

# FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SELECTION OF A UNIVERSITY AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS – A CASE OF A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

**L. P. Funeka\***

Department of Applied Management

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1705-1253>

**N. Govender\***

Writing Centre

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9613-0341>

**V. Govender\***

Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0756-424X>

\*Durban University of Technology

Durban, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

The social and political history of South Africa yielded massive transformation in the higher education landscape, including access to education and the merger of universities. Despite the many successes of transformation, it brought with it challenges such as increasing participation, student retention, throughput, and graduation rates; changes in government funding models; declining student subsidies and providing quality education with limited resources.

The South African higher education sector is multi-faceted, and students have a wide range of higher education options. This study explored factors influencing decision-making of first-year students when selecting a university. Data was collected from first-year students and employees at a University of Technology. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the researchers analysed the complex factors that guide students' decision-making when selecting a university.

The findings revealed that factors significantly influencing decision-making on university selection are, the reputation and quality of university programmes offered, response time and support provided by staff; location; and infrastructure and facilities. This research is significant in that it will assist higher education institutions, particularly marketing and communications departments to be more responsive to students' needs by shifting toward active engagement in its marketing and recruitment approaches to attract, retain, and satisfy students.

**Keywords:** students' choice, first-year students, university of technology, reputation, student retention, quality of programmes

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) need to develop, enhance, and strengthen their reputation and offerings to differentiate themselves from competitors in the field. In South Africa (SA), students have access to a myriad of choices to further their education, including public and private universities and distance education colleges. The trend today in universities is shifting towards active engagement in marketing and public relations initiatives to enhance reputation and attract, retain, and satisfy students.

Choice and decision-making are areas of growing research interest as HEIs have been transformed from a controlled, centrally funded non-marketed sector to a highly marketed and competitive sector (Panda et al. 2019; Nazidin, Ismail, and Haron 2019). However, studies relating to the influence on students' choice of institutions of learning is limited in Southern African and in a University of Technology (UoT) context (Shah, Nair, and Bennett 2013). This is affirmed by other researchers (Wiese 2008; Pringle and Fritz 2019; Pinar, Girard, and Basfirinci 2020) who highlighted that although research has been conducted on HEIs' challenges in the global market and the increase in competition, there is limited information on student choice factors when selecting an institution. As a result, this article focuses on the factors that influence student decision-making by understanding the needs and experiences of first-year UoT students in SA and the marketing and recruitment teams' perspectives on the reputation of the institution and their efforts to maintain quality standards to attract, retain and satisfy students.

Universities need to understand the complex factors that influence students' choice and the needs and experiences of first-year UoT students to be able to provide supportive, transformative university spaces that can produce well rounded, independent, and socially committed graduates. According to Browne and Shen (2017), higher education is a significant factor in influencing changes in society, as it enables the formulation of good decision-making in every area of modern society, in business, education, politics, and science. The competition for qualified students has increased with student awareness about the programmes and services offered by universities (Shtudiner, Zwilling, and Kantor 2017). Therefore, student retention is an important factor in higher education – not just in attracting students but retaining and satisfying students and providing a holistic student experience.

Student retention is associated with student satisfaction based on the quality of services and facilities, and teaching and learning experiences (García-Ros et al. 2018). Based on this, this study explores factors influencing students' choice when selecting a university, with specific reference to a UoT, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) located in KwaZulu-

Natal, SA to understand the complexity of the needs, aspirations, and experiences of first-year students. This understanding will assist institutional marketing departments to develop marketing and recruitment plans that will contribute to offering students an enriching university experience.

### **History of higher education institutions in South Africa**

Equity of access, understanding the needs of key stakeholders particularly students, is an area of importance within the country's transformation higher education agenda. The South African higher education landscape has evolved over the years by creating a bigger market to accommodate students; however, universities are expected to work within reduced budgets while increasing student numbers (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck 2015; Swartz et al. 2019). With new entrants in universities, the demands remain higher for services to be provided and public funding does not meet these demands (Peer and Mpinganjira 2011; Mohamedbhai 2014). The National Plan for Higher Education is aimed at attaining the policy goals of the Education White Paper 3 to "promote equity of access and fair chances for success, to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, simultaneously eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities" (Ministry of Education 2001, 11).

At dawn of democracy in 1994, the education "system" comprised 21 public universities, 15 technikons, 120 colleges of education, 24 nursing colleges and 11 agricultural colleges (Badat 2015, 177). In the early 90s, Minister of Higher Education, Kader Asmal intervened in Technikons, insisting on mergers that would address the imbalances of the apartheid government ensuring primary access to all, and he affirmed that the purpose of the mergers was educational (Jansen 2003; Baloyi 2015) with the intention to create HEIs that were sustainable and responsive to national needs.

The DUT was one of the first South African HEIs formed through merger. The institution comprised of predominantly culturally diverse White and Indian students (Ngcamu 2016). Two Technikons, ML Sultan and Technikon Natal merged to form Durban Institute of Technology (DIT) in April 2002. In 2006, DIT changed its name to Durban University of Technology as the process of consolidating and emerging as a leading UoT for the region and beyond. After the merger, new policies and corporate strategies were created in-line with the new vision and mission statements, placing itself as an international brand, attracting international students, and as a leading UoT in Africa.

