POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT AN EMERGING MARKET HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

A constructive learning experience for postgraduate students is important for higher educational institutions, particularly in emerging markets such as South Africa. The context of the student and supervisor relationship, operating in an intensive service delivery system, is also vitally important in this context, in order to secure a positive and successful learning outcome for the student. This study's aim is to evaluate postgraduate students' learning experience in an intensive higher educational service delivery system. It places the student at the center of a service design and relationship marketing approach, and highlights several areas of exploration. The study adopted a qualitative approach. Several online interviews were conducted with masters and doctoral students. The data was collected online and analysed using inductive content analysis. The main results indicate that, overall, the students' experience and emotions were positive, but that the lecturer, as internal stakeholder in the service system, should receive more support. The contributions of this study are in the practical implementation of an improved service design experience, and the elimination of possible service gaps, to secure customer loyalty and effective service delivery.

Keywords: service design, emerging market education, postgraduate

INTRODUCTION

Emerging markets such as South Africa face the challenge and responsibility of growing the undergraduate student intake at higher educational institutions (HEI), as a growing education sector is argued to contribute to economic growth, which is especially vital in these types of economies (Mauch 2001). The South African government's funding policies work on a reward system for research output in the form of academic publications and postgraduate students. HEIs in South Africa have embraced these policies, and have particularly focused on increasing and growing their postgraduate student output (Bitzer 2009). A positive postgraduate learning

experience is therefore of great importance to HEIs. As intensive service delivery systems, taking a service, customer, and relationship marketing approach to students is becoming an important focus for HEIs as a means to achieve positive student experiences and the successful growth and graduating of postgraduate students.

As a first step towards understanding how to secure an improved postgraduate experience at an HEI, this study is rooted in relationship marketing and service design. It begins with a view of the postgraduate student experience at one HEI in a major South African city. More specifically, taking a service design perspective, this study places the student at the centre of the service process, and aims to appraise postgraduate students' experience as consumers within an intensive higher educational service delivery system. In order to achieve this aim, the following areas are explored:

- The students' learning experience (with a focus on the supervisor).
- The students' experience of using technology.
- The students' experience of their home department.
- The students' experience of service departments.

This article opens with a literature review, first setting the scene for higher education in the emerging market of South Africa, followed by the importance of taking a customer relationship approach in higher education postgraduate studies and the application of service design principles to enhance the customer experience. This is followed by the methodology section, a presentation and discussion of the results, the managerial implications, and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section endeavours to place the students at the heart of an intensive service delivery system by also grounding the study within relationship management. The key research issues addressed in the literature review involve the following:

- Higher education in the emerging market of South Africa
- Relationship marketing
- Service design

Higher education in the emerging market of South Africa

Emerging markets are countries regarded by investors as possessing certain qualities, such as

the potential for economic growth and a possible high return on investment. Further to these qualities, characteristics such as a growing educational system are of great importance. A growing educational system contributes to a stable workforce that is both educated and has the ability to engage in further education initiatives, and in turn contributes to successful economic growth (Mauch 2001). As an emerging market and member of the BRICS community (South African Government 2019), South Africa places tremendous importance on higher education. Its universities are growing at a rapid rate as it increases student intake at the undergraduate level (Africa Check 2016).

The growth in the intake of undergraduate students is also important to securing a strong stream of postgraduate students. As university funding has gradually declined, student numbers have increased (Africa Check 2016), forcing many South African universities to shift their focus from the government funding received for undergraduates to a stronger focus on research and postgraduate students. This is because the South African government's funding policies reward – and therefore provide money for – research output, which is produced in the forms of academic publications and postgraduate degrees (Bitzer 2009).

Although questions have been asked about how these rewards influence universities' priorities – e.g., producing quantity over quality – this policy remains in place, and it forms a large part of South African universities' drive to push research publications and to see postgraduate students graduate (Bitzer 2009). Achieving a positive postgraduate student experience is therefore of great importance, and can arguably be achieved by implementing a stronger service delivery approach and enhanced relationships.

