) are confronted with many challenges including those of poorly supported students, academics that have little resources to conduct their jobs, and support staff that are deemed as "less important". In order to develop the African tertiary institution into one that can compete on a global level and develop students that can find creative and context related solutions to burgeoning African business problems, it is essential that these institutions understand how all areas of the institution function collectively and support each other. The concept of systems theory states that all areas within the institution should work in an integrated way and combining the aspect of co-creation, each area should co-create and increase the value provided to each stakeholder at each point of interaction. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of support staff within an African Tertiary institution in order to identify where gaps in the service delivery and the overall co-creation process lie. An exploratory research design and interpretivistic research philosophy was used to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with 10 support staff (ranging from programme co-ordinators to general academic support staff, faculty officers and secretaries). From the nine themes identified from the findings it is evident that support staff deal with many stakeholders within the tertiary institution and that it is important to ensure that daily tasks and systems are improved for better co-creation with other stakeholders.

Keywords: Systems theory, co-creation, networking theory, tertiary institution, support staff

1. INTRODUCTION

The African Tertiary and Higher Education system has faced a number of changes in the last few years and are subsequently facing greater challenges in the years ahead. These challenges come from student protests, insufficient funding and high unemployment rates (Mampane & Omidire, 2018:1). Tertiary institutions therefore need to adapt to this changing environment in order to remain competitive and attract quality students. For this to occur, tertiary institutions need to ensure they function as a system within this complex environment and work with all stakeholders involved in delivering quality services. One of these stakeholders are the support staff which are often neglected in research but are essential in playing a role in innovation within a Tertiary institution (Rothmann & Essenko, 2007:135). For the purposes of this paper, support staff are any non-academic and non-managerial employee working at a Tertiary institution in South Africa whose role it is to provide secretarial, financial, IT, and administrative support to academics, managers and students at the Institution. As these support staff often deal with conflicting pressures from academics, managers and students, their role within the proper functioning of a Tertiary institution becomes vital (Rothmann & Essenko, 2007:135). The rest of this paper therefore focusses on the role of complexity theory, systems theory and networking theory as ways in which the co-creation of value can be developed by support staff within the Tertiary institution system, as part of the literature review. Thereafter, the problem statement, methodology, results and recommendations are provided.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a Tertiary institution is a complex system working with many stakeholders, the literature review commences with a brief description of complexity theory within a business environment. This is then linked to the idea of systems theory as all stakeholders work within a complex system. For this complex system to function well, it is essential that relationships are developed within the networks in the system. The authors posit that once this occurs, the need for co-creation within the system becomes essential as that leads to efficient and effective services being designed. The final section of the literature review considers the theories within the Tertiary Higher education system and specifically considers the need for support staff to be part of this system.

2.1 Complexity theory
Holbrook (2003) quoted by Frow, Nenonen, Payne and Storbacka (2015) explains that complexity theory is essential to understand from a business and marketing paradigm as these systems comprise numerous stakeholders each with their own dynamic interactions. This is specifically true within a service setting

such as Tertiary education. This theory is multidisciplinary in nature and states that the functioning of each element within a system and how that functioning interacts, and relates to other areas in the system needs to be determined, specifically as many interactions do not follow a rational process (Koopmans, 2016). Basile, Kaufmann and Savastano (2018:60) add that from a service provider perspective, complexity theory should also be considered as a way to assist service providers in determining how to adapt to various challenges and situations caused by changes within the system that may be outside of the providers' control. This therefore also requires the service provider to be an adaptive system.

2.2   Systems theory

As complexity theory states the service providers' work within a complex system needs to be adapted based on the situation; it is necessary to consider systems theory within this study. Sim, Conduit and Plewa (2018:427) explain that a service system is one where all stakeholders are involved in creating service exchanges within a self-adjusting system. Ingram (2018) explains that systems theory requires all areas within a system work in such a way that they are interdependent of each other, and identify ways to encourage collaboration with each other. Von Bertanlanffy (1972:413) describes Luhmanns' systems theory as one that can be utilised in many fields, but is specifically relevant for a business that functions with many employees, units and departments. Each of these need to identify how they fit into the bigger system of, for example, a Tertiary institution. Many organisations do not want to consider systems theory as a way to function within a changing and dynamic environment as it is considered to be challenging and complex to implement (Gerim, 2017:142). As Jaaron and Backhouse (2017:3) describe, systems theory, although challenging, must be integrated throughout the entire organisation in order to determine system participants and how they function. This therefore requires that throughout the system, the experiences of all stakeholders must be identified and considered (Harvianen, Ojasalo & Kumar, 2018:193).

