Student perceptions of customer experience in a higher education environment

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Orientation: Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing many challenges such as intense competition and a decrease in government subsidies. Creating more satisfied undergraduate students with a high level of loyalty can increase retention of students.

Research purpose: The main aim of the study was to measure students' level of loyalty, advocacy intentions and perceptions of customer experience during service encounters with administrative staff of the North-West University.

Motivation for the study: Positive experiences by students on-campus can increase their satisfaction levels which will lead to an increased propensity for further studies, develop a sense of loyalty and increase advocacy intentions to promote the university to others.

Research approach, design and method: This quantitative research followed a descriptive research design. Self-administered questionnaires were handed out to 1295 students on the 3 campuses of the university.

Main findings: Students on the Potchefstroom campus show much higher loyalty and advocacy intentions than their counterparts on the Vaal and Mafikeng campuses. Overall the findings indicate that the students have very positive perceptions of the professional appearance of staff members, and also think that their personal information is handled in a secure manner. Male and female students did not differ in their levels of customer experience. European language-speaking students reported a higher level of customer experience compared to their African language-speaking counterparts. The customer experience levels of students in the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences are higher than students in the Vaal Faculty of Humanities.

Practical/managerial implications: It could be beneficial for the management of tertiary institutions to gain insight into the sources or factors that constitute positive experiences for students, for example convenient opening hours and ease of contacting staff by telephone. The training of newly appointed and existing staff could also be enhanced when they are sensitised regarding students' perceptions of positive customer experiences.

Contribution/value-add: The adoption of strategies by HEIs to attract and retain students and render excellent services will result in loyal ambassadors who will demonstrate high advocacy intentions.

Introduction

Service quality and the associated topics of relationship marketing, customer relationship management and customer experience management have become key areas of research by many scholars over the past few decades (Armstrong & Kotler 2005:6; Arussy 2005:42; Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne 2002:xiii). Nadiri, Kandampully and Hussain (2009:523) declare that service quality (which is related to student experience and satisfaction) is a new emerging concept in the higher education environment. They argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to attract, serve and retain students by ensuring that the students' needs and perceptions related to service quality are pre-determined and then addressed. Oldfield and Baron (2000:86) posit that it is still an emotive issue to determine what comprises service quality in the higher education environment. Voss, Gruber and Szmigin (2007:949) warn that new students have an idealistic belief of the nature and overall perception of service quality levels they can expect on campus. HEIs should strive to determine those levels, in order to enable them to manage service quality efficiently, which will lead to positive customer experiences by students. Athiyaman (2000:54) agree by stating that the efficient management of service quality at an HEI should also result in an effort to attract and retain students. Once these students are enrolled, the service encounters must be managed in such a way as to lead to meaningful experiences, satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth referrals.

Since the mid-1980s the service quality sub-discipline became a very important and relevant concept in the field of marketing (Clewes 2003:69). Clemes, Gan and Kao (2008:315) are of the opinion that service quality is the most important contributor towards increased customer satisfaction levels. Gummesson (2002:3) posits that relationship marketing (RM) can be regarded as an extension of marketing based on the interaction within networks of relationships. Payne and Frow (2005) define customer relationship management (CRM) as a management approach that seeks to create, develop and enhance relationships with carefully targeted customers in order to maximise customer value, corporate profitability and thus shareholder value.

Customer experience management (CEM) is a closely related term to CRM and RM which is markedly receiving more attention, not only in the literature, but also by practitioners and market research companies (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons 2006:11; Frow & Payne 2007:89–101; Verhoef *et al.* 2009:31–41). It can be assumed that the CEM approach could lead to benefits for all types of organisations. Loyal university students, for example, could be a valuable marketing tool to promote and recommend the university to friends or family members.

Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2006:11) postulate that services are undergoing a transformation from the traditional concept of a service transaction to one of an experience. According to these authors experiences must 'create added value by engaging and connecting with customers in a personal and memorable way' (p. 11). Hence, it can be assumed that the achievement of acceptable customer satisfaction levels is a vital instrument for HEIs. Due to fierce competition, universities are nowadays engaging in promotional and recruitment programmes to attract and retain students (Yeo 2008:267).

