The drivers of student enrolment and retention: A stakeholder perception analysis in higher education

GEORGE ANGELOPULO
University of South Africa

This study identified the drivers of student participation in the academic programmes of a South African university department. First, it explored the determinants of student enrolment and retention from earlier research and literature. Second, it discussed the utility of Q methodology in the identification of subjective perception. Finally, it isolated dominant perceptions of the factors that govern enrolment and retention in the academic programmes of the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa. The research was undertaken amongst a diverse group of students, faculty, support and oversight staff, chosen to represent as wide a range of opinions on the topic as possible. Q methodology was used to categorise the variety and span of subjective opinion on the market-related, service quality and cultural variables that support or undermine student participation in the department's academic programmes. Eight richly diverse accounts were derived, reflecting the most salient perceptions on the topic. Underlying factors that supported student enrolment and retention were the reputation, credibility and image of university and department, and specific academic, disciplinary, technical and administrative competencies. The main factors that undermined enrolment and retention were the scope of research and tuition, institutional performance, inconsistency in teaching quality and the relative inaccessibility of tuition material. The research framework described in this paper offers a promising resource for the student development strategies of academic institutions.

Keywords: student enrolment, student retention, higher education, Q methodology, student development strategy, Unisa, communication, solution meaning, perception analysis, brand perception, university marketing

Introduction

This paper describes a study of the dominant factors governing student enrolment and retention in Communication studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa). A range of variables other than pure academic performance are discussed and framed within a Q study that investigated the primary perceptions associated with enrolment and retention in the academic programmes of the Department of Communication Science amongst current students, faculty, support and oversight groups.

Student enrolment, retention and the factors related to these issues have been widely explored (Ammann, Frauendiener & Holton, 2010; Hagedorn, 2006; Murtaugh, Burns & Schuster, 1999; St. John, 2000), most commonly in terms of single variables or single dimensions of the broader phenomenon. Traditionally such approaches have focused on a range of variables related to pedagogy (Kaya, 2009; Stewart, Myers & Culley, 2010). In southern Africa a number of such variables have been identified, including the quality of prior education (Du Preez, Steyn & Owen, 2008; Reddy, 2005), language of tuition (De Klerk, 2002; Veloso, 2002), educators' acceptance of diversity (London, Ismail, Alperstein & Baqwa, 2002), thinking style (Steyn & Maree, 2003) and the relationship between course content and job opportunities (Kruss, 2002). Increasingly, student participation in academic programmes has been associated with factors that are not purely pedagogical. Safety and security (Thro, 2006), relationships between academic institutions and their stakeholders (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010), service and student satisfaction (Marozzi, 2009), institutional assessment and development (Malott & Martinez, 2006) and social class (Anderson, 2004) have been identified as individual dimensions of the phenomenon, while in South Africa students' immigrant status (Sookrajh, Gopal & Maharaj, 2005), fee structures (Fleisch &

Woolman, 2004), degree of access (Carol, 2003) and the individual aspiration of the student (Fataar, 2010) have also been considered in related research.

Student enrolment and retention cannot, however, be ascribed to a single factor (Paulsen, 1990). The reasons for studying at a particular institution and remaining with that institution for the duration of study vary extensively. They are formulated from the unique perspective of the individual student and are highly subjective (Yasin, Noor & Mamat, 2009). This study took cognisance of this complexity and allowed for the range and interrelationship of causes associated with student enrolment and retention in its methodology and theoretical framework. The study was approached from a marketing perspective which, despite substantial resistance in the academic arena (Sung, 2010), has become increasingly important in an environment where higher education is integrated in the market economy and exposed to market competition (Litten, 1980; Newman & Couturier, 2001).

Aim of the research

The aim of the research was to identify the 'solution meaning' of Unisa's Communication studies. 'Solution meaning', as originally conceptualised by Grönroos (2000), is the perceived quality of the relationship between a customer and a specific organisation, service or product, and the factor that contributes most directly to their consumption. In this paper the term refers to the perceived quality of the relationship between Communication students, Unisa and the Department of Communication Science, and the degree to which Unisa's Communication studies are perceived to offer the department's students the solution to their academic needs. The study focused on drivers of student enrolment and retention other than academic success or failure and student drop-out based on academic performance.

