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## **ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SERVICE RECOVERY STRATEGIES ON PROCEDURAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

Students in higher education institutions encounter different problems which are normally reported through the appropriate complaints channels. Sometimes institutions and their employees do not address the reported problems on time due to systematic issues such as internal processes or procedures which are cumbersome. This paper assessed the impact of service recovery strategies (speed and empowerment) on procedural justice in higher education institutions. The study was conducted across three public universities in South Africa using a purposive sample of 430 students. The findings showed that speed and empowerment have a positive and significant impact on procedural justice. The findings underpin the importance of fairness in the procedures being used to address student problems. Besides, the study could help faculty and institutional managers to pinpoint areas that are hindering the smooth running of the operations and interface between students and employees of the universities. This study contributes to the literature on procedural justice in the higher education sector and provides an analysis of students' experiences from the developing world where infrastructural and financial challenges contribute to the final recipe.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Institutions, Students, Speed, Empowerment, Service Recovery, Procedural Justice

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### **1. Introduction**

Developing nations have the challenge of ensuring that they provide quality higher education for their citizens. In the 21st century, ideas are regarded as the currency of our times. Therefore, individuals must be able to access education if they are to succeed in life and if society is to progress (Maharey, 2011). One of the most important aspects of higher education is student engagement in their studies and university life in general, which is crucial to attracting students and maximizing their success. Thus, a robust relationship management system is very essential to meet challenges of equitable access, student recruitment and engagement (O'Connor and

Moodie, 2007). However, the biggest challenge in the higher education sector is redesigning and personalizing student support services. Students expect universities to be customer-facing; this entails having processes that facilitate student support services such as admission, advising (counselling), registration and placement being flexible and accessible. In addition, rising student expectations is in itself a problem affecting quality in the higher education sector. Moreover, the cost of education has gone up such that students expect high-quality facilities and services as a value for their money and investment (Deloitte, 2015; Hanna, 2003).

Blackboard Student Service (2013) notes that challenges that lead to service failures in institutions of higher learning are a global phenomenon. For instance, in the United States of America, Ivy Tech Community College has observed that fragmented customer service, long call hold times and high abandon rates are the most frequent service breakdowns. The college campuses are also characterized by the absence of personalized attention or service and inconsistencies in processes across campuses resulting in the high dropout rate. In addition, Dawood *et al.* (2016) have noted that in South Africa, students are not happy with the living conditions. They complain that outsourced rental accommodation by the institution is converted into barely habitable flats. Student efforts of going through the relevant channels to register their problems do not yield any positive results; therefore, the students resort to protests.

The aim of this study was to analyze the impact of service recovery strategies on procedural justice in higher education institutions. Specifically, the study evaluated the impact of speed on procedural justice, and the impact of empowerment on procedural justice.

It is envisaged that this study will contribute to literature on service recovery strategies and procedural justice in the higher education sector specifically from the developing world where financial, economic, and infrastructural challenges have a significant impact on the quality of life on campus and also the way institutions of higher learning address student problems. Furthermore, this study will act as a launchpad for re-designing policies and procedures in higher education institutions so that they are responsive to the changing needs of students.

## **2. Service recovery**

Service recovery is based on the social exchange theory and refers to actions by the higher education institution or university to resolve any problems arising from a service failure or unmet student expectations. Some of the service recovery examples include offering compensation, speed, an explanation, free service, upgrade and an apology (Sahadev *et al.* 2015). In addition, service recovery is a complaint management system that seeks to address service failures (Boshoff, 2014). Thus, institutions are always in a precarious situation when a service failure occurs. Moreover, students are fond of apportioning the responsibility for service failure to the institution even when the employees have no control over the situation. Institutions are, therefore, advised to regard service recovery as an important process of managing students' complaints. However, the challenge is that sometimes employees do not take their roles seriously when a service failure occurs even though student expectations are high that the employees will deliver (Battaglia *et al.* 2012).