2.3   Networking theory

Briscoe, Keranen and Parry (2012:420) explain that within systems theory, there are critical networks that are developed within the system which also need to be considered. Albinsson, Perera and Sautter (2016:42) continue that within collaborative systems, all stakeholders need to consider their networks and identify how each network partner adds value to the systems and functions within the system. Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber (2011:328) explain that a network is embedded within a service and that it is essential for all resources available to be provided to stakeholders within the system. Therefore an important element of networking theory is that systems obtain value and resources from its network partners, rather than just the assets available within an organisation. Networking theory with systems theory therefore considers how value is added within the entire system through networks and determines how value can be co-created by network interactions (Frow et al., 2015:465; Briscoe et al., 2012:420).

2.4   Co-creation and Service design

Within the context of systems theory, from a services perspective, co-creation occurs when networks within the system function well together and all stakeholders are involved in the development of a service that adds value to all and lies within the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) developed by Vargo and Lusch (Edvardsson et al., 2011:328). Sutarso, Halim, Balgiah and Tjiptoherijanto (2019:43-44) explain that co-creation should be focused from a company perspective (i.e. internal stakeholders) and from a customer perspective. From a service perspective, it is essential that both perspectives are considered when designing a service or identifying ways to solve complex problems. This again, like in systems theory, requires that the experiences of the participants are considered (Harvianen et al., 2018:193). The concept of service design requires that all stakeholders' experiences with the service must be considered as this will fundamentally influence how the service should and will be designed and presented (Følstad & Kvale, 2018:198). Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonella (2009:53-54) explain that the experiences of stakeholders should be considered from various aspects including social experiences, behavioural experiences, feelings, thoughts and actions.

2.5   Co-creation and Service design within Tertiary institutions

Tertiary institutions are very complex systems functioning within a local, national and international level (Mofokeng, 2002:75). In Africa, this is specifically true, based on the increased demand for decolonisation in Africa, high employment rates amongst graduates, student protests and low levels of government funding for tertiary education (Mampane & Omidire, 2018:1). Aubgre (2018:324) clearly states that Tertiary institutions play a vital role in the development of economic growth and therefore these institutions need to consider the role they play within the local, national and international system. As there are various points of interaction within a Tertiary education system, each of these should be seen as a way

to co-create value (Briscoe et al., 2012:420). From a services perspective, all stakeholders use the system in one way or another and their experiences should be considered to reduce any gaps that can cause stakeholder dissatisfaction (Maduro, Fernandes & Alves, 2018:80; Durl, Trischler & Dietrich, 2017:441). Rothmann and Essenko (2007:135) state that support staff are vital stakeholders within the tertiary education system but are often ignored in terms of their ability to create knowledge and innovative services. This is supported by Voss and Gruber (2006:5&8) who explain that depending on how effectively internal systems (those that include support staff) are functioning will influence how well external customers' problems can be solved while providing quality services.

3.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Sutarso et al. (2019:43) state that understanding co-creation and identifying stakeholder experiences from a higher education perspective are limited. Aubgre (2018:324) emphasises the need for research within the Tertiary education system due to the importance this sector has in the development of new knowledge and skills required for the proper functioning of society as large. The drive of African Tertiary institutions to reach higher global rankings again require that the entire system functions well and effectively, but this is rarely the case. Specifically, in terms of support staff, Rothmann and Essenko (2007:136) explain that these staff experience different issues compared with academic staff within Tertiary education as these staff experience a high level of demands but have limited resources to function within. Roberts and Dunworth (2012:518) explain that studies considering the experiences of support staff have been largely ignored with focus being on academics and students. Some studies on support staff have focused on their stress levels and its influence on job satisfaction, but not on their experiences within the system and the system that they are functioning in. Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten and Moore-Cheery (2015:196) state that in many studies the role of co-creation between academics and students have been considered, but the experience of support staff within that system and their ability to co-create value has not. Aubgre (2018:324) emphasises that leveraging the support staff skills into resources that will increase governance levels, administrative compliance and innovativeness are essential to create positive outcomes and better service delivery for the system as a whole. Therefore, focussing on support staff and their experiences within the systems theory context is essential to create a more efficient and effective system that can lead to higher levels of innovativeness, service delivery, job satisfaction and engagement (van Straaten, du Plessis, van Tonder, 2016:1). Based on the above, the following objectives are set:

- To examine support staff working at a Tertiary education institutions' experience
- To explore the factors that affect support staff working at a Tertiary education institution experience
- To uncover how support staff function within a larger Tertiary education institution as a key service provider
- To identify potential gaps in the support staffs' experience in their daily tasks and responsibilities as key service providers within the Tertiary education institution.