Relationship marketing

Of cardinal importance in the supervision process is the student and supervisor relationship. A study by Docherty-Skippen and Brown (2017) argues that the development specifically of trust, openness, and caring is important to motivating students in the postgraduate study phase to develop the abilities to look at academic challenges differently, and to move past obstacles that limit academic growth – such as experiencing writer's block. However, this relationship remains positioned within a service delivery context – that is, between the supervisor (representing the higher education institution) and the student (the customer who purchased this service). So it is important to a take relationship marketing perspective to understand better how the postgraduate service experience can be optimally enhanced.

Relationship marketing is about obtaining privileged information about customers' needs and using this to service customers efficiently and to optimise their satisfaction (Rasul 2017). Importantly, it also requires an improved understanding and identification of the key drivers of

satisfaction, which might then lead to loyalty (Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh 2016, 263). Similar to Docherty-Skippen and Brown's (2017) findings about the importance of a relationship of trust between the student and the supervisor, relationship marketing theory suggests that it is important to establish trust and commitment. Commitment plays an important role in building customer service relationships, and allows for the relationship to remain indefinitely in place (Bardauskaite 2014, 48; Hidayat, Zalzalah, and Ekasasi 2016); but at the same time, commitment is also found to be highly correlated with trust (Yen et al. 2015, 177). This proposes that commitment and trust together represent key components upon which to base and develop the student-supervisor relationship in a service intensive system such as an HEI.

However, students engage with multiple other touchpoints in a complex university system, which can further influence their experience. As proposed by Rasul (2017) and Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh (2016), it is important to advance the understanding of service delivery by obtaining information about customers' needs, and identifying and uncovering key drivers in the service system that contribute to student satisfaction and loyalty. A good student postgraduate experience can secure future growth through their enrolment in further postgraduate studies (e.g., a Master's student progressing to enrol for a PhD).

Service design

In obtaining further information and understanding customer needs, the concept of "service design" has grown in importance in recent years as a discipline that uses numerous creative tools to understand customers and to place them at the centre of the service design process (Ojasalo and Ojasalo 2015). It also investigates the various interactions that take place between multiple stakeholders in a service system, aiming to achieve a holistic perspective on the entire customer experience (Segelström 2013; Wetter-Edman 2014). Service design also relies on adopting a design thinking perspective that is rooted in a people-centred approach, and then applying visual methods to understand and explore the problems and/or tensions experienced (Brown 2019; Ojasalo and Ojasalo 2015).

In understanding the additional factors that contribute to service delivery satisfaction and loyalty, this article adopts a service design perspective, placing the student (as the customer) at the centre of the design process. The specific focus is on uncovering students' experiences at one HEI in South Africa as a first step towards understanding how to improve service delivery and secure student loyalty among postgraduate students in South Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study made use of an online open-ended questions survey to collect the data. Inductive

content analysis was used to analyse the online interviews. Inductive content analysis lends itself to cases where there are limited studies in the field, and the coded texts are derived directly from the text (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013, 398). It also lends itself to the service design concept of having an open-minded and holistic look at the customer (in this case, the student) experience. In this study, the online interviews formed the text used for coding.

Target group and sample decision

The researchers were provided with a list of all postgraduate students – masters and doctoral students – currently enrolled in the faculty where the researchers work, and an invitation to participate in this study was extended to this list of students. Purposive sampling techniques were used for this study, as they are designed to provide information-rich data for in-depth studies. This is because these participants have the required status or experience, or are known to possess special knowledge, to provide the information that the researchers seek (Lopez and Whitehead 2013). Two other sampling techniques fall under the umbrella of purposive sampling: quota sampling and maximum variation sampling. To obtain multiple opinions from various master's and doctoral students with-in several departments, studying an array of different business specialities, in a large business college (Yin 2016), it is useful to deploy maximum variation sampling methods, thus ensuring well-balanced views from numerous participants. Fifty online open-ended question responses were collected in this study. Elo et al. (2014, 8) state that the trustworthiness of content analysis depends on the availability of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data. Trustworthiness also depends on the manner in which the data is collected.