### **Reputation**

An organisation's reputation is as important in academic institutions as it is in the corporate

world. In an academic environment, corporate reputation can be described as a perception, attitude, and evaluation of the university among key stakeholders. It is also based on communication, past behaviour, and potential to satisfy the stakeholder expectations in comparison with competition (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Felix 2015). In terms of this study, the reputation of HEIs is imperative as it can contribute to student enrolment numbers, retention, and satisfaction. The significant dimensions of a university's reputation include quality of academic performance, quality of external performance and emotional engagement (Budur, Rashid, and Poturak 2018; Slåtten et al. 2021).

Reputation is regarded as a key factor when students are selecting and evaluating HEI options (Hemsley-Brown 2012; Budur et al. 2018). Reputation in HEIs is influenced by the students' interrelated academic, interpersonal, and physical or face to face experiences (Sajtos, Kreis, and Brodie 2015; Plewa et al. 2016). This emphasises universities' role in building strong relationships that enable transparent communication for a holistic university experience that can enable the development of resilient and well-rounded individuals. Communication can be a vehicle to harness mutually beneficial relationships among the university and key stakeholders, including students, parents, and alumni.

DUT prides itself on being student-centered and an engaged institution and has a set of guiding principles including “academic freedom; collegiality and ethical behaviour; accountability; relevance to society, both local and global; seeking new knowledge through research; understanding students as developing human beings; and seeing staff development as essential in the DUT purpose” (Durban University of Technology 2015, 4). Universities have a responsibility to focus on students' “being” and “becoming” instead of just attaining skills and knowledge while at university (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007; Barnett 2010). It is essential that universities reflect on students' challenges and chart ways in which to involve and integrate students into all aspects of university life to be able to attract, satisfy and retain students.

Establishing intentional opportunities for a holistic student experience will contribute to raising the profile and reputation of the university, thereby attracting students. Long (2012, 52) explains that such opportunities include “extracurricular activities, informal student interactions, and faculty/student interactions”. What is further needed is for academic and support staff to reflect on their practices and chart ways to transform them to be more responsive to students' needs. Students enter university searching for a sense of being and belonging and lecturers have significant influence in the development of these identities. Case (2015, 848) maintains that “the central role of human interaction in student learning must be recognised: both peer interaction and even more centrally the interaction with the lecturer”.

Funeka, Govender, and Govender (2022) research found that profiling stories that will

resonate with students so that they can feel a sense of belonging, can draw students to a university. Student success stories can be used to raise the profile of the institution and influence students to select DUT as their choice of institution. Also, taking into considering the context of the university is imperative; “majority of DUT students are first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds and these students are driven to excel academically as they are influenced by the fact that they are being relied upon to study, graduate and move their families out of poverty” (Funeka et al. 2022, 159).

### **Students’ choice**

Prospective students have a wide variety of universities to choose from, whether in public or private institutions. International study opportunities, growing number of private HEIs, along with differentiation of the public higher education sector into UoT’s, comprehensive universities and traditional universities has expanded students’ choice of tertiary institutions to attend (Pillay 2010; Ramrathan 2018).

Furthermore, South African universities attract many students from other African countries. Cowling (2019) states that “there were 40,712 foreign students in South Africa as of 2019, of which just over 33,281 were from Sub-Saharan Africa, the main region of origin”. South Africa is the economic hub of the African continent and students are drawn to South African universities as a result of the infrastructure, particularly internet connectivity, funding opportunities, resources and quality of education. Majority of African higher education institutions face unprecedented challenges and there are common elements such as the legacy of colonialism, and social and economic crisis. Findings from this study can contribute to Africa’s future academic development in countries faced with crippling issues that restrict growth and development in the higher education sector. The study recommendations can enable other African universities to more fully understand the factors that contribute to a student’s choice of university.

Research recognising student choice factors in university selection and the relevance of informational material provided has encouraged a position that relationship and social marketing strategies are more appropriate for higher education, rather than seeing university choice as a product (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Dao and Thorpe 2015).

This implies that universities need to research, analyse, and understand how and why students make the decisions they do and develop marketing strategies that can contribute to developing and maintaining educational relationships with all stakeholders including current, past and prospective students, their parents, alumni, school teachers and friends (O’Connor and Lundstrom 2011; Ramrathan 2018). One of the most important stakeholders in any organisation

is the customer and in the case of HEIs, it is its students. For an organisation to prosper, it needs to satisfy customers. Student choice, or “consumer buyer behaviour” as expressed by Armstrong et al. (2014) is used within a marketing framework to understand how and why students use specific services to satisfy their needs. Students are customers whose decisions to buy a particular product is influenced by different and complex factors.