4.   METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist research philosophy was followed in this research. Specifically a qualitative approach by utilising an exploratory research design. A probability sampling approach, namely systematic random sampling, to identify participants was followed. Each participant for the study was selected from a list of support staff that appear on the specific Tertiary education institutions internal email list, where a skip interval was used to identify a total of 10 participants ranging from secretaries, finance officers, IT staff and academic support staff. All relevant ethical and procedural considerations were followed in obtaining the list and contacting potential participants. Once approached via an introductory email, participants were informed of the nature of the study and were invited to participate in the study. Only those participants who provided informed consent were then contacted for an in-depth personal interview. An external research company conducted the in-depth interviews and transcribed the data to ensure no researcher bias, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. The in-depth interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide aimed directly at answering the research questions and lasted between one to one and a half hours. According to Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), six to eight participants in this type of study would allow for saturation to be reached. In this study, saturation was realised after six interviews. The data analysis process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used where researchers read the transcripts and developed codes using an inductive approach. The codes were compared through

repetition and re-reading and a set of final themes were identified (Spiggle, 1994). The use of various researchers ensured triangulation which contributed to the credibility of the findings.

5. FINDINGS

This section focuses on discussing the results obtained from the data analysis phase. Table 1 below describes the demographic profile and the different roles of the 10 support staff interviewed. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. The participants ranged from being five months to eight years in their current position.

Table 1: Participant demographics and administrative role

Pseudonym	Demographic characteristics	Administrative/support role
Melanie	White female, 50s	Central Academic technology support
Astrid	White female, 60s	Academic admin support and secretary
Alfred	Black Male, 40s	Faculty Administrator
Kerry	Black female, 40s	Senior Faculty Administrator
Ennie	Black female, 30s	Secretary – 4 years in current position
Adel	White female, 50s	Secretary – 1.5 years in current position
Francisca	Indian female, 40s	Secretary – 5 months in current position
Albert	Black Male, 30s	Academic support staff (teaching evaluations)
Maria	White female, 40s	Academic development centre
Lucia	Indian female, 40s	Admin and academic programme coordinator (Postgraduate)

From the analysis of the interviews, nine themes emerged which are discussed below from most to least prominent.

5.1 Process flow

This theme pertains to references made by participants about different systems and processes followed at the institution. This theme was most prominent in participants' answers, and is divided into five sub-themes in order to provide a more structured description of the different processes and systems that cause frustrations. Participants clearly expressed frustration at specific areas within the University such as the Finance and approval system and Human Resources Department. This clearly indicates problems with co-creations amongst stakeholders in the system.

5.1.1   Sub-theme 1: Frustration at the time it takes to get approval
On numerous occasions participants made mention of the time consuming process to obtain approvals for aspects such as quotations and flights. Frustration was in particular expressed with the delay that these approval systems cause on the individual's ability to meet their own deadlines and to appear as competent in doing their job. The following provides a quote from a participant expressing the length of the process.

> "If my boss had to travel somewhere, I have to source the flight quote or accommodation…and we fill in a form…it goes to the secretary, from the secretary to the head of school…it goes to the accountant, then to the dean…it's that process there.." [Lucia]

5.1.2   Sub-theme 2: Frustration with established process and role-players in the chain
Further frustration was expressed in terms of those individuals in the system that seemed unresponsive to requests and that have to be contacted repeatedly before a response is received. Underpinning this sub-theme and the frustrations experienced are the following quotes from participants.

> "I don't know whether people are ignorant or what, you would ask for something and it's not done. You need to force people to do their jobs. It makes my life miserable, because I need to do my job and it makes my job…It makes me feel inefficient." [Ennie].

> "… meeting my deadlines is dependent on them meeting theirs too…its not easy to meet deadlines…one has to continuously remind them…do a lot of follow ups" [Kerry]

> "And then you get problem areas where I just keep sending mails…I mail that person like a pest until I get a response." [Astrid]

In addition to the above, participants clearly expressed a lack of consistent and clear communication when changes or new procedures for established processes are rolled out. The following two quotes express the frustration participants experience due to this lack of communication with changes in processes and the role-players involved in the process.

"…nothing has been done about it…and people are sitting with old laptops…I was doing laptop purchases and they changed the system…but they didn't communicate it to all staff members" [Ennie]

"We feel the workers on the ground…people feel that the faculty just makes decisions, they don't think it through, and it affects us directly, its not practical." [Astrid]

5.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Financial systems and approvals
Participants expressed their frustration and concern at the length of the finance approval system; the response time from people working in the finance department as well as the length of time taken to pay suppliers. Quotes that emphasise this include:

"…I started getting copied in things that… where payments had to come through but was sitting in the system for a while…and I couldn't understand if a payment came through…it's like having to tell people, listen I need you to transfer monies now, because there is an impact on my students…" [Lucia]

"Another is the procurement section…I think they don't have enough staff or too much work…they are just not delivering often. They are slow. "..I struggle to get publishers paid…so I'm getting this hate mail… but it's not me." [Melanie].

"It takes time to pay the people…and I feel sorry for those people who are waiting for their money." [Adel].