Research analysis

This study was exploratory in design, and employed the inductive procedural model of Mayring (2014, 80) to guide the research (Figure 1).

Step 1

Research questions. Formulate a clear research question that fits an inductive logic, which means that it must be exploratory. The aim of this study is to appraise postgraduate students' experience as consumers in an intensive higher educational service delivery system. The theoretical background must be described using the literature and previous studies. This section of the study is covered in the literature review section.

Step 2

Category definition and level of abstraction. The category definition, which has to be explicit,

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│   │              Step 1                         │     │
│   │   Research question, theoretical background │     │
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│   │              Step 2                         │     │
│   │   Establishment of a selection criterion,   │     │
│   │   category definition, level of abstraction │     │
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│   │              Step 3                         │     │
│   │   Working through the texts line by line,   │     │
│   │   new category formulation or subsumption   │     │
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│   │              Step 4                         │     │
│   │     Revision of categories and rules        │     │
│   │        after 10 to 50% of texts             │     │
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│   │              Step 5                         │     │
│   │     Final working through the material      │     │
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│   │              Step 6                         │     │
│   │     Building of main categories if useful   │     │
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│   │              Step 7                         │     │
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│   │              Step 8                         │     │
│   │ Final results, e.g., frequencies,           │     │
│   │ interpretation                              │     │
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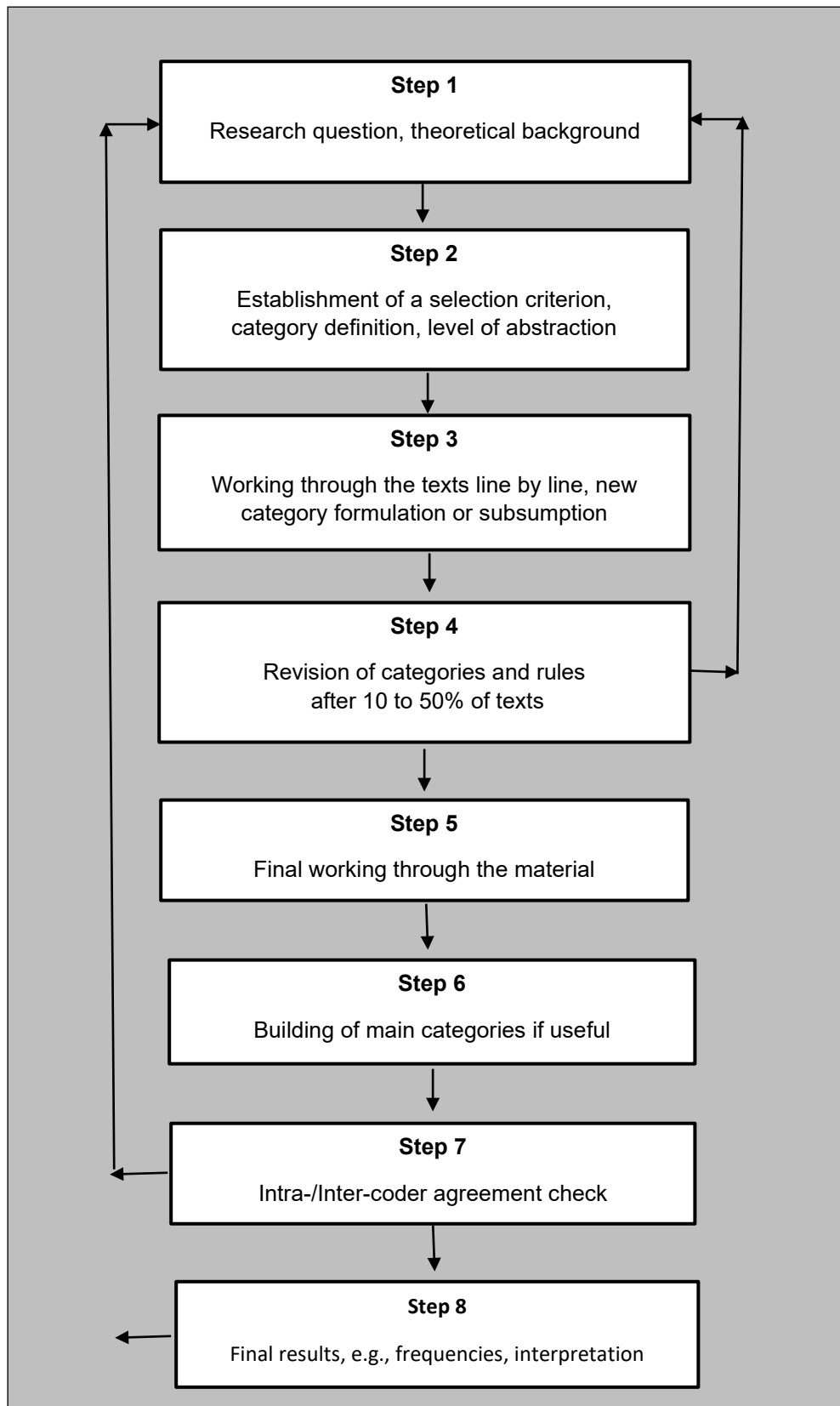
Figure 1: Steps of inductive category management (Source: Mayring 2014, 80)