There is a need for higher education institutions to analyze and understand the potential hazards that service failure could bring and devise robust service management strategies to prevent their occurrence. Initial student dissatisfaction can be prevented if institutional managers are more active and respond quickly to students' needs. Successful and fair handling of students' complaints is crucial to avoid a spiral of increasing complaints (Lee and Park, 2010). In addition, standard operating procedures for service failure recoveries are very important in addressing student problems. These may include an apology, speed, listening properly to student complaints and opinions, understanding student problems, suggesting and conducting a service recovery alternative, confirming the effect of the service recovery alternative, getting feedback and adding to the service recovery system database to facilitate the process of dealing with similar future service problems (Chang and Chen, 2013).

## **2.1. Speed**

Nowadays, higher education institutions are confronted with the challenge of how to address or respond to students' complaints quickly and if not possible to address the problem immediately, at least to inform the student quickly and indicate the steps being taken to address the problem (Rust *et al.* 1996). The reality is that slow processes and resolutions of student problems create negative word-of-mouth reports. The implications of slow service recovery are greater than if the recovery process was quick (Gronroos, 2007). Service failures should be handled quickly and efficiently. Quick and timely service recovery initiatives are essential to creating a sustainable bond with customers while, at the same time, they will avoid possible conflicts between the customer and the service provider (Komunda and Osarenkhoe, 2012). Applying this scenario in the context of higher education institutions, it is possible that some of the conflicts, disagreements and protests are a result of institutional managers failing to rise to the occasion quickly and to deal with service failures emanating from unmet student expectations. One may be inclined to assume, that some institutional managers and employees are clueless as to what to do in an event of service failure. They are not familiar with service recovery strategies and, as a result, most of the service failure incidents are left to chance.

Higher education institutions should create a seamless system that can detect service failure and respond immediately with service recovery efforts without students asking for relief (Ellyawati *et al.* 2013). For example, responses to student queries and needs should be addressed quickly. The needs may range from academic, financial, technical, administrative to social issues. Given this, there is a need to set up policies and to provide training to members of staff to ensure that they adhere to service standards and, ultimately, achieve student satisfaction (Yeo and Li, 2014). Service providers who encourage or welcome student complaints must be prepared to act quickly. Sadly, many institutions require students to get in touch with multiple employees before being assisted and having the problem resolved. Extant research suggests that more satisfaction can be derived from a transaction if problems are handled by the first contact person. However, the reality is that more than one person is often needed to address the problem and this affects student satisfaction. A problem that cannot be solved immediately is likely to escalate and puts an organization in an awkward position. The ability to provide a quick response depends not only on good systems and processes, but also on empowered employees. Employees should not only be given authority, but they should also not be punished for taking action. Employees should be encouraged to be pro-active or responsive without fear of retribution (Wilson *et al.* 2012).

## **2.2. Empowerment**

The importance of empowerment in higher education institutions cannot be overemphasized. Speedy resolution of student problems is only possible if employees managing the front desk are given some authority to settle complaints. Taking a problem through different chains of commands would be slow; therefore, there is a need to implement a key to the successful delegation, which is empowerment (Rust *et al.* 1996). Similarly, Gronroos (2007) argues that service employees may, in some cases, feel helpless, frustrated and humiliated by angry students if they have not been given sufficient authority or empowerment to deal with service failures as soon as they occur. Furthermore, failed service recovery may cause a lot of stress to service employees, as such organizations should find a way of absorbing and recognizing these scenarios and assist employees to recover. Thus, training and autonomy are important elements of empowerment that can help employees to deal with service failure and recovery incidents.

