CUSTOMER SERVICE ORIENTATION OF INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the customer service orientation of institutes of higher learning in South Africa, with specific reference to Universities of Technology in KwaZulu–Natal (KZN). As an exploratory study, the research aimed at understanding how various factors, of customer service orientation of institutes of higher learning, affected the perceived service quality provided to students. This quantitative survey was conducted among the universities' students, located in the province of KwaZulu–Natal, South Africa. A cross-sectional survey design was used to assess university of Technology students' perceptions of customer service orientation, by means of a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. A total of 110 questionnaires were analysed. Findings indicated that, most university of Technology students either agreed or were neutral regarding the customer service orientation they received in their respective universities of Technology, with above average, overall mean scores. The important factors that determined the customer service orientation of universities of Technology in South Africa were facilities, academic staff attendance during lecturing periods, administration of other activities relevant to the students, equal research funding accessibility, as well as ethical behaviour and professionalism of academic staff. The managerial implication is that measuring the customer service orientation of the universities of technology, to prioritize those factors identified as important by the students, for effective management of customer service. Providing good customer services across the universities is critical in gaining a competitive edge in the education sector.

Keywords: Service Orientation, Institutes, Higher Learning, Universities of Technology, Customer Service

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1. Introduction

It has been noticed that service quality spreads from business to education, as many higher education institutions have been stimulated and influenced by service quality, both for teaching and administrative support functions (Zeithaml, Bitner & Glemler, 2009). Focusing on the customer is an essential principle of service quality, and customers for the service of a higher education institution fall into five groups, students, employees, government and the public sector, and the industry and wider community (Martensen, Gronholdt, Elkildsen & Kristensen, 2000). Current literature, pertaining to service quality in the higher education sector is significantly undeveloped, as many researchers focus efforts on commercial services (Sultan & Wong, 2010). Oldfield & Baron (2000) stress that institutions operating in the higher education sector, previously not regarded as profit-making organisations, and are attempting to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals. As a result of this, universities must consider themselves as profit–making organisations that operate in a competitive market place.

The institutions of higher learning in South Africa are faced with many challenges, such as increased competition, lack of support from key constituencies, an increase in the size and diversity of the student population, and dealing with changing technology. In addition, there are increased calls for accountability, a higher demand for quality by all the stakeholders involved, more responsibility for research and teaching, and greater emphasis on efficient and effective management (Van Schalkwyk, 2011). Considering the competitive environment, there is a need for institutions to plan strategies that will differentiate them from each other. This can be achieved through the delivery of exceptional service quality (Kheng, Mahamad, Ramayah & Mosahab, 2010). In today's competitive world, institutions put customers at the centre of their attention, and their loyalty is the key to earn competitive advantage for institutions (Molaee, Ansar & Teimour, 2013).

2. Statement of the research problem

The increase in the dropout rate and low throughput rate, at both public and private institutions of higher learning in South Africa, are a big concern among local nationals and has created interest among scholarly researchers. There are many questions that require answers, with regard to the quality of service that students receive at the universities, as many stakeholders do not understand customer service orientation of South African Universities. The quality of service provided by the Universities of Technology are still unknown and surrounded by many assumptions, which attribute the high student dropout rate from the Universities of Technology, to the poor quality of customer services. This problem statement is supported by many researchers, which may be an indication that high dropout and low throughput rates could be caused by poor service quality provided by the institutions of higher learning in South Africa (Malele, 2011; Letseka & Maile, 2008). Murdoch (2013) echoes the sentiment in a study that shows only 15% of South African university students' graduate.

3. Aim and Objectives

Aim: The main aim of the study was to assess and evaluate the level of customer service orientation at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, using the case study of a University of Technology, and to establish to what extent it exists.

Objectives

• To examine the level of customer service orientation of institutions of higher learning in South Africa;
• To determine students' attitudes towards the quality of customer service provided by institutions of higher learning in South Africa; and
• To determine what action students believe the institutions should take to improve customer service orientation.

4. Literature review

This section outline the literature review used to formulate the questionnaire for this survey and to determine the critical variables for this study.

Service quality in South African institutions of higher learning: Service quality and customer satisfaction are global issues that affect all organisations, whether large or small, profit or non–profit, global or local (Yap & Kew, 2007). It has been observed that there is a significant association found between all the service quality factors and customer satisfaction, as well as with customer loyalty (Anand & Selvaraj, 2012). Success of a service provider depends on a high quality relationship with customers

(Panda, 2003), which determines customer satisfaction and loyalty (Jones, 2002 as cited by Lymperopoulos, Chaniotakis & Soureli, 2006). Literature indicates that higher education in South Africa is experiencing unrelenting pressure to expand access opportunities to learners, while at the same time improving present educational quality, without prospects of funding possibilities. The sector is faced with many difficulties, such as overcrowded lecture rooms, unsatisfied and outdated curricula, and poor learning facilities (Froneman, 2002).

Customer Service in Higher Education: The primary customers of the institution of higher learning are the students (Wallace, 1999). This means that, without students to teach, there is neither business for higher institutions nor service to provide. Robert (2013) indicate that Universities and colleges now recognize that the cost of education, coupled with busy lifestyles, mean it is necessary to become far more customer-centric in terms of learning delivery methods and an understanding that they are competing for students. Wiese, et al. (2010) show that globally, as well as in South Africa, both the non-profit sector and higher education are undergoing a period of change and increased competition. The higher education environment is experiencing significant changes, and the focus is moving to competitiveness and customer care (Liebenberg & Barnes, 2004). Boyd (2012) argues that higher education has focused less on the process of good customer service and more on the final product of producing educated graduates. With an ever-growing assortment of educational options, students seek institutions that will provide them with a unique educational experience that they will remember for a lifetime. In addition, the present student is a customer seeking an educational programme that will prepare him/her for a successful career and gainful employment (Asaduzzaman, Hossain & Rahman, 2013).

