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## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF OUTSOURCED CATERING SERVICES AT A RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

Inadequate government subsidies in South Africa have led to financial challenges for many institutions of higher education. Some universities have sought strategies to operate and survive within the limited resources available. Outsourcing campus-catering services is one of the strategies employed by universities to save costs. The study, based on quantitative research study used a structured data collection process informed by a positivist research paradigm, investigate students' perceptions of the outsourced catering services in an institution of higher learning in a peri-urban area in the Eastern Cape Province. Participation in the study was voluntary and involved a sample of 270 campus residence students. Results indicate that services offered by the outsourced catering services did not meet the needs of students and thus students' expectations. Students were particularly not satisfied with food pricing and quality. The students' dissatisfaction with campus catering services may negatively affect students' experience of the campus. Food is important for students' physical and cognitive developmental needs and thus vital to students' academic performance and progress. The study highlights an urgent need for the evaluation of the outsourced catering services. The institutions of higher education need to put measures in place to redress the situation and ensure that students' best interests are served.

**Keywords:** Outsourcing, students' experiences, campus catering services, campus cafeteria, effective learning and development, campus space

### INTRODUCTION

Limited funding available to institutions of higher education across the globe has led to financial challenges (Ntshoe, 2003). These challenges have placed a great pressure on institutions of higher education to reduce costs (Pendlebury & Van der Walt, 2006), and one of the many cost reduction strategies employed is outsourcing (Badat, 2016; Jefferies, 1996). The outsourcing phenomenon has become an important operational strategy adopted by businesses all over the world (Patil & Patil, 2014). Gunasekaran, Irani, Choy, Filippi & Papadopoulos, 2015), with outside companies or persons tasked with performing functions traditionally performed internally (Gunasekaran et al., 2015; Ikeije & Nwaoma, 2015). Functions and services mostly outsourced are those that companies regard as non-core, and this allows companies to focus on the core activities of the business (Patil & Patil, 2014). Outsourcing as a strategy in higher education has faced much criticism. The question to outsource or not to outsource became a focus of debates, conversations and studies (Dixon & FitzGerald, 2008; Sang, 2010; Shaw, 2013).

Traditionally residential universities provided a range of services for students from dining halls, shops for essentials and for books, cleaning and security services. However, financial challenges experienced by universities led to outsourcing some of services (Gupta, Herath, Mikouiza, 2005). American institutions of higher learning have been outsourcing services such as food services for decades (Kim, Hertzman & Hwang, 2010). Universities in Kenya (Sang, 2010) and Nigeria (Ikeije & Nwaoma, 2015) have also adopted outsourcing. South African universities such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), WITS, WSU and many others have outsourced one or more of its functions (Lockett & Mzobe, 2016).

Outsourcing has become a highly contested discourse in the higher education dialogues. University staff and students have disapproved of the practice, stating that outsourcing affects university experience and morale (Shaw, 2013). Opponents of the notion of outsourcing state their concerns, including that universities are becoming profit-orientated and operating more like private companies, and this may negatively influence the university's role and responsibility towards the community (Shaw, 2013). Regardless of the opposition to outsourcing, outsourcing has continuously found its way into many academic institutions around the world (Sang, 2010).

Advocates of outsourcing argue that outsourcing a private company to perform some of the university's functions reduces the university's labour costs, improves quality and efficiency, brings on board external expertise that further enhances operations of the universities, and ultimately affords higher education institutions the opportunity to focus

on their core competencies such as teaching, learning and research. (Ikejije & Nwaoma, 2015; Sang, 2010; Wood, 2000). Outsourcing also shifts the responsibility of rendering the service away from the university, allowing the university to shift its focus onto its core business (Muchuka et. al., 2020:.). This means that a university's core function is servicing its student population, which suggests that ultimately outsourcing should benefit students. However, developments in the South African (SA) higher education landscape proved otherwise. SA Universities have been faced with a number of protests around outsourcing of services. A nationwide students' campaign named #FeesMustFall raised several issues affecting students. #Feesmustfall was a students' movement that called for a no increase in tuition fees, decolonised education and the reduction of outsourcing (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016; Langa, 2017). The students denounced outsourcing and called for insourcing.