5.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Human Resources (HR) systems and approvals
A large concern with the HR department included the response times for approvals for positions such as tutors (accompanied by the payment to be processed with the post approval), and with the resultant pressures on departments and systems due to the length of time taken to both advertise and fill positions. Participants shared the following quotes:

"It has been interesting, as some interactions with HR have been responsive, others not – especially when it comes to things like tutors payments" [Maria]

"Especially the HR department…concerning new appointment, academics – we are suffering. It's horrific. Really horrific. It just increases workload…They are incompetent in not streamlining or advertising positions. Not following up. It takes a very long time to fill a position…that kind of thing" [Astrid]

"HR…I don't know what the problem is, but HR is just not finding their feet. They are slow, they make a lot of mistakes, I think that's one thing here that is not working." [Melanie].

5.1.5 Sub-theme 4: Venue booking systems and timetables
Participants explained that a new venue booking system was recently put in place, but expressed concerns that these systems removed responsibility from the venue and timetables department so that the individual department now need to make the booking. If there are thus timetable clashes (which apparently occur frequently even though the system is supposed to be electronic) or double venue bookings, there seems to be no contact person to help or anyone to take responsibility for these events. Participants expressed the following views:

"…for example, I want to book a venue….there's a new system that they are using… you log into the system, and its not working, and you need that venue… and when it's working you process it, and its stuck with someone who is not processing it… I requested a venue three weeks ago… and I am still waiting for it…" [Ennie].

"Something not happening properly at another Department (timetables) impacts my workload…" [Astrid]

"They administer the process…which is good and well…but if you have a clash…who do you go to? They going to say you made the booking…you did not see the clash." [Francisca].

"it's a new online system…but sometimes there will be clashes and stuff…it's still new for me and those that need to approve it." [Adel]

5.2 Academics

The second main theme occurring from the data analysis revolved around support staff expressing frustrations in dealing with academics. Although participants indicated that this did not apply to all academics, a number made mention of one or two academics they have to deal with that conveys an attitude of superiority and to an extent a disrespectful attitude toward support staff. Support staff also expressed that they are often faced with a few academics in their department that are always non-responsive to requests and often need to be nagged and reminded to complete certain tasks. Academic staff in general are described as not fond of doing administrative tasks and are often complaining that certain tasks are not - or at least should not be - their responsibility. One participant described academics as being conformists – they merely do a task because they are forced to and have to, with little thought or reflection behind the reasons for the tasks, and that it is often difficult to get their buy-in to a new system, process or method. Quotes supporting this theme include:

"They are the most difficult to deal with…academics…you send them emails and they don't respond…they don't read their emails…yet they expect you to perform miracles…" [Ennie]

"Whether a Prof, a doctor, and administrator…we are colleagues and that's how it should be…some people have these chips on their shoulders…there is maybe three people in this department that I know …that kind of speak down…but you get used to that…you learn to say no and stand up and say sorry I don't appreciate that, don't do that." [Astrid].

"I think the academic title is what drives many people crazy…one academic reminded me of the academic title, because I spoke to them without including it…they are also conformists…they do things because they need to get done…they wait for the last hour" [Albert]

Although many support staff experienced frustrations with academics, two participants expressed some compassion with academics' roles, stating that teaching is emotionally draining, and that lecturers have very high workloads.

'…but you got to look a bit wider…it's their workload. They have priorities as well and then everything falls in. With most of them I get good cooperation." [Astrid].

'Truth be told…academics are not easy to please…it take time to gain their trust and understand them…they complain about a lot of things they have to do…exams…research and are unable to cope with all the pressure which results in their admin lagging behind…" [Kerry].

5.3 Culture and age

The third main theme that came through refers to culture and age. In a few instances administrative staff referred to older staff members as being frustrating to engage with as they are often unwilling to innovate and to teach others and transfer their skills. Quotes underpinning this theme include:

"…or some are still stuck in the historical past…" [Albert]

"There's a sense of…you know…a racial dynamic…as to how people feel…there's people that have been working in the same job for 40 years or 30 years…they have a certain skill…but then someone comes in and has a better qualification, and they are treated as less…because the person in the position for 30 years does not want to hand over that skill." [Francisca]

In addition, this theme identified that to a lesser extent, mention was also made of the need for others to convey an accepting attitude towards different backgrounds and to demonstrate acknowledgement of tasks being done.