Students as customers for the University: The service quality of education in business institutes/universities is of immense importance especially it matters due to increase in the competition between the business institutes/universities (Kimani, Kagira & Kendi, 2011). Universities should become more student orientated rather than more customer service oriented (Justin, 2007). According to Finney & Finney (2010), students who perceive themselves as customers are more likely to feel entitled to and view complaining as beneficial. Satisfaction with their university, but not their perceptions of themselves as university customers, predicts educational involvement.

Student perceived service quality at the university: The perceived service quality dimensions that contribute most towards the overall perceived service quality of a university, are that of facilities (Sumaedi, Bakti & Metasari, 2012). The important dimensions or factors that determine service quality in

the universities are administrative quality, academic quality, programme quality, student support, and availability of resources (Kimani, Kagira & Kendi, 2011). A comparison of perceptions of service quality, between first and final year students, suggests that perceptions of service quality elements change over a period of study (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). However, as universities become more student orientated, student perceptions of higher educational facilities and customer service orientation are becoming more important (Arpin, 2007).

Student satisfaction: Consumer satisfaction and service quality continue to attract the attention of researchers and practitioners in a wide variety of disciplines (Athiyaman, 1997). It is believed that student satisfaction is an important qualitative indicator for higher educational institutes (Khosravia, Poushaneh, Roozegara & Sohrabifard, 2012). In addition, it has been noticed that in many countries, the globalization of higher education has led to an increased climate of competition and has modified the way universities face the market (Carvalho & Mota, 2010). Service quality attributes, such as instruction, capstone experience, academic advising, overall college experience and preparation for career, are mentioned as having a significant impact on students' satisfaction at the universities (Tessema, Ready & Yu, 2012). Manzoor (2013) indicates that both sports and transportation facilities have a significant effect on the satisfaction of students in the universities, while accommodation facilities do not have any significant effect on the satisfaction of the students.

Student satisfaction and Service quality attributes: It has been found that service quality determinants as reliability, responsiveness, competence, tangibility and communication are significant of service quality for the business institutes/Universities (Imran, Ahmed, Husaain, & Ahmed, 2011). However, Gibson (2010) classifies the identified antecedents of satisfaction across different factors:

• Academic staff/teaching – this means the quality of instruction, expertise and interest in the subject, degree of caring, helpfulness, accessibility, and feedback provided;
• Classes/curriculum - which include overall design and delivery, usefulness, scheduling, content, availability, class size/logistics, and level of difficulty;
• Advising support – consisting of accessibility, reliability, professionalism, helpfulness, responsiveness, and understanding;

• Skills developed by students – relationship skills, critical thinking, intellectual growth and social/moral awareness;
• Preparation for future – preparation for or furthering of a career and expecting a good job/quality of life;
• Services/facilities – opportunities to socialize, campus safety, a sense of belonging, enjoyable experiences and diversity of the student body;
• Student centredness/responsiveness to student concerns/suggestions, helpfulness, academic support and financial aid; and
• Pre-enrolment factors – accuracy of information provided, first, second, and third choice, admissions and orientation, and degree to which expectations are met.

5. Research Methodology

A quantitative survey method was utilised to collect primary data. A questionnaire was designed and pre–tested, in order to obtain the necessary information. The data were collected through a closed ended, self–administered questionnaire, in which a number of alternative answers are provided for respondents to choose from. In the case of this study, the sampling frame consisted of students from six faculties, namely Applied Sciences, Management Science, Art and Design, Engineering and the Built Environment, Accounting and Informatics, Health and Science, as well as from the Business studies unit.. A non-probability sampling method was used to select 110 respondents from Durban University of Technology (DUT) students.

Questionnaire design: The questionnaire consisted of closed–ended questions, in which respondents were asked to make one or more choices from a list of possible responses in addition to a rating scale, where respondents were given a continuum of labelled categories that represented a range of responses. The questions were designed in a manner that elicited answers to the objectives of the study. A Likert scale was used to structure some of the questions, as Likert scales are easy to code and analyse. Clear and simple words were used to construct the questions, in an effort to make them easier to understand and answer. The questionnaire consisted of questions developed from reviewing relevant literature on this research area. Key questions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of key questions

Research area	Question
Gender of participants	Please indicate your gender *Response alternatives:* Female; Male
Age of participants	Please indicate your age *Response alternatives:* age 15-21; age 22-31; age32-45; age 46+
Faculty/study registered under	Please indicate Faculty/study registered under *Response alternatives:*
Level of study of participants	Please indicate your level of study *Response alternatives:*1st year; 2nd year; 3rd year; B-Tech; Post-Graduate
Academic challenges at University	Studying at University of Technology is academically challenging *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Student's responsibilities at the University	Studying at University of Technology encompasses too many responsibilities *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Sufficient time to do other things	There is sufficient time to: Relax, study, do homework and socialise *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Facilities availability at the University	Facilities at the University of Technology are good and enough for all students *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
University administration	Good administration of other activities and services, such as receiving results on time, fee updates on time *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Qualifications of academic staff and competency	Academic staff, including lecturers, are highly qualified and competent *Response alternatives*: 5 point Likert scale
Academic staff professionalism and ethical	Academic staff are more ethical and professional *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Academic staff attendance of lectures	Academic staff are always on time for lectures *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
University programmes structured	Programmes structured very well and adequate *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale
Research Funding availability	Research funding and other relevant financial assistance are made available for all students *Response alternatives*: 5 point Likert scale
University pass rate	Pass rate at the University of Technology is good in all faculties *Response alternatives*: 5 point Likert scale
Stipulated time for university programmes	Study period is adequate for the students to finish their studies in the stipulated time *Response alternatives:* 5 point Likert scale

Data analysis: The data were coded and edited to reduce errors, thus making it easier to capture the data into the SPSS computer package. The questionnaires were counted and re–counted to ensure that all respondents had answered and completed the questions satisfactorily. The data capture was double–checked in order to ensure there were no capturing errors.