The Department of Communication Science

The Department of Communication Science was established at Unisa in 1969. The department has been the largest in the Communication discipline in Africa, with approximately fifty academic and administrative staff and 26 000 students in South Africa and around the globe (Unisa, 2009; Unisa, 2011). This study was undertaken to gain insight into specific stakeholders' dominant perceptions of the Department, its academic products and service, and the factors that supported or undermined its competitive position - in short, its drivers of enrolment and retention.

The solution meaning of Unisa's Communication studies

The solution meaning of an academic institution may be seen as the consolidated reasons why people use or reject its academic offerings. The solution meaning of a university, faculty, college, school or department is the body of reasons, other than purely academic performance or failure that determine student enrolment and retention. Its variety explains why people study at an institution or do not. Enrolment and retention are caused by the variables that make up the solution meaning of a particular institution. Solution meaning shares many of the attributes of brand perception and may be assessed in similar ways. Aspects such as perception of service quality (Haelsig, Swoboda, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2007), recall and likeability (Baharun, 2004; Fam & Waller, 2004), salience (Laurent, Kapferer & Roussel, 1995) or perceived cost (Aydin & Özer, 2005; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999) affect the selection or rejection of organisations in general and academic institutions in particular. However, the relative influence of each of these varies extensively and it is more fruitful to consider such variables holistically as *market-specific variables*, *service* and *corporate culture*. The solution meaning of an academic institution, or put another way, the drivers that govern student enrolment and retention, are similarly *operationalised* as market-specific variables, service and corporate culture.

Market-specific variables

The relative advantage of an organisation's core solution – in the case of a university its academic solution – may determine its consumption, but only where it is clearly evident. Increasingly this is no longer evident

in organisations' core solutions. Consumption may be influenced by the variables of the marketing mix (Diamond & Oppenheim, 2004), market structure, prevailing economic conditions, dominance, supplier concentration, competition, size, legislation or cost of entry (Porter, 1980; Scherer, 1980). While these may explain institutional preferences to some extent, they are far better at explaining the consumption of packaged goods (Grönroos, 1997).

Service

Service, service quality and service relationships have an increasingly direct bearing on the success of organisations and corporate brands because the comparative advantage of other variables has diminished. Service quality is the most powerful competitive trend in the determination of strategy in marketing and business (Abdullah, 2006; Buzzell & Gale, 1987). The challenge is to manage a company and its market relationships in such a way that the company's total offering is perceived to be the best of the alternatives available- with 'best' defined by the customer, not the company (Grönroos, 2000).

Service quality has a number of dimensions: a *technical* dimension (perceived quality of the solution – 'what' the customer obtains); a *functional* dimension (perceived quality of obtaining the solution – 'how' it is obtained); and an *image-filter* or *brand aura* dimension (perception 'filters' such as image that affect overall perception) (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Grönroos, 2000).

Service quality variables include location, responsiveness, tangibles, assurance, friendliness, empathy, access, reliability, servicescape (service environment), waiting times, availability, convenience and relatedness (Andreassen & Lanseng, 1997; Brady & Cronin, 2001). Grönroos (2000) redefines and consolidates these with professionalism and skills as technical dimensions; attitudes, behaviour, accessibility, flexibility, reliability, trustworthiness, service recovery and servicescape as functional dimensions; and reputation and credibility as image-filter dimensions of service quality. Service quality is generated at different and distinct points in the organisation but the customer (or student) perceives it as a single undifferentiated entity.

Corporate culture

Organisational culture has been widely linked to service quality, organisational performance and effectiveness (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Lee & Yu, 2004; Wilson, 2001). Angelopulo (1990) defines perception of that dimension of corporate culture that relates to effectiveness as a bipolar construct, with 'active outward orientation' at the one pole and 'passive inward orientation' at the other. Active outward orientation is perception of an organisation as environmentally aware, adaptable, predisposed to integration, information rich, open to its market and environment, and being proactive. Passive inward orientation is its opposite. Actively outward orientated organisations tend to draw customers more than those perceived to be passively inward orientated. In parallel research the constructs of the active outward orientated–passive inward orientated typology have been linked to corporate performance and effectiveness in a number of studies (Collins & Porras, 1994; De Geus, 1997; Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992). Few organisations are entirely actively outward or passively inward orientated. Most fall between these extremes.