One of the first South African higher education institutions to outsource services was the University of Cape Town (UCT) and this was in 1999 (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). UCT outsourced some of the essential services such as food services and cleaning (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016). The #feesmustfall movement call for the abolishment of outsourcing resulted in universities such as UCT, University of Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University and University of the Free State commit to doing away with outsourcing and consider insourcing services rendered to university communities (Mokoena, 2017; Luckett & Mzobe, 2016).

Outsourcing services such as food, security and cleaning services may be some of the many cost-saving strategies employed by universities, but does leaving such crucial services to outsiders benefit students? The student protest actions across South African universities indicate otherwise. Students' lives have been largely characterised by protests over living conditions, particularly food quality (Mogashoa, 2014). Studies indicated that, compared to the experiences of students based in United States of America, students in South Africa and other African countries complained of poor quality meals and services offered by outsourced catering companies (Ikejije & Nwaoma, 2015; Mogashoa, 2014; Sang, 2010). Given these concerns of quality, community and the effect that the environment has on student learning, this study investigate students' perceptions of the outsourced catering services in an institution of higher learning in a peri-urban area in the Eastern Cape Province.

### **Problem statement**

The outsourced suppliers service students' basic needs like food, shelter and security and it is therefore imperative to ensure that these services are rendered properly and as per expectation (Glickman, Holm, Keating, Pannait & White, 2007; Kim, 2008) . Ganasegeran, Al-Dubai, Qureshi, Al-Abed & Aljunid, (2012) and LaCaille et al. (2011) state that university students make their food choices based on cost, availability of fast foods and lack of healthy options on university campuses. All these factors influence what a student ultimately decides on. Students' safety should be paramount to any university therefore offering adequate food services on campus within a clean safe environment means students spend more of their time on campus and are hopefully safer than in the broader outside environment. As seen with the #feesmustfall movement, failure to ensure that students' needs are met may result in student protests. These protests affect the students' academic programmes and have the potential of turning violent (Langa, 2017) thus compromises students' safety. For the purpose of this study, the main focus will be on the outsourced campus-based food services offered to students in a peri-urban context.

A better understanding of what university students expect and perceive to be quality service from the contracted service providers will assist in providing the necessary measures needed to improve services offered to students.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

Social interaction is an important aspect of a student's life. Social interaction amongst students provides for Astin's (1984) involvement theory. The more time a student spends on campus is important especially in contributing to their academic success. A campus environment, which offers satisfactory food services, has the ability to provide an ideal environment for peer social interaction. Social interaction amongst students has a positive effect on persistence and cognitive development (Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Students who spend more time on campus identify themselves with the institution and feel more attachment to university life, therefore are more likely to persist and succeed (Astin, 1984). Students deserve a good experience, which will ensure optimal learning from their higher education engagement and basic needs like food services are a vital part of that experience (Quigley & Pereira, 2011.), therefore useful to know how students view their campus food services and how it contributes to their experience.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study employed a quantitative research approach (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014). The research study was exploratory in nature and used descriptive data. The researcher subscribed to a positivist paradigm, employing quantitative methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Positivists subscribe to the

notion that relationships between variables can be measured and this knowledge can be acquired by using quantitative research approaches (Creswell, 2009; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). The institution has four (4) campuses based in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The representative sample was drawn from the undergraduate students enrolled at a campus based in a peri-urban area. The studied campus had 5,786 full-time registered students, 898 of whom resided in the campus-based university residences. The study included full-time campus resident students only, because compared to non-resident students, they use the cafeteria on a full-time basis therefore are more directly affected by services offered by outsourced suppliers. The study population consisted of 898 residence students. The study involved 270 male and female undergraduate students. In recruiting participants for the study a convenience sampling technique, which is a non-random sampling technique, was employed. Convenience sampling depends on opportunity (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014). In an attempt to increase participants' response rate recruitment of participants was done through face-to-face interaction.

### Data collection

The study used a self-administered survey questionnaire. The research instrument was developed through literature from several studies that sought to determine university students' perceptions and satisfaction with university campus catering services (Garg & Kumar, 2017; Kim et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2016; Mogashoa, 2014; Raman & Chinniah, 2011; Saglik et al., 2014). Variables relevant to the present study were adopted and modified to fit the objectives of the study. The study involved a sample drawn from one of the 4 campuses. The study was quantitative in nature, resulting in a quantitative analysis and discussion of the results.