Frequencies: Frequencies were used to determine the number of responses that each question received, and were also used to crosscheck the coding of the data. The information gathered from the frequencies thus allowed for a comparison between faculties, ages, gender, and year of study.

Chi–Square Tests: A Chi–square test was conducted, to measure the extent to which the observed and expected frequencies differ. In this study, it was used to identify variables that were strongly associated with the dependent variables.

Validity and reliability: The questionnaire was assessed by the researcher and statistical experts and by pre–testing it with a small sample similar to the population, to determine content and construct for this study. No significant changes were required. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was tested, to determine a coefficient of 0.75, and the results indicate that the reliability of the study was acceptable.

6. Research Findings

This section provides a detailed analysis of the findings and interpretation of the results. The analysis entails the use of descriptive statistics analysis, in the form of frequencies, and bi-variate analysis, in the form of Chi–Square tests. The descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies and percentages, provide an initial, general overview of the results and are illustrated by means of bar charts. Chi–Square tests were used to confirm the reliability of the results. Some information is presented in the form of graphs extracted from Microsoft Excel, to clarify the findings.
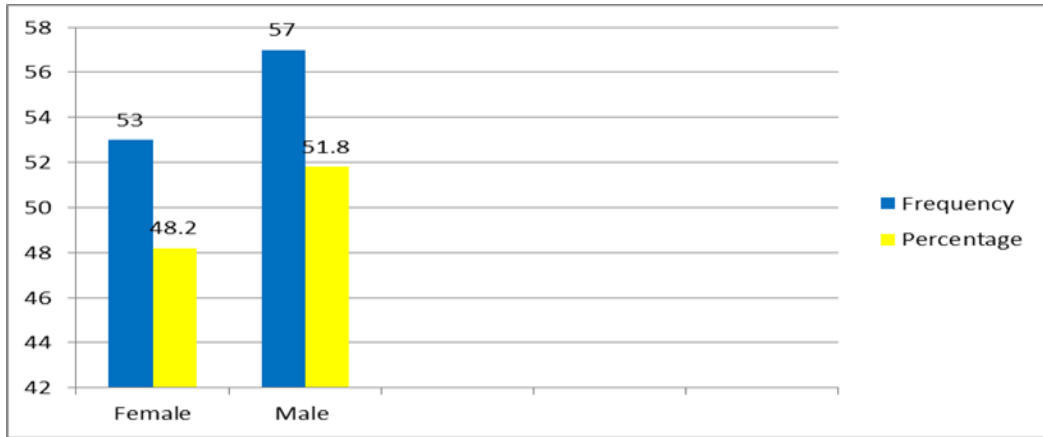
Figure 1. Gender of respondents

With regard to Figure 1, out of the 110 questionnaires distributed, the results indicate that 53 (48.2%) of the respondents were female and 57 (51.8%) were male.
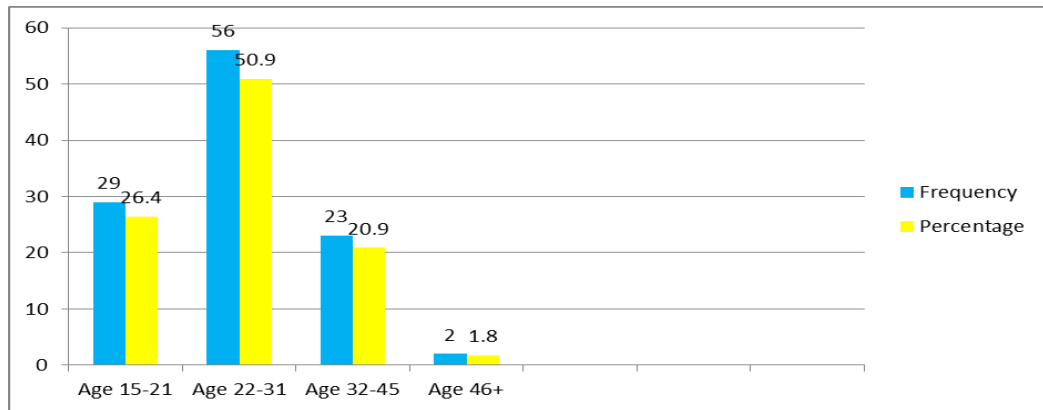

Figure 2. Age of respondents

Figure 2 shows that 29 (26%) of the respondents were between 15 – 21 years of age, 56 (50.9%) were between 22 – 31 years of age, 23 (20.9%) were between 32 – 45 years of age, while two (1.8%) were 46 years of age or older. A Chi–square test was conducted to determine whether the age of students at the University influences how they perceive customer service orientation provided by the University. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2 = .001; df = 8; 0.005).
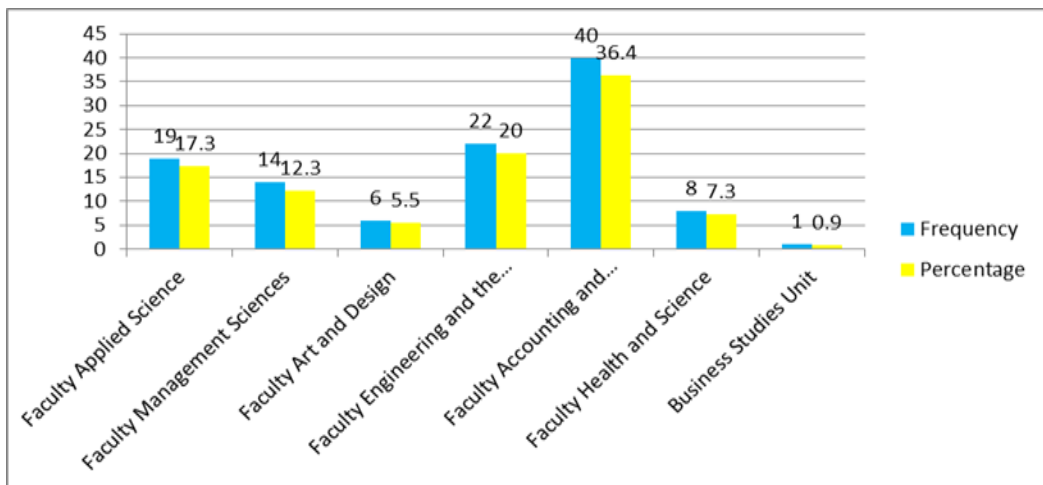