Methodology

Solution meaning is subjective. Moriarty (in Harris, 1998: 293) observes that the brain "gathers information from an untold number of contact points and assimilates it into one picture" making every institutional product, service or brand perception the unique formulation of the individual. Every student has unique reasons for choosing one institution over others. A university has as many solution meanings as it has students, and these may coincide to a greater or lesser degree. While all students' solution meanings affect their interaction with a university, it is the commonly held, dominant solution meanings that drive enrolment. In this study a methodology that could identify such meanings was required, and Q methodology was selected.

Q methodology has characteristics of qualitative and quantitative methodology. Qualitative, because it does not impose *a priory* constructs upon respondents, it elicits subjective opinions and beliefs, and small samples are sufficient to obtain the diversity of opinion on a topic; quantitative, because of the rigour of its statistical and mathematical data collection and processing (Baker, Thompson & Mannion, 2006).

This study followed a typical Q study sequence. The concourse was identified, Q and person samples selected, the Q sample assessed and ranked, and data captured, processed, analysed and interpreted (Du Plessis, Angelopulo & Du Plessis, 2006; Stricklin & Almeida, 2004). A range of individual items representing the primary factors for enrolment and retention was drawn from the literature and submitted for assessment to the participants in the study. Participants arranged these to reflect their individual perceptions, and participant responses were factored to identify the dominant drivers of student enrolment and retention and the participants who clustered around these perceptions. These findings were interpreted in order to identify the specific conditions and processes that undermined or supported student enrolment.

The research began by identifying the broad spectrum of communicated ideas on the topics of Communication study, student registration and retention, in what Cross (2005) and Brown (1980) term the 'concourse'. From the concourse the representative Q sample was selected with a smaller number of items. Because it is characterised by theoretical categories and subcategories, a structured Q sample was developed to reflect its theoretical framework (Brown, 1980). The 49 items of the Q sample were divided into four categories: technical competence, process quality, brand aura, markets and marketing. The items were simultaneously divided into seven subcategories termed professionalism and skills, attitude and behaviour, accessibility and flexibility, reliability, trustworthiness and service recovery, servicescape, reputation, credibility and image, core solution, market structure and marketing mix. The 49 items of the Q study are attached as Appendix A.

All items were separately categorised as active outward orientated or passive inward orientated in roughly equal numbers. Roughly half the number of items were stated in the positive and the remainder in the negative to "avoid confounding the measure of the attitude itself with acquiescent response style" (Kidder & Judd, 1986: 204). Upon completion of the Q sample, it was reviewed, pretested and refined.

Respondents in a Q study are termed the 'person sample' and are selected for their ability to contribute to the full explanation of majority and minority views – a process governed by the researcher's judgement (Stainton Rogers, 1995). Where the person sample is comparatively large and randomisation is desirable, selection may be enhanced through disproportional stratified sampling (P Schmolck, pers. comm.), a method used in this study to refine the student sample.

The overall perception of an organisation and its services is not the direct function of the customer-organisation relationship alone but also of the relationships that predetermine it – those existing between the customer, organisation and all other significant stakeholders (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). For this reason the universe in this study was specified as 1050 students, academic and administrative staff, Unisa support and oversight personnel who influenced the department's performance and were accessible through interactive online media. The person sample comprised three primary stakeholder groups, each with its own subgroups. The three primary stakeholder groups were students, support and oversight, and the Department of Communication Science (see Table 1). Subgroups were developed to ensure the inclusion of the fullest range of views within them, with due consideration given to aspects such as residence, courses, study level, occupation, language, etc. In all, 120 participants were selected. Consideration was given to extending the study to potential students and students at competing institutions, but this was rejected because of the extra resources required and the inductive, exploratory nature of the study.