The next section will provide a brief and concise overview of the literature pertaining to this study. The problem statement and objectives will be presented, followed by the methodology and a discussion of the results. The limitations of the study and suggestions for future research will conclude the article.

Literature review

Armstrong and Kotler (2005:5) boldly state that the building of customer relations based on customer value and satisfaction is at the very heart of modern marketing. Hoffman *et al.* (2009:367) concur by saying that customer satisfaction is one of the most studied areas in marketing, and is frequently included in the mission statements and promotional campaigns of companies. Levy, Weitz and Beitelspacher (2012:91) describe customer satisfaction as an evaluation of how well a store, product (or service) meets or exceeds customer expectations. Hunt (1991:109,110) describes satisfaction as a function of the consumers' belief that they were treated fairly.

In the HEI context, Bolliger and Wasilik (2009:105) and Paswan (2008:288) contend that service augmenters, such as a strong and effective administrative department, will be a positive factor towards increasing the levels of students' experiences, resulting in satisfaction and eventually loyalty towards the institution.

Customer experience

Palmer (2010:197) postulates that discussions relating to experience in a marketing context has a long history. Almost 60 years ago Abbott (in Palmer 2010) argued that customers really desire satisfying experiences instead of products, whilst Pine and Gilmore (1998:98) describe successful experiences as being those that 'a customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time'. Where Abbott has a utilitarian view on experiences, Schmitt (1999:26) is of the opinion that definitions based more on hedonistic experiences that provide, for example, sensory, emotional and behavioural values, have merit. Gupta and Vajic (2000:34) agree by stating that 'an experience occurs when a customer has any sensation resulting from some level of interaction ... created by the service provider'. Palmer (2010:198) points out that emotions must be considered as a distinguishing feature of customer experience.

The historic work of Pine and Gilmore (1998:98) considers experience as a total new dimension of commodities, products and services. This view is supported by other authors (Arussy 2005:42; Rahman 2006:203; Verhoef *et al.* 2009:31) who believe that the creation of a superior customer experience seems to become one of the central objectives in business. Henry and Greenhalgh (2005:45) define customer experience management (CEM) as the management of the touch zones of customer interactions that take place during the customer lifecycle.

The concept of total customer experience (TCE) was introduced by Petre, Minocha and Roberts (2006:189), who claim that it influences customers' perceptions of value and service quality and as a result affects customer loyalty. They also assert that this experience takes place in a multifaceted personal, public and educational framework, which influences the customer's expectations, opinion and loyalty. According to Wadhwa (2008:8), TCE is not merely the improvement of customer service, but a radical change in the interactions with customers through added value in multiple channels and transactions.

Customer satisfaction and loyalty

Hill, Roche and Allen (2007:32) define customer satisfaction as 'a feeling customers have about the extent to which their experiences with a company have met their needs'. Customer satisfaction has a significant and strong direct impact on loyalty and word-of-mouth communication (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler 2002:233), whilst loyalty and retention have a substantial influence on profitability (Petre *et al.*

2006:189). An organisation that delivers a flawless customer experience will have a distinctly stronger chance of creating more loyal customers (Bailor 2007:15). Helgesen and Nesset (2007:43) and Honigman (2007:26) point out that customer satisfaction is the relationship between expectations and performance, but caution that many customer satisfaction models ignore the customer experience, which could affect satisfaction.

Student satisfaction is a goal worth pursuing for HEIs, as it is 'significantly and positively associated with recommending prospective students' (Mavondo & Zaman 2000:787). Bolliger and Wasilik (2009:105) found that administrative issues can also affect a student's satisfaction level. Paswan (2008:288) states that universities with strong administrative support systems can positively influence a student to be brand loyal to that university. Helgesen and Nesset (2007:38) posit that high levels of association exist between student satisfaction and student loyalty.