Figure 3. Faculties of Respondents

As illustrated in Figure 3, 19 (17.3%) of the respondents were from the faculty of Applied Science, 14 (12.7%) were from the faculty of Management Science, six (5.5%) were from the faculty of Art and Design, with 22 (20%) from the faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, and 40 (36.4%) were from the faculty of Accounting and Informatics. Another eight (7.3%) were from the faculty of Health and Science and one (0.9%) was from the Business studies Unit. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine whether the faculty at which students are registered, influences how they perceive service quality provided by the university. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 43, 450$; df= 24; P = .009).
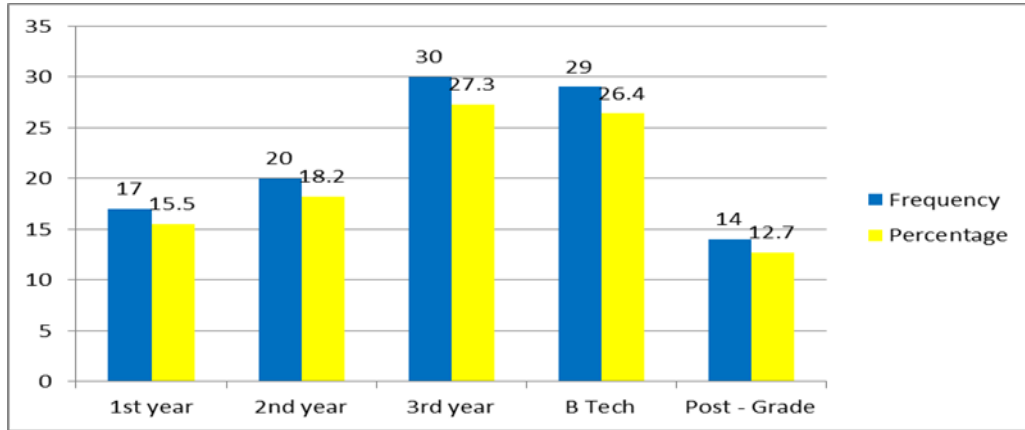
Figure 4. Level of qualification of respondents

The findings reflected by Figure 4, show that, of the 110 respondents who answered the questionnaire, 17 (15.5%) were first year students, 20 (18.2%) were second year students, and 30 (27.3%) were third year student, with 29 (26.4%) B–Tech and 14 (12.7%) post–graduate students. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine if the level at which students were registered has any influence on how they perceive the quality of service provided by the University. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 43, 799$, df =16, P= .000).
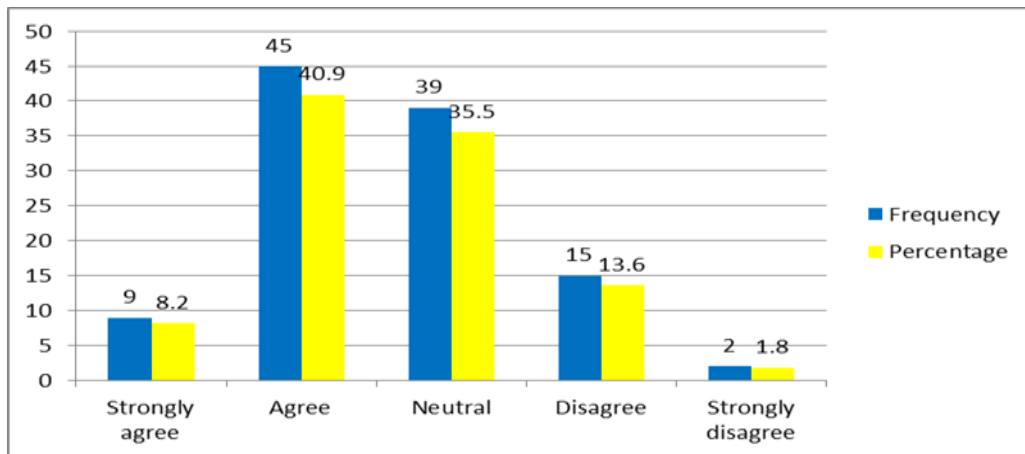