serves as a selection criterion to determine the relevant material from the texts. The level of

abstraction defines how specific or general categories have to be formulated, which is central to inductive category formation. For the purpose of this study, the areas of exploration were operationalised into category definitions. These are: the students' learning experience, the students' experience of using technology, the students' experience of their home department, the students' experience of service departments, and the students' experience of the HEI's physical location in a major city. Step 2 is covered in the introduction, the literature review, and the respondents' feedback from the interviews. The online interviews served as the unit of analysis.

Step 3

Coding the text. Qualitative data coding decisions should be based on the paradigm and the theoretical approach of the study. The following coding methods were chosen for the data analysis. Attribute coding was used to log the essential descriptive information about the participants. In order to tap into the students' experience, in-vivo coding was used to honour the participants' voice and to ground the data analysis from their perspective. In-vivo coding is also very effective for developing new theories. Emotion coding taps into the participants' inner cognitive systems; it was used to label the feelings that the participants' have experienced, and adopted the list of the six main emotions (confusion, sad, strong, happy anger and energized) as provided by www.englishstudyhere.com (Saldana 2009). Steps 3 to 7 were carried out on the transcriptions, with each step improving on the previous one.

Step 4

Revision. A revision in the sense of a pilot loop is necessary when the category system seems to become stable. A check is done to see whether the category system fits the research question. If it does not, a revision of the category definition is necessary. A check is also done to see whether the degree of generalisation is sufficient. If there are only a few categories, then the level of abstraction is too general. If there are many categories, then the level of abstraction is too specific.

Step 5

Final coding. The whole material – in this case, the online interviews – has to be worked through with the same rules – that is, category definition and level of abstraction.

Step 6

A list of categories emerges at the end of this process. They are grouped together to build

themes, keeping in line with the research question.

Step 7

Intra- or inter-coder check. The text is coded from the beginning to match the categories.