Table 1 illustrates the logic that a HEI that is committed to service quality will render services that are memorable, satisfying experiences for students who can become loyal ambassadors promoting the university to friends and family members (Frow & Payne 2007:98; Rowley 2005:574).

Demographic variables

This study aims to answer questions regarding the role of gender and language in students' perceptions of customer services rendered to them.
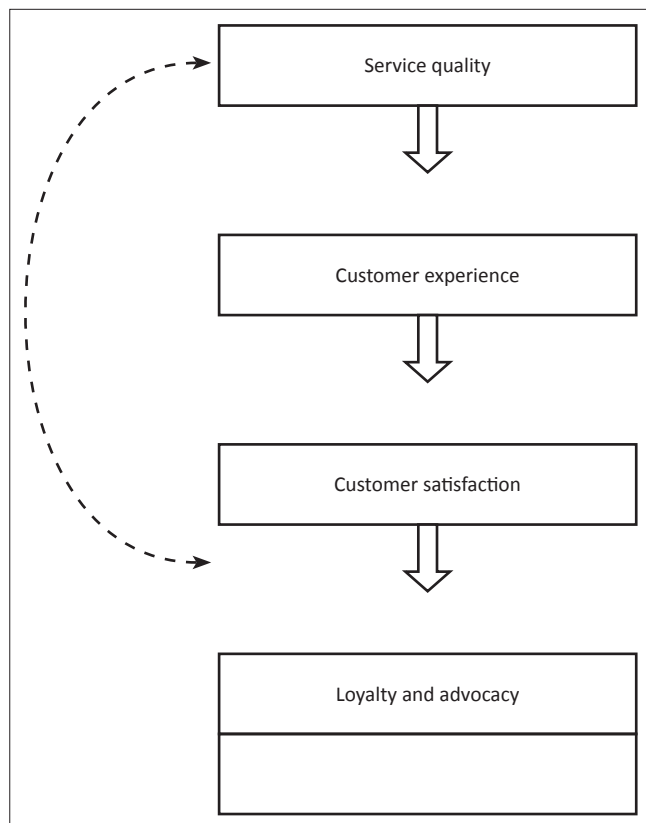

FIGURE 1: Service quality, experience, satisfaction and loyalty.

Studies on gender issues and gender roles are widely researched topics in a broad field of disciplines. A continuing stream of studies, covering a wide range of topics related to gender in the field of marketing specifically, are being undertaken across the globe (Kruger *et al.* 2013; Levy *et al.* 2012). Based on the Values and Lifestyle (VALS 2) segmentation approach the 'experiencers' (one of the identified segments) according to Babin and Harris (2012:116,119) are consumers of both genders who are impulsive and enthusiastic and who value novelty and excitement. Findings from a study by Dhurup and Mohamane (2007:72) to determine the relationship between administrative personnel (internal suppliers of service) and the research and development personnel (internal customers) within a petrochemical company indicate that male employees experience higher levels of satisfaction than their female counterparts in the realisation of service quality through cooperation, consistency and accessibility of services. Babin and Harris (2012:288) posit that value can be seen as a key outcome variable in the consumption experience. For example, marketers in India redesigned the Vespa scooter (the 'Indian Vespa') by adding a footrest extension to the left side because Indian women only ride in a side-saddle style (Babin & Harris 2012:181). This value-added feature enhances the customer experience levels of this segment. In the South African higher education context Wiese, Van Heerden and Jordaan (2010:153) and Lubbe (2013:337) investigated male and female differences in choice factors considered by potential students when selecting a higher education institution.

In order to determine students' perceptions regarding their customer experiences and the literature presented earlier, we hypothesise:

> **H1:** Significant differences exist between male and female students' perceived customer experience levels.