### Results

#### Demographic profile of participants

Attribute	Category	Number	Percentage
Age	18-21	128	47%
	>21	142	53%
Gender	Male	116	43%
	Female	154	57%
Level of study	1 <sup>st</sup>	27	10%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	103	38%
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	140	52%
Amount of money spent on food	<R300	38	14
	R300-R500	92	34
	>R500	140	52
Source of funds	Bursary		5
	NSFAS		58
	Other		37
Preferred supplier of meals	Campus cafeteria	3	1
	Tuckshop	51	19
	Supermarket	178	66
	Other	38	14
Reason for chosen Supplier	Convenience	73	27
	Price	127	47
	Service quality	40	15
	Taste	22	8
	Other	8	3

The demographic profile of participants indicate that the majority (57%) of the students who participated in the study were female and 43% were male; 38% and 52% of the participants were respectively, in their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study suggesting that the majority (90%) of the participants were familiar with university environment and culture. The results further indicate that majority (66%) of these participants sourced their meals from the local supermarket. The reason for the chosen supplier of meals was the price factor and this was indicated by 47% of the participants, while 15% and 3% indicated that service quality and taste respectively was the reason for the chosen supplier, and only 3% indicated that convenience were the factors and 27% of the students indicated that factors other than the predetermined ones were reasons for the chosen supplier. Majority of participants (52%) spent over R500 for food per month. The other 48% of participants spent less than R500 per month on food; while a concerning, 14% spent less than R300 a month suggesting that this group of students spent less than R10 a day for food. Majority (58%) of the participants relied on NSFAS food allowance suggesting that economic background of participants necessitated financial aid. To a certain extent this provides a picture of the students' financial standing and reflects on issues of affordability.

### Food service attributes

Participants we asked to rate the level of satisfaction with regard to food received from the campus cafeteria.

The table below indicated response of participants.

Food service attributes	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Taste	26%	11%	29%	34%
Consistency of taste	16%	11%	50%	23%
Variety in menu	7%	8%	77%	8%
Menu items (preferred food)	8%	4.5%	73%	14.5%
Presentation of food (food packaging)	25%	9%	57%	9%
Freshness of food	26%	9%	33%	32%
Price	13%	6%	65%	16%

**Taste:** Similar to studies which reported that students in higher education institutions were not satisfied with food sold on campus cafeterias (Khaniki et al., 2016; Raman & Chinniah, 2011); majority (75%) of the students were not satisfied with the taste of food served at the cafeteria. The results further indicate that half (50%) of participants were dissatisfied with consistency of the taste of food with an additional 23% indicating that they were very dissatisfied with this aspect. Bad food drives students away from campus and this limits time spent on campus and exposes students to danger.

**Variety in menu:** Only 15% of students were satisfied with this aspect. Majority (85%) of the students were of the opinion that the cafeteria menu offered a limited variety. Variety in the form of food available and served to students is an important food service attribute, which influences satisfaction with food services (Choi et al., 2011; Raman & Chinniah, 2011).

**Menu items (preferred food):** Menu items sold at the cafeteria were preferred by only 12.5% of the participants. This finding is consistent with findings of a study conducted at Stellenbosch University. Students at this institution indicated that meals were not planned with their needs and preferences in consideration therefore it was not what they preferred (Marais et al., 2017).

**Presentation of food (food packaging):** More than half (66%) of the participants do not like the packaging that food is served in. Only 25% and 9% of the students are reportedly satisfied and very satisfied respectively with this attribute. Appearance of food is one of the characteristics that affect students' satisfaction with food. If this aspect of food quality is not met students are likely to find the food unacceptable (Khaniki et al., 2016) and look for other alternatives.

**Freshness of food:** Only 26% and 9% of the participants were satisfied and very satisfied respectively suggesting that the majority of students were not content with the freshness of food served on campus. Failure to meet this aspect risks students' health and well-being as students may be exposed to harmful food-borne diseases (Khaniki et al., 2016).

**Price:** With regard to the price of food sold on campus, only 13% were satisfied and 6% very satisfied with pricing of food. These results are similar to those reported for Malaysian students (Nadzirah et al., 2013). More than half (55.8%) of the students indicated that the significant reason for eating at a particular restaurant on campus was due to price.

**Nutritional content of food:** Results further indicate that food sold on campus did not meet the nutritional needs of the majority (79%) of students. Poor dietary intake deprives the body of nutrients essential for optimum brain development and functioning. Poor nutrition affects cognitive abilities, and this may impact students' academic progress and success (Alibabić et al., 2014).