Table 1: The person sample

Students	n
1st year South African	22
1st year international	3
2nd year South African	23
2nd year international	4

Students	n
3rd year South African	26
3rd year international	5
honours South African	10
honours international	1
masters and doctoral	2
Support and oversight staff	
college of human sciences	1
assignments	2
directorate of curriculum & learning development (DCLD)	3
library	1
production	3
Department of Communication Science	
professor	1
associate professor	1
senior lecturer	1
lecturer	3
junior lecturer	4
external assessor	2
administrative	2
Total	**120**

Q studies are commonly paper based and undertaken in the presence of the researcher. Items are written on cards, one per card. Participants then sort these cards onto a grid that allows their placement in order of some continuum such as degree of agreement. The completed grid is termed a 'Q sort'. In this study this process was impossible given the dispersion of participants, and an online assessment was undertaken. Software was developed for the purpose as a survey in three parts. The first was an 11-point Likert-type scale that assessed disagreement or agreement with the 49 survey items. The second was a refinement of items and the third allowed free comment on participants' perceptions. This replicated the paper-based Q sort process and generated data in a format suitable for processing. The PCQ for Windows package was used for the Q factor analysis. Factors were derived using centroid factor extraction and Varimax rotation, and these were subjected to judgemental rotation to further explain the derived factors. Factors were individually assessed, their principal characteristics identified, and each given a title.

Results

Nine factors were generated. One was rejected as it did not meet the criterion of significance, set at a loading of .37 or more for at least one sort (one participant's data) that registered on the factor. The remaining eight factors were retained (see Table 2).

Table 2: Eigenvalues and the percentage variance of the eight significant factors

factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
eigens	36.77	11.05	4.58	4.34	4.46	3.21	3.62	3.91
% variance	31	9	4	4	4	3	3	3

Each of the remaining factors identified strong, unique perceptions of Communication study at Unisa, and combined these accounted for 61% of the variance. The 39% variance that was unaccounted for

represented perceptions that were insufficiently salient or that fractured amongst factors. The following were the composite perceptions that made up each of the eight factors.

Academic Excellence (Factor 1)

This factor was called *Academic Excellence* (see Table 3). Accounting for 31% of the variance, it was the strongest and most salient perception of Communication study at Unisa. The department was seen to be exceptionally active outward orientated with a high student orientation and its students' needs were accurately identified. Academic content, operational processes and courses were what students wanted.

Perception was dominated by reputable and highly credible images of Unisa, the department and its personnel. Unisa was the university of choice for studying Communication, and its systems worked well. The service environment (campuses, online, face-to-face, tuition material) was perceived very positively. At a lower level reliability, trustworthiness and the ability to recover from service failures were also associated with the department.

Factors driving enrolment and student retention were firstly Unisa's Communication Science brand, and secondly the academic excellence of staff. Process quality, marketing and relative market position had a slightly positive effect on student enrolment. This perception was evident in all student categories but was not as pervasive amongst support and oversight staff or in the department.

Table 3: The dominant items of the *Academic Excellence* factor

Very Strong Agreement
Unisa's Communication lecturers are the best in their field
I do associate myself with Unisa's image
Unisa's Communication qualification is highly respected
Unisa's Communication qualifications prepare students for the real world
Strong Agreement
Communication staff meet my expectations
myUnisa***** does help students with their studies
Most students study Communication at Unisa even though they have an alternative
Communication lecturers' academic knowledge is excellent
Unisa's Communication studies reflect the latest knowledge in the subject
The Communication Department's tuition material is easy to use
***** myUnisa is a web-based system for academic collaboration that is accessible to students and staff

Unisa Bad, Department Good (Factor 2)

In the *Unisa Bad, Department Good* factor the department was favourably viewed but many aspects of the Unisa system were not (see Table 4).

Institutional culture was biased towards passive inward orientation: the department considered its students seriously but the institution as a whole lacked the capacity to identify student needs

Consistently negative perceptions of Unisa dominated. Unisa "does not respond to students' problems immediately", it offered "poor administrative support" and "administrative systems work poorly". Certain perceptions of the department were positive but less salient. The department's staff "are friendly" and the department "is highly innovative".

This factor reflected mildly positive perceptions of the department's credibility and image, market position and the attitude of its staff. Opposed to this were negative views of Unisa's reliability, trustworthiness and ability to recover from service failures.

The strongest influences on enrolment and retention were Unisa technical competence (negative), departmental brand aura (positive), process quality (negative) and marketing variables (positive).

South African students in the first, third and honours years, second-year international students, master's and doctoral students clustered around this factor. It was evident in a significant spread of support departments, DCLD, the library and Production, amongst lecturers and external assessors.