North and Kotze (2010:21) indicate that ethnic differences exist between consumers' perception regarding sources of shopping enjoyment, for example shopping to socialise and shopping for exercise. Wang and Mattila (2011:429) posit that consumers' cultural backgrounds influence their service consumption experiences, including expectations and reactions to service recovery after service failures. Brand (2003:28) posits that much of the inequality and inaccessibility of HEIs in the past originated from class distinctions and discrimination based on abilities of students. Language can be seen as a barrier to access and success in higher education in South Africa, because most of the HEIs in South Africa offer their programmes in English or Afrikaans. Van der Walt and Brink (2005:824) contend that many South African higher education institutions offer their courses in English, with some offering core programmes in another language (for example Afrikaans) as a commitment to the particular community. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

> **H2:** There is a significant difference between the perceived customer experience levels of students who

speak European languages (Afrikaans and English) and students who speak African languages.

The three-campus model of North-West University (NWU) makes provision for 3 separate campuses with a rector and senior managers for each campus. In total, 15 faculties offer courses on the 3 campuses. From 5 of these faculties fewer than 50 respondents participated, and from 6 faculties between 50 and 100 respondents participated in the study. Therefore, for the purpose of this study it was decided to compare the perceptions of students in the 2 largest faculties, namely the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences (198 respondents participated) and the Vaal Faculty of Humanities (180 respondents participated). In the Dhurup and Mohamane (2007:72) study, differences regarding internal service quality were recorded between the employees from the Human Resources department and employees from the Science department. Hence, we hypothesise:

H3: There is a significant difference between the perceived customer experience levels of students enrolled in the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences and students enrolled in the Vaal Faculty of Humanities.

Problem statement and research objectives

As far as could be established no studies have investigated student perceptions of service quality in South African HEIs. This served as the rationale or impetus for this study.

Hence, the broad aim of the study was to determine undergraduate students' perceptions of customer experiences during service encounters with administrative staff on the 3 campuses of NWU. More specifically, the study focused on the following:

- To describe the demographic profile of respondents.
- To determine students' advocacy intentions and loyalty towards NWU.
- To determine if differences exist between the perceived customer experiences of:
  - male and female students.
  - speakers of European (Afrikaans and English) languages and African languages.
  - students enrolled in the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences and students enrolled in the Vaal Faculty of Humanities.

This study could contribute towards a better understanding, awareness and application of the measurement of customer experience in the higher education environment.

Method

This quantitative study followed a descriptive research design. Questionnaires were administered to students on the three campuses of NWU. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to collect data from the respondents. Due to the unique communication channels available for the different modes of delivery, the questionnaires were made available in hard copy, as well as on the electronic learning platform for certain population groups where it could be more effective. Respondents from all faculties were approached by fieldworkers during lectures. The fieldworkers were trained to assist respondents if necessary.

Undergraduate modules were randomly selected from all faculties, and the researcher obtained permission from the relevant lecturers (for the on-campus programmes) to visit the lecture room during a contact session to conduct the research. Every tenth student (as they were seated in the lecture room) was then requested to complete a questionnaire. The programme managers of the off-campus programmes were requested to provide a list of all the study centres, facilitators at those centres, as well as the timetables for all the modules. Modules were randomly selected from all off-campus programmes and the facilitators were contacted. If they agreed to assist, the questionnaires and detailed instructions were forwarded to them.

The facilitators then assisted with supervising the completion of the questionnaires at these off-campus study centres, whilst the researcher was available by telephone to answer any questions or assist with any problems or uncertainties. Completed questionnaires were then couriered back to the researcher, coded and then analysed together with the questionnaires of the on-campus participants.

In this study, systematic random sampling was used to select the undergraduate student participants from all the strata. Ten different strata were identified and their sizes were obtained from the NWU management information system. Due to the marked difference in size between the different strata (ranging from 156 students for the school-based learning model up to 13 201 for the on-campus students at Potchefstroom), it was decided to adapt the sample size percentage according to the size of each stratum relative to the total population. For the smaller strata the sample size was determined as 10% of the population from the different campuses and modes of learning, but for the 2 largest on-campus strata (Potchefstroom and Mafikeng) the sample size was reduced to 4% of the population. The target population included 1295 undergraduate students.