In the existing literature, there is limited information about the choice factors considered by local students when they select a HEI and particularly in a UoT in SA. This research is significant in that it will assist universities, particular marketing, and communications departments in understanding the complex factors that influence students’ choices and the needs and experiences of students to be able to develop transformative marketing and recruitment approaches. Previous studies have identified factors that contribute to students’ choice namely availability of course, employment opportunities, academic reputation and quality of teaching, university geographical location, quality of programme and financial considerations (Santos, Rita, and Guerreiro 2018).

The university students’ graduate rates also serve as a factor that informs students’ choice of university (Agrey and Lampadan 2014, 392). Furthermore, Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007) indicated that higher education transformation incorporates university subsidies, financial support for students, curriculum development, widening access and graduation rates, research, the institution’s culture, and gender equity challenges. Moreover, the studies highlighted that student markets often provide practical reasons for making choices; these were usually filtered through preconceptions originating from influences in family, culture, and life histories (Hemsley-Brown 1999; Roksa and Kinsley 2019).

For universities to successfully attract students, an institution’s recruitment team needs to understand the factors which impact on student choice and tailor their recruitment drives and marketing activities to meet students’ contexts and requirements. This study presents valuable findings as first-year students are part of the dataset and offer their post selection experience at a UoT. In addition, the institution’s marketing and recruitment team offer their perspectives on the reputation of the institution and their efforts to maintain quality standards to attract, retain and satisfy students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research methodology was employed to explore the factors that influence students’ choice when selecting a university. A case study approach was used, with the DUT as the unit of analysis. Silverman (2013, 142) maintains that “a case study refers to the study of social phenomenon: carried out within the boundaries of one social system (the case), or within

the boundaries of few social systems (the cases), such as people, organisations, groups, individuals and local communities or nation-states, in which the phenomenon to be studied exists”.

The qualitative methodology enabled the generation of key themes from interviews and focus group discussions. The small setting qualitative methodology enabled the natural connection between the researchers and the participants which enhanced the quality of data. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed to ensure that by focusing on specific characteristics of the population, the researchers would be able to meet the aims and objectives of the study which includes analysing factors influencing university choice of first-year students at a UoT.

Focus group discussions were conducted with 60 first-year students from DUT’s six faculties namely Accounting and Informatics; Applied Sciences; Arts and Design; Engineering and the Built Environment; Health Sciences; and Management Sciences. Students were selected based on specific research criteria – first-year student; first-year registration at a HEI; and first-generation student. Many students in SA are the first in their families to access higher education and are referred to as “first generation students” (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013; Lewin and Mawoyo 2014). The term first generation student is used with an understanding that “first generation status has a significant impact on students’ experiences of higher education” (Alcock 2017, 3). Their reasons and experiences for selecting a university may differ from other students who were not the first in their family to attend university. Most first-generation students may appear more driven than other students to enrol in the HEIs, as the opportunity to further their studies empowers them to work towards improving their lives as well as the lives of their families (Funeka 2019).

A semi-structured interview schedule with predominantly open-ended questions was used in six focus group discussions. This enabled a deeper understanding of factors influencing students’ choice of a university and how the reputation of a university influences their choice. Focus group discussions were conducted over eight weeks, were audio recorded and ranged from 20 to 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted with three staff from the Division of Corporate Affairs, which may be known as Department of Marketing in other HEIs. These one-on-one interviews provided in-depth, reflective information on the institution’s approach to meeting prospective student’s expectations and needs. A semi-structured interview schedule was compiled and administered to interviewees during one-on-one sessions. The main aim of these interviews was to add depth to the study and attain rich data on the factors that contribute to students’ choice of university. With predominantly open-ended questions, the interview sessions ranged from 45 to 70 minutes.

Data from the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the latest version of NVIVO software. All participants provided voluntary consent and participants' names were not used. The findings of this study contribute to institutional marketing and recruitment teams becoming more responsive to the complex needs and aspirations of university students, developing strategic marketing plans that attract students and offering students the capacity to make more informed choices when selecting HEIs.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section provides an in-depth analysis and discussion on the findings from the interviews and focus group discussions by unpacking the themes and trends that emanated from the data.

The interviewed participants shared their views on the factors that influence students' choice of university through a semi-structured questionnaire. The focus group discussion participants detailed their post selection reflections. The conversations and views from the participants were described and analysed using four themes: Theme 1: Programme offerings, Curriculum Renewal Project, and Work Integrated Learning (WIL); Theme 2: Response time and staff support (administrative and academic); Theme 3: Location of a university; and Theme 4: Infrastructure and facilities.

### **Theme 1: Programme offerings, Curriculum Renewal Project (CRP) and Work Integrated Learning (WIL)**

As a way of enhancing learning and teaching and aligning to national standards, DUT changed its qualification system. As reported by the Council on Higher Education (2017, 5) DUT “started serious engagement with two significant transformational projects linked to the aims of the Quality Enhancement Project: an e-learning initiative and a Curriculum Renewal Project”. The Curriculum Renewal Project (CRP) considers the changing profile of undergraduates and their readiness for tertiary level education and evaluates the skills of the students and lecturers in terms of learning and teaching with the aim of producing confident, globally portable graduates (Unger and Hanekom 2014; Parker 2016). National Diploma (N-Dip) qualifications and Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech) programmes were phased out with the introduction of more traditional qualifications. This change has placed DUT on par with other traditional universities as findings revealed that the quality of academic experience that students receive has vastly improved as supported by modern facilities, qualified and experienced lecturers with PHD's and master's Degrees.

