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## Customer service factors of a Telematic Learning BBA degree

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*Traditional educational boundaries at tertiary institutions in South Africa are fast becoming more flexible and as a result, quality distance learning is becoming more accessible to the market. The challenges of the distance education market reside not only within the traditional academic system in South Africa, but also with the accessibility of quality tertiary education via distance learning programmes of foreign institutions. In order to supply the ultimate learning experience to students, the concept of client relations is becoming increasingly important. Client relations should not be regarded as a surrogate for academic excellence but it certainly enhances the value gained through distance learning on a tertiary level. In view of this exciting transformation process a vital Department of Telematic Learning Systems was established at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE). This department delivers and administrates all the degree and diploma programmes constructed by the academic departments at the PU for CHE. This department adopts a strong customer aligned approach as a strategic thrust and students are treated as valued clients of the university. Continuous client satisfaction research is conducted and this article reports on the results of one such a research project. Apart from supplying the demographic profile of students, the article reports on the service levels that undergraduate Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) students experienced during their 1997 year of study. The statistical technique, factor analysis, was employed to determine underlying communalities of these specific services. Eight factors were identified from the varimax rotated factor matrix. As a result of the reliability statistical procedure: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (value of 0.928), a favourable cumulative variance of almost 60% is explained. The results obtained could be of significant value, firstly, to the PU for CHE which attempts to improve the service that is rendered to students. If they understand the client relationship and its service levels, they should be able to concentrate more energy in these areas. This reasoning also applies to other universities who wish to enter distance and/or open-learning educational systems. Secondly, students should profit from efficiently trained front-line staff who are educated in client's expectations of service levels. Thirdly, other researchers in service quality could use the results as a basis for future research since they provide a comparative foundation.*

### Introduction

In a new millennium universities should not be functioning in traditional cocoons where educational boundaries exist. Traditional geographic borders are fast becoming obsolete and universities no longer

serve their immediate communities exclusively (Rossouw, 1998:2). This traditional approach restricted part-time students to the immediate geographical area of the university (apart from students housed in hostels or nearby private accommodation) and as a result tertiary studies at institutions of personal choice were not accessible to many prospective students living in remote areas. This is especially true in South Africa where the majority of the population is from previously disadvantaged communities. Governmental policies on education of the so-called Apartheid's Regime did not foresee tertiary education being accessible to financially disadvantaged prospective students, the majority coming from the black communities of South Africa. Although universities were built in the black communities, they were all residential universities. The result of this policy was very little increase in tertiary education student numbers since the financially disadvantaged student could still not attend. The only tertiary institution that served the market properly was the University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance education institution and even though their student numbers soared to 140 000, the capacity is insufficient for the South African need for tertiary education.

The Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE) realised this need of students for a wider choice in selecting a tertiary institution for further studies. The university thus transformed to expand their traditional residential educational boundaries by entering into telematic learning as delivery platform. This visionary step not only increased the accessibility to graduate studies, but it also made university studies more affordable. Traditional residential boundaries are surmounted and students from all over the country are enrolling for the courses offered via the telematic learning system as a delivery platform. The possibility to expand internationally also exists and, during 1997, 0.5% of enrolled students were from outside the RSA borders.

Telematic learning implies a distance learning system whereby state of the art technology is available to students such as live satellite television broadcasts, inter-active electronic communication networks and value-adding video tapes (opposed to traditional distance learning that mostly uses study guides and text books). Study Centres are established throughout the RSA and students attend sessions hosted by appropriately qualified facilitators who are selected and appointed by PU for CHE. These sessions take place under the guidance of the academic course co-ordinator where relevant academic topics are included in frequent group discussions. A student attends four facilitation sessions per course unit followed.

The specialised approach of telematic learning is relatively new

to the PU for CHE and the management of the telematic courses is centralised. Telematic Learning Systems (TLS), as specialised department, aids academic departments in course development whilst taking responsibility to administer and deliver these courses to students. Students are treated as clients and they have an open channel of communication with the management team. Customer service surveys and research are frequently done for each programme. This article reports on such a research project (Bisschoff, Van Wyk & Bisschoff, 1997), more specifically the 1997 customer service reports on the BBA degree (Bachelor of Business Administration).