The structure of the questionnaire contained a preamble inviting students to participate in the study and they were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The first section contained 5 questions relating to demographic information of respondents. The next section contained a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree) with 18 statements to measure respondents' views on their level of customer experiences during service encounters with administrative staff. The scale was adapted from the work of Abdullah (2006:569, 576) who developed the Higher Education PERFormance-only (HEdPERF) instrument. This measuring instrument captures the authentic determinants of service quality within

the higher education sector. Exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were utilised to test the unidimensionality, reliability and validity of the HEdPERF scale. The last section contained a four-point labelled scale with 2 statements to determine students' loyalty (1 = not; 4 = very) and advocacy intentions (1 = never; 4 = always).

The draft questionnaire was pretested with a convenience sample of 15 undergraduate students of both genders and subsequently submitted to 5 academics. A few minor errors in the draft questionnaire were reported and consequently changes were made accordingly.

Data analysis

The SPSS (version 20) programme was used to analyse the data. Fieldworkers performed the coding procedure under supervision. After the data capturing, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated. The statistical significance level was set at 0.05, and two-sample t-tests were used to test the stated hypotheses. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the summated scores for the 18 questionnaire items related to respondents' customer experiences. The frequencies for all the demographic variables and respondents' advocacy and loyalty intensions are reported in Tables 1, 2 and 3. The HEdPERF scale (Abdullah 2006:576) identified 6 dimensions to measure student perceptions of quality: non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access, programme issues and understanding. For the purpose of this study Factor 1 (non-academic aspects related to duties performed by staff) was adapted to measure students' perceptions of service experiences. This factor accounted for 59.8% of the variation in the data, using the Varimax-technique of orthogonal rotation. Pallant (2013:192) posits that the Varimax method attempts to minimise the number of variables with high factor loadings. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling is used to test if the correlations between the variables are large enough, whilst the Bartlett's test of sphericity determines if the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. Two-sample t-tests were used to test the stated hypotheses and the statistical significance level was set at 0.05 to interpret the results.

Results

Table 1 contains information regarding the demographic profile of the respondents. The majority of the respondents (63.2%) are female and more than two-thirds (72.6%) fall in the age group 18–29 years. A fairly equal balance exists between the mother tongue of respondents (European languages, i.e. Afrikaans and English, 51.7% and African languages 45.6%).

According to Table 2 full-time (on-campus) students on the Potchefstroom campus have the highest loyalty levels (84.4%) compared to 63.1% for the Vaal campus and 56.3% for the Mafikeng campus.

Table 3 provides an exposition of the advocacy intentions of the respondents. Marked differences exist between the high and low intentions of students on the Potchefstroom campus (94.3% versus 5.7%) and the Vaal campus (83.8% versus 16.2%). A relatively low percentage of students on the Mafikeng campus (53.1%) have high advocacy intentions.

Table 4 presents the mean and standard deviation for the 18 statements used in the questionnaire (Likert scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7= strongly disagree).

The overall findings for the 3 campuses indicate that students have a positive perception of the professional appearance of staff members (mean 2.32). They also think that their personal information is handled in a secure manner (mean 2.38). Convenient opening hours (mean 2.61) and being confident in their dealings with administrative staff of the university (mean 2.60) are positive perceptions. Surprisingly, the findings indicate that their perceptions regarding their requests for assistance (mean 3.43) and efficient and prompt dealing with their complaints (mean 3.32) were less positive. Marked differences exist between the perceptions of students on the 3 campuses (Potchefstroom, Mafikeng, Vaal) for efficient and prompt dealing with complaints (means 2.65, 4.05, 3.26).

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of respondents (n = 1295).