In addition, the CRP is aligned to the calls for the decolonisation of education in South Africa. Over the years, students have voiced their demands through protest actions with the aim



of decolonising education. The 2015–2016 national students protest called for decolonisation of HEIs and curricular amongst other issues. This CRP project has contributed to rethinking curriculum at the institution such that it is decolonised and has opened ways for institutional stakeholders to understand what decolonisation means, how it can be enacted and how it impacts on university students.

The CRP as a transformative university project, is particularly important from an employability perspective, as industries are seeking skilled graduates who can seamlessly adapt to industry requirements. Given the high rate of unemployment in SA, data revealed that DUT's revised curriculum was influential in student's selection. The advantage of the changed curriculum at DUT also enables strategic partnerships with industry. Many programmes offered at DUT require students to acquire industry experience to prepare them for the globalised workplace. DUT has advisory boards which includes the private sector – industry experts and departmental representatives and assist with the placement of students. The facilitation of work experience opportunities known as work integrated learning (WIL) and employment opportunities for students were reported to be huge drawcards to the university.

In addition to providing opportunity for WIL, DUT offers unique programmes such as: *Clinical Technology, Homeopathy, Radiography, Medical Orthotics and Prosthetics and Engineering programmes* where students are given an opportunity to put theory into practice. From the findings, it was evident that DUT's WIL aspect can be used to attract students to the institution as WIL is considered as a selling point for DUT and should be emphasised in its marketing and communications strategies.

Considering the current economic state of the country and high unemployment rate, for many students it is essential that they get into the job market and contribute to getting their families out of poverty. Evidently, focus group participants mentioned that they would recommend DUT because of its WIL component that enables students to experience the working environment whilst studying. Furthermore, the findings revealed that some students selected DUT based on its reputation to deliver quality teaching and learning experience with practical training. With regards to the programmes offered, it was established that DUT offers unique programmes such as *Maritime Studies, Chiropractic, Homeopathy and Nursing*, within the KZN province. As such, students that want to study these courses, register at the DUT.

DUT's vision and mission in its current strategic plan foregrounds developing leadership and productive citizenship by excelling through the teaching and learning environment through producing quality graduates who are well trained and who will excel in the modern, innovative world (Durban University of Technology 2020). It has been noted that the WIL component and the uniqueness of programmes offered, influences students in making a university their first

choice. This section highlighted the influence of DUT's WIL component as well as how students are drawn to specific or unique programmes due to the practical opportunities available which enable them to be more marketable and compatible to industry requirements.

## **Theme 2: Response time and staff support (administrative and academic)**

Focus group participants pointed out that application processes, the response time, and staff support (administrative and academic) contribute to student's selection of an institution. Interviewees echoed these sentiments which indicate that poor response time to students could lead to a bad reputation and losing quality university students. Findings revealed that student's enrollment is influenced by the university selection process response time. The positive feedback related to registration and response time regarding students' application can enhance the institution's reputation. Fortunately, for the past three-years DUT's online registration has become popular with more students using smartphones to access university information.

Interviewees recommended that DUT must endeavor to attract the best students by expressing that this will promote the image of the institution better than any other source of promotional tools that the institution can implement, however, DUT needs to focus on building its reputation. Data showed that satisfaction levels and experiences of the students differed and as much as there were many positive comments on the programmes offered, the teaching and learning approaches, the university culture, and the WIL component, some negative experiences were communicated. Noting discontent related to the university experience, some students faced challenges with the lack of support and professionalism by academic staff. Students reported that they experienced barriers to communication with regards to timetables and absence of lecturers without notification.

Moreover, participants mentioned that academic staff are not supportive and accommodative towards first-year students. Participants highlighted the need to be treated justly and this foregrounds the need for university staff to understand students as developing human beings. The findings relating to academic and support staff and their unprofessionalism was echoed by other students expressing that the behaviour and attitude of DUT staff reflects on the image of the institution.

As expressed in the literature review, a student-centred and engaged institution must uphold its values that underlines amongst other important factors "... collegiality and ethical behaviour; transparency; relevance to society, both local and global; ... understanding students as developing human beings and seeing staff development as essential in the DUT purpose" (Durban University of Technology 2015, 4). From the above theme on response time and staff support, it can be concluded that there are mixed reactions on students' experiences. Therefore,

it is important for the university to use student friendly registration processes and systems and train staff to be more supportive, approachable, and professional as their behaviour has an impact on the university's reputation and the teaching and learning function.