Table 4: The dominant items of the *Unisa Bad, Department Good* factor

Very Strong Agreement
Communication Department staff are friendly
Unisa does not respond to students' problems immediately
Students receive poor administrative support at Unisa
Problems at Unisa often remain unresolved
Strong Agreement
Unisa's administrative systems work poorly
Unisa is not in tune with its students' needs
Students are not kept informed about the status of their problems at Unisa
Communication lecturers' academic knowledge is excellent
Unisa adapts too slowly to students' needs
The Communication Department is highly innovative

No Student Orientation (Factor 3)

The *No Student Orientation* factor represented the most negative perception of Communication study at Unisa (see Table 5), representing a view of institutional culture that was the most passive inward orientated of all factors. Perceptions of Unisa and the department were predominantly negative. Tuition and administrative material were perceived favourably, but response rates, problem resolution, access to and consistency of staff were viewed negatively throughout. Unisa and the department focused on internal interests; student needs were secondary. The greatest problems associated with Communication study at Unisa were reliability, trustworthiness and service recovery, poor accessibility and flexibility.

In order of salience, three inhibitors of enrolment and retention dominated: poor operational processes, negative brand associations and a lack of technical competence. Only the university's market position and its relatively unique and protected position in the market were seen as slightly positive. Participants clustering on this factor were undergraduate students (second-year South African and third-year South African and international students) and Production.

Table 5: The dominant items of the *No Student Orientation* factor

Very Strong Agreement
e-mailing Communication staff does not get a quick response
Students are not kept informed about the status of their problems at Unisa
Some Communication lecturers are much better than others
The Communication Department's tuition material is easy to use
Strong Agreement
Unisa does not respond to students' problems immediately
MyUnisa does help students with their studies
The Communication Department is not innovative
It's difficult to get hold of the Communication Department's staff
Problems at Unisa often remain unresolved
Unisa's online tuition system works well

Expensive Quality Education (Factor 4)

Factor 4 was called *Expensive Quality Education* because Unisa's Communication studies were perceived to be amongst the best available. Unisa was seen to offer quality education and sound operational systems, but costs were seen to be too high (see Table 6). Institutional culture was perceived to be active outward orientated. With the exception of cost, Communication studies met student expectations.

Perception was dominated by three positive attributes: servicescape, the skills and professionalism of departmental staff, and reputation. The strongest negative attributes but at lower levels of significance were inconsistent teaching quality, high costs, low reliability and trustworthiness.

Of the underlying variables, three contributed to and only one inhibited enrolment and retention. The strongest contributor by a significant margin was the technical competence (knowledge and teaching ability) of departmental staff. Brand aura and process quality were also positively perceived. Aspects of Unisa's marketing, in particular its pricing, deterred student enrolment. This perception was evident only amongst South African students in their first and second years of study.

Table 6: The dominant items of the *Expensive Quality Education* factor

Very Strong Agreement
Most students do not study at Unisa simply because it is a distance learning university
Unisa does not offer students the best access and teaching quality at the lowest price
Some Communication lecturers are much better than others
Unisa is too expensive
Strong Agreement
Students receive good administrative support at Unisa
I like Unisa's campuses
MyUnisa does help students with their studies
Unisa documentation is easy to complete
I feel part of the Unisa community
Unisa's Communication qualifications prepare students for the real world

Unisa Good, Department Mixed (Factor 5)

Factor 5 was named *Unisa Good, Department Mixed* because Unisa was consistently regarded very highly while the department received a mixed response (see Table 7). The institution was seen to be predominantly active outward orientated, strongly focused on students' needs, but with aspects of culture that were inward looking and static.

The most significant attributes of this view were reputation, credibility and image, followed by accessibility and flexibility. Next were the views that Unisa's Communication studies were not the best available as discrepancies existed in lecturer and service quality, exacerbated by tuition material which was difficult to use. The attitude and behaviour of departmental staff were poor and the department was not perceived to be particularly reliable, trustworthy or able to recover from service problems. The service environment of Communication studies was, however, perceived favourably.

Communication study at Unisa was seen to be driven by a favourable image, positive perceptions of the department's technical quality and the university's process quality. The department's primary problems were poor competitive position and inconsistency in service quality. This view was evident amongst South African students at the second-year, third-year and honours levels of study.