Demographic profile	Frequency	Not indicated*	%	Not indicated†	Total %
Gender					
Male	466	4	35.98	0.3	36.29
Female	818	7	63.17	0.54	63.71
-	-	-	-	-	100
Age					
Younger (18–29 years)	940	13	72.59	1.00	73.59
Older (30 years +)	337	5	26.10	0.31	26.41
-	-	-	-	-	100
Mother tongue					
European language (Afrikaans or English)	669	11	51.66	0.85	52.51
African languages	590	25	45.56	1.93	47.49
-	-	-	-	-	100

†, missing data.

TABLE 2: Loyalty levels of full-time (on-campus) students (n = 797).

Campus	Low intentions		High intentions		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Potchefstroom	69	15.6	373	84.4	442
Mafikeng	63	43.7	81	56.3	144
Vaal	78	37.0	133	63.1	211
Total	**210**	**26.3**	**587**	**73.7**	**797**

TABLE 3: Advocacy intention levels of full-time (on-campus) students (n = 798).

Campus	Low intentions		High intentions		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Potchefstroom	25	5.70	416	94.30	441
Mafikeng	69	46.90	78	53.10	147
Vaal	34	16.20	176	83.80	210
Total	**128**	**16.04**	**670**	**83.96**	**798**

Reliability and validity

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the internal-consistency reliability of the scale for use in a South African context. Pallant (2010:6) maintains that a Cronbach's alpha value for a scale varies between 0 and 1. A value closer to 1 is an indication of a reliable scale. To determine the reliability for this study a value of 0.70 or above was used as a cut-off point. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.96 was reported, which means that the 0.70 value was exceeded.

The seven-point scale used for this study was adapted from Abdullah (2006:576) by using 18 variables from the non-academic aspects (Factor 1) to measure respondents' views on the customer service experiences at the NWU. Construct validity was confirmed by subjecting the items to a confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood model for extraction and Varimax for orthogonal rotation (Pallant 2010:185). The KMO measure of sampling adequacy realised a value 0.969 and a p-value of 0.000 for the Bartlett's test of sphericity. Only one factor was extracted explaining 59.8% of the variance. The factor loadings varied between 0.559 and 0.843.

Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses were tested at a 5% level of significance using parametric independent *t*-tests. The results for H1 indicate that the mean scores for men (2.7368) and women (2.6791) do not differ significantly (*p*-value = 0.136). Thus, H1 is not accepted.

H2 states that significant differences exist between speakers of European (Afrikaans and English) languages and African language-speaking students' customer experience levels. The results indicate that speakers of European (Afrikaans and English) languages have a higher level of customer experience (mean = 2.5679; *p*-value = 0.000) than African language-speaking respondents (mean = 2.8741; *p*-value = 0.000). Hence, Hypothesis 2 can be accepted.

The results for H3 confirm that significant differences exist between students enrolled in the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences (mean = 2.7811; *p*-value = 0.000) and students enrolled in the Vaal Faculty of Humanities (mean = 2.3403; *p*-value = 0.000). Hypothesis 3 can therefore be accepted.

Ethical considerations

In this survey respondents were not exposed to any psychological or physical risk or strain. The institutional guidelines were adhered to in the execution of the study.

Potential benefits and hazards

No real physical risk was involved as respondents only had to use a pencil or pen to complete the questionnaire.

TABLE 4: Mean and standard deviation of respondents for measured statements (*n* = 1295).