Training and empowering employees are interdependent of each other such that it is of no use to spend resources training employees who are not empowered. The fact that employees are pleasant, friendly or attentive to a student is not important if he or she is not able to solve the problem. This leads to dissatisfaction and eventually defection (Boshoff, 2014). This view is shared by Gronroos (2007), who argues that training of student-facing employees is very important as it provides skills and understanding of their roles in service recovery. However, training may not be enough if the employees do not have the authority to make decisions

regarding what to do and how much to compensate. For example, student reaction is more intense and negative to process failures during service encounters. However, firms can take some steps to minimize process failures by setting up feedback or performance evaluation systems to assess staff service quality. Additionally, individual members of staff should be provided with professional education and training to enhance their confidence and the quality of their student relationship. Emotional intelligence training can also assist members of staff, particularly those working in the frontline, to engage students better and more professionally (Tsai *et al.* 2014). Mostafa *et al.* (2014) have noted that service providers such as higher education institutions should demonstrate beyond mere rhetoric their commitment to addressing student problems. Consequently, action is preferable to rhetoric in satisfying students. Being courteous may be good, but good manners are of no use if the employee cannot solve the student's problem. Therefore, service providers should train employees to be able to deal with issues promptly and also equip them with resources to do so. Douglas *et al.* (2016) argue that in higher education institutions, lecturers' training should include an aspect of how to deal with student classroom disruptions.

According to De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000), employee autonomy is a prerequisite for effective real-time service recovery. Service employees should be given the authority to offer different recovery efforts or tactics including compensation without management or superiors' interference. Wamuyu *et al.* (2015) argue that frontline employees should be given authority to deal with student complaints without referring them to other people. The probability of a successful service recovery increases when the initial contact is empowered to deal with student complaints quickly. Prompt response to student complaints increases the likelihood of student satisfaction. Therefore, higher education institutions need to give members of staff autonomy to be able to resolve student problems independently without management intervention. Employee empowerment in the higher education sector can enhance the speedy resolution of student complaints. Front-desk employees should act quickly, show empathy and avoid arguments with students when handling complaints. This will enable the employees to re-establish students' goodwill through an effective service recovery strategy. Furthermore, service recovery processes should be flexible and employees should be given the authority to use their judgment and communication skills to come up with a solution that will ensure that the aggrieved students are satisfied (Nwokorie, 2016). Masoud and Hmeidan (2013) advise service managers to encourage employees to handle student problems effectively without seeking management consent before handling the problem.

### **3. Procedural justice**

The challenge for higher education institutions is knowing whether students act legitimately or not if given a chance to claim. Some students have self-serving justice perceptions and are fond of engaging in opportunistic claiming. However, when service recovery efforts are considered to be fair, students tend to be less opportunistic in making their claims. Thus, service providers should set up fair recovery processes and procedures to curb these opportunistic claims (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010).

According to Harun *et al.* (2018), managers should seek feedback from frontline employees. This may include asking whether they feel constrained in providing fast responses and any challenges in problem-solving because of any organizational policy. Based on the feedback, management can adapt the input to existing policies. When a member of staff lacks empowerment, it becomes burdensome and time-consuming to get closure or assistance for the problems. When students perceive the process to complain as cumbersome and time-consuming, they may assume that the institution is trying to run away from responsibility and this is not a favorable image (Chen *et al.* 2014). Therefore, managerial initiatives such as explicitly designing and establishing organizational policies about training, employee reward systems, as well as creating a service climate that fosters supportive management and servant leadership behaviors, should facilitate higher service recovery (Daskin and Kasim, 2016).

#### 4. Research methodology

This study adopted a quantitative and descriptive research approach. Descriptive research uses numbers that enable statistical and mathematical relationships to be evaluated. However, caution should be exercised when interpreting the relationships because descriptive research cannot be used to establish causality (Clow and James, 2013). In addition, quantitative research uses statistical methods and commences with data collection based on a known theory and is followed by the application of descriptive and inferential statistics (Patil and Mankar, 2016).

A purposive sample of 430 students from three public higher education institutions were used as respondents based on their previous service failure and recovery encounter. The variables that were used in this study were adapted from previous research. For instance, Speed (Mostafa *et al.* 2014; Ramadan, 2012), Empowerment (Boshoff, 1999), Procedural justice (Severt, 2002; Ramadan, 2012) were adapted to suit the objectives of the current study. A five-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from strongly disagree representing scale number 1 to strongly agree representing scale number 5 was used to gauge student feelings on speed, empowerment and procedural justice (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Data was analyzed using Partial Least Square by means of a Smart PLS3.