### Problem statement

The PU for CHE has gained extensive experience in dealing with students (full-time as well as part-time) on campus since being founded in 1869. However, all this experience relates to residential (on campus) students who attend lectures at the university. The infrastructure, computer systems and design of the university are, therefore, not primarily focused to satisfy the needs of distance students who could (for example) visit the campus in Potchefstroom for the first time when they graduate. Although the PU for CHE has a good knowledge and realisation of the important service issues on campus, the same can not be said about distance learning students. In addition, the ethnic composition of the distance learning students also differs from the residential students. (Almost half of the students on the distance programmes comes from previously disadvantaged ethnic groups). The diversification in the distance education market, therefore, resulted in a number of service research questions that needs to be investigated and reassured. These questions are:

- What are the service needs of distance learning students?
- How important is each service factor to a distance learning student?
- Does the university provide satisfactory customer service to distance learning students?

This article focuses primarily on the first two research questions, namely to identify the service needs and rank them in order of importance. Factor analysis is used as analytical tool. Once these service factors for distance learning students had been identified, the third research question on performance measurement could be researched.

### Theoretical discussion

The strong competition in the tertiary education market in South Africa has resulted in universities actively competing for student numbers in order to remain profitable. Strategically, the PU for CHE focused on a growth in residential students but also initiated telematic learning as a method of contact distance learning. However, due to the higher education subsidy formula used by the Department of Education, financial rewards are based on students who complete their degree programmes. In addition, universities do recognise subjects completed at acknowledged counterparts, and therefore, student retention is also an important aspect in student numbers. The PU for CHE identified customer service as a strategic thrust to gain and to retain their student numbers.

Although direct relationships between customer satisfaction and profitability have not yet been determined by research, various researchers have shown that a strong positive correlation exists between service quality through customer retention and success of an enterprise (Van den Heever, 1997:47-50; Blem, 1995:13; Irons, 1997:25; Bisschoff, 2000:35). This correlation is influenced by the level of service quality that customers experience (or more specifically, distance students of the PU for CHE). Woodside, Frey & Daly (in Van den Heever, 1997:47-50) refer to the relationship between customer service, service quality and intentions to enter into business transactions by means of an expectancy model of behaviour where service performance forms the basis of continued business intentions of cus-

tomers towards a specific enterprise. In this regard, Doyle (in Wilson & Gilligan, 1997:24) states that:

"Satisfied customers are the source of all profits and shareholders' value. Customers can choose from whom they buy, and unless the firm satisfies them at least as well as competitors, sales and profits will quickly erode. Customer satisfaction should therefore be a prime objective and measure of performance of managers."

Scheuing (in Van Breda, 1996:19) reasons that the following relationships exist between profitability and customer service:

- customer retention leads to loyalty, which in turn leads to profitability. In addition, loyalty is closely related to the positive influences of the so-called word-of-mouth promotions; and
- loyal students become more active in alumni activities and prove to be a valuable promotional asset in years to come (Cloete, pers. comm.).

To evaluate the services rendered, Lytle & Mokva (in Van den Heever, 1997:50), indicate that three types of evaluations are necessary, namely, an evaluation of the service performance by the PU for CHE, the service processes and the physical attributes of service delivery. To remain competitive, as pointed out by Boyd, Westfall & Larracheté (1996:86), a market pioneer (such as telematic learning as alternative to traditional distance learning) has to perform research on the strategic thrust areas (at the PU for CHE: quality education, accessibility and customer service). This is especially true in markets where followers are quick to react (TeleTUKS for example), and challenge the position as the market leader. Jude (1998:7) adds that the research should be applied for a competitive advantage and that "... excellence is the norm, not a competitive advantage any more in the nineties, and it will continue to be true in the new millennium".

However, in a new venture, no frame of reference exists that could be applied to measure or compare the customer service norms and service levels. New service issues have to be determined to set a reference to what must be measured and researched. The renowned quote by Peter Drucker "What gets measured, gets done" thus provides a new context to the Department of TLS because the service factors important to telematic students have to be determined first, thus referring to Drucker's "What".

The research methodology followed in this paper made use of structured questionnaires to BBA students of the Department of TLS. The specifics of the research methodology are discussed next.

### Methodology

The population of the research consisted of all the students enrolled for the BBA degree at the PU for CHE during April 1997 and included first and second year students from the commence of the BBA degree in 1996. A random sample of 400 registered students was identified, using the enrolment list as sampling frame. Structured questionnaires with self-addressed return envelopes were mailed to students. A total of 145 completed questionnaires were returned, signifying a 36.3% response rate. The questionnaire was designed to:

- collect demographical information in anticipated categories on the semi-structured questions; and
- present a series of items that evaluated the customer service levels rendered by the Department of Telematic Learning Systems to its clients. A seven-point Likert scale, that ranged from "Very unsatisfactory" (1) to "Very satisfactory" (7) was used to measure the service perceptions of the students. All statements were generated positively with relation to the measured attributes that enabled the respondents to rank the experienced service levels on the Likert scale as suggested by Leland and Bailey (1995:119-153).