Figure 5. Academic Challenges of the respondents

As illustrated in Figure 5, 54 (49.1%) of the respondents agree that, studying at a University of Technology is academically challenging, while 39 (35.5%) are neutral towards the statement, and 17 (15.4%) disagree with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted, to determine if academic challenges for students at the university include quality of service orientation. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2: 42, 478; df= 16; P=.000).
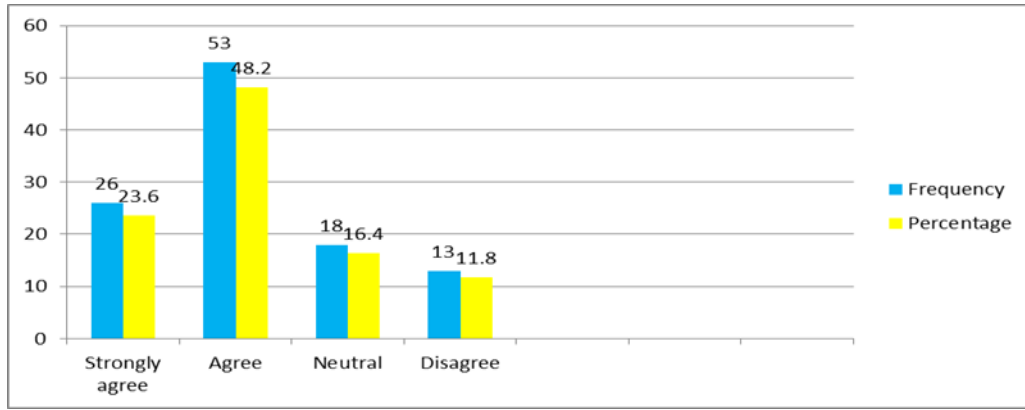
Figure 6. Responsibilities of respondents at the University

The findings, illustrated in Figure 6, show that 26 (23.6%) of the respondents strongly agree that studying at the University of Technology encompasses too many responsibilities, with 53 (48.2%) of the respondents agreeing, while 18 (16.4%) are neutral and 13 (11.8%) disagree. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2= 36.265; df=12; P= .000).
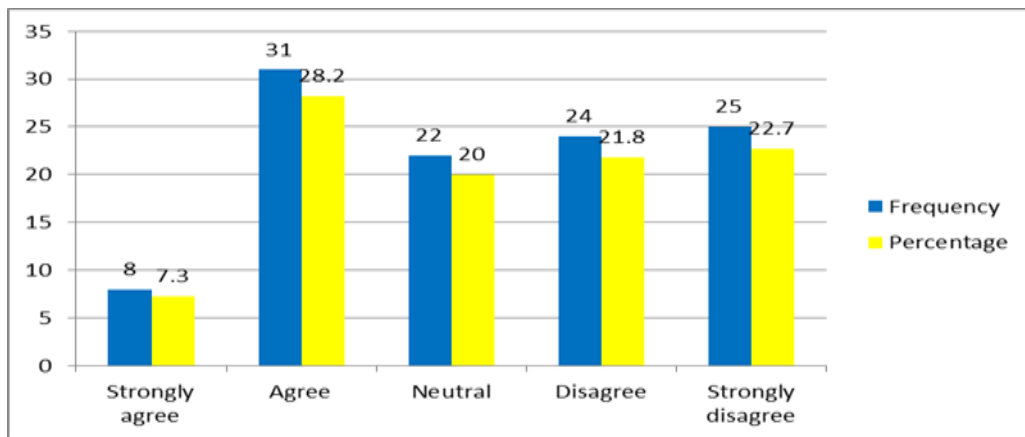

Figure 7. Respondents' time allocation

The results, as shown in Figure 7, illustrate that eight (7.3%) of the respondents strongly agree that there is sufficient time to relax, study, do homework and socialise. A further 31 (28.2%) agree with the statement, 22 (20%) are neutral, while 24 (21.8%) disagree and 25 (22.7%) strongly disagree. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2=46. 444; df = 16; P = .000).
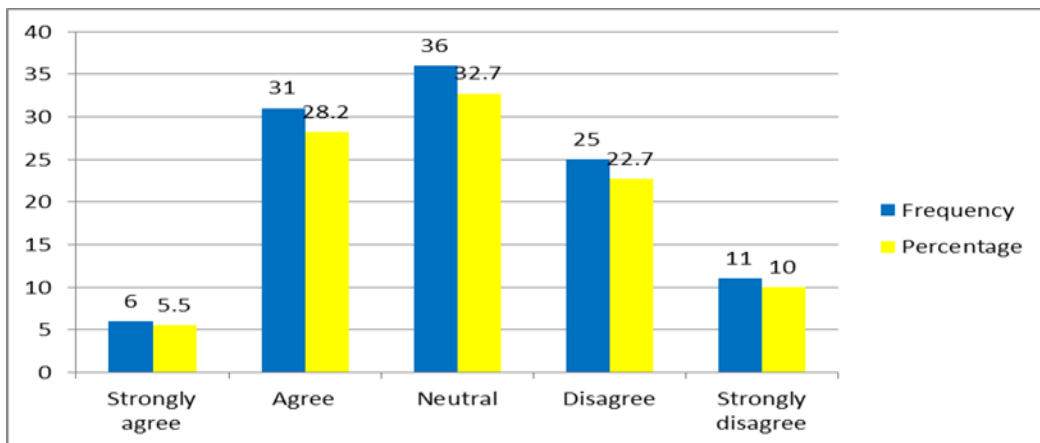