##### 4.1. Reliability and validity

The reliability for this study was ascertained using the Cronbach alpha. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach alpha coefficient scores for empowerment = 0.820, procedural justice = 0.946, speed = 0.901. A Cronbach alpha score above 0.6 is considered acceptable (Hair *et al.* 2014). In this study, convergent validity was assessed by factor loading, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Composite reliability scores for empowerment = 0.818, procedural justice = 0.946, speed = 0.901. According to Hair *et al.* (2010), the CR score of 0.7 and above is deemed acceptable.

**Table 1. Construct reliability and Validity**

Factor	Item/question	Factor loading	Composite reliability	Cronbach alpha	Average variance extracted
<b>Empowerment (Mostafa <i>et al.</i> 2014; Ramadan, 2012)</b>	First contact employee solved my problem	0.781			
	Employee told me what to expect from the process	0.800			
	Employee did not need help	0.530			
	Employee had skills and knowledge	0.788	0.818	0.820	0.535
<b>Speed (Mostafa <i>et al.</i> 2014; Ramadan, 2012)</b>	Offered a quick recovery plan	0.845			
	Problem was solved at once	0.813			
	Was not kept waiting	0.817			
	Solved within a reasonable time	0.858	0.901	0.901	0.695
<b>Procedural Justice (Ramadan, 2012)</b>	Procedures were fair	0.909			
	Procedures were sensible	0.878			
	Procedures were streamlined	0.848			
	Procedures did what I expected	0.830			
	Procedures put the student first	0.838			
	Procedures made me feel important	0.877	0.947	0.946	0.746

**Source:** Authors' work

To ascertain discriminant validity, the average value extracted was calculated as shown in Table 1 and compared with the correlated square root values. Thus, the discriminant validity

values above 0.5 are acceptable. In the current study, discriminant validity values have been presented in bold along the diagonal as illustrated in Table 2. In this regard, the validity scores are 0.731 for empowerment, 0.864 for procedural justice and 0.833 for speed. Thus, it can be concluded that this study has met all the acceptable thresholds for both reliability and validity.

**Table 2. Factor AVE and correlation measures (Fornell-Larcker criterion)**

Factor	EMT	PJ	SP
EMT	<b>0.731</b>		
PJ	0.670	<b>0.864</b>	
SP	0.568	0.610	<b>0.833</b>

**Note:** the values in bold along the diagonal are the square root of AVE for each factor.

AG=apology, EMT= empowerment, PJ= procedural justice, SP= speed

**Source:** Authors' work

## 5. Results

The hypothesized relationships were evaluated to ascertain the impact of service recovery strategies namely, speed and empowerment on procedural justice. Firstly, the impact of empowerment on procedural justice in higher education institutions was analyzed. As illustrated in Table 3, the findings show a positive and significant impact of empowerment on procedural justice ( $\beta=0.465$ ,  $t\text{-value}=6.512$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Secondly, the impact of speed on procedural justice in the higher education sector was evaluated. The findings as shown in Table 3 indicate that speed has a positive and significant impact on procedural justice ( $\beta=0.325$ ,  $t\text{-value}=4.972$ ,  $p=0.000$ ).

**Table 3. Results of the impact of speed and empowerment on procedural justice**

Factors	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Statistics ( O/STDEV )	P-Values
Empowerment -> Procedural justice	0.465	0.469	0.071	6.512	0.000
Speed -> Procedural justice	0.325	0.325	0.065	4.972	0.000

**Note:** SE (standard error), ns (not significant), \* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\* $p<0.001$  (two-tailed t-tests)

**Source:** Authors' work

As shown in Table 4, the summary of the results of this study shows that all the hypothesized relationships are significant. For instance, the impact of empowerment on procedural justice shows positive and significant hence supported. Similarly, the impact of speed on procedural justice is positive and significant hence supported.