To identify the underlying service needs of the customers, a factor analysis was employed since this methodology was successfully put into practice by Bisschoff (1992:189-191) and Du Plessis and Ackerman (1987:172). Factor analysis could be criticised for yielding different

algorithms with varied rotational methods. However, the purpose of this research was to reduce the abundant data set to a workable number of constructs that could serve as guidelines for the researchers in future projects (Luck, Wales, Taylor & Rubin, 1982: 450; Bisschoff, 1992). The level of the reliability of the data was tested by employing Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (Statistica, 1996). A total of nine statements were omitted from the analysis because of their insufficient reliability. This was a result of six repetitive calculations and eliminatory analyses of the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient to achieve internal stability and ensure a reliable data set (Hooley & Hussey, 1994:145-146). This refined data set was subjected to a Normalised Varimax Rotated Factor Analysis.

The significance of the resultant factor loadings reside in the value of each specific loading. Comrey (1973:225-227) is supported by Yates (1987:295-305) in stating that the value of the squared factor loading, discussed above, represents the variance explained by that statement with regard to the specific factor it loads onto. Thus, if the factor loading is less than 0.30, it implies that the explained variance is  $(0.30)^2 = 0.09 = 9\%$ . The other 91% of variance is distributed amongst the other factors and, in this case, the explained variance is regarded as too low. A factor loading below 0.30 is, therefore, not considered for interpretation. Similarly, a cut-off value can be calculated and a factor loading of 0.40 (explaining a variance of 16%) is regarded as the minimum value in factor analytical research, as suggested by Bisschoff (1989:106-111). In this work the minimum factor loading was set at 0.50. The personal-computer software Statistica (1996) was used to analyse the data.

## Results

### Demographic profile

The demographic profile of the respondents included their age, gender, residential province, and management experience. This information is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Demographic profile

Profile category	As %
<b>Age (n = 145)</b>	
Less than 21 years	12.9
21 to 25	25.6
26 to 30	22.1
31 to 35	16.8
36 to 40	8.5
Older than 40	9.6
<b>Race (n = 144)</b>	
Black	45.3
White	54.7
<b>Gender (n = 145)</b>	
Male	63.4
Female	36.6
<b>Province (n = 133)</b>	
Northern Province	8.8
Free State	9.8
Western Cape	12.0
Gauteng	20.9
Eastern Cape	11.3
KwaZulu Natal	12.1
North West Province	13.3
Northern Cape	4.2
Mpumalanga	7.1
Foreign country	0.5
<b>Management experience (n = 123)</b>	
Top	10.7
Middle	21.5
Junior	29.0

The majority of the BBA students fell within the category 21 to 35 years of age (64.5%). The majority of students were male (63.4%). A third of the management students were therefore female in a traditionally male-dominated educational field. As expected, the majority of students resided in the Gauteng area (20.9%). The Northern Cape and Mpumalanga rendered the lowest number of students whilst the rest of the RSA contributed fairly equally to the student numbers. The majority of students for the BBA degree were employed at junior level (29.0%), followed by middle managers (21.5%). Junior and middle management contributed to almost 50% of student numbers. Another significant category was clerks and other lower level personnel who study to better their education (24.9%). Professionally qualified people were an insignificant market segment for BBA studies but a major market segment in the MBA programme (Bisschoff, Van Wyk & Bisschoff, 1997).

### Factor identification

The initial data set, consisting of 62 variables, was subjected to Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (") reliability test (Boshoff & Hoole, 1998:77) and 9 variables were rejected. An " value of 0.928 showed that the remainder of the variables used maintained acceptable internal stability levels in the factor analytical procedure.

The factor analysis revealed that eight factors could be identified from the data. The identified factors were interpreted and labelled appropriately. The number of each factor corresponds with the factor number in Table 2 which shows the percentage of variance explained and " value for each factor. With the exception of factor 6 (which was not calculated due to the limited number of statements) and factor 7 (" = 0,571), all the factors showed favourable " values in excess of 0.74.

- *Factor 1: Customer orientation on first contact*

Factor 1 was identified as Customer orientation on first contact, since all service items either pointed towards training of personnel to serve the customer better or towards making the application process easier. The factor explained a variance of 11.6%.