### **Theme 3: Location of the university**

The majority of DUT students come from disadvantaged backgrounds in rural areas and for many it is difficult to find their way in and around the university, adapt to the university culture and student lifestyle. The new academic environment could be exciting and challenging, but not all students will have the same excitement and views about being away from home and exploring a new environment. A pertinent point that emerged from the focus group discussions with the first-year students was that the location of the university was critical in their selection. It was found that some students prefer that the university is far away from their homes, while others attributed the closeness to their homes as the deciding factor in selecting the university.

DUT has four campuses located within the heart of Durban and two in Pietermaritzburg. In terms of the location, focus group discussion participants expressed the desire to be away from home to experience a "new life". Other participants lauded the proximity of the university to their home, they selected DUT to be able to travel to their families after classes. The interviews with DUT staff highlighted the negative aspects of the location of the campuses. The proximity of the campuses to the Durban market and taxi ranks was a cause for concern for parents and teachers about the safety of students as muggings are often reported in the media. While concurring that the students can be easily mugged crossing the road, one of the participants expressed the reputational damage that can be incurred due to the criminal activity that takes place in the vicinity of DUT campuses.

In addition, the recklessness of taxi drivers in the proximity of the Durban campus was raised as a potential threat to students. This further contributes to the negative reputation of the university. Consequently, this poses a marketing challenge in terms of attracting and influencing students. Being situated in the vicinity of the market and taxi rank in Durban has raised safety issues among parents and guardians. At the same time however, being in the centre of the city close to malls, and close to the beach in Durban also seems to attract many students who expressed desire for the "city life and beach".

Theme 3 explored the influence of the location of the DUT in students' selection of university. It revealed the social needs of students as individuals and fears related to students' safety and security around the campus. In terms of safety, students, particularly those entering the university for the first time, need to feel safe to thrive and develop in their academic journeys. There are aspects of this theme that are interconnected to the final theme which are

discussed in the following section.

#### **Theme 4: Infrastructure and facilities**

This theme explores specific infrastructural factors that influence the decision-making of students relating to their choice of university. These factors include the infrastructure of the university, the standard of residences, sporting facilities and access to resources such as technology. From a quality delivery context, satisfied customers tell good stories about the organisation which in turn helps market and promote an organisation. Given that students are a key stakeholder in higher education, it is important to understand the post selection experiences of students. This understanding will enable university management to tailor marketing and communication tactics that will contribute to attracting, nurturing, and retaining students.

A salient point that emerged from the focus group discussions was that sport opportunities contribute to students' level of satisfaction in higher education. The staff interviewees alluded that some students select universities based on the availability of sporting facilities. During recruitment drives, school visits and exhibitions, students often enquire about sporting codes available at the institution as some aspire to play professionally.

DUT has many support structures, clubs and societies that include but are not limited to sport clubs, music genres, student political parties, religious groups, and support centers to offer support for students to succeed in their educational journeys and reach their goals. These initiatives are aimed at restoring a sense of balance to the emotional well-being of students as well as offering them a sense of belonging to a community on campus. A focus group discussion participant noted that sport was the contributing factor to a satisfying and enjoyable university experience.

A holistic learning environment can be regarded as a supportive environment that offers safety, a sense of community and provides opportunities that are associated with life-long learning and development (Modell, DeMiero, and Rose 2009; DeWitty 2018). Offering sporting opportunities to students is further in line with DUT vision to “improve the life chances and aspirations of their students and to contribute by building a safe, learning, busy and playing society” (Durban University of Technology 2015, 1). Students need holistic university experience to thrive in their studies. Findings revealed the need for DUT to recognise the importance of offering quality service and support, infrastructure, and quality teaching to students so that they can succeed in their academic journeys.

Furthermore, employees interviewed expressed that during school visits, the university facilities became a critical factor in influencing students' selection of DUT. Participants highlighted the need for enriching teaching and learning spaces. The poor state of residences,

broken furniture in lecture venues, inadequate transport, and students' services were identified as some of the areas that the university needs to work on to attract, retain and satisfy students. In finding ways to address some of the perceived difficulties students face at DUT, the extension of library access to students offers them the opportunity to learn and develop outside of lecture time, in a safe learning environment.

The focus group discussions and interviews revealed that the programme offerings, CRP, and WIL; response time and staff support (administrative and academic), location of the university and infrastructure and facilities influenced student's selection of DUT as a first choice. It emerged that unique programme offerings including CRP, WIL, sport activities offered by the institution was the significant reason for their satisfaction with the DUT while, staff support, and professionalism of lecturers, university response time and inadequate infrastructure was highlighted as the contributing factor for their dissatisfaction.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings enabled a deeper understanding of the complexity of students' needs, experiences, and aspirations in higher education. Recommendations on how the DUT can enhance marketing and communication strategies to maintain a good reputation and attract, retain, and satisfy students, as well as increase the number of students choosing DUT as a first choice will be provided.

The institution's unique programme offerings were identified as key elements that influence students' decision-making. The study revealed that students were likely to select DUT because of the WIL component as they believe that engaging in practical opportunities will increase their ability to find jobs and be work-environment ready. Students expressed that they perceived DUT as the university that produces graduates who have better chances of being employed, compared to other universities. These views were supported by employees interviewed. Interviewees indicated that the DUT has formed strategic partnerships with industries to facilitate work integrated learning opportunities and improve the chances of employment for students. This is an important drawcard for the university as poverty and employment are huge challenges in SA.