**Table 4. Summary of the results of the impact of service recovery strategies on procedural justice**

Factors	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistics ( O/STDEV )	P-Values	Result
Empowerment -> Procedural justice	0.465	6.512	0.000***	Supported
Speed -> Procedural justice	0.325	4.972	0.000***	Supported

**Note:** SE (standard error), ns (not significant), \* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\* $p<0.001$  (two-tailed t-tests).

**Source:** Authors' work

## **5. Discussion**

This study analyzed the impact of service recovery strategies on procedural justice in higher education institutions. Specifically, the study evaluated the relationship between speed and procedural justice. The findings of this study showed that the relationship between speed and procedural justice is positive and significant. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Mostafa *et al.* (2015) who found that speed and procedural justice have a significant and positive relationship. The reality is that good service recovery does not happen by chance. It takes extraordinary individuals or employees to address students' problems promptly. However, organizations should not rely on uncommon scenarios of resourcefulness. They should take measures to ensure that every member of staff has the requisite skills, motivation, and authority to take a service recovery initiative quickly as an integral part of the institution's operation (Hart *et al.* 1990).

Lastly, the study evaluated the relationship between empowerment and procedural justice. The findings of this study showed that the relationship is positive and significant. This finding corroborates the findings by Mostafa *et al.* (2015) who also found that the relationship between empowerment and procedural justice is positive and significant. Thus, employee empowerment is critical to achieving student satisfaction because the modern student is very unpredictable. Therefore, university employees should have the requisite knowledge and freedom to make decisions to handle the student encounter successfully (Azemi *et al.* 2015).

## **6. Conclusion**

This study aimed to assess the impact of service recovery strategies (speed and empowerment) on procedural justice. Based on the finding, several recommendations were made. For instance, there is a need to review how the institutions hire, train and motivate its workers. Higher education institutions need to employ members of staff with student acumen and the right skills to facilitate the provision of speedy resolutions to student problems. In addition, there is a need for staff training to facilitate the acquisition of new skill sets. In this regard, customer service and problem-solving skills should be inculcated in members of staff to allow the provision of seamless quality service. Quick and timely service is essential if these institutions are to achieve students' recovery satisfaction. Institutions are like steel beams; they tend to rust over time. It is, therefore, recommended for these institutions to invest in new technology or systems that will enable speedy resolution of student problems. There is a need to redesign systems and processes so that they are responsive to the needs of students. In this regard, the universities can develop web portals to enable students to log in complaints and follow up on their problems without having to present themselves physically in the case of issues that can be dealt with easily. This will help the universities to manage queues, which are partly the genesis of recovery strategy failure.

University employees should be trained so that the role they have to play during the service recovery process is properly understood and executed. Besides, it is proposed that professional training or courses be provided to employees to enhance their confidence and skills in emotional intelligence and customer-relationship management. For example, training can be provided to lecturers to enable them to deal with class disruptions effectively. It is proposed that members of staff be given authority to make decisions on student-related issues. This can be done through the creation of a policy that gives a mandate to employees to make decisions without escalating every problem to senior management. Employees need to be informed of the extent to which they can intervene when a service breakdown is reported. This will ensure the speedy resolution of student problems because the next in line in terms of authority to address a problem is known, depending on the severity of the problem. In addition, members of staff should be able to make decisions such as offering compensation without the interference of management.

Effective procedures should be able to facilitate speedy or timely access to facilities, services, and resolution of service breakdowns. Furthermore, organizational procedures should be designed to indicate standards or response periods to encourage speedy resolution of student complaints. For example, management of HEI's can commit to resolving student complaints within

five working days for complex complaints that need to be investigated. The management of student expectations is essential in achieving recovery satisfaction. In terms of limitation, the study adopted a small sample size, which makes the findings limited to the current scope. Future researchers should analyze the impact of service recovery strategies on the dimensions of justice across many institutions with larger sample size.

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