"Accept other people's background. Embrace each other. Know everyone's weaknesses and strengths. Support each other and work together in harmony…" [Ennie]

"…treat everybody fairly…because there are still some animal farm tendencies here…the ideal would be everyone would be equal…irrespective of their skin, because currently that is not the case…you are told about restrictions and whatever…but the same things are given to white people…" [Kerry]

5.4   Infrastructure and facilities

In terms of infrastructure (theme four), by far the largest number of complaints centred on the restrooms. Female participants complained excessively in the transcripts about the restrooms when asked to discuss infrastructure. In the majority of cases, these facilities are shared with students, as there are no separate restrooms for administrative and academic staff. Participants stated:

"So there is never soap and hand towels to wipe your hands, sometimes we do run out of toilet paper and that for me is a bit of a sticky area, because I mean its hygiene at the end of the day" [Maria]

"Cleaners don't do their job…the place is dirty. You go to the toilet…I don't know how many infections I have had, bladder infections." [Ennie].

"The toilets are hideous. The toilets are not sufficiently clean…and I think if there was more hygiene in the bathrooms we wouldn't get sick as often…" [Francisca]

"The bathrooms, it's horrible to use them….sometimes when you get visitors, you feel bad to take them to the bathrooms…it's horrible…not clean…and I think there's a lot of people who get sick from the bathrooms…especially the ladies…you need to be quick and go back to the office and its difficult there's a lot of people…it would be nice if there's a different bathroom for students and staff. I think there is more students than ever before in the entire history. It (the institution) wasn't built for so many students."
[Adel]

In terms of infrastructure, some complaints were also raised about parking facilities, entrance booms not working and students then parking in staff areas. This applies in particular to the main campus of the specific institution.

"As staff you cannot find parking because students are parking in the staff parking…because the booms are not working" [Maria]

"It's a disaster…You find that students are using staff parking…and when you come as staff, you don't have parking. I'm supposed to be here at 8…but you find that I come here at quarter past 8 in my office, because I couldn't get parking…I feel like I lose that time. With operations…there is no leadership at all".
[Ennie].

5.5   Budget cuts

The fifth theme centred on participants highlighting their awareness of the budget cuts experienced at the institution. This was most evident in their mentioning of the application for new computers for staff members, and battling with old computers. Quotes that support this include:

"…this laptop was giving me a problem…the cord wasn't working with the network cable…so it kept losing connectivity…I only got this sorted out in the last month since I came here." [Lucia].

"I have been struggling with computers and getting new computers for staff is like drawing blood…"
[Francisca]

This theme came through depending on the position of the support staff. Mostly faculty administrators and only some general support staff expressed financial frustrations about experiencing continued extra workloads with no additional compensation. Faculty officers also expressed concern about workload associated with the particularly large faculty that they work in.

"the workload is too much…we getting this triangle where management is a lot of crooks getting high salaries and where people on the ground are not enough…" [Astrid]

"they pile us administrators with more load of work…and less money…and that is the problem… You get a senior faculty officer that earns the same as a senior faculty officer at another smaller faculty…is that fair?" [Kerry].

"..in the process the budget remains the same…we have more work…but operate with last year's budget."[Albert]

One participant explained that there are a lot of pressure on management in terms of the allocation of funds and that people don't always appreciate what is really going on.

"People don't always realise, that we too quick to complain about management…but there's a lot of those things that people are not thinking about…government is not subsidizing us properly…all the problems with not supporting students…. students not having food… millions spent for free e-books (to help students)…all of this comes from the university budgets." [Melanie].

5.6   Promotion and job variety

In terms of theme six – promotion and variety – there were differences in experiences depending on which position the participant fulfilled. For example, administrators in secretarial roles often expressed enjoyment in their roles due to the variety and the unpredictable nature of the day to day job, with little mention of promotional concerns. Specific quotes that support this include:

"I love admin, it's order and you can always make changes. I love it, I sit here and I do my job and everyone is happy and everything is under control, so I love it." [Ennie].

'I would say I like the variety of my job, there is a lot of stuff to do. I would hate just doing one thing."
[Astrid]

"It's not mundane…you are not doing the same thing over and over…they should call us admin coordinators…not secretaries…we don't do much secretarial work" [Francisca]

On the other hand, those support staff in faculty roles however often expressed frustration about not having clear promotional routes. A particular concern was the fact that a lot of investment is made in developing a person in a faculty role, and once they've obtained the skills, the person leaves for another faculty or institution, as there is nowhere higher for them to progress in their current roles. This in turn also has workload implications. These participants expressed the following views:

"Academics have clear promotion policy which is something that they do not have for administrators and that is why we always lose staff…we can only promote staff when a senior position becomes vacant due to resignation or a member moving to another Department. "I have an admin assistant who has been in one position and not been able to move to a Faculty officer position…as there is no vacancy. We develop these people…give them skills and have to lose them because we cannot promote them." [Kerry].