Students valued DUT's hands-on approach, and its relationship with industry bodies. These views affirm that strategic partnerships must continue to be nurtured, developed, and maintained to uphold the reputation of the university and to be able to attract students. Research participants indicated that the institution's unique programme offerings such as chiropractic studies, clinical technology, maritime studies, and prosthetics and orthotics attract students from all parts of SA. This underlines the importance of rigorously marketing unique programme

offerings to attract students to DUT. Staff interviewed explained how DUT employees, current students and alumni should serve as ambassadors of the institution and share their experiences of the university. This is one way of raising the profile of the unique programme offerings and the reputation of the institution.

Universities are pressurised by government to develop a curriculum that prepares well rounded graduates for the world of work. As a result, the curriculum renewal project has been introduced to prepare graduates for the complex, globalised work environment which contributes to DUTs competitiveness and enhancing its reputation. These initiatives are valuable in highlighting DUT's commitment to a decolonised curriculum, promoting lifelong learning, growing successful, globally portable graduates that will succeed in social and academic contexts. Moreover, Unger and Hanekom (2014) stated the main aim of the CRP is to produce graduates who can meet the complex requirements of the workplace. It further enables DUT to consider the changing profile of undergraduates and their readiness for tertiary-level education and evaluate the skills of the students and lecturers in terms of learning and teaching. This was confirmed by DUT staff who explained how the curriculum change and degree offerings contribute to positioning the institution competitively in the higher education sector.

DUT needs to work hard to sell the good news stories via media advertising and feature achievements of alumni that are excelling in the world of work as well as information on quality teaching, learning and research. The marketing and communications department can work closely with the alumni affairs department to initiate projects that will showcase DUT's alumni, thereby attracting students. It is imperative to feature relatable narratives of student and staff success.

Focus group discussion participants voiced their encounters with university response time, particularly in terms of allocating housing and funding. Participants expressed that they often felt destitute and likened to "squatters". It is vital that the institution prioritise student safety and security and the well-being of students. The institution needs to make resolute efforts to understand the food insecurity experiences of students and collaborate with organisations to fund and donate towards projects such as food security programmes.

To enhance DUT's reputation, the institution could better position itself by providing timely responses to the students' inquiries and applications. Good service delivery is a significant factor in contributing to a positive reputation of an organisation. This could include regularly alerting and updating the prospective students' application status and making sure that staff are available to communicate relevant information. Focus group discussion participants indicated that students value engagement and transparent communication from lecturers and

support staff. Consequently, DUT needs to understand its students' needs and develop strategies with the objectives of maintaining open communication with students. As garnered from participants, it can be said that staff of an institution contribute to the reputation by the way they respond to the public, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, in times of protest action, marketing and communication departments must maintain regular communication with students and parents in terms of security measures and the academic programme.

Location of the institution is another key social environmental factor that influences students' choice of university. Students considered location of university as a significant factor that guided their decision, and some noted the desire to experience a "new," or "different" environment, even if it meant relocating to another city or location, to grow as an individual, to be independent, to network and meet new people. Staff also shared the strengths of DUT's location by maintaining that according to recent statistics, location counts in favour of DUT because it revealed that students chose DUT because it is close to the town, malls, and the city's beach. This can be used as a drawcard to attract, retain, and satisfy students.

On the other hand, DUT's location has often been raised as an issue that requires attention as it is situated in the vicinity of the city's bustling market and taxi rank in Durban. Staff interviewed explained that many parents have concerns about the recklessness of taxi drivers as well as assault and robberies in the area. Parents and guardians are significant university stakeholders and need to be assured that safety and security is prioritised. The presence of security personnel, well-lit facilities and general security monitoring efforts can provide students with a sense of security on campus and in their residences.

In addition, students highlighted how facilities including availability of sporting codes influenced their decision to study at an institution. To attract students, the institution should profile students that excel in diverse sport codes to attract prospective sport enthusiasts. Sporting facilities should also be marketed during open days.

Reputation and credibility of an institution is key in influencing students' choice of university. As affirmed in the literature, both staff and students explained that credibility and reputation go hand in hand when selecting a university (Hemsley-Brown 2012; Munisamy, Jaafar, and Nagaraj 2014). Reputation represents the perceived excellence of the institution which guides the decisions of prospective students to enroll with the institution. The discussions and findings of this study offer valuable insight on students' decision-making and shows that it is largely influenced by the quality of programmes offered, work integrated learning opportunities, response time and staff support (administrative and academic), location of the university, and infrastructure and facilities.

This research is significant in that it can assist marketing and communication departments in understanding the complex factors that influence students' choice and the needs and experiences of first-year UoT students. This study contributed to universities' understanding the significance of shifting towards a deeply embedded commitment and active engagement in marketing and communications initiatives to enhance university reputation and attract, retain, and satisfy students.