Figure 8. Respondents' feelings about Facilities at the University

Figure 8 shows that only six (5.5%) of the respondents strongly agree that facilities at the University of Technology are good and enough for all students, with an additional 31 (28.2%) agreeing with the statement, with 36 (32.7%) indicating that they were neutral. Twenty-five (22.7%) disagree, and 11 (10%) strongly disagree, while one (0.9) response was missing or not answered. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine if the University does have enough facilities to accommodate all registered students. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 84.777$; df = 24; P = .000).
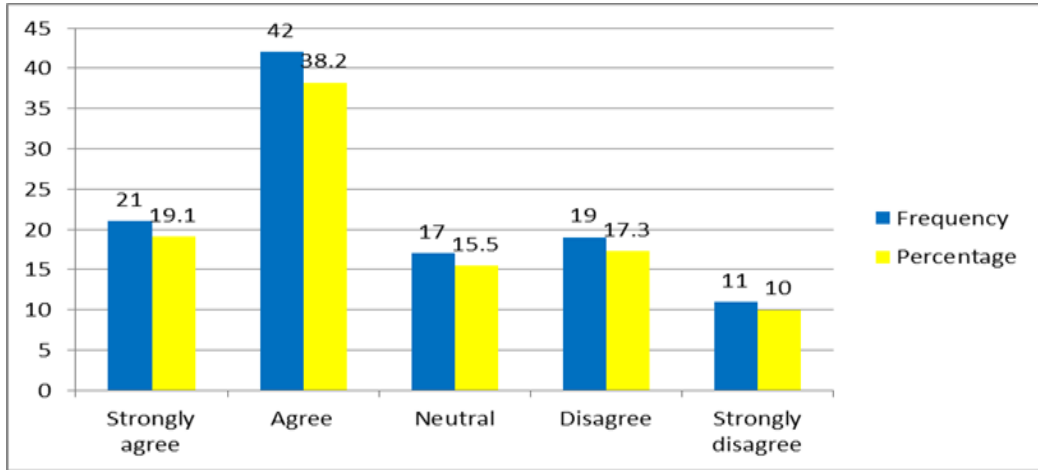

Figure 9. Respondents' feelings with regard to administration of other activities and service

Figure 9 indicates that 21 (19.1%) and 42 (38.2%) of the respondents agree that good administration of other activities and service such as getting results and fees updates on time, 17 (15.5%) are neutral, while 19 (17.3%) and 11 (10%) of the respondents disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine if good administration of other activities and service do have impact on how students perceived customer service orientation of University. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 82.775$; df=24; P= .000).
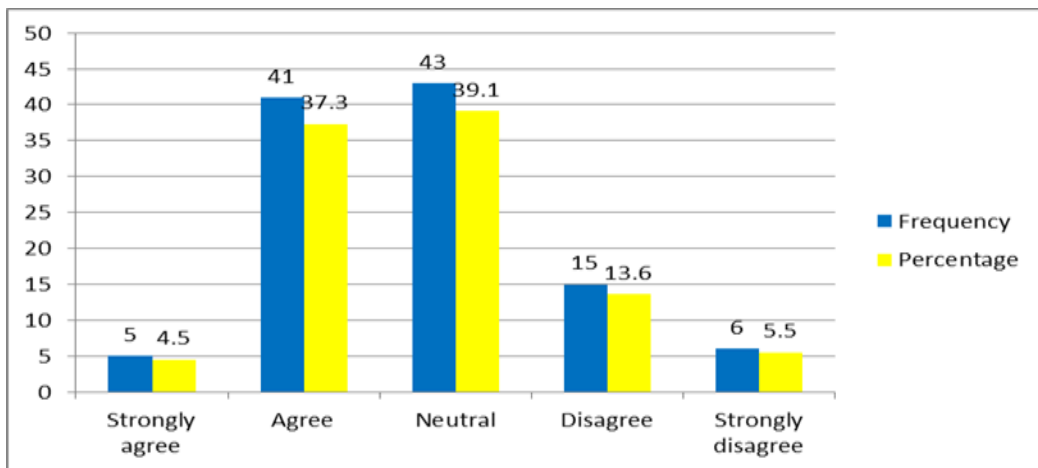

Figure 10. Respondents perceptions regarding the competence and qualifications of Academic staff

The findings illustrated by Figure 10 shows that five (4.5%) and 41 (37.1%) of the respondents agree with the statement that academic staff, including lecturers, are highly qualified and competent. A total, of 43 (39.1%) of the respondents are neutral, while 15 (13.6%) and six (5.5%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted on the relationship between the students' faculties, their level of study, and how they felt about academic staff qualifications and competency. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 83.508$; df= 24; P= .000).
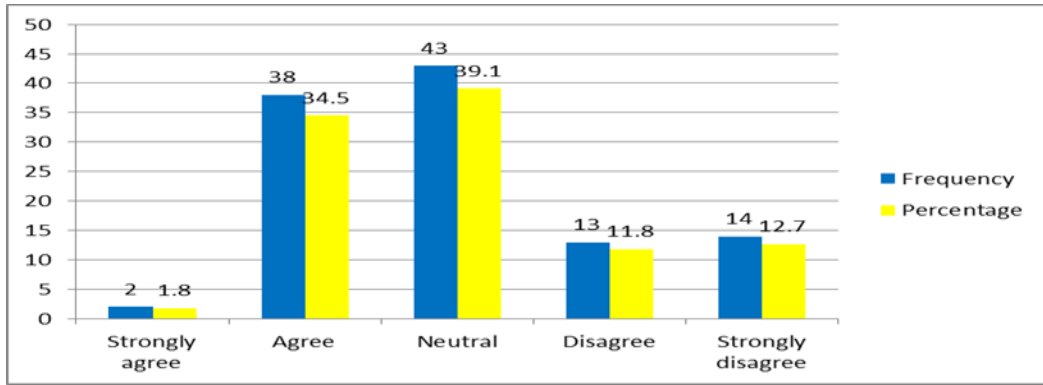
Figure 11. Respondents' feelings about academic staff behaving ethically and with professionalism