Statement in questionnaire	Potchefstroom			Mafikeng			Vaal			Total (all three campuses)		
	Mean	Standard deviation	*n*	Mean	Standard deviation	*n*	Mean	Standard deviation	*n*	Mean	Standard deviation	*n*†
Professional appearance and image	1.82	1.080	697	2.86	1.542	257	2.28	1.330	293	2.32	1.317	1247
Sincere interest in solving problem	2.49	1.436	700	3.86	1.798	257	2.93	1.419	290	3.09	1.551	1247
Caring and individualised attention	2.54	1.364	700	3.85	1.871	256	3.12	1.396	293	3.18	1.543	1249
Efficient and prompt dealing with complaints	2.65	1.429	694	4.05	1.907	255	3.26	1.443	291	3.32	1.593	1240
Responding to request for assistance	2.76	1.456	696	4.26	1.904	254	3.28	1.465	291	3.43	1.608	1241
Accurate and retrievable records	2.22	1.270	697	3.33	1.779	251	2.58	1.437	291	2.71	1.496	1239
Promises kept	**2.68**	1.498	698	**4.01**	1.960	254	**3.13**	1.536	293	3.27	1.664	1245
Convenient opening hours	2.32	1.217	691	2.88	1.579	254	2.64	1.496	291	2.61	1.430	1236
Positive attitude	2.42	1.296	690	3.62	1.840	253	2.86	1.402	289	2.96	1.512	1232
Good communication	2.32	1.239	684	3.87	1.939	252	2.83	1.407	288	3.00	1.528	1224
Knowledgeable of systems and procedures	2.13	1.190	688	3.28	1.720	253	2.62	1.311	287	2.67	1.407	1228
Feeling secured and confident	**2.09**	1.204	690	**3.19**	1.745	253	**2.52**	1.341	289	2.60	1.430	1232
Service within reasonable time frame	2.31	1.260	689	3.53	1.665	250	2.77	1.336	287	2.87	1.421	1226
Equal treatment and respect	2.35	1.413	683	3.99	2.100	252	3.10	1.708	286	3.14	1.740	1221
Confidentiality of information	2.04	1.046	680	2.75	1.577	253	2.37	1.276	289	2.38	1.299	1222
Easily contacted by telephone	2.51	1.358	682	3.16	1.817	253	2.62	1.402	289	2.76	1.525	1224
Values feedback for improvement	2.42	1.287	681	3.55	1.828	252	2.98	1.482	289	2.98	1.532	1222
Effective service delivery procedures	2.35	1.218	674	3.49	1.792	251	2.93	1.399	288	2.92	1.469	1213

†, missing responses.

Recruitment procedure

Questionnaires were administered to students on the three campuses of NWU. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and participation was completely voluntary.

Informed consent

The questionnaire contained a preamble inviting students to participate in the study. A screening question was used to ensure the respondents fit the criteria to participate in the study. Respondents were given the opportunity to withdraw from the survey at any time whilst completing the questionnaire.

Data protection

In this study data protection was ensured by storing completed questionnaires in a locked cabinet, whilst the collected data were stored on the two authors' password-protected computers.

Discussion and recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that female students represented almost two-thirds of the respondents who participated in the study. This figure is in line with the total of 66% female students registered at NWU. This finding is also in agreement with Lubbe (2013:282) indicating that more women (56%) participated in a study to determine the factors that influence potential students to enrol at a certain university in South Africa. It is suspected that female students outnumber their male counterparts at many other universities in South Africa. The results relating to gender further indicate that male and female students do not differ regarding their perceptions of customer services. Although the academic planning strategies of HEIs in South Africa encourage the enrolment of female students, some universities may wish to recruit more male students to enrol at their university in order to maintain the levels of diversity that they seek. The recruitment strategies could, for example, target schools for boys only and inform Grade 11 and 12 learners about the various programmes offered, various sport, social and cultural activities, accommodation possibilities and availability of transport services and security. They could also invite alumni to visit schools to promote the university. This could be of great value especially if the alumnus is a well-known sportsman or sportswoman, artist, entrepreneur or public figure.

In this study differences between the experiences of students from different ethnic groups are reported. This finding is consistent with other cross-cultural studies on higher education (Clemes, Ozanne, & Tram 2001:15; Mai 2005:873). Wang and Mattila (2011:429) found in their study on service failures and recovery that East Asian consumers rate excuse explanations higher in terms of informational fairness than their Western counterparts. In this study, the overwhelming majority of students on the Potchefstroom campus fall in the group of European language-speaking group (Afrikaans and English), whereas the majority of the students who speak an African language are enrolled on the Vaal and Mafikeng campuses. Staff on the latter two campuses should be sensitised to deal effectively with complaints communicated by students, and be willing to customise and adjust the services to meet the needs of these students. Wiese *et al.* (2010:159) speculate whether results regarding ethical and language issues support comments by Higher Education of South Africa (HESA) that some institutions still have alienating institutional cultures. In an attempt to create a culture of inclusion, the Potchefstroom campus could embark on a strategy to recruit African language-speaking students.