## LIMITATIONS

The study was limited to participants who were staff from the Division of Corporate Affairs and first-generation students, the findings of the study may not be compulsory for other category of staff and students. Moreover, this study is limited to a University of Technology context in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Do you want to insert a paragraph here?

## DECLARATIONS

The authors declare that this journal article is their own work that is derived from a large dissertation of a Masters Degree submitted for graduation in 2019 at the Durban University of Technology.

## REFERENCES

- Agrey, L. and N. Lampadan. 2014. "Determinant factors contributing to student choice in selecting a university." *Journal of Education and Human Development* 3(2): 391–404.
- Alcock, A. 2017. "Positioning 'the self': Comparative case studies of first-generation students' academic identities when home meets campus in a rapidly transforming higher education context." Master in Education thesis, Rhodes University.
- Armstrong, G., S. Adam, S. Denize, and P. Kotler. 2014. *Principles of marketing*. Pearson Australia.
- Badat, S. 2015. "Institutional combinations and the creation of a new higher education institutional landscape in post-1994 South Africa." In *Mergers and alliances in higher education*, 175–201. Springer, Cham.
- Baloyi, M. C. 2015. "Mergers in South African Higher Education: Realization of Policy Intentions." University of South Africa Pretoria.
- Barnett, R. 2010. *Being a university*. Routledge.
- Browne, R. A. and H. Shen. 2017. "Challenges and Solutions of Higher Education in the Eastern Caribbean States." *International Journal of Higher Education* 6(1): 169–179.
- Budur, T., C. A. Rashid, and M. Poturak. 2018. "Students perceptions on university selection, decision-making process: A case study in Kurdistan Region of Iraq." *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies* 5(1): 133–144.



- Case, J. M. 2015. "A social realist perspective on student learning in higher education: The morphogenesis of agency." *Higher Education Research & Development* 34(5): 841–852.
- Council on Higher Education. 2017. "Quality Enhancement Project – Institutional Report Phase: 2." [https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/RPT\\_DUT\\_QEP%20Phase%202%20Final%20Report\\_20171130.pdf](https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/RPT_DUT_QEP%20Phase%202%20Final%20Report_20171130.pdf)
- Cowling, N. 2019. STATISTA. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1262516/number-of-foreign-students-by-region-in-south-africa/#statisticContainer>.
- Dall’Alba, G. and R. Barnacle. 2007. "An ontological turn for higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* 32(6): 679–691.
- Dao, M. T. N. and A. Thorpe. 2015. "What factors influence Vietnamese students’ choice of university?" *International Journal of Educational Management* 29(5): 666–681.
- DeWitty, V. P. 2018. "What is holistic admissions review, and why does it matter?" *Journal of Nursing Education* 57(4): 195–196. SLACK Journals.
- Durban University of Technology. 2015. "DUT STRATEGIC PLAN 2015–2019." Durban University of Technology. <https://www.dut.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/DUT-strategic-plan-2015.pdf>.
- Durban University of Technology. 2020. "ENVISION 2030." <https://www.dut.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Envision-2030-strategy-map.pdf>.
- Felix, E. 2015. "Marketing challenges of satisfying consumers changing expectations and preferences in a competitive market." *International Journal of Marketing Studies* 7(5): 41.
- Funeka, L. P. 2019. "The Influence of Corporate Reputation on students’ choice of University: A Case Study of the Durban University of Technology." Master of Management Sciences – Specialising in Public Relations and Communication, Management Science Durban University of Technology.
- Funeka, L. P., N. Govender, and V. Govender. 2022. "Attracting and Retaining University Students through Effective Marketing and Public Relations Strategies." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics and Business Law* 11(4): 155–179. [http://www.ijebll.co.uk/ijebll\\_subscribersonly.html](http://www.ijebll.co.uk/ijebll_subscribersonly.html).
- García-Ros, R., F. Pérez-González, F. Cavas-Martínez, and J. M. Tomás. 2018. "Social interaction learning strategies, motivation, first-year students’ experiences and permanence in university studies." *Educational Psychology* 38(4): 451–469.
- Hemsley-Brown, J. 1999. "College choice: Perceptions and priorities." *Educational Management & Administration* 27(1): 85–98.
- Hemsley-Brown, J. 2012. "‘The best education in the world’: Reality, repetition or cliché? International students’ reasons for choosing an English university." *Studies in Higher Education* 37(8): 1005–1022.
- Hemsley-Brown, J. and I. Oplatka. 2006. "Universities in a competitive global marketplace: A systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing." *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 19(4): 316–338. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/09513550610669176/full/html?queryID=12%2F18036857>.
- Jansen, Jonathan. 2003. "Mergers in South African higher education: Theorising change in transitional contexts." *Politikon* 30(1): 27–50.
- Lewin, T. and M. Mawoyo. 2014. *Student Access and Success: Issues and Interventions in South African Universities*. The Kresge Foundation. Inyathelo Publishers: Cape Town. February.
- Long, D. 2012. "Theories and models of student development." In *Environments for student growth and development: Librarians and student affairs in collaboration*, edited by L. J. Hinchliffe and M. A. Wong, 41–55. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries.
- Ministry of Education. 2001. *National Plan for Higher Education*. Vol. 230. Vol. 22138: The Ministry. South Africa.
- Modell, H. I., F. G. DeMiero, and L. Rose. 2009. "In pursuit of a holistic learning environment: the impact of music in the medical physiology classroom." *Advances in Physiology Education* 33(1):

37–45.