"It is very difficult for support staff to get promoted…" [Melanie]

"They need to have like a promotion plan for support staff…or non-academics…unless you apply for another advertised position…there is no other plan…" [Alfred]

5.7   Time periods and workload

The seventh theme that emerged pertained directly to higher workload at certain times and can be linked to the budget cut theme. It was evident, in particular from faculty officers, as well as from participants dealing with the faculty directly on a regular basis, that there are certain times of the year when the work pressures, loads and deadlines are immense and that this causes high levels of stress with other stakeholders and potential resignations. Participants stated:

"Even when it was only the faculty…we had the same problem…too little people and not enough people…and too much work…that is why a lot of people left there…and later on it just became worse…"
[Astrid]

Students also visit the faculties more regularly at certain periods of the year (exam time, registration time). A problem with frequent student visits seems to include that students do not understand the hierarchy of the system and therefore visiting the faculty in instances where they should be visiting a home department or specific academic.

5.8 Students
In the majority of cases, administrators are exposed to dealing with students. Some more than others which led to the identification of theme eight. The majority of participants indicated a sense of compassion toward the students, an appreciation for student challenges, sympathy for their problems, and willingness to help and serve the students to the best of their abilities. Some quotes that support this include:

5.9 Management
The final theme identified in the transcripts are centred on one stakeholder – management. The majority of participants commended their managers for having an attitude of openness, accessibility, willingness to listen to recommendations and for being available and accessible and making staff feel valued. Specifically, participants indicated:

A few participants expressed concerns in terms of acknowledgment, their ideas not being considered or if they are not consulted as someone who is supposed to be the most knowledgeable on something. Some quotes that depict this include:

"…my voice is zero…I can complain to the HoD…which takes it up to the HoD meeting…where the decisions is made…and then they complain to the dean or the director…" [Astrid]

"All we want is a bit of value and to feel valued and that we contribute, if you undermine me, then you know what…it becomes very difficult to be happy." [Maria]

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The identification of nine themes from the data suggests the complexity and the many stakeholders and processes that support staff at this specific Tertiary institution engage with (Nenonen et al., 2015). In reviewing the results, the largest theme "process flow" in particular confirms that many of the interactions in this Tertiary institution's processes do not follow a rational process (Koopmans, 2016), and that numerous delays, due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders cause backlogs and delays which result in staffs frustration and prolonged service delivery. These processes included general management approvals systems, role-players in the systems that are unresponsive, financial approval and payment systems, HR systems pertaining to approval of and making of staff appointments and venue booking systems. It is evident from the findings that these delays, in the processes cause heightened emotions and frustrations in support staff (e.g. continued requests from suppliers about their payments), and that certain delays have a potentially more severe long term impact on the system – e.g. workload problems in the case of slagging with staff appointments and poor service delivery which causes additional problems.

The second theme pertaining to academics is supported by previous research by Rothmann and Essenko (2007). The authors state that support staff often deal with conflicting pressures with multiple stakeholders, which includes academics. Complaints here mostly centred on the manner in which academics treated support staff, as well as being unresponsiveness to tasks, thereby causing negative emotions amongst support staff and delays in the system. In a previous study by De Meyer-Heydenrych and Stiehler-Mulder (2018), it was found that academics experienced feelings of immense workload pressures and often complained about inefficient administrative functions and not being clear on which administrative duties they should be taking responsibility for, based on what their core job description are. With regard to the delayed responses from academics and the reluctant attitude towards administrative duties, academics' workloads might therefore be a contributing factor to this behaviour. The third theme – culture and age - although not mentioned by all participants as equally challenging, should be appreciated as a dynamic of the country's history and current efforts to stimulate integration and to uplift and upskill previously disadvantaged communities (Hornsby 2015), and will remain an ongoing challenge that affects all activities if not addressed with the needed leadership and sensitivity.

The fourth and fifth themes of budget cuts and infrastructure and facilities mostly highlighted the states of the restrooms, the general cleanliness of the institution, parking facilities, technology (e.g. obtaining new computers) and increased workloads without additional or increased remuneration. These themes are a possible direct result, which is becoming a symbol of the challenges that Tertiary institutions in South Africa are facing, due to reduced government funding (Hornsby, 2015; Mampane & Omidire, 2018:1) and university pressures to reallocate its funds to other more pressing priorities such as student support. This challenge is supported in a comment made by one participant explaining that staffs do not always understand the pressures that management is faced with and how many additional expenses – e.g. student support and paying for learning materials, universities are faced with.

Promotion and job variety, the sixth theme, provided some interesting insights. Those support staff who experienced many challenges and variety in their role seemed very positive and happy, and made little mention of promotion needs, whilst those who were in more specific support roles with clearly specified duties, conveyed a stronger need to have a clear promotional path and opportunities. The latter group of participants also complained most about increased workloads, which, in referring to the seventh theme of time-periods and workload, suggests that particular time-periods caused increased stress and even resulted in some resignations, and could therefore be a contributing factor to this need for acknowledgement in the form of promotional advancement. Perceptions of unfairness may lead to physiological stress and sickness, which may increase absenteeism and potential job accidents, and should therefore be acknowledged as an important role player in employee performance and behaviours. It is also argued that justice in the workplace could be a stronger predictor of behaviours such as intentions to resign - the application of justice in the workplace is therefore an important aspect to be considered (Lemons & Jones, 2001).