Table 7: The dominant items of the *Unisa Good, Department Mixed* factor

Very Strong Agreement
MyUnisa does help students with their studies
Unisa's Communication course content is not the best available
Some Communication lecturers are much better than others
I feel part of the Unisa community

Strong Agreement
Students do not find Unisa to be too inflexible
Problems at Unisa rarely remain unresolved
I do associate myself with Unisa's image
The Communication Department's service to students is sometimes good and sometimes bad
The Communication Department is not prepared to go out of its way to serve students
e-mailing Communication staff gets a quick response

Critical but Positive (Factor 6)

Factor 6 was named Critical but Positive (see Table 8). Perception was strongly skewed towards an active outward orientation and an exceptionally good perception of the service environment. Tuition material was easy to use, turnaround times, online tuition and interaction were good.

The favourable image of the department was supported by that of Unisa. Attitude, behaviour and the professionalism of staff were good, but tempered by service lapses, inflexibility and the supply of information that was sometimes incorrect. The department's qualifications, however, would not prepare students for the real world.

In order of importance, students enrolled and remained with the department because of brand aura, processes and operations, and functional ability. People would not study Communication at Unisa because its curriculum was not exactly what students require, qualifications would not prepare them for employment, and the cost of study. This perception was only evident amongst South African first-year students.

Table 8: The dominant items of the *Critical but Positive* factor

Very Strong Agreement
I like the way the Communication Department presents itself to students
Unisa's Communication qualifications do not prepare students for the real world
The Communication Department's tuition material is easy to use
Unisa documentation is easy to complete

Strong Agreement
Unisa explains what it needs from students clearly enough
I do associate myself with Unisa's image
Unisa does not offer students the best access and teaching quality at the lowest price
Students find Unisa too inflexible
Unisa's online tuition system works well
I have been critical of the Communication Department to others

Admin Undermines Good Tuition (Factor 7)

Factor 7 represented a mixed view of Communication studies at Unisa (see Table 9). It was called Admin Undermines Good Tuition because, with the exception of its range of courses, the department

was well regarded, but this perception was tempered by strongly negative perceptions of the university's administration. Perception of culture was slightly biased towards an active outward orientation.

Servicescape, reputation, accessibility and flexibility were good. It was easy to reach staff, deadlines were satisfactory, information was easily accessed and tuition material easy to use. Professionalism, skills and marketing were perceived to be poor. Unisa administration was unsatisfactory and Communication subjects did not adequately meet students' needs. Students were deterred from studying Communication because of poor administration, tuition turnaround times and a subject mix that did not meet all requirements. Primary factors attracting students were department and Unisa images, and to a lesser degree the quality of processes such as interaction with lecturers. This factor was only evident amongst South African first-year students.

Table 9: The dominant items of the *Admin Undermines Good Tuition* factor

Very Strong Agreement
Unisa's administrative systems do not work well
Most students study Communication at Unisa even though they have an alternative
Students receive poor administrative support at Unisa
The Communication Department does not offer all Communication subjects that students need
Strong Agreement
It's easy to get hold of the Communication Department's staff
Unisa has managed to bridge the distance between lecturers and students
I do like the way the Communication Department presents itself to students
Communication Department deadlines work well for students
Communication students find information on their studies without any trouble
The Communication Department's tuition material is easy to use

Excellent Relationship Over a Distance (Factor 8)

Factor 8 was named Excellent Relationship Over a Distance because it described a positive, friendly, caring approach and an exceptional active outward orientation (see Table 10).

Favourable attitude and behaviour were the strongest characteristics of the department, while perceptions of trustworthiness, service recovery, servicescape, reputation, core solution, and the marketing mix were also positive.

Unisa and the department benefitted from the university's dominant position as a distance learning institution. The department and university enjoyed a good reputation, were positively disposed to their students and actively engaged them. On the other hand, Unisa was associated with a lack of accessibility and flexibility. The institution did not respond well to students. These negative factors were, however, less significant than the positive attributes associated with Communication study at Unisa.

The key reasons for enrolment and retention were perceived to lie roughly between the value of the Communication qualification, brand aura and process quality. Participants clustering around this factor were South African third-year students and DCLD staff.