Figure 11 reveals that two (1.8%) and 38 (34.5%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that the behaviour of academic staff is more ethical and professional. While 43 (39.1%) of the respondents gave a neutral response, 13 (11.8%) and 14 (12.7%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted on the perception of all registered students at the University of Technology, regarding this statement. A Chi –square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2=49.739; df= 12; P= .000).
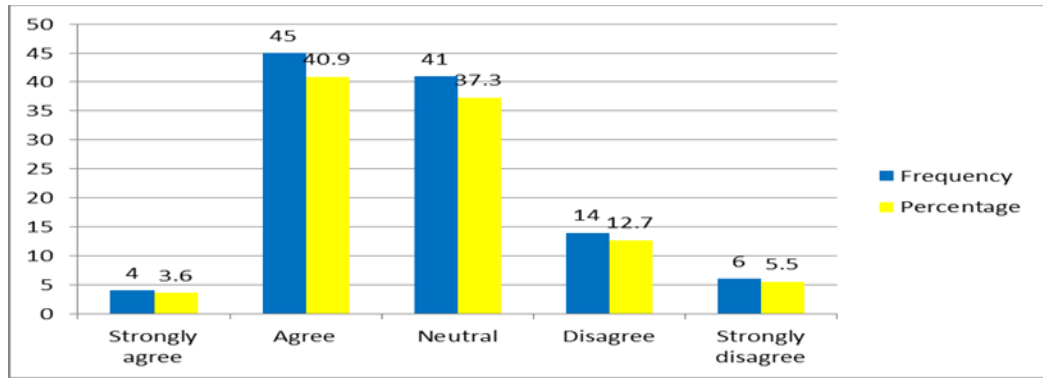

Figure 12. Respondents feelings about academic staff attendance during lecturing time

Figure 12 indicates that four (3.6%) and 45 (40.9%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that academic staff are always on time for lectures, with 41 (37.3%) being neutral, and 14 (12.7%) and six (5.5%) disagree. A Chi- square goodness of fit was conducted, to determine if all students from different faculties believe academic staff are always on time for lectures, as well as whether students have time to relax, study, do homework and socialise. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2 = 3,823; df = 6; P= .701).
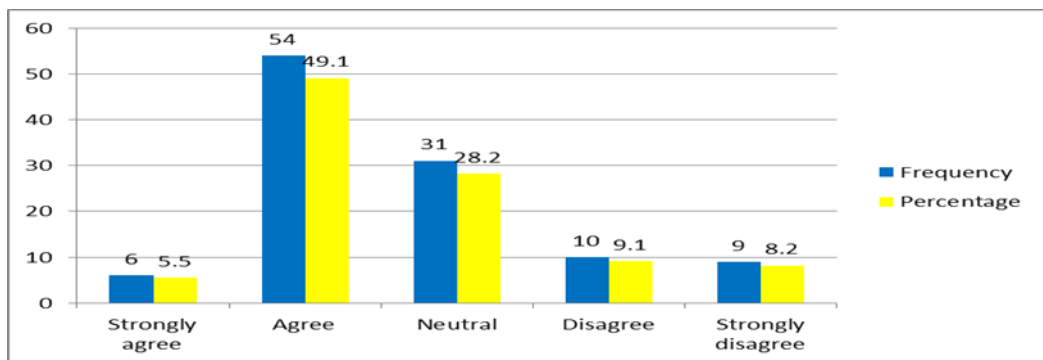

Figure 13. Respondents attitude towards the University programmes' structure

The results displayed in Figure 13 show that, of the respondents, six (5.5%) and 54 (49.1%) agree that programmes are structured very well and are adequate, while 31 (28.2%) are neutral, and 10 (9.1%)

and nine (8.2%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted on the relationship between faculties under which students are registered, and the availability of research funding, in all programmes offered by the

University of Technology. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2 = 64,549; df = 24; P = .000).
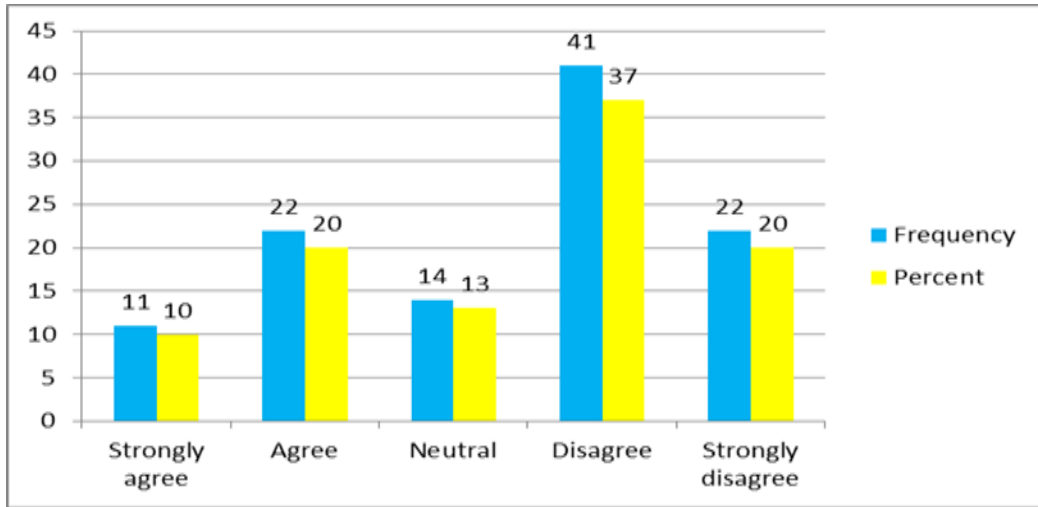

Figure 14. Perceptions of respondents about availability of research funding in University