The last two themes – students and management were both mostly positive in nature. It was evident that support staff were well aware of students' challenges and often times challenging circumstances and that this resulted in treating them with compassion. Interestingly, despite the workload and promotional complaints, which one would assume to an extent would reflect on attitudes towards management, staff indicated that management had a very open and positive attitude and were approachable. They did however highlight the importance of being consulted and acknowledged for their skills at times. Management's role is a strength that could potentially be leveraged to improve other areas of concern.

Figure 1 below is a visual representation of the themes and serves to demonstrate the different tasks, system engagements and challenges that support staff encounter, and are faced with on a daily basis. Those engagements that have either a predominant positive (+) or negative (-) effect, or both (+/-), are shown to provide a clearer picture of what support staffs' daily encounters and challenges include and the resultant impact.

Figure 1: Support staff system engagements
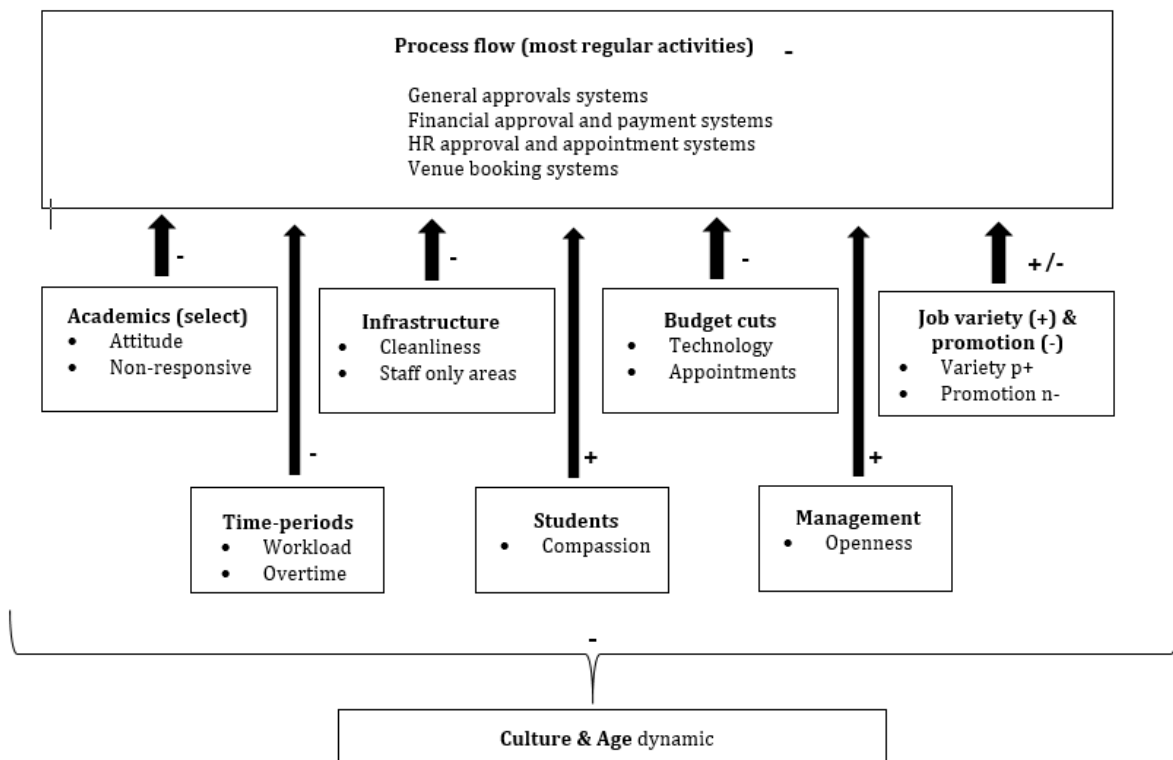
In reviewing the above activities and encounters as per Figure 1, and in an effort to propose improved system flow and functioning, as well as to identify areas where positive co-creation may take place, the following recommendations to management are proposed to ensure the effective functioning of the Tertiary system:

Process flow (-)
- Relook approval systems and assigned responsibilities of different mangers in the system in an effort to reduce the number of approvals that need to take place. Clear guidelines, responsibilities and consequences in terms of efficient, ethical and responsible approvals need to be developed and more responsibilities given to lower level managers thereby reducing the number of parties and approvals in the chain. Engage with support staff to obtain ideas as to how to reduce these processes.
- Revise the Financial and HR systems and identify areas where a possible additional staff component is needed, where internal approval chains may be too long and where new systems or methods need to be implemented in order to speed up turnaround times pertaining to payments and appointments.
- Consider internal annual staff service rating systems that are linked to team performance bonuses.