Step 8

 Findings. Initially the findings are the list of categories. If categories have to be found for several text passages, a frequency analysis of the categories' occurrence could be useful. The categories and the frequencies have to be interpreted in the direction of the research aim. Step 8 revealed the findings of this study, which are presented below.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

All fifty responses were collected via an online open-ended questions survey in the from Masters and Doctoral students in the faculty. The questions were broadly phrased to allow for rich information to be provided, and asked students to describe their experience of their learning growth and their supervisor, the use of technology to facilitate learning, and their overall experience with service departments at the institution, such as their home departments, registration, and finance. The findings were analysed from the answers provided in the open-ended surveys, and are formulated to reflect the main themes that emerged. Participants were anonymised, apart from the attribute table below, and therefore direct quotations are identified by referring to them as P1 to P50, with corresponding details.

Table 1: Details of participants

Interviewee number P1 to P50	Master's (M) or Doctoral (D) student	Male (M) or Female (F)	Age

On exploring the participants' opinion on their learning experience as postgraduate students, the vast majority of them said that the experience was "very good". Many of the participants gave very short and concise answers. They also referred to the relationship between themselves and their supervisor as "healthy", and that this area of their learning experience was working:

> "Very good." (P13; D; M; 34).
> "Relationship and feedback is quite healthy." (P21; D; M; 42).

Some of the students went further and elaborated on the positive impact of their student / supervisor relationship:

"Overall, it was a good experience learning about the subject area and getting more actively involved with my project. Further to that, I built lifelong relationships with my supervisors and will continue to be grateful for their support and advice during and after completion of masters study." (P3; D; M; 32).

On the emotional experience, the dominant theme that was picked up was one of happiness: "The best experience of my life, very knowledgeable Professor and academically sound ..." (P6; D; F; 43).

And many students continued by expressing their gratitude: "... my experience at UJ has been outstanding with endless support" (P41; M; F; 25).

On the next area of exploration, the participants were probed to give an opinion on the issue of technology as part of their learning experience. The majority felt that the system was easy to use and that the overall process provided for a positive experience: "The use of the University's systems was resourceful and user-friendly, so I can say I had a good experience in using the built-in programmes for registration and commencement of my studies" (P3; D; M; 31).

Some of the participants spontaneously mentioned all the technology touchpoints in a positive light: "I have found the university systems quite useful and effective and the support staff in the Library, IT, security, registration, application quite helpful ..." (P43; D; F; 55).

On an emotional level, the participants felt happy with their learning experience with the aid of technology:

"So far I have been very happy with the Office 365 and the One Drive integration, it is really a pleasure to use, I don't use Blackboard at all other than for the Postgraduate Group email list to receive notifications for scheduled research workshops." (P22; D; M; 33).

Exploring the participants' experience of their home departments also revealed optimistic results. The majority saw the home department as the "go-to place" to help with queries and administration:

"I had good experiences within the department e.g. administrative services are at an excellent level" (P43; M; F; 50); and

"The department assisted me very well during the course of my Mcom studies and I had no issues when I was dealing with them. Whenever I experienced any problems related to my registration or completion of my studies, they were always willing to assist and resolve the matter in the best way possible." (P43; D; F; 55).

The vast majority of the participants cited "happiness" on the emotional scale when dealing with their home department: "Absolutely great" (P46; D; F; 32).

Some of the participants expressed their faith and gratitude when dealing with the home department: "The assistant and the availability of the department is always 100% helpful" (P6; D; F; 43).

On exploring service departments and the participants feedback on their experience of this – the registration process and the finance department – the finding overall were positive. The participants spontaneously brought up the issue of the technology that drives these processes and that makes them work very smoothly. The findings of the on-line registration process will be dealt with first: "Good. Relatively fast administrative and technology-driven process" (P19; D; M; 39); "It was easy and quite swift" (P46; D; F; 32).

On the issue of the participants' experience with the finance department, the findings indicate a user-friendly system. Some of the participants mentioned that they had learned the process of making on-line payments while they were undergraduate students, and that the system seems much easier now. The participants also provided feedback that showed that the majority of them used the on-line system for finances rather than visiting a finance department in person: "Good. The use of technology-driven process (using student portal) is very innovative and make registration/payment very easy with available info" (P19; D; M; 39).