Figure 14 illustrates that one (10%) and 22 (20%) of the respondents agreed that research funding, and other relevant financial assistance, are made available to all students, while 14 (13%) are neutral, and 41 (37%) and 22 (20%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine whether

students from all faculties believe that research funding is accessible by every student who needs it. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2= 84.777; df = 24; P = .000).
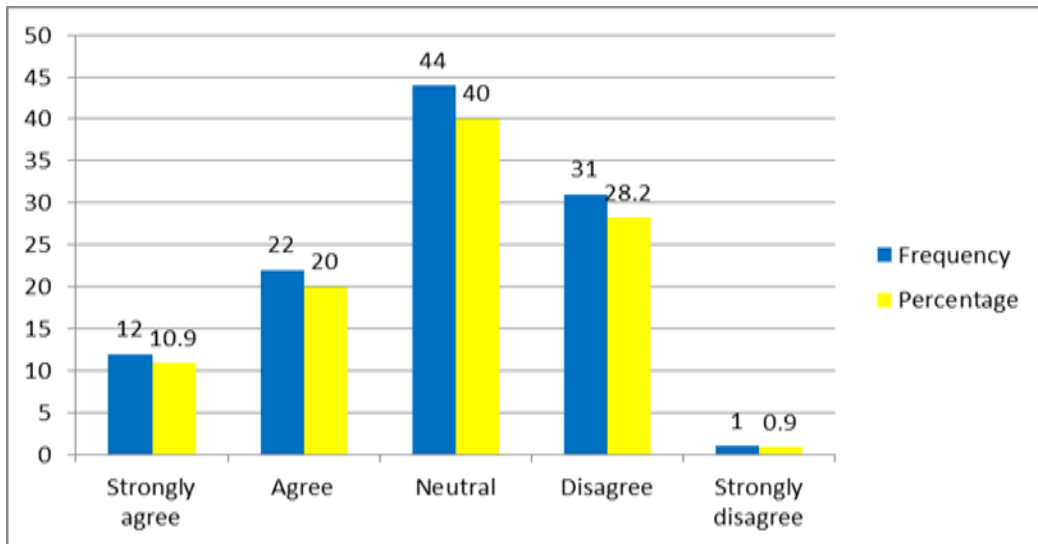

Figure 15. Respondents' feelings about University pass rate

The results, as shown in Figure 15, indicate that 12 (10.9%) and 22 (20%) of the respondents agree that the pass rate at the University of Technology is good in all faculties, with 44 (40%) indicating neutral, while 31 (28.2%) and one (0.9%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted, to determine whether

square test was conducted, to determine whether students from all faculties believe that the pass rate at the University of Technology is good. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant (X^2= 43, 025; df= 24; P= 010).
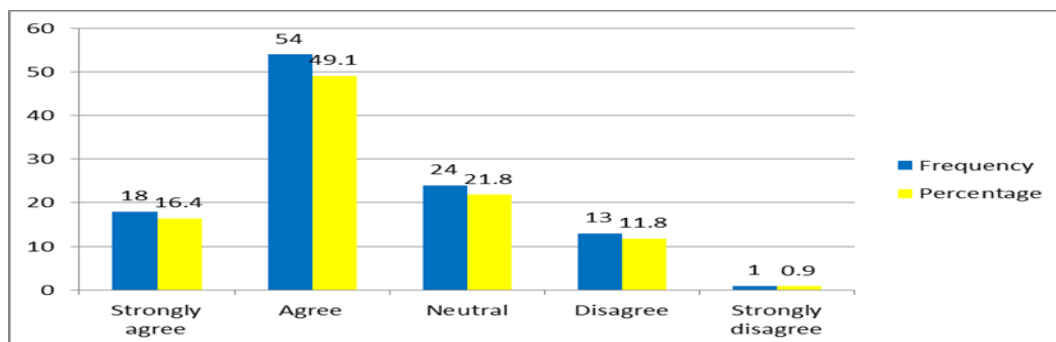
Figure 16. Respondents' perceptions about time stipulated to finish programme

Figure 16 reveals that 18 (16.4%) and 54 (49.1%) of the respondents agree with the statement that study period is adequate for the students to finish their studies in the stipulated time, with 24 (21.8%) being neutral and 13 (11.8%) and one (0.9%) disagree. A Chi–square test was conducted on the relationship between gender, age, faculties under which students are registered, and how they feel about the stipulated time in which to finish the programme. A Chi–square goodness of fit test showed this finding to be statistically significant ($X^2 = 2.731$; df = 4; P =. 604).

Limitations: The study was limited to one South African institute of higher learning, which was the Durban University of Technology (DUT) only. It was therefore not appropriate to generalise the findings of the study to the total population. Nevertheless, there are many institutions of higher learning in South Africa, such as the one at which the research study was carried out, in which there might be the same problem.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions: This study investigated the nature, causes, and the effects of customer service orientation of institutions of higher learning, with specific reference to the DUT. The findings indicate that the availability of facilities at the University of Technology is perceived as inadequate, to accommodate all students enrolled with the university. The study further found that more than 57.3% of students indicated that they perceive the university to have good administration of other activities and services, such as receiving results and fees updates on time. The results also indicate less than 50% of students agree that academic staff, including lecturers, are highly qualified and competent, while about the same percentage of students was neutral. It was, additionally found that, less than 50% of students agree that academic staffs are always on time for lectures.

Recommendations: The findings of the study suggest that there are several challenges that need to be addressed by University management and all the affiliated stakeholders, including government. The following recommendations would be helpful in meeting the identified challenges. Since many institutions of higher learning in South Africa fall under the government sector, as a policy intervention, government may consider establishing or helping to establish customer service centres on the premises. This move will help universities to handle student problems on time, before strike action is initiated.

In order to solve and address different problems and address the dissatisfaction of students, from various faculties within the Universities, government should provide varied assistance to the Universities, such as making financial support available for learning facilities improvement. To improve the quality of service, education and training at the universities should be monitored, from time to time, by government.

Recommended future research: This study was aimed at establishing the level of customer service orientation of institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Based on the findings and limitations of the study, further research could include similar studies with samples, and research in other provinces, which will include comprehensive universities, universities of Technologies, and Further Education Training (FET) facilities, for both public and private institutions, in order to find out whether these findings will be the same. In-depth, qualitative research would help to better understand the nature of these difficulties experienced by students.

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