- *Factor 2: Service orientated conduct*

Factor 2 was labelled Service orientated conduct since its service items all relate to the service orientated aspects of the department. Items 58, 60 and 61 relate to the service orientated behaviour of the personnel and item 59 relates to the physical environment to enable completion of necessary documentation for those who wish to apply in person. Item 57 relates directly to professionalism. Due to the service orientated attributes, customers felt confident that the department (and its personnel) is able to assist their students well. The factor explained a variance of 9.4%.

- *Factor 3: Managing a conducive study environment*

The creation of a conducive study environment for study centre students results from a well-managed Study Centre. Although most of the items were clear in their interpretation, item number 48 is technically not a manageable function of the Study Centre. However, in practice it has happened that although the broadcast was perfectly performed by the broadcasting house (Africa Growth Network), the receiver decoder was not tuned correctly at the Study Centre or the venue was inaccessible. Since this is manageable, it could explain why students perceived item number 48 to be a manageable item. Factor 3 explained a variance of 8.3% of the total variance.

- *Factor 4: User-friendly learning platform*

All items in factor 4 related to one common aspect, namely, that of the value of the BBA degree delivered via telematic learning. The telematic medium, therefore, seems to be a good alternative if one is not able to attend classes on a full-time basis at a residential institution.



The factor is thus labelled as User-friendly Learning Platform and explained 6.9% of the total variance.

• *Factor 5: Study Centre support*

Students regarded the Study Centres as an extension of the PU for CHE. The support offered by the Study Centre was identified by Factor 5. Item 16, as expected, correlated negatively with the factor since facilitators have limited knowledge of the administrative process. Although facilitators are not expected to have this knowledge, it could be that students regard them as an extension of the university personnel. This could explain the negative factor loading displayed by item 16. Factor 5 explained 6.4% of the variance.

• *Factor 6: Condition of delivered study material*

Only two items loaded significantly to Factor 6 that was labelled Condition of delivered study material. Study material is couriered to students individually. Although this is a costly affair, students appreciated the prompt reliable service of couriers. Since both items were clear in their intent (relating specifically to study material and not all correspondence or deliveries), no further explanation is offered. The factor explained 4.7% of the variance.

• *Factor 7: Positive growth experience*

Factor 7, being labelled as a Positive growth experience, explained 4.1% of the variance. All three items related to support and assignments that enable the students to grow in academic stature during the year.

• *Factor 8: Timeous availability of material*

The common identity within Factor 8 was the timeous availability of material. The factor differed from factor 6 in the sense that it referred to the timeousness of all deliveries and not to the condition of study material *per se*. Factor 8 explained 3.8% of the variance.

The variance explained by each factor, the calculated Cronbach Alpha Coefficients ( $\alpha$ ), and the cumulative variance explained are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3** Cumulative variance explained and internal stability

Factor number	Variance explained (%)	Cumulative variance explained (%)	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient ( $\alpha$ )
1	11.6	11.6	0.885
2	9.4	21.0	0.943
3	8.3	29.3	0.831
4	6.9	36.2	0.816
5	6.4	42.6	0.749
6	4.7	47.3	***
7	4.1	51.4	0.571
8	3.8	55.2	0.769

From Table 3 it is clear that the cumulative variance explained by all eight factors is 55.2%, which means that almost half of the variance explained by the factor analysis is portrayed by the eight extracted factors. Although a cumulative variance value of 60% is regarded to be a "good fit" to a data set, the 55% level of explained variance offers valuable information.

Factor 7 shows an unfavourable Cronbach Alpha value below 0.75 whilst the limited items loading to factor 6 made the calculation of the  $\alpha$  value unreliable. These two factors could thus not be regarded as internally stable factors. This simplification of the initial data set could be applied to the customer service management of the Department of Telematic Learning Systems.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The factor analysis identified eight factors. As can be expected, the most important factor is identified as the "Customer orientation at first contact". Important is the fact that there is only one opportunity to make a first impression. The second factor is identified as "Service orientated conduct". Together, these two factors explain 21% of the total variance. Service issues, furthermore, also feature throughout almost all the other factors identified, although not as dominant than in the first two factors. This leads to the first conclusion and the relevant recommendation:

**Conclusion 1**

There is a strong indication that the traditional approach to education has changed towards a more customer-centred approach and students should be regarded as valued clients of an educational institution.

**Recommendation 1**

Universities should focus on customer service as part of their strategic thrust. Formal customer service programmes and relevant support systems (such as Customer Relationship Management software) should be employed to enhance their level of service quality rendered to students.