The findings also indicate that students enrolled in the Potchefstroom Faculty of Health Sciences perceive the services rendered to them by administrative staff more favourably than their counterparts in the Vaal Faculty of Humanities. The reason for this is not clear. It could be that the administrative staff on one campus are better equipped and trained than staff on another campus. Formal investigations could supply answers to these questions.

The loyalty levels of both the Vaal and the Mafikeng campuses are much lower than their counterparts at the Potchefstroom campus. The advocacy intentions of students on the Mafikeng campus in particular, are significantly lower than their counterparts on the Vaal and Potchefstroom campuses. Findings from a local study by Wiese, Van Heerden, Jordaan and North (2009:39) indicate that word-of-mouth from friends does not rank very highly as a source of information potential students consider when they have to make a choice regarding enrolling at a HEI. The reasons for the differences in loyalty and advocacy intentions between the three campuses should be investigated. It could be beneficial to investigate, inter alia, whether one campus has better strategies to recruit better qualified and more experienced administrative staff and lecturers. Alternatively, the management of relationships with alumni may be more established on one campus compared to other campuses. Formal investigation into these (and other) matters could possibly supply answers and propose solutions to improve the loyalty levels and advocacy intentions of students on the Vaal and Mafikeng campuses. Other HEIs in South Africa who have more than one campus could benefit from such investigations.

Overall, students have positive perceptions of the professional appearance of staff, think members of administrative staff have sufficient knowledge of systems and procedures, and are confident in their dealings with staff.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

In this study a non-probability convenience sample was used, limiting the researchers to generalise the findings to the study population. The respondents were students

from NWU only. Future studies should be undertaken to determine the perceptions of students from other HEIs in South Africa during their encounters with administrative staff of their universities. Qualitative studies such as focus groups could be executed to gain a more in-depth view of students' perceptions of service quality in HEIs. Marketers at HEIs could also investigate the possibility of an integrated electronic document management system to enhance administrative staff's ability to provide a quality service to students. Feasibility studies to investigate the establishment of a call centre for the university could be considered. As mentioned earlier, this study only focused on one dimension of the Abdullah (2006:576) scale (administrative duties performed by staff). Future studies should investigate students' perceptions of the teaching responsibilities of academic staff.

This study only measured perceptions of students regarding their service experiences. Although the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985) is a highly debated measure of service quality, it is proposed that researchers in this area also measure students' expectations of the service delivery of HEIs (Hoffman *et al.* 2009:167, 410). A large gap between expectations and perceptions is an indication of a service failure and this should be addressed to improve the efficiency of the service operation. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2006:149) warn that a service failure 'becomes a story for that customer to tell others'. In order to remain competitive, marketing and human resource managers at HEIs should offer training courses to staff including, inter alia, the following topics: management of consumer waiting periods, dealing with difficult customers (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons 2006:328, 333), failures and service recovery (Hoffman *et al.* 2009:441) and the role and importance of personal branding of employees to enhance the corporate brand of the HEI (e.g. dress code, personal grooming, communication skills and connecting with students by being friendly, positive and customer focused). Clemes *et al.* (2001:12, 15) posit that administrative staff of HEIs should be incorporated into the internal and external marketing programmes of universities. Future studies should measure the perceptions of students regarding service experiences in similar faculties, for example the Potchefstroom Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences and the Mafikeng Faculty of Commerce and Administration.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

R.J.v.R. (North-West University) was the project leader and A.l.R. (North-West University) wrote the literature review, compiled the questionnaire, coordinated the fieldwork and wrote up the methodology and findings.

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