Evaluating the emotions of this area, the participants all felt "happy". Hardly any negative emotions were experienced by the participants: "Very simple and user friendly" (P14; D; M; 49).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The overwhelmingly positivity of the students' experience and emotions are reflected in the findings with quotes such as "very good", "quite healthy" "outstanding experience" and "absolutely great". This overall positivity has many benefits, and as Maher et al. (2021) defend, a positive student performs academically better, adapt better to a learning environment and generally have a better mental outlook. This positivity is evident on the students' overall learning experience, supervisor relationships, and engagement with other service delivery departments may be due to a few reasons. First, as the findings showed, postgraduate students are familiar with university systems as a result of their undergraduate engagement and experiences with an HEI. They therefore find it easy to navigate the systems, and know where to request help when they battle. This suggests that the popular argument that "it is easier and more profitable to maintain and service existing customers, than to acquire new ones" (Reichheld 2001; Wertz 2018) proves true in the context of postgraduate students. Because they

are existing customers, the institution requires very little effort to help and guide them in the use of the day-to-day service systems.

Second, the continued drive to grow postgraduate students in the South African market because of funding incentives (Bitzer 2009) could be a further contributor, in that both the university and supervisors are keenly aware of the importance of helping postgraduate students to succeed. This has possibly created a culture of having to foster good relationships and a good service experience. Of further and particular importance is the role of the student-and-supervisor relationship in securing trust and commitment (Docherty-Skippen and Brown 2017; Yen et al. 2015) and in enhancing the relationship to secure a good service experience in this context. The findings suggest that supervisors generally manage to secure this, with positive comments from the students saying that they have built lifelong relationships with a supervisor.

What is important to note, however, is a previous study by De Meyer-Heydenrych and Stiehler-Mulder (2018) of the lecturers' experience at the same higher education institution in South Africa, which found that lecturers found it challenging to be in a supervision role. Hurdles that were identified included getting students' writing up to standard, working on their comprehension of difficult concepts, and the lecturers' perception that students see their success as the responsibility of the lecturer, not the student. This suggests that the incentive for growing postgraduate output improves the student experience, but possibly to the detriment of the institution's internal stakeholders – the lecturers.

In taking a service design perspective in placing the student as the customer at the centre of the service design process, and considering the interactions with different stakeholders (Segelström 2013; Wetter-Edman 2014; Brown 2019; Ojasalo and Ojasalo 2015), the findings suggest that the student service experience at a higher education institution may be understood and represented as follows:
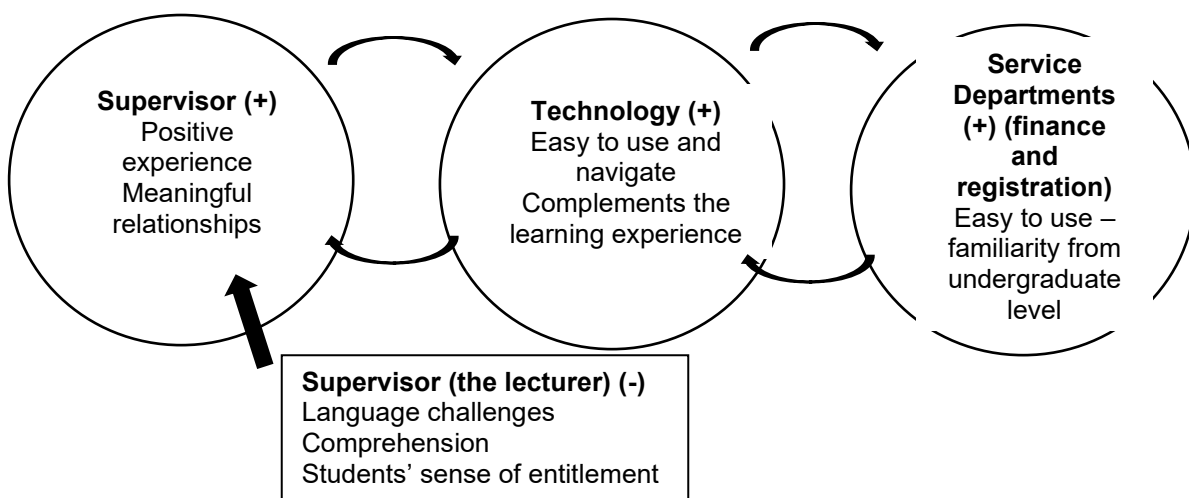