Factors 3 and 4 relate to the environmental concerns of the learning experience and to what extent this experience enhances the knowledge levels and the value of the BBA degree course. These factors are supported by Factors 5 and 7 that deal with student support at the Study Centres and the process of intellectual growth throughout the year. This leads to the second conclusion:

**Conclusion 2**

The academic environment created by the university must be supportive to students on distance learning programmes. These students regard themselves not as distance learning students, but as part and parcel of the student body of the university.

**Recommendation 2**

The universities should treat distance learning as part of their student body and should employ a variety of available resources to supply academic and other support. An example could be to reserve a seat on the Student Representative Council so that they are able to express their views on a variety of academic matters (library facilities, student networking and alumni activities).

Factor 6 deals with the study material and the condition thereof after delivery to students and is supported by Factor 8 that deals with the timeous delivery of material (study and administrative) to the students. This factor is another operational service issue, and leads to the conclusion that:

**Conclusion 3**

Distance students are sensitive to academic material delivery, and university management should take note of the fact that it takes more time to correct mistakes or re-issue study material. Time is of the essence since errors cause a reduction in actual studying time for distance learning students.

**Recommendation 3**

TLS management should closely monitor the dispatch of study material since it impacts negatively on time available for students' academic activities.

**Summary**

The use of factor analysis to determine the underlying constructs of a data set proved to be beneficial in this application setting since it supplied the researcher with additional information to better manage cus-

tomers relations at the Department of Telematic Learning Systems. This benefit extends not only to the university's competitive advantage, but also increases the value received by the customer for his or her hard earned money (or that of the bursar). As the telematic method of distance learning is a new venture for the PU for CHE and its clients, a scientific approach to customer service management is of the utmost importance to ensure a maximum value adding experience to all role players in the tertiary educational system. The research thus reported on here is but one such an attempt to base managerial decisions on scientific evidence to the benefit of all role-players.

Similar research continues on all the courses delivered by the Department of Telematic Learning Systems. As the TLS continues their search in service excellence, new service items are emerging. The PU for CHE attempts to act pro-actively and aims towards realising customer service as a competitive advantage in order to become the benchmark of service quality in telematic learning in the RSA and possibly the continent.

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## Multicultural education and its politics

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*This article is an account of how multicultural education is experienced within the US society and its national school curriculum. The author has had an opportunity to partly witness this situation, when he was selected as one of the South African Educators who participated in the June-July 1999 South African Transformation Institute (SETI) at the Indiana University in US. Multicultural education, as a transformative concept or movement as others view it, is very vital to prepare members of the society and learners in the schools to develop intercultural skills. On the other hand, it is also not an appreciated concept in the minds of those who do not identify with transformative concepts/movements like it. In this article the author, by reflecting on the US experience, attempted to communicate this message through the literature survey, and by reporting about the workshop activities that he took part in regarding the concept of multicultural education. In the end, implications of these accounts on US, South Africa and in general are pondered upon.*

### Introduction

Multicultural education is not a concept that lulls the mind, but rather one that prompts debates. It has significantly impacted schooling in the United States (US) for at least the last two or three decades (Banks cited by Milligan, 1999:2). Its proponents, it is asserted, have argued compellingly, that education that excludes the experiences and contributions of other diverse cultural groups and women is miseducative as well as robs its entire society of the treasure endowed in the multicultural nature of that society (Milligan, 1999:2).

The author refused to be silent on arrival in the home country about the experiences he had encountered in the US. He first shared

them with his colleagues. This disquiet is relevant acknowledging the fact that our South African society is also a multicultural one, and it evolves from a history when its multiculturalism could not be celebrated due to the (Apartheid) hegemonic ruling. He therefore chose to share the views on multicultural education, from an informed position of the US experience. The basic reason is to engage especially the thinking of our educators regarding the impact of multicultural education that is also pertinent to a national transformation effort in education. Thus, the aim of the author is to generate an educational engagement geared towards the transformation of the exclusive mind-set that still bedevils some of our learning institutions and creating an atmosphere accommodative of the cultural diversity that makes our South African society, and advance the idea of a call to a unified force towards oneness in difference. The mind map that the author chose to follow in this article is, describing multicultural education and the concepts that are quite close to mind whenever the term multicultural education is mentioned, unravelling some of the debates regarding the developments and practices of multicultural education in the US, presenting the outcomes of the discussion exercises that the South African Educators took part in, and finally discussing the implications of these outcomes.

### Definition of multicultural education and related concepts

Multicultural education is a highly challenging concept which can be viewed as an organising principle for systemic school reform (Ovando & Collier, 1998:147). In fact, Nieto (1996:9) advises that without thinking of multicultural education in a transformative socio-political approach, it just means a trip to "fairyland". Many authors in the likes