- In an effort to instil a collaborative attitude between stakeholders in the different chains and to thereby co-create value, consider including collaboration and co-creation as a KPI in employee performance agreements where employees need to provide evidence of collaboration and co-creation in the system that they work with and how they have contributed to improving these as well as the effective functioning of the system (this can apply to all stakeholders – administration, management and academics)
- Many tasks are repeated or added to another workload – identify where there are inefficiencies and overlaps and streamline the process to reduce workload and inefficient systems.

Academics (-)

- Although not all academics were described as treating staff with a superiority attitude, academics need to be cognisant of the multiple roles and functions and important tasks that administrators play and treat them in the same fashion as they expect to be treated and acknowledge and appreciate the role that administrative staff play - this also links through to the culture and age theme (see below)
- The institution should review academic administrative tasks and provide greater clarity in terms of which areas academics need to take responsibility for and which not
- Admin support numbers in departments should also be revised and where needed budget allocated to increase the support staff component in those cases where administrative duties potentially severely impact on lecturer output in terms of their core functions of teaching and research

Culture and age (-)

- Consulting the institutions own anthropoly department to develop a short learning course or host a session on workplace culture and dynamics to better educate staff to be sensitive and to and better understand age and cultural dynamics should help to improve on this particular challenge
- More opportunities for staff members to interact on social levels should also be created in order to better learn from and get to know one another

Infrastructure and facilities and Budget cuts (-)

- Budget allocations need to be revised to ensure that all stakeholders have the best equipment (such as computers) to work with and improve daily staff environments. Policies could be implemented such as allocating a certain percentage of additional income streams generated by the Tertiary institution being allocated for hiring additional support staff for peak periods, to build additional or allocate current restrooms to staff only and employ additional cleaning staff, and provide equipment and supplies.
- Ensure that budgets include a "maintenance" section that ensures that technologies such as for entry and exit (booms) are updated and in working order and where basic facilities such as restrooms are kept in working order. Maintenance staff should also be motivated and evaluated accordingly on their responsiveness to address issues that arise

Job variety and Promotion (+/-)

- Management of the Tertiary institution needs to work with support staff to identify ways to increase job variety and complexity to increase job satisfaction and to determine clearer promotional paths for administrators

Time-periods and workload (-)

- Through systems thinking and networking theory identify the major activities that overlap and happen simultaneous during particular periods of the year and revise and restructure those activities that could be moved to different time periods and due dates in this way reallocating resources to different activities.
- Justice should be regarded as an important contributing factor to employee behaviour and should be demonstrated by suppling additional support and assistance during peak periods.
- Faculties may consider developing large service boards that can be displayed in the faculty entrance to guide students to where they need to be, to answer some of their smaller questions they might have

and so to help them understand where they should go with their requests – thereby helping to stream student visits better and reducing staff interruptions

Students and Management (+)

- Linking back to the themes of process flow, managements' openness and positivity toward staff could be used as a strength in enhancing communication levels. For example, new systems that need to be implemented could firstly be assigned and explained to managers who then convey and clearly explain the new system and process to support staff to ensure that the reasoning behind changed systems are clearly understood and therefore better supported.
- Management should also be encouraged to consult internal staff before asking external opinions and should focus on applying listening and acknowledgement when dealing with employees

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is not without its limitations. This study was only conducted at one Tertiary institution among staff from one Faculty. The study also did not consider the interactions of other stakeholders with support staff. Although experiences from support staff were assessed, the external environmental changes such as those of lower Governmental funding for Tertiary institutions or the requirement by Government to insource cleaning and other support staff as not considered in the interview guide. Based on these limitations, further research should be conducted to consider the experiences and interactions of all support staff at the Tertiary institution as a whole (and other institutions) as well as the impact of Government policy on the functioning of the Tertiary system should be conducted.

8. CONCLUSION

The results of the study clearly indicated that support staff play a vital role in the functioning of the Tertiary institution and work with many stakeholders within the system, but they experience high levels of frustration as part of their jobs. This can mainly be attributed to the lack of communication, systems thinking and networking theory applied at the Tertiary institution. In order to improve the levels of job satisfaction and efficiency amongst support staff, it is essential that the Tertiary institution needs to implement systems thinking and service design in order to co-create value. This will require that all stakeholder experiences as well as policies and processes be reconsidered from a systems viewpoint and utilise all resources within the network for effective, efficiency and a more streamlined process. This will then allow for co-creation to occur amongst all stakeholders and within the system leading to a more competitive and self-sufficient system which could also assist in creating solutions for complex African problems.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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