Figure 2: Summary of results

The figure summarises the findings by visually demonstrating the different processes and contact points that postgraduate students experience, and suggests that, as important external stakeholders in the system, the students are generally happy, partly because they are familiar with the process (the power of maintaining existing customers), but also due to good relationships with their supervisors. The figure further indicates the important role of the internal stakeholder (the lecturer as supervisor), demonstrating that, although the institution is succeeding in achieving positive postgraduate experiences, previous research at the same institution suggests that this may be achieved to the detriment of an important internal stakeholder, the lecturer. A service design approach to advance post-graduate support brings together multidisciplinary contributions, offered to the student. These include service interfaces and offerings, operations and technologies. Multidisciplinarity means juxtaposing various contributions, in order to foster wider knowledge to uncover hidden matters (Prestes Joly et al. 2019).

In summarizing the findings this research contributes towards higher education transformation in several ways. Firstly, it provides evidence of technological transformation as an excellence driver in post-Covid and 4IR. Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) state that this factor alone can contribute to better access of HE and better pedagogy. Secondly, to respond to the demands of today's world, lecturers have been abandoning the traditional model of contact teaching in favour for online methods. Santos, Figueiredo and Vieira (2019) laments that the current student is more demanding and needs innovative ways of engagement.

MANAGERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is of vital importance that students at HEIs are seen as actors in a service delivery system. By building relationships that are focused on commitment and trust and good customer service, loyalty can be enhanced. It seems best for undergraduates to become postgraduate students within the same system, as their familiarity with the system allows for a fluid experience with the service systems. This contributes to the ease of use of a service system, and limits any additional service pressures. Supervisors should continue to build trust and commitment in relationships, as these are the aspects of service delivery that they value the most; and home departments should continue with their service delivery approach. The role of the supervisor as an internal stakeholder should be considered, and possible ways to provide better support to supervisors explored. These internal stakeholders play a critical role in the successful graduation of postgraduate students, but seem to experience a lot of pressure in maintaining this service delivery process.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted at one major HEI in an important economic city in South Africa. The results cannot be generalised, therefore. The study aimed, rather, to serve as a first step towards understanding the experiences of postgraduate students at an HEI. A concern about the findings is that, although the online interview protocol was open-ended and allowed participants to write answers that were as long as they wished, the majority of the participants gave very concise responses. This could be attributed to the method of data collection. If the interviews had been carried out using a conversational interview approach, richer data might have been produced. Although the data was not rich and layered, it was well-saturated, and therefore was appropriate (Elo et al. 2014, 8). Further studies could be carried out on the other stakeholders in the intensive higher educational service delivery system, to determine their role and experiences in contributing to the success of the master's and doctoral students' output.

CONCLUSION

The article aimed to appraise postgraduate students' experience as consumers in an intensive higher educational service delivery system, and to review possibilities for improvement. This was done by exploring postgraduate students' experience as customers in an intensive HEI service delivery system. Because of the pressure to publish and graduate master's and doctoral graduates, supervisors experience an increased workload as well as pressure from their HEI; and these frustrations raised the danger of being carried over to the student. Although this article proved quite the opposite (very positive student experiences), supervisor pressure and frustrations could become a future problem, and should be explored in greater depth.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The proper ethical procedures were followed in line with the university's structures and policies, and an ethical clearance certificate was issued for this study.

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