**Food service environment:**

Students were further asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the food service environment. Results indicate that 50% of the students indicated that food was always served in a clean environment. These results are in contrast with results of a study conducted by Khaniki et al. (2016) where the majority (78%) were satisfied with the environment food was served in and reported that food was served in a clean and hygienic environment. Hygiene and cleanliness of the food service environment contributes to the overall satisfaction with the cafeteria thus the highest level of expectation of students from the university canteen is about hygiene of the environment where food service is delivered (Nadzirah et al., 2013).

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study show that the majority of students were not satisfied with the services offered by campus cafeteria. The students' responses suggest that the food sold did not meet their expectations. Results further show that the basis for student dissatisfaction was the negative experience with food quality and service. Students were not satisfied with all aspects of the quality of food sold at the campus-based cafeteria. Students did not like the taste of the food, the menu did not offer enough variety, and meals served were not to the students' preferences and did not meet their nutritional needs. Poor nutrition affects academic performance, and this may impact students' academic progress and success (Alibabić et al., 2014). Good and optimal nutrition is essential for physical and cognitive wellbeing and is therefore an important element of holistic development of students. Results suggest that students' holistic well-being maybe greatly compromised, subsequently jeopardising successful completion of academic programmes. It is important for students' nutritional requirements to be met in order to contribute to the holistic development of students. It is therefore important for food service outlets to offer healthy and nutritious meals.

Results further indicate that food was not always served in a clean environment. An unhygienic food environment exposes students to potential harm and sickness caused by food-borne illness, and ill health affects studying and academic progress (Khaniki et al., 2016). Food freshness and hygiene are important elements of food health and safety. Providing students with food of questionable quality may subject students to harmful bacteria and diseases. The food preparation and serving environment should be kept clean at all times to ensure that food prepared for students is safe and free of harmful micro-organisms (Khaniki et al., 2016). All these elements influence the customer's food dining experience. Insufficient quality of food causes low levels of satisfaction with food service and food is an important aspect of students' social lives and academic experience (Dollah, Mansor & Mohamed, 2012).

Results from this study are consistent with those of a study by Raman and Chinniah (2011) in which the majority of students were not happy with all attributes of food service and these attributes were considered important factors influencing their satisfaction with cafeteria food. Bad quality food drives students away, causing students to look outside the university campus for food (Raman & Chinniah, 2011) exposing them to danger and risk as well as interfering with the academic process. This interferes with the sense of belonging that students achieve by spending more time on campus (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987). The environmental and hygiene conditions of a food service outlet is an aspect considered important by university students (Kim et al., 2012). Dissatisfaction with catering services and failure to meet and maintain hygiene acceptable to students influences students' attitude towards the university and its environment leading to dissatisfaction with the campus and university (Kim et al., 2012) and this may, through word of mouth, affect university's reputation with potential students. The price of food was also a source of discontent. Price affects customers' buying behaviour and choice, and results of this study suggest that pricing of food is one of the major attributes that drive students to source meals outside the campus. The food was sold at prices above students' affordability. Students spent a little over R16.67 per day on all their meals. If students sourced three meals a day from the cafeteria the amount for each meal would work out to R5.55 per meal and this shows that the money students spent on food matched with students' eating frequency was not enough to source decent and nutritious food on campus. This may explain why students prefer to purchase food from the supermarket.

Lack of affordable, convenient, healthy food on campus is likely to propel students to seek food service outlets that will accommodate their food preferences, budget, dietary needs and expectations (Tam et al., 2017). Students spent time away to source food and the time lost due to shopping limited the time these students spent on campus and spent on studies. Time lost during shopping trips could have been spent on social activities with other students or working

on academic activities and programmes. Time is an important factor in academic performance and progress. The amount of student learning and personal development is equal to the amount of time a student dedicates to their learning (Astin, 1984). The more a student involves themselves with their environment, the more learning and development is likely to take place.