Table 10: The dominant items of the *Excellent Relationship over a Distance* factor

Very Strong Agreement
Communication Department staff are friendly
myUnisa does help students with their studies
The Communication Department always acts in the best interests of its students
Most students study at Unisa simply because it is a distance learning university
Strong Agreement
Unisa is interested in solving students' problems
The Communication Department is prepared to go out of its way to serve students
I have not been critical of the Communication Department to others
The Communication Department gives high quality responses to enquiries
Unisa has not managed to bridge the distance between lecturers and students
There is too much administration at Unisa

Consolidated perceptions of Communication study at Unisa

The study generated eight separate, strong perceptions of Communication study at Unisa. By assessing the cumulative value of the theoretically framed variables within these perceptions and compensating for variance, it was possible to generate a range of consolidated perceptions of corporate culture, underlying perceptions of Communication study at Unisa, and the main drivers of student enrolment and retention.

Corporate culture

The consolidated perception of corporate culture was strongly active outward orientated, reflecting a strong student orientation.

Underlying perceptions of Communication study at Unisa

Two underlying perceptions of Communication study at Unisa dominated: highly positive reputation, credibility and image; and a favourable service environment. Professionalism and skills were also associated strongly with the department and Unisa, but at a lower level.

The drivers of student enrolment and retention

The strongest driver of student enrolment and retention was brand aura. Unisa's position as the dominant provider of tertiary distance education in (primarily) South and southern Africa played a large role in attracting Communication students. Considerable value also resided in the image of the department itself. The high degree of technical competence ascribed to the staff of the department and Unisa was also a factor in enrolment. Process quality was rated positively, but at a lower level than brand aura and technical competence. The same applied to markets and marketing which was positively ranked, but at a low level. While its market position as a provider of distance education was relatively entrenched and protected, this alone was insufficient to draw students. Views held by a number of participants were that the subject spectrum was inadequate and qualifications would not prepare Communication graduates for employment.

The study identified positive and negative factors that affected enrolment and retention in Communication studies at Unisa, which would require attention in the student acquisition strategy of the institution. Unisa's overall administrative performance was inconsistent and in some cases was experienced as poor. Service expectations of flexibility, response rate, trust, tuition turnaround time, access and problem resolution were not consistently met. The quality of the department's staff was perceived by numerous stakeholders to vary greatly. Other minority perceptions were that tuition material was difficult to use, costs were too high, Unisa's Communication studies were suitable for elementary, not advanced study and the department's qualifications would not prepare students for employment.

The dispersion of factors within the person sample is noted in Table 11. Of primary interest is the location amongst students of the factors because it is student perceptions that determine enrolment. Other stakeholders clustering around the factors indicate the extent to which these perceptions were shared by those who determined or influenced student perceptions by their strategies, decisions and actions.

Table 11: Dominant factors and person sample group clusters

STAKEHOLDER GROUP		FACTORS							
		1 Academic Excellence	2 Unisa Bad, Department Good	3 No Student Orientation	4 Expensive Quality Education	5 Unisa Good, Department Mixed	6 Critical but Positive	7 Admin Undermines Good Tuition	8 Excellent Education Over A Distance
Department	professor								
	associate professor								
	senior lecturer	■							
	lecturer		■						
	junior lecturer	■							
	external assessor		■						
	administrative	■							
Support/ Oversight	college of human sciences	■							
	assignments	■							
	dcld		■						■
	library		■						
	production		■	■					
Students	1st yr south african	■	■		■		■	■	
	1st yr international	■							
	2nd yr south african	■		■	■	■			
	2nd yr international	■	■						
	3rd yr south african	■	■	■		■			■
	3rd yr international	■		■					
	honours south african	■	■			■			
	honours international	■							
	masters & doctoral	■	■						

The Q factor analysis clearly identified major reasons for student uptake and retention in the programmes of Unisa's Department of Communication Science. The Q factor analysis also identified major reasons for student drop-out, and possibly the avoidance of study at Unisa by potential Communication students.

Perhaps more significantly, and because of the nature of Q methodology, the Q factor analysis identified the participants that clustered around the factors, and therefore the stakeholders who should be the focus of any interventions undertaken to improve student enrolment and retention.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study Q methodology was used to identify the range and structure of the discourse around student enrolment and retention in Communication studies at Unisa. It identified the characteristics of that discourse, not the characteristics of those engaging in it. "Q is not a technique for large-scale generalizable research along logical-positivistic lines where the proportion of individuals subscribing to a point of view is deemed important" (Baker *et al*., 2006: 44). To explore the demographic characteristics of the population segments holding these views, a quantitative methodology would be more appropriate.