- Mohamedbhai, G. 2014. “Massification in higher education institutions in Africa: Causes, consequences and responses.” *International Journal of African Higher Education* 1(1).
- Munisamy, S., N. I. M. Jaafar, and S. Nagaraj. 2014. “Does reputation matter? Case study of undergraduate choice at a premier university.” *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 23(3): 451–462.
- Nazidin, N. M., Ishak Ismail, and H. Haron. 2019. “The Intention to Enroll among Students of Private Higher Learning Institutions.” *KnE Social Sciences*: 498–510.
- Ncayiyane, D. L. and F. M Hayward. 2007. “Centre for Higher Education Transformation, Governance Series.” Department of Education. Republic of South Africa.
- Ngcamu, B. S. 2016. “Conceptualizing transformation in the post-merger and incorporation environment era: A case of the Durban University of Technology.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36(5/6): 270–288.
- O’Connor, L. and K. Lundstrom. 2011. “The impact of social marketing strategies on the information seeking behaviors of college students.” *Reference & user services quarterly* 59(4): 351–365.
- Panda, S., S. C. Pandey, A. Bennett, and X. Tian. 2019. “University brand image as competitive advantage: A two-country study.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 33(2): 234–251
- Parker, K. M. 2016. “Curriculum renewal as a transformational project at the Durban University of Technology: What do the existing data say?” *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 14(1): 129–143.
- Peer, M. and M. Mpinganjira. 2011. “Understanding service quality and patient satisfaction in private medical practice: A case study.” *African Journal of Business Management* 5(9): 3690–3698.
- Pillay, T. S. 2010. “Student enrolment planning in public higher education: A South African case study – Durban University of Technology.” DTech, Public Management, Durban University of Technology.
- Pinar, M., T. Girard, and C. Basfirinci. 2020. “Examining the relationship between brand equity dimensions and university brand equity: An empirical study in Turkey.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 34(7): 1119–1141.
- Plewa, C., J. Ho, J. Conduit, and I. O. Karpen. 2016. “Reputation in higher education: A fuzzy set analysis of resource configurations.” *Journal of business research* 69(8): 3087–3095.
- Pringle, J. and S. Fritz. 2019. “The university brand and social media: Using data analytics to assess brand authenticity.” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 29(1): 19–44.
- Ramrathan, S. 2018. “Exploring inequality in institutional marketing: Access to higher education by marginalised communities.” PhD dissertation. Durban University of Technology, Durban.
- Roksa, J. and P. Kinsley. 2019. “The role of family support in facilitating academic success of low-income students.” *Research in Higher Education* 60(4): 415–436.
- Sajtos, L., H. Kreis, and R. Brodie. 2015. “Image, brand relationships and customer value: Exploring the moderating role of advertising spending- and labour-intensity in customer loyalty.” *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* 25(1): 51–74.
- Santos, C. L., P. Rita, and J. Guerreiro. 2018. “Improving international attractiveness of higher education institutions based on text mining and sentiment analysis.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 32(3): 431–447.
- Shah, M., C. S. Nair, and L. Bennett. 2013. “Factors influencing student choice to study at private higher education institutions.” *Quality Assurance in Education* 21(4): 402–416.
- Shtudiner, Z., M. Zwillling, and J. Kantor. 2017. “Field of study choice: Using conjoint analysis and clustering.” *International Journal of educational management* 31(2): 179–188.
- Silverman, D. 2013. *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. Sage.

- Slåtten, T., G. Lien, S. B. N. Evenstad, and T. Onshus. 2021. "Supportive study climate and academic performance among university students: The role of psychological capital, positive emotions and study engagement." *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences* 13(4).
- Spiegler, T. and A. Bednarek. 2013. "First-generation students: What we ask, what we know and what it means: An international review of the state of research." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 23(4): 318–337.
- Swartz, R., M. Ivancheva, L. Czerniewicz, and N. P. Morris. 2019. "Between a rock and a hard place: Dilemmas regarding the purpose of public universities in South Africa." *Higher Education* 77(4): 567–583. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10734-018-0291-9.pdf>.
- Unger, M. and S. D. Hanekom. 2014. "Benefits of curriculum renewal: the Stellenbosch University physiotherapy experience: supplement 1-research." *African Journal of Health Professions Education* 6(2): 222–226.
- Wiese, M. 2008. "A higher education marketing perspective on choice factors and information sources considered by South African first-year university students." PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria.
- Woldegiorgis, E. T. and M. Doevenspeck. 2015. "Current trends, challenges and prospects of student mobility in the African higher education landscape." *International Journal of Higher Education* 4(2): 105–115.