Results of this study have shown that the majority of students spent time away from campus to source food. Given the high crime statistics in South Africa, it is clearly reasonable to deduce that students' safety outside the university campus is a concern. The UJ case of a student shot on his way back from purchasing food outside the campus shows that students' safety outside the university campus is a concern. While the university's control over what happens outside the campus is restricted, data on how time outside and inside the university campus is important as this will show how time spent away from campus affects students' safety and security. Providing efficient and satisfactory services on campus will minimise time spent outside the university and this will inevitably minimise exposure to security risks outside the university campus. Self-directed learning that emanates from spending time on interactive campus facilities such as campus cafeterias enhances learning and supports retention (Kuh, 1995).

### **Implications of the results**

Provision of food service outlets that cater to the growing needs of students remains a challenge for many institutions, including South African institutions of higher education (Chinomona, Maziriri & Moloji, 2014). Outsourced services, particularly outsourced food services, have caused unrest and protests within SA universities (Lukhele, 2016). Canteens and cafeterias are central to student development and outsourcing may create a disconnection between the university's vision and mission, creating a disjointed and disconnected environment, which the university cannot always control. The services offered by the outsourced suppliers may not always subscribe to the vision and desires of the institution but only offer the suite of services deemed pertinent.

Business organisations are profits driven and prices charged by these companies may not be in the interests of the students' financial background and affordability (Ikeije & Nwaoma, 2015; Sang, 2010; Shaw, 2013). Students constrained financial resources limit their buying power. Students' well-being may be compromised as those who are without financial aid and funding may not be able to afford to purchase food, risking poverty and hunger. It is therefore important for the university to consider pricing charged to students when outsourcing food services.

The students are based in campus that is located in the province that is reported to have the highest malnutrition and food insecurity in South Africa (Shisana et al., 2014). This background necessitates careful consideration of students' needs, particularly food. Unaffordable food makes students vulnerable to food insecurity. Students' nutrition is also an important aspect of students' physical and mental well-being. Unhealthy and contaminated food may have harmful effects on students and negatively affect academic performance (Khaniki et al., 2016). This will not only affect students' progress and success in university but will have a negative impact on the university's output rate (Paura & Arhipova, 2014). Time spent away affects time spent on campus, which reduces the time the students may spend with their peers on campus and increases exposure to safety and security risks. Frequent trips to supermarket compromise social interaction with peers and academic staff.

### **Recommendations and conclusion**

Challenges and concerns associated with outsourcing can be addressed in several ways. The university management and/or the food service outlet managers may put measures in place to ensure that the needs and expectations of students are met. Service providers can be evaluated and such evaluation may be conducted by assessing students' expectations and satisfaction with the contracted service provider and sharing the results of the assessment with the service provider. The results can assist the food service managers to improve the service offered to students by developing a service strategy that will provide for the needs of the students (Kim et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2010). The university may, after analysing the results of the assessment, contract more food service providers on campus.

One of the measures put in place may be contracting more campus-based food service suppliers. Outsourcing multiple food service companies will create competition between the food service suppliers and thus improve service quality and reduce prices. Competition for customers has the potential to drive companies to evaluate and improve the service offered to customers in order to retain existing clientele and recruit more customers from the competitors (Glickman, Holm, Keating, Pannait & White, 2007).

Not all services within universities are good candidates for outsourcing. Some services, such as food services, should remain the university's responsibility, however, should the university decide to outsource food services, proper and stringent measures should be put in place to ensure that students' well-being is not compromised in the process. A further enquiry into the effects of outsourcing across the different functions of the university is required in order to

ascertain the extent of the effects of outsourcing in a peri-urban university. A study involving the whole institution's student population and all stakeholders affected by outsourcing is recommended.

It can be concluded that the campus-based outsourced cafeteria did not meet the needs and expectations of students. Students have shown dissatisfaction with services most pertinent to their everyday campus lives. Services pertinent to student development should complement one another: Learning is a holistic process that requires the university and its staff to shape services to support the vision of teaching and learning rather than allowing aspects important to effective teaching and learning to be governed too far by outsiders. Disregard of the students' well-being may have a negative effect on students' lives on campus. Holistic development of students requires that all aspects associated with the development of students are provided for. The university should be in control of the services offered to students. Outsourcing should always be considered with the students' well-being in mind; and thus should not be entirely viewed as a means to an end but as a strategy that aims to benefit both the university and its student population. In the context of this study, outsourcing disadvantages the students and may possibly affect morale and interaction with the university space. The institution should further prioritise students' experience of the university by ensuring that campus space promotes effective learning and development. University management should constantly evaluate the services offered by contracted companies to ensure that students' rights and interests are protected.

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