The study would certainly have yielded more universal results had it included potential students and those studying at competing institutions, but in consideration of the resources required to do so and the exploratory nature of the study, it was limited to the population of Unisa's accessible stakeholders. Nonetheless, the study attained the objective of crystallising the solution meaning of Unisa's Communication studies – the dominant perceptions that governed enrolment and retention in Communication studies at Unisa – from the perspectives of existing students, staff and oversight groups. The study identified questions that may be tested in large-scale empirical research where, and if, extrapolation to the broader population is required.

This study yielded eight richly diverse accounts of Communication study at Unisa. While each of these identified the most significant variables affecting student uptake and retention amongst a particular group of stakeholders, it is possible to distil from these a set of the most important. Amongst the stakeholders assessed, the strongest perceptions underpinning recruitment and retention were the Unisa and departmental brands and Unisa's unique distance education credentials, followed by the academic, disciplinary, technical and administrative competencies that resonated strongly in a number of factors. Variables that undermined recruitment and retention amongst certain students were the scope of research and tuition which should be reviewed in the light of industry and employer requirements; lapses in institutional performance in terms of flexibility, access and problem resolution; inconsistencies in teaching quality; accessibility of tuition material by students whose first language is not English; and the cost of study.

While the study derived a range of findings specific to Unisa and its Department of Communication Science, it also generated a theoretical and methodological resource for the student development strategies of a broad range of academic institutions. The research framework offers the scope and means to identify the most important factors that enhance or undermine enrolment and retention. It allows for the formulation of these factors by students and other significant stakeholder groups from their own unique points of view as opposed to the view of the researcher, and it generates findings that are highly suggestive of the strategies and solutions that would improve student enrolment and retention.

Appendix A: The 49 items of the Q study

item 1. Unisa's Communication lecturers are not the best in their field
item 2. Communication lecturers' academic knowledge is excellent
item 3. Students receive poor administrative support at Unisa
item 4. The Communication Department's service to students is sometimes good and sometimes bad
item 5. Unisa's administrative systems work well
item 6. Information given by Communication Department staff is consistently accurate
item 7. Unisa's Communication studies reflect the latest knowledge in the subject
item 8. Unisa is uninterested in solving students' problems
item 9. Communication Department staff are unfriendly
item 10. Unisa is in tune with its students' needs
item 11. The Communication Department is highly motivated to serve its students
item 12. Unisa does not explain what it needs from students clearly enough
item 13. The Communication Department gives high quality responses to enquiries
item 14. The Communication Department is not prepared to go out of its way to serve students
item 15. Communication Department deadlines work well for students
item 16. Students find Unisa too inflexible
item 17. It's difficult to get hold of the Communication Department's staff
item 18. e-mailing Communication staff gets a quick response
item 19. Unisa adapts too slowly to students' needs
item 20. Turnaround time for assignments is good
item 21. Communication students find information on their studies without any trouble
item 22. Communication staff take too long to resolve their students' problems
item 23. Students are kept informed about the status of their problems at Unisa
item 24. Some Communication lecturers are much better than others
item 25. The Communication Department always acts in the best interests of its students
item 26. Unisa responds to students' problems immediately
item 27. Communication staff do not meet my expectations
item 28. Problems at Unisa often remain unresolved
item 29. Unisa's online tuition system works well
item 30. The Communication Department's tuition material is easy to use
item 31. Unisa documentation is easy to complete
item 32. Unisa has not managed to bridge the distance between lecturers and students
item 33. There is too much administration at Unisa
item 34. I don't like Unisa's campuses
item 35. myUnisa does not help students with their studies
item 36. Unisa's Communication qualification is highly respected
item 37. The Communication Department is highly innovative
item 38. I don't like the way the Communication Department presents itself to students
item 39. I have been critical of the Communication Department to others
item 40. I feel part of the Unisa community
item 41. I don't associate myself with Unisa's image
item 42. The Communication Department needs to improve its reputation in industry

item 43. Most students study Communication at Unisa because they don't have an alternative
item 44. Most students study at Unisa simply because it is a distance learning university
item 45. Unisa is too expensive
item 46. Unisa's Communication qualifications prepare students for the real world
item 47. Unisa offers students the best access and teaching quality at the lowest price
item 48. Students study Communication at Unisa because its course content is the best available
item 49. The Communication Department does not offer all Communication